

CHAPTER 39

Adaptive Work

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Our language fails us in many aspects of our lives, entrapping us in a set of cultural assumptions like cattle herded by fences into a corral. Gender pronouns, for example, corral us into teaching children that God is a “he,” distancing girls and women from the experience of the divine in themselves.

Our language fails us, too, when we discuss, analyze, and practice leadership. We commonly talk about “leaders” in organizations or politics when we actually mean “people in positions of managerial or political authority.” Although we have confounded leadership with authority in nearly every journalistic and scholarly article written on “leadership” during the last one hundred years, we know intuitively that these two phenomena are distinct when we complain all too frequently in politics and business that “the leadership isn’t exercising any leadership,” by which we actually mean that “people in authority aren’t exercising any leadership.” Whether people with formal, charismatic, or otherwise informal authority actually practice leadership on any given issue at any moment in time ought to remain a separate question answered with wholly different criteria than those used to define a relationship of formal or informal authority. As we know, all too many people are

skilled at gaining authority, and thus a following, but do not then lead.

Moreover, we assume a logical connection between the words *leader* and *follower*; as if this dyad (pair) were an absolute and inherently logical structure. It is not. The most interesting leadership operates without anyone experiencing anything remotely similar to the experience of “following.” Indeed, most leadership mobilizes those people who are opposed or who sit on the fence, in addition to allies and friends. Allies and friends come relatively cheap; the people in opposition have the most to lose in any significant process of change. When mobilized, allies and friends become, not followers, but rather activated participants—employees or citizens who themselves often lead in turn by taking responsibility for tackling tough challenges, often beyond expectations and often beyond their authority. They become partners. When mobilized, opposition and fence-sitters become engaged with the issues, provoked to work through the problems of loss, loyalty, and competence embedded in the change they are challenged to make. Indeed, they may continue to fight, providing an ongoing source of diverse views necessary for the adaptive success of the business or community. Far from becoming “aligned” and far from having any

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Responsibility Shift

Third, adaptive work requires a shift in responsibility from the shoulders of the authority figures and the authority structure to the stakeholders (people with an interest in an outcome) themselves. In contrast to expert problem solving, adaptive work requires a different form of deliberation and a different kind of responsibility taking. In doing adaptive work, responsibility needs to be felt in a far more widespread fashion. At best, an organization would have its members know that there are many technical problems for which looking to authority for answers is appropriate and efficient but that for the adaptive set of challenges, looking primarily to authority for answers becomes self-defeating. When people make the classic error of treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical, they wait for the person in authority to know what to do. He or she then makes a best guess—probably just a guess—while the many sit back and wait to see whether the guess pans out. Frequently enough, when it does not pan out, people get rid of that person in authority and go find another one, all the while operating under the illusion that “if only we had the right ‘leader,’ our problems would be solved.” Progress is impeded by inappropriate dependency, and thus a major task of leadership is the development of responsibility taking by stakeholders themselves.

Fourth, adaptive work requires people to distinguish what is precious and essential from what is expendable within their culture. In cultural adaptation the job is to take the best from history, leave behind that which is no longer serviceable, and through innovation learn ways to thrive in the new environment.

Therefore, adaptive work is inherently conservative as well as progressive. The point of innovation is to conserve what is best from history as the community moves into the future. As in biology, a successful adaptation takes the best from its past set of competencies and loses the DNA that is no longer useful. Thus, unlike many current conceptions of culturally “transforming” processes, many of which are ahistorical—as if one begins all anew—adaptive work, profound as it may be in terms of change, must honor ancestry and history at the same time that it challenges them.

Adaptive work generates resistance in us because adaptation requires us to let go of certain elements of our past ways of working or living, which means to experience loss—loss of competence, loss of reporting relationships,

loss of jobs, loss of traditions, or loss of loyalty to the people who taught us the lessons of our heritage. Thus, an adaptive challenge generates a situation that forces us to make tough tradeoffs. The source of the resistance that people have to change isn't resistance to change per se; it is resistance to loss. People love change when they know it is beneficial. Nobody gives the lottery ticket back when he or she wins. Leadership must contend, then, with the various forms of feared and real losses that accompany adaptive work.

Anchored to the tasks of mobilizing people to thrive in new and challenging contexts, leadership is not simply about change; more profoundly leadership is about identifying that which is worth conserving. It is the conserving of the precious dimensions of our past that makes the pains of change worth sustaining.

Improvisation

Fifth, adaptive work demands experimentation. In biology, the adaptability of a species depends on the multiplicity of experiments that are being run constantly within its gene pool, increasing the odds that in that distributed intelligence some diverse member of the species will have the means to succeed in a new context. Similarly, in cultural adaptation, an organization or community needs to be running multiple experiments and learning fast from these experiments in order to see “which horses to ride into the future.”

Technical problem solving appropriately and efficiently depends on authoritative experts for knowledge and decisive action.

In contrast, dealing with adaptive challenges requires a comfort with not knowing where to go or how to move next. In mobilizing adaptive work from an authority position, leadership takes the form of protecting elements of deviance and creativity in the organization in spite of the inefficiencies associated with those elements. If creative or outspoken people generate conflict, then so be it. Conflict becomes an engine of innovation rather than solely a source of dangerous inefficiency. Managing the dynamic tension between creativity and efficiency becomes an ongoing part of leadership practice for which there exists no equilibrium point at which this tension disappears. Leadership becomes an improvisation, however frustrating it may be to not know the answers.

Sixth, the time frame of adaptive work is markedly different from that of technical work. People need time

to learn new ways—to sift through what is precious from what is expendable and to innovate in ways that enable people to carry forward into the future that which they continue to hold precious from the past. Moses took forty years to bring the children of Israel to the Promised Land, not because it was such a long walk from Egypt, but rather because it took that much time for the people to leave behind the dependent mentality of slavery and generate the capacity for self-government guided by faith in something ineffable. (See Figure 39.1.)

Because people have so much difficulty sustaining prolonged periods of disturbance and uncertainty, people naturally engage in a variety of efforts to restore equilibrium as quickly as possible, even if it means avoiding adaptive work and begging the tough issues. Most forms of adaptive failure are a product of our difficulty in containing prolonged periods of experimentation and the difficult conversations that accompany them.

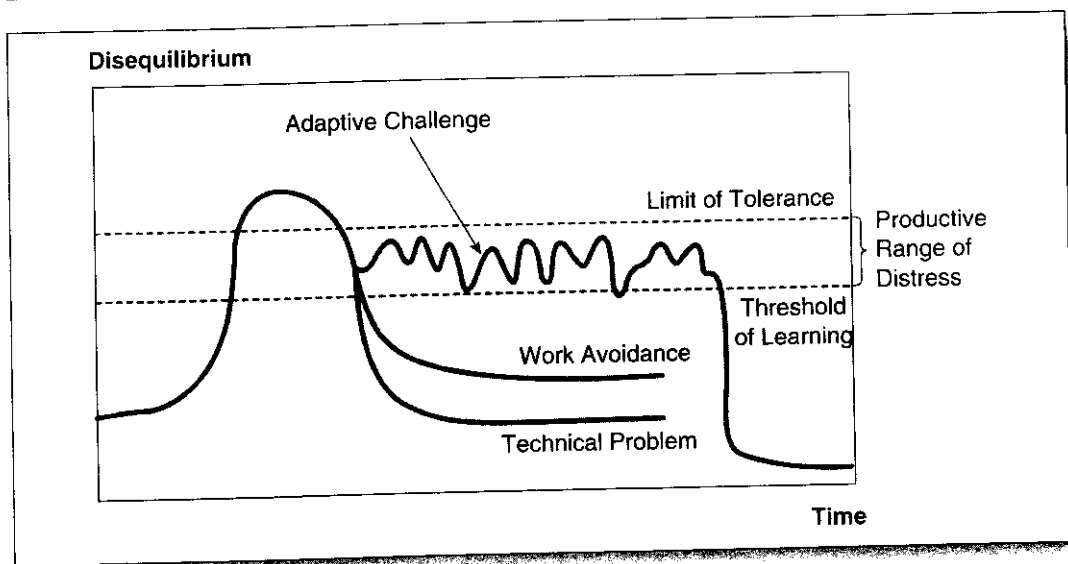
Work avoidance is simply the natural effort to restore a more familiar order, to restore equilibrium. Although many forms of work avoidance operate across cultures and peoples, two common pathways appear to exist: the displacement of responsibility and the diversion of attention. Both pathways work all too well in the short term, even if they leave people more exposed and vulnerable in the medium and long terms. Some common forms of

displacement of responsibility include scapegoating, blaming the persistence of problems on authority, externalizing the enemy, and killing the messenger. Diverting attention can take the form of fake remedies, such as the Golden Calf of the Bible's Book of Exodus; an effort to define problems to fit one's competence; repeated structural adjustments; the faulty use of consultants, committees, and task forces; sterile conflicts and proxy fights ("let's watch the gladiator fight!"); and outright denial.

Seventh, adaptive work is a normative concept. The concept of adaptation arises from scientific efforts to understand biological evolution. Applied to the change of cultures and societies, the concept becomes a useful, if inexact, metaphor. For example, species evolve, whereas cultures learn. Evolution is generally understood by scientists as a matter of chance, whereas societies will often consciously deliberate, plan, and intentionally experiment. Close to our normative concern, biological evolution conforms to laws of survival. Societies, on the other hand, generate purposes beyond survival. The concept of adaptation applied to culture raises the question, "Adapt to what, for what purpose?"

In biology the "objective function" of adaptive work is straightforward: to thrive in new environments. Survival of the self and one's gene-carrying kin defines the direction in which animals adapt. A situation becomes an

Figure 39.1 Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?



Source: Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie.

adaptive challenge because it threatens the capacity of a species to pass on its genetic heritage. Thus, when a species multiplies its own kind and succeeds in passing on its genes, it is said to be “thriving” in its environment.

Thriving is more than coping. Nothing is trivial in biology about adaptation. Some adaptive leaps transform the capacity of a species by sparking an ongoing and profound process of adaptive change that leads to a vastly expanded range of living.

In human societies “thriving” takes on a host of values not restricted to survival of one’s own kind. At times human beings will even trade off their own survival for values such as liberty, justice, and faith. Thus, adaptive work in cultures involves both the clarification of values and the assessment of realities that challenge the realization of those values.

Because most organizations and communities honor a mix of values, the competition within this mix largely explains why adaptive work so often involves conflict. People with competing values engage one another as they confront a shared situation from their own points of view. At its extreme, and in the absence of better methods of social change, the conflict over values can be violent. The U.S. Civil War changed the meaning of union and individual freedom. In 1857 fulfilling the preamble to the Constitutional goal “to insure domestic tranquility” meant the return of escaped slaves to their owners; in 1957 it meant the use of federal troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Some realities threaten not only a set of values beyond survival, but also the very existence of a society if these realities are not discovered and met early on by the value-clarifying and reality-testing functions of that society. In the view of many environmentalists, for example, our focus on the production of wealth rather than co-existence with nature has led us to neglect fragile factors in our ecosystem. These factors may become relevant to us when finally they begin to challenge our central values of health and survival, but by then, we may have paid a high price in damage already done, and the costs of and odds against adaptive adjustment may have increased enormously.

Adaptive work, then, requires us to deliberate on the values by which we seek to thrive and demands diagnostic inquiry into the realities that threaten the realization of those values. Beyond legitimizing a convenient set of assumptions about reality, beyond denying or avoiding the internal contradictions in some of the values we hold

precious, and beyond coping, adaptive work involves proactively seeking to clarify aspirations or develop new ones, and then involves the hard work of innovation, experimentation, and cultural change to realize a closer approximation of those aspirations by which we would define “thriving.”

The normative tests of adaptive work, then, involve an appraisal of both the processes by which orienting values are clarified in an organization or community and the quality of reality testing by which a more accurate rather than convenient diagnosis is achieved. For example, by these tests, serving up fake remedies for our collective troubles by scapegoating and externalizing the enemy, as was done in extreme form in Nazi Germany, might generate throngs of misled supporters who readily grant to charlatans extraordinary authority in the short run, but they would not constitute adaptive work. Nor would political efforts to gain influence and authority by pandering to people’s longing for easy answers constitute leadership. Indeed, misleading people is likely over time to produce adaptive failure.

Further Reading

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