

# Adaptive Leadership: The Leader's Advantage

by **Bill McCollum and Kevin Shea**

*Truly adept leaders know not only how to identify the context they're working in but also how to change their behaviors to match.<sup>1</sup>*

The National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering statistics survey for fiscal years 2015–2017 estimates obligations for federally funded research and development programs and initiatives will exceed \$12 billion in 2017.<sup>2</sup> While this amount appears staggering, few in research and development question the efficacy of the programs to remain technologically competitive in an increasingly complex world. However, new programs, systems, and technologies are not the only variables necessary to address the complexities facing today's leaders. The most critical variable for maximizing the effectiveness of these investments lies in leaders' ability to think and lead adaptively. This article frames contemporary thought of the term "adaptive leadership," addresses ways of framing and understanding complexity, suggests challenges leaders and members face when confronted with adaptive challenges, and recommends leader behaviors and actions necessary for effectively leading organizations in adaptive environments. However, before proceeding one must ensure an understanding of the term "adaptive" in the context of adaptive leadership.

## Introduction to Adaptive Leadership

Peter Northouse addresses adaptive leadership by stating, "...adaptive leadership is about how leaders encourage people to adapt – to face and deal with problems, challenges and changes...

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focuses on the adaptations required of people in response to changing environments.”<sup>3</sup> Northouse draws heavily on the work of Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, who describe adaptive leadership as “...an iterative activity, an ongoing engagement between you and groups of people”<sup>4</sup> and “...the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”<sup>5</sup> Two considerations are key to understanding these descriptions. The first is the necessity for adaptive leadership when addressing the truly complex challenges facing organizations. Heifetz et al. refer to the word “adaptive” in terms of challenges faced by leaders, and they draw a distinct difference between technical and adaptive challenges. They state, “While technical problems may be very complex and critically important...they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Heifetz describes technical challenges as those where solutions lie within the current ways of operating, current expertise is sufficient, authoritative decision-making and standard operating procedures suffice, and culturally informed behaviors are not challenged.<sup>7</sup>

**...Heifetz describes adaptive challenges as those where solutions lie outside the current way of operating, where the gap between the desired state and reality cannot be closed using existing approaches alone...**

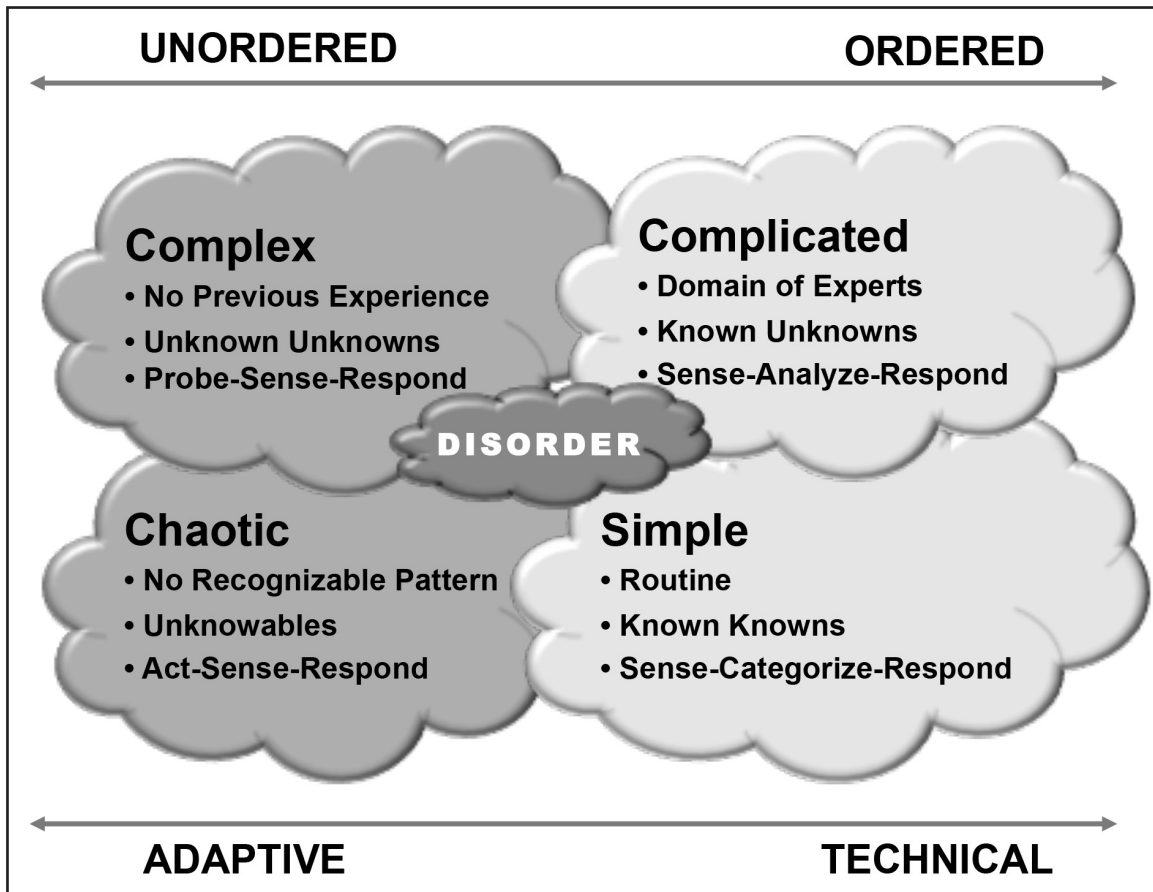
In contrast, Heifetz describes adaptive challenges as those where solutions lie outside the current way of operating, where the gap between the desired state and reality cannot be closed using existing approaches alone, and “...exist when people themselves are the problem and when progress requires retooling of their own ways of thinking and operating.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, adaptive challenges require leaders who understand and recognize complexity, are willing to change behaviors to lead differently, personally learn and develop learning organizations, are comfortable with shifting responsibility to stakeholders, have the courage to experiment, and are patient when addressing complexity. Central to this discussion is a common framing and understanding of complexity.

## Complexity

David Snowden and Mary Boone suggest the Cynefin framework as a means for helping leaders frame their actions when making decisions in environments of varying complexity.<sup>9</sup> Figure 1 provides Snowden and Boone’s five domains of the framework: simple, complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder. However, most diagrams of the Cynefin framework portray the domains as entities with seemingly hard lines, or boundaries, separating each. Figure 1 provides a different perspective as it recognizes there are few problems that fit solely into one given definition or set of circumstances; thus, the use of clouds to represent less certainty of domain boundaries. Further, the diagram includes continuums that incorporate Heifetz et al.’s emphasis on technical and adaptive problems,<sup>10</sup> as well as Snowden and Boone’s emphasis on ordered and unordered conditions. Each of the domains are briefly addressed.

Snowden and Boone’s simple domain represents technical challenges routinely confronting leaders and their organizations. While the challenges may not be easy, they are ordered and have clear relationships between cause and effect. The authors refer to this domain as the known knowns; leaders know what needs to be done, and they know how to do it. Recommended actions for leaders are to simply sense the situation and environment, categorize the situation based upon previous experiences, and respond accordingly with proven processes, procedures, actions and decisions.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 1. Five Domains of the Cynefin Framework.**

The complicated domain represents more difficult problems and situations where problems are still ordered, but leaders may not personally have the requisite knowledge and skills for making decisions. However they know that necessary experts are available to address them. In this domain, challenges increase in ambiguity and the cause and effect relationships are less clear. Additionally, the complicated domain represents the known unknowns; leaders know what needs to be done, but uncertainty exists in how and/or who will address them. Heifetz et al. allude to this when recognizing some challenges may actually have both technical and adaptive characteristics,<sup>12</sup> thus underscoring the importance of depicting the confines of the domains in a less discrete manner.

Snowden and Boone's complex domain

begins to represent the environment described by Heifetz et al.'s adaptive challenges; an environment where the exercise of adaptive leadership becomes essential. Problems in the complex domain present leaders with unordered situations where neither the leader nor members of the organizations have previous experiences in the environment, and where no clear cause and effect relationships exist to provide clarity to the situation. Further, in the complex domain no outside experts exist with the requisite knowledge to address the challenges. The complex domain represents unknown unknowns; leaders have no previous experience with the problem and ideas to move forward, there's no one to turn to for expert knowledge, and leaders are uncertain of types of information needed to start addressing the problems. Because of the uncertain nature

### What's the Problem: Research or Thinking?

After completing the Suez Canal, in the 1880s Frenchman Ferdinand De Lesseps led construction on the largest, most costly single effort ever attempted. He soon found building a 50 mile canal through the uncharted jungles of Panama would challenge both men and equipment in unimaginable ways. His efforts failed when he was unable to solve unexperienced financial, engineering, environmental and health challenges. More specifically, despite initial research efforts on the mosquito as an airborne transmitter of disease, De Lesseps and others ignored these indicators, contributing to the death of over 5,000 of 22,000 workers due to yellow fever.

De Lesseps was not alone. Upon assuming control of the canal project in 1903, U.S. leaders faced similar problems in protecting the health of its estimated 50,000 workers. Contributing was the refusal of Canal Commission and U.S. political leaders to believe mosquitoes carried diseases such as yellow fever and malaria, and believed the mosquito theory would only waste both time and money. Yet, between 1904 and 1913, almost 5,600 workers would die from environmental conditions.

Fortunately, Dr. William C. Gorgas thought differently and stood as an advocate for the eradication of the mosquito to mitigate yellow fever. In contrast to those who believed the theory of mosquito-borne infection as “balderdash”, he remained steadfast that mosquito transmission of disease was a “scientifically determined fact.” In the face of intense opposition, learned differently, took action eliminate breeding grounds, and eventually eradicated the threat of mosquito-transmitted diseases in the Canal Zone.

It seems inconceivable today the minds of men could be so closed. Dr. Gorgas' challenges underscore the importance of thinking differently. His experience also suggests ideas have a period of extrinsic incubation, particularly if they are contrary to what appears as common sense.<sup>16</sup>

### Narrative 1.

of the complex domain, the framework suggests leaders must probe to gain more information, sense and make sense of new information to build awareness and understanding, and respond with appropriate actions from both leader and organizational member perspectives. One can easily see how this environment would require different leader actions and behaviors.

Snowden and Boone provide two additional domains: chaotic and disorder. The authors describe the chaotic context as, “...searching for the right answers is pointless: The relationships between cause and effect are impossible...and no manageable pattern exists – only turbulence.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, chaotic represents the domain of the unknowables. Here, conditions are so unique and different that leaders have no previous frame of reference, no idea of the information needed, and no idea of how to find it. Understandably, when these conditions exist the best recommendation for leaders is to, “staunch the bleeding”<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, it also represents conditions that will, “...be the best place for leaders to impel innovation.”<sup>15</sup> One can easily see how conditions in the chaotic domain take complexity to higher

levels, as well as place significantly greater demands upon leaders.

If the chaotic domain represents the greatest conceivable challenges, disorder represents the scariest scenarios for leaders. Here, events are in such a state of disequilibrium that leaders can make no sense of the events, much less their causes or ways forward.

Narrative 1 above illustrates how building the Panama Canal presented multiple levels of complexity and costs. Construction of the canal in the late 1800s and early 1900s illustrates adaptive problems and Cynefin's domains. Ferdinand De Lesseps is credited for leading the construction of the Suez Canal in the late 1800s. Since the Suez was designed as a sea-level waterway, the challenges he faced were complicated, however engineering skills and processes existed to overcome the challenges. Further, although the desert conditions presented numerous environment problems, leaders and their workforce were up to the task with only minor adjustments to the status quo.

Unfortunately, when De Lesseps assumed

leadership of building a canal in Panama to link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, conditions were anything but routine. Not only was Panama's terrain not conducive to a sea-level canal that challenged his existing engineering techniques and processes (most of which he never solved), his workers were decimated by health issues - yellow fever among the most deadly.

After De Lesseps' failure, the United States assumed control of the canal project and, not surprisingly, was confronted with the same engineering and health challenges. Focusing on the health issues, although medical research in Cuba had previously linked yellow fever and malaria with the mosquito, few chose to believe it. Worse yet, they accepted untold deaths as the cost of doing business in a jungle environment, and did little to address systemic causes. As the narrative's title asks, "What's the problem: research or thinking?"

## Leader Challenges

Cynefin's complex domain suggests the need for leaders to probe, sense and respond. Thus, a logical question emerges: what are the implications and considerations for leaders when exercising adaptive leadership? Heifetz et al. provide suggestions. The first is differentiating between leadership and authority. Most associate leadership with "...authoritative expertise, and...holding a high position in a political or organizational hierarchy."<sup>17</sup> Northouse suggests this orientation as leading through legitimate sources "Associated with having status or formal job authority."<sup>18</sup> However, effective adaptive leadership requires an inclusive approach to leadership. Because of the nature of a complex environment, it requires more than mere positional authority, as well as a fundamental belief that "...anyone can exhibit leadership."<sup>19</sup> It also demands a willingness to learn.

Heifetz states, "...adaptive challenges demand learning. An adaptive challenge exists when the people themselves are the problem

and when progress requires a retooling...of their own ways of thinking and operating."<sup>20</sup> While most organizations would cringe at the thought of not learning, that doesn't necessarily mean they embrace it. Some suggest hierarchical organizations may be the least receptive to new learning due to well-entrenched cultures. Writing specifically to militaries in general, British Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely suggests variables such as a tendency toward anti-intellectualism and the inability to accept and accommodate criticism as particularly important impediments to learning.<sup>21</sup> However, do not think militaries are unique in this regard. An unwillingness to learn represents a major hurdle for all organizations, hierarchical or not. This leads to shifting leadership responsibilities.

**...hierarchical organizations may be the least receptive to new learning due to well-entrenched cultures.**

As mentioned earlier, Snowden and Boone suggest the complex domain presents leaders with situations where neither the leader nor members of the organizations have previous experience, and where no clear cause and effect relationships exist to provide clarity.<sup>22</sup> Understandably, this environment presents unique challenges to leaders accustomed to providing directions to their organizations based upon their experience and expertise. Heifetz suggests an adaptive environment requires leaders to shift responsibility to the stakeholders, and requires "... a different form of deliberation and a different way of taking responsibility. In doing adaptive work, responsibility needs to be felt in a far more widespread fashion."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the exercise of adaptive leadership also places greater demands on junior leaders, possibly accustomed to waiting for directives from the top before acting, as well as senior

## **Iraq: Technical or Adaptive?**

In 2003 the U.S. invaded Iraq on the basis of poor intelligence and even poorer planning at the national level. Intelligence was a house of cards. The Administration was determined to go to war with Iraq. It was stated that if inspectors find weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), that would mean Saddam was cheating based on UN mandates. Conversely, if no WMDs were found it meant Saddam was hiding them; either way the U.S. was going to war.

These conditions led to distrust among the civilian and military leadership at the highest levels of the Department of Defense (DoD). For example, when queried, the Army Chief of Staff suggested on Capitol Hill that the postwar occupation force should be on the order of 300,000 Soldiers to guarantee safety and security within Iraq. However, both the Secretary of Defense and his deputy downplayed this number citing a figure of 30,000, while excoriating the Army Chief in the press and on Capitol Hill. This bothered many, as most knew they lacked necessary information and experience to support such a decision with such “rock hard” certainty. They (DoD) asked for expert advice, they received it, and then they ignored it.

Postwar interagency planning also stumbled in early 2003. In February 2003, the head of post-war Iraq planning convened a meeting of government experts to discuss postwar Iraq. The session was notable because it was the sole occasion before the war when all factions within the U.S. government met; with over 155 attendees, including foreign representatives. This was the first time all the interagency organizations sat down and discussed in detail activities each had in the postwar efforts. Combat operations were initiated on the morning of 20 March 2003.

A 2005 Rand Study surmised that postwar reconstruction was only generally addressed, largely because that task was not considered difficult.<sup>24</sup>

## **Narrative 2.**

leaders willing to develop junior leaders with capacity to accept increased responsibilities.

To illustrate, U.S. leaders’ actions and decisions prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as described in Narrative 2 above effectively illustrate gaps in exercising adaptive leadership. While criticism of U.S. civilian and military senior leaders continue to this day, it is clear the real complexity of the problem was misread from the start. Did leaders frame the problems as technical or adaptive? The argument still rages and the decisions of those leaders are still debated. However, 14 years later the cost to U.S. lives and treasure continues to increase. Why wasn’t necessary change recognized and implemented? Adaptive leadership’s importance to affecting change may hold part of the answer.

Inherent in adaptive leadership is leading necessary change in organizations and overcoming resistance. In overcoming resistance, a major concern for leaders during periods of change is, “to distinguish between what is precious and essential and what is expendable within their culture.”<sup>25</sup> Naturally

this presents another significant challenge for leaders, as “adaptive work generates resistance in people because adaptation requires us to let go of certain elements of our past ways of working or living, which means to experience loss....”<sup>26</sup> Thus, “The source of resistance that people have to change is not resistance to change per se; it is resistance to loss.”<sup>27</sup> Adaptive leader behaviors can help mitigate member dissonance when retaining the essential elements of organizational culture while jettisoning the expendable, all while minimizing the perceptions of loss by members. However, there is one hidden element of an organization’s culture that may have the greatest impact; tolerance to mistakes.

Adaptive leadership, by necessity, requires a tolerance to mistakes. The Cynefin framework suggests in the complex domain the initial leader action required is to probe. Understandably, “probe” means to take chances; to experiment. Heifetz states, “...dealing with adaptive challenges requires a comfort with not knowing where to go or how to move next.”<sup>28</sup> This is not the domain for a zero defects mindset. Mistakes



## **Zika: Today's Adaptive Challenge**

The recent outbreak of the mosquito-borne Zika virus well illustrates a contemporary problem ripe for adaptive leadership. As described by National Geographic, Zika is "...a virus unknown to most people until recent days... and now suddenly the subject of somber warnings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, which announced on Thursday that the virus is 'spreading explosively.'"

Although experts know Zika's tragic effects on pregnant mothers and their babies, and that it is primarily spread by the *Aedes aegypti*, commonly referred to as the yellow fever mosquito, other contributing factors are not so well known. Rather, "This is a story of biogeography as well as medicine and public health, and of the consequences of human travel and transport." In short, easy answers do not exist, and technical solutions alone will not suffice to control mitigate Zika's spreading impact.

National Geographic concludes by stating, "This is not something that is merely happening to us, a cosmic misfortune, a one-off event over which we must get up on our hind legs and howl at our governments for insufficient diligence. It is, on the contrary, a result of things we do as a modern society—traveling, transporting people and things speedily around the globe, having babies to the point where there are more than seven billion of us on this planet, so that we now represent an irresistible resource for any virus that can adapt to preying upon us—and it's part of a longer, broader pattern."<sup>33</sup>

### **Narrative 3.**

and experimentation are inextricably linked. Further, adaptive challenges require leaders to tolerate disagreement, as "Conflict becomes an engine of innovation, rather than solely a source of dangerous inefficiency."<sup>29</sup> Leonard and Straus refer to creative abrasion as, "different approaches to grate against one another in a productive process..."<sup>30</sup> However, this abrasion, or conflict, has the potential to become a greater obstacle when considering the importance of time.

Leaders must understand adaptive challenges require time and patience to navigate. Whereas a top-driven "I want it now" leadership mentality may work when confronting technical challenges, it will not when confronted with an adaptive challenge. When reviewing the above discussions on new learning, developing leaders and shifting responsibility, distinguishing cultural imperatives, and experimentation, it becomes apparent these transformations will not occur overnight. They take time, and they require patience. Compounding the necessity for more time and patience is a requirement to not only interpret mind shifts from the technical to the adaptive, but also shifts from the benign to the conflictual, and the individual to the systemic.<sup>31</sup> These new interpretations require

time and patience not only from the leader, but also from organizational members. Heifetz writes, "Because it is so difficult for people to sustain prolonged periods of disturbance and uncertainty, human beings naturally engage in a variety of efforts to restore equilibrium as quickly as possible, even if it means avoiding adaptive work and begging off the tough issues."<sup>32</sup> This understanding further underscores the importance of effective adaptive behaviors in truly complex and adaptive environments.

### **Adaptive Behaviors and Activities**

As described in Narrative 3 above, the Zika virus' explosive spread throughout the world provides a problem ripe for the exercise of adaptive leadership. While many have addressed various means of identifying and categorizing complex and ambiguous problems, few have provided suggestions for addressing leader behaviors necessary for organizations to not only cope with new environments, but also succeed and thrive in those environments. Fortunately, forward-thinking organizations such as the Kansas Leadership Center,<sup>34</sup> and authors such as Northouse provide suggested intervention behaviors.<sup>35</sup> Which of the following behaviors and activities are essential for addressing Zika?

### **Battle of Ia Drang: Getting on the Balcony**

Hal Moore believed, “you had to soak up firsthand information for your instincts to operate accurately.”<sup>40</sup> This led him to lead from the front. However, this belief was sorely put to the test in the highly complex battle for the Ia Drang Valley.

As the battle’s tempo increased, Moore was standing in the open coordinating troop movements, air strikes and artillery, and had to resist the temptation to get involved in the direct fire fight surrounding him. As he was yelling, waving, hand-signaling and talking on the radio he felt his sergeant major’s hand on his shoulder while shouting at him, “Sir, if you don’t find some cover you’re going to go down-and if you go down, we all go down”<sup>41</sup>

#### **Narrative 4.**

Given the urgency of the problem, the first may present the most difficult for leaders.

#### ***Get on the Balcony.***

The first behavior of “getting on the balcony”<sup>36</sup> may appear difficult at first as it runs counter to the “leading from the front, hands-on approach” espoused throughout leadership careers. However, the behavior and discipline to do so are essentials to adaptive leadership. Northouse leans heavily on the work of Heifetz et al. and writes, “‘getting on the balcony’ is a metaphor for stepping out of the fray and finding perspective in the midst of a challenging situation.”<sup>37</sup> (See Narrative 4 above.)

Exercising over-watch behaviors outside the noise and confusion of the situation provides senior leaders much-needed reflection to gain big-picture awareness and understanding, as well as help to “...identify value and power conflicts among people, ways they may be avoiding work, and other dysfunctional reactions to change.”<sup>38</sup> However, just because a leader takes an over-watch position does not mean the leader disassociates from the challenge; quite the opposite. Instead, “getting on the balcony” allows perspective necessary for exercising the second activity: identify adaptive challenges.<sup>39</sup>

#### ***Identify Adaptive Challenges.***

“Identify adaptive challenges” appears intuitive given earlier discussions. However, the difficulty lies in tendencies for leaders to misinterpret situations where initially perceived technical challenges are actually adaptive.

Snowden and Boone suggest one of the greatest pitfalls for leaders is interpreting a problem as routine, when in reality it deserves much greater attention. They state, “...when things appear to be going smoothly, leaders often become complacent. If the context changes a leader is likely to miss what is happening and react too late... this shift can bring about catastrophic failure.”<sup>42</sup> Misdiagnosis is especially dangerous when addressing challenges related to organizational members. Northouse writes, “When people’s beliefs, attitudes, and values are affected by a problem, leaders need to take an adaptive approach.”<sup>43</sup> This holds especially true if organizational changes strike at core beliefs, emotions and required learning of the organization’s members.<sup>44</sup> This leads to the third activity and associated behavior: regulate distress.

#### ***Regulate Distress.***

Stress exists in all organizations, and rightfully so. Every individual or organization requires stress to achieve productivity. The term eustress recognizes this. Derived from the Greek word eustress consists of “eu,” meaning well or good, plus the word stress. Quick, Quick, Nelson, and Hurrell define eustress it as, “the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response.”<sup>45</sup> Eustress contributes to positive inputs and variables that combine to contribute to success. However, stress can also have a down side. Quick et al. define distress as “the degree of physiological, psychological,



and behavioral deviation from an individual's healthy functioning."<sup>46</sup> While many variables create and contribute to distress, hopefully leaders themselves are not the primary source. McCollum and Broadbudd suggest leaders have the potential to unintentionally inject harmful stress into their organizations through their level of emotional intelligence, leadership styles, and application of power and control.<sup>47</sup>

Northouse provides leader actions to help regulate distress: creating a holding environment, providing direction and productive norms, and ensuring protection and reducing conflict. Adaptive leaders exercise most of these steps well before finding themselves facing true adaptive problems. For example, holding environments are established long before leaders and organizations find themselves in adaptive situations. A positive holding environment requires a culture conducive to growth and a climate of trust where, "people feel safe in tackling problems, but not so much they can avoid the problem."<sup>48</sup> In an adaptive leadership context, a holding environment is described as, "...structural, procedural, or virtual space formed by cohesive relationships between people... the space where adaptive work plays out."<sup>49</sup> The concept of a positive holding environment is not unique, however its benefits are essential during periods of increased stress caused by turbulent, adaptive situations.

Direction and productive norms are also established well in advance. The concept of direction aligns well with Northouse's transformational discussion of vision. Organizational vision provides, "...an image of an attractive, realistic, and believable future."<sup>50</sup> Another benefit of vision is it allows, "... people within the organization to learn how they fit in with the overall direction of the organization...."<sup>51</sup> While concepts such as vision and direction appear long-term in nature, they provide even greater value in stressful adaptive situations, as even the best of organizations

experience at least temporary dissonance caused by unknown, unclear, and competing goals.<sup>52</sup>

Along with direction comes expectations in the form of productive norms. Norms provide, "... rules of behavior that are established and shared by group members and are not easily changed."<sup>53</sup> Productive norms provide needed consistency for members during periods of adaptive stress, as well as established benchmarks for leaders when navigating adaptive issues under changing conditions.

**...leaders have a responsibility to regulate, or protect their organizations from the rate of adaptive change.**

Finally, protection and conflict management are each important considerations for regulating distress. While adaptive change is necessary, leaders have a responsibility to regulate, or protect their organizations from the rate of adaptive change. Too much, or too little, can have adverse implications. Similarly, conflict management remains a responsibility for leaders during periods of adaptive change. As mentioned earlier, Leonard's "creative abrasion" is necessary for creativity and innovation, as well as to spur and foster growth. Conversely, unmanaged conflict can understandably add to organizational distress.

### ***Maintain Disciplined Attention.***

Even in the best of organizations, Northouse suggests members may shy away from adaptive work. Since change is inherent in adaptive conditions, leaders must understand, "...people naturally do not want to confront change, particularly when it is related to changing their beliefs, values, or behaviors." This is especially important when organizational members are in a state of unanticipated disequilibrium. Their reluctance to change places unique demands on

leaders. When leading in this environment, to maintain disciplined attention leaders must realize there is no “one size fits all” leadership approach. While the purpose of this discussion is not to address all possible leadership styles, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee provide six styles commonly found among executive leaders; visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and commanding.<sup>55</sup> When applied correctly, each possesses utility given the environment and circumstances. However, one or two may not suffice to maintain disciplined attention. Instead, Goleman’s research concludes, “Leaders who have mastered four or more - especially the authoritative, democratic, affiliative, and coaching styles - have the very best climate and business performance.”<sup>56</sup> This conclusion may have even greater importance in highly complex environments requiring adaptive leadership to maintain disciplined attention.

### ***Give the Work Back to the People.***

While members of organizations naturally want guidance and direction, Northouse writes, “...too much leadership and authority can be debilitating, decrease people’s confidence to solve problems on their own, and suppress their creative capacities.”<sup>57</sup> Further, not only can too much leader control contribute to harmful stress,<sup>58</sup> it can also create an overdependence on leaders inhibiting their ability to do adaptive work. Instead of limiting delegation to others, Northouse suggests adaptive leaders should say, “This is your work – how do you want to handle it?”<sup>59</sup> In essence, giving the work back to the members contributes to empowerment necessary for commitment. However, in a true environment of empowerment, creativity often originates from unusual sources.

### ***Protect Leadership Voices from Below.***

This behavior means listening to and protecting thoughts and ideas from all sources, regardless of rank, power, position, or social acceptance. Leonard and Strauss allude to this when suggesting, “Look for the ugly duckling” when seeking creativity.<sup>60</sup> Adaptive work requires members who think differently. Whereas traditional thinkers may be well-suited for contributing to technical solutions, they may be ill-suited for the out-of-the-ordinary adaptive problems requiring creativity. By not protecting the unusual voices, regardless of rank or status, leaders may deprive the organization and themselves from creative minds with the capacity to excel in addressing adaptive problems.

## **Conclusion**

Historical examples in Panama and Iraq illustrate leader deficiencies in thinking and leading adaptively, and the jury is still out on Zika. Adaptive problems require leaders comfortable with leading and making decisions in highly complex environments, environments that require both survival and improvement. To do so, they must seek to understand and recognize adaptive problems, explore new behaviors and lead differently, personally learn and develop learning organizations, include all members in leading, experiment, and exercise patience when addressing complexity. If understood and well executed through effective behaviors and actions, adaptive leadership will make a difference. Moreover, investments in research and development will never reach their full potential without leaders capable of leading and navigating through the future’s uncharted complexities. To do so, adaptive leadership may well represent the leader’s advantage. **IAJ**

## NOTES

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