

BOOK REVIEW

# THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: TOOLS AND TACTICS FOR CHANGING YOUR ORGANIZATION AND THE WORLD

By RONALD HEIFETZ, ALEXANDER GRASHOW, & MARTY LINSKY  
Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press (2009)

Hardcover, 326 pages

**Reviewed by Thomas Gyuroka**

I work in a conservative 150-member church made up primarily of older people. Recently, a group of 40 students joined the church and their numbers will likely continue to grow. But the blessing of growth came with some unexpected challenges. The students' different values and expectations are clashing with the more traditional mindset of the older members in the congregation. Both sides demonstrate limited understanding for each other and are appealing to me to straighten out the other party on the basis of my pastoral authority. You may have faced similar circumstances, in which there is no standard answer because the adequate response has yet to be developed. Situations like this have often left me feeling awkward and thinking, "If I were a better leader I certainly would know what to do." Heifetz's adaptive leadership theory helped me to grow in my understanding of how to deal with situations that seem to defy simple solutions.

The term "adaptive leadership" originated in the work of Ronald Heifetz in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994), in which he unfolded the understanding of adaptive leadership. This approach was expanded in *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leadership* (2002), which he wrote with Marty Linsky. The current book is coauthored with Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky.

Heifetz et al. (2009) maintain that it is important to redefine popular

misconceptions of leadership. In their understanding it is imperative for leaders to distinguish between leadership and authority and between technical and adaptive tasks. Many leaders fail to lead when they mistakenly treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.

Technical problems, although potentially complex and critically important, have a known solution within the expertise of those in authority. In contrast, adaptive challenges usually need a learning experience which requires an adaptation of habits, attitudes and values, or of organizational roles, norms, and procedures. Technical problems usually are solved by a person in authority who has the answers, decision-making power, and the power to enforce necessary steps. But adaptive problems do not need someone who exerts authority; rather, they require a leader who is willing to frame and ask tough questions, to confront reality, draw out issues, challenge current procedures, and, most importantly, to transfer the responsibility for solving the problem to the people who need to learn and who have to do the changing.

In contrast to Heifetz's first and second books, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* does not discuss the theory of adaptive leadership. Rather, this book tries to put adaptive leadership into practice. It comprises a wealth of tools, diagrams, reflections, exercises, charts, and tactics which can be used to work through adaptive challenges in all kinds of organizations. For those who are not familiar with adaptive leadership, the authors include a chapter called "Theory Behind the Practice."

Heifetz et al. take their concept from evolutionary biology, which sees successful adaptation as necessary to preserve DNA, to discard unnecessary DNA, and to create new DNA that can flourish under new circumstances. From this background they come up with the following basic assumptions:

- Adaptive leadership is about change that enables the capacity to thrive.
- Adaptive change interventions build on the past rather than jettison it.
- Organizational change happens through experimentation.
- Adaptive leadership relies on diversity.
- New adaptations have the potential of significantly displacing, re-regulating, and rearranging old DNA.
- Adaptive change takes time.

Adaptive leadership theory starts with the realization that there are really no dysfunctional organizations because all organizations function at the level of adaptation they are willing to engage in (p. 17).

Organizations unwilling to adapt may become non-viable and eventually die. Some existing organizations, though appearing dysfunctional, may in reality be best equipped to achieve their current purpose. Thus, organizational development processes are “mostly not about change at all” (p. 23) but about preserving those aspects which guarantee the survival of the organization thus far while at the same time producing successive small changes so as to adapt the organization to the changing conditions of its environment.

The best leadership laboratory for learning adaptive leadership is life itself. Leadership development at its best happens when the reader discovers the many opportunities to exercise adaptive leadership in the different areas of his or her life. The book, however, is not simply a handbook of best practices and tactics. It builds on a systems view with the self as the most important system in order to move an organizational system forward. Like an organization, a leader is a complex unit with competing values, interests, preferences, tendencies, aspirations, and fears. Understanding the personal system will help a leader to make the choices necessary to lead an organization successfully through adaptive challenges.

One of the most important principles of adaptive work is “getting on the balcony.” Often leaders are so swept into the field of action that they are no longer able to diagnose problems and understand their roots. Leaders therefore need the ability to step back and to see the different processes as if standing on a balcony in order to see the whole picture. Only then are they able to identify value conflicts and power struggles, recognize patterns of work avoidance, and watch out for dysfunctional system procedures.

The book comprises 23 chapters divided into 5 sections. Each chapter consists of framing ideas and illustrative stories followed by reflection exercises and a low-risk experimental exercise that encourages trying out some ideas in the personal leadership practice. A whole section of the book deals with understanding an organization’s structure, norms and forces, default interpretations and behavior, the diagnosis of adaptive challenges and the political landscape, and the presence or absence of the important qualities of an adaptive organization.

How does adaptive leadership apply to Christian leadership? Its major merit lies in the fact that it helps the reader to differentiate between technical problems and adaptive challenges on the one hand

and the appropriate reaction of authority versus leadership on the other hand. It also offers good diagnostic tools for organizations and gives practical help for the personal development of the leader.

Since Christian leaders do not derive their leadership theory from evolutionary biology but from biblical principles, they will not be able to agree with all the principles this book suggests for bringing about adaptive change. For them change interventions do not build on the past in the first place but on God's plan for the future. Some readers may not agree that "there is no such thing as a dysfunctional organization" (p. 17), since the standard for any Christian organization does not come from the people in that system, its leaders, or the jointly held values, but from outside the system, from the eternal God. Christian leaders might also dispute the notion that the answers for all adaptive changes can be found within the system. In a world of sin and broken relationships—horizontally as well as vertically—Christian leaders find that change often has to come as an intervention from God, because what is needed is not only adaptation, but renewal and a new creation. Also the notion of political thinking (pp. 89-100) at times might be a difficult concept for spiritual leaders.

Personally, I profited from studying Heifetz's theory of adaptive leadership. It is not a reference book for change initiatives but rather a carefully thought-out theory of action which can serve as a foundation for action. Those who are willing to invest time and energy into a careful study and Christian reflection about adaptive leadership will certainly advance in their leadership abilities.

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky are cofounders of Cambridge Leadership Associates; Alexander Grashow is the Managing Director. This international leadership development firm has clients from corporate, nonprofit, and public sectors all over the globe. Heifetz and Linsky have been colleagues and collaborators at the Harvard Kennedy School for over twenty-five years. Grashow has taught leadership in executive education programs at Harvard, New York University, and Duke Corporate Education.

## Related Literature

Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the danger of leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.