HARVARD BUSINESS Press

Diagnose the Adaptive Challenge

Understanding the Human Dimensions of Change

Buy the book:
Amazon
Barnes & Noble
HarvardBusiness.org

Diagnose the Adaptive Challenge

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES ARE difficult because their solutions require people to change their ways. Unlike known or routine problem solving for which past ways of thinking, relating, and operating are sufficient for achieving good outcomes, adaptive work demands three very tough, human tasks: figuring out what to conserve from past practices, figuring out what to discard from past practices, and inventing new ways that build from the best of the past.

Many people apply solutions that have worked in other situations in the past but fail to take sufficiently into account the value-laden complexity of the new problem situation. The complexity is not just analytical complexity in the way that difficult economics or engineering problems have uncertainty and complexity associated with them. They have human complexity because the problems themselves cannot be abstracted from the people who are part of the problem scenario itself. So the analysis must take into account the human dimensions of the changes required, the human costs, paces of adjustment, tolerances for conflict, uncertainty, risks and losses of various sorts, and the resilience of the culture, and network of authority and lateral relationships that will need to backstop the tensions and pains of change.

The failure to take into account the diagnosis of the human aspects of adaptive challenges, and the tendency to treat the diagnostic task

like any other analytical, expert task that can be separated from the cultural and political human dimensions of the situation, is a primary cause of low implementation rates, whether of doctors' exercise and diet regimens for patients; brilliant public policy analysis performed in universities, think tanks, and government agencies; or well-considered strategic plans developed by the major business consulting firms.

Separating a situation's technical elements from its adaptive elements, listening for clues in what people are saying about the problem, and looking for adaptive challenge archetypes can help.

Determine the Technical and Adaptive Elements

Leadership begins, then, with the diagnostic work of separating a problem's technical elements from its adaptive elements. The task is to appreciate, value, and take in what the experts say, but then go beyond their filters to take into account the cultural and political human requirements of tangible progress. Anybody operating with a theory of leadership that assumes that experts know what is best, and that then the leadership problem is basically a sales problem in persuasion, is in our experience doomed at best to selling partial solutions at high cost.

Adaptive challenges are typically grounded in the complexity of values, beliefs, and loyalties rather than technical complexity and stir up intense emotions rather than dispassionate analysis. For these reasons, organizations often avoid addressing the value-laden aspects and try to get through the issue with a technical fix. For example, we have worked with health-care organizations that have tried to contain costs by introducing new technology, rather than looking at the highly valued processes and procedures that contribute to the problem. Typically, the new technology has created its own set of adaptive issues (e.g., medical personnel who do not want to give up face-to-face patient contact in favor of e-mail) and has not produced the desired cost savings. One way you know that there is an adaptive challenge facing your organization or community is that the problem persists even after a series of attempted technical fixes.

But even when people feel a genuine interest in naming the adaptive challenge, doing so is difficult. People are enmeshed in their defaults, and it's difficult to gain the balcony perspective needed to more completely

define the problem. Attempts to describe the situation can lead to one or more of the following stories:

- *Where's Waldo?* Presenters tell a long, complicated story about the problem situation and its history, but the story makes no mention of their own roles, interests, stakes, or contributions to the problem.

- *Community of jerks.* The story goes something like this: "If all the jerks I work with would just shape up or get out of the way or agree with me or do their jobs or do what I say . . . we wouldn't have this problem."

- *End world hunger.* The story is that the problem is so big, so important, and so noble that no one can be faulted for taking it on and failing.

- *Breakfast of champions.* The story is that the organization has a huge, incredibly difficult challenge that it has already solved.

How do you know whether you and your team are confronting an adaptive challenge? Look for two characteristic signals: a cycle of failure and a persistent dependence on authority.

A Cycle of Failure

The most common leadership failure stems from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges. Authorities make this mistake because they misinterpret or simplify the problem, fail to see how the organizational landscape has changed, or prefer a "solution" that will avoid disruption or distress in the organization. Sometimes throwing a technical fix at the problem will solve a piece of it and provide a diversion from the tougher issue, though only temporarily.

Understandably, people gravitate toward technical solutions, especially those that have worked in the past, because they reduce uncertainty and are easier to apply. The tendency will often persist even when the evidence of failure is clear: "Let's try it again, this time with more enthusiasm and attention." (Remember the old saw, often attributed to Albert Einstein, that defines insanity as trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result?)

These failure cycles can unfold over short or long time frames, depending on the nature of the problem and the applied technical solution. It is also quite difficult to see these cycles in real time, without the benefit of hindsight. You have to get on the balcony and look for indicators early on and midstream, which is particularly hard to do when you think you've found a painless way to move forward. "A Failure Cycle at Work" gives an example.

A Failure Cycle at Work

A retail company that sold mostly to U.S. federal agencies expanded its territory beyond Washington, D.C., to New York. The field staff had a difficult time selling the product under the company guidelines that had been developed for D.C. As was the custom, they wrote a memo outlining the situation, a friendly e-mail addressed to corporate headquarters and discussing how the New York metro market was different. They got no response. There was no change in the company's policies or practices. And no improvement in New York.

The staff wrote a longer, more detailed e-mail that took a tougher-sounding stance. Still nothing changed. Then they wrote a really harsh e-mail. That produced a response: a key person on the field staff was fired.

The increasingly aggressive e-mails did not help corporate headquarters adapt to a new reality. It was easier for corporate to fire the "troublemaker" from the field staff than to treat the New York initiative as an adaptive challenge that needed to be addressed.

ON THE BALCONY

- Think of a problem you have tried (and failed) to fix multiple times. What solution have you attempted to use? What story have you been telling to explain why the problem remains unfixed?

- Identify a major challenge facing your organization. Which elements of the challenge are technical, and which are adaptive? Which are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable at first glance? Consider the relative degree of difficulty you are facing in trying to manage

the technical versus the adaptive elements of the challenge you have identified.

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- Meet one-on-one with each member of your team. Ask each person to name the most pressing adaptive challenge confronting the team. Ask each to then tell a story about why the problem has not yet been addressed. Videotape each story, and then watch the team's "film shorts" together as a group. Discuss what you are seeing, and explore the advantages and limitations of the current ways of thinking expressed in the stories.

Dependence on Authority

From the moment humans are born, they turn to those in authority to provide answers, comfort, sustenance, and safety. Their first concern as newborns is to find the milk supply and then to figure out how to keep it flowing. Babies do whatever is necessary to make that happen: laugh, cry, smile, or whine. As with other mammals, this dependence on authority is hardwired into human DNA. Teenagers develop more complex and nuanced relationships with parents, teachers, coaches, and other authority figures. But even rebellious teenagers and otherwise self-sufficient adults often look again to authorities to provide direction, protection, and order when problems arise.

Holding authority figures responsible for causing and/or fixing organizational problems makes sense when it's a technical problem that fits their authoritative expertise. But what happens when an adaptive challenge lurks beneath the surface? Authority figures typically try to meet these challenges just as if they were technical problems because that is what people expect of them, and that's also what they've come to expect of themselves. Usually, they think that's what it means to be the "go to" person. But authorities cannot solve an adaptive challenge by issuing a directive or bringing together a group of experts, because the solutions to adaptive problems lie in the new attitudes, competencies, and coordination of the people with the problem

itself. Because the problem lies in people, the solution lies in them, too. So the work of addressing an adaptive challenge must be done by the people connected to the problem. And those in authority must mobilize people to do this hard work rather than try to solve the problem for them.

We have earlier identified characteristics of adaptive challenges. Each of the characteristics is a flag or a signal for diagnosis; table 5-1 connects the characteristics with a social flag that can give you a starting point for your diagnostic work.

A Basic Diagnostic Framework

Diagnosing an adaptive challenge is a challenge in itself. At best it requires some of the skills we are discussing in this part plus a healthy dose of willingness to step into the unknown. That is why reality testing is so important. But there are a series of questions that we have found useful for you to use in framing this piece of work:

- What is the mission or purpose of the organization or group facing the challenge?

TABLE 5-1

Identifying a primarily adaptive challenge

Concept	Identifying flag
Persistent gap between aspirations and reality.	The language of complaint is used increasingly to describe the current situation.
Responses within current repertoire inadequate.	Previously successful outside experts and internal authorities unable to solve the problem.
Difficult learning required.	Frustration and stress manifest. Failures more frequent than usual. Traditional problem-solving methods used repeatedly, but without success.
New stakeholders across boundaries need to be engaged.	Rounding up the usual suspects to address the issue has not produced progress.
Longer time frame necessary.	Problem festers or reappears after short-term fix is applied.
Disequilibrium experienced as sense of crisis starting to be felt.	Increasing conflict and frustration generate tension and chaos. Willingness to try something new begins to build as urgency becomes widespread.

- Does the current challenge emerge from changing values or priorities within the organization or changing conditions externally?

- What are the adaptive aspects and the technical aspects of this challenge?

- Where am I in the organization, and what is my perspective on the challenge?

- Who are the relevant parties to the challenge, and what are their perspectives?

- Where does the conflict emerge—at the level of orienting values and mission, or at the level of objectives, strategy, and tasks?

- Are there internal contradictions, breaks in the linkage that ideally should coherently connect the orienting values and mission of the organization through its strategy, goals, objectives, and action plans down to the concrete level of its operations close to the ground?

- To test ways to frame the adaptive work, start at high levels of abstraction, at the level of orienting purpose and values, where it is likely that most of the relevant parties agree. Then ask, "What would it take to do that?" to get down to the next lower level of abstraction. Keep asking that question, getting more and more specific, until the conflicts begin to emerge. Then frame the work at the lowest level of abstraction where people agree just above the level where the conflict begins to emerge.

- What work avoidance mechanisms might have been operating to control the conflict and maintain the equilibrium?

- What authority and resources do I have to manage the organization and the environment? How well positioned am I to intervene? What assumptions am I making here that might be constraining me?

- What strategies have I tried? What happened? What strategies have I thought of but been unwilling to try? Why? What strategies might work that I am unwilling to even consider? Again, what assumptions am I making that might be constraining my imagination of possible interventions?

ON THE BALCONY

- Choose an adaptive challenge your organization currently faces, and identify the people who have been involved to date in trying to solve it. Who are they? What degree of authority do they possess? How effective have they been so far? Brainstorm ideas about others who should get involved in the problem because they are part of the problem, but have not been drawn into the process yet.

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- Over the next week, look for signs of dependence on authority figures to address adaptive challenges in your organization. Look for where people are asking their senior authorities what to do rather than make more of their own decisions and run more of their own experiments. At the end of the week, meet with your team, name the signs you have noted, and ask team members to add to your list before you collectively try to dig into any aspects of the adaptive challenge itself.

Listen to the Song Beneath the Words

To identify the adaptive challenges confronting an organization, look beyond what people are saying about them. We call this listening to the song beneath the words. There is so much more data than just the actual words being said. Look for the body language, eye contact, emotion, energy. For example, pay as much attention to what is *not* being said as you do to what *is* being said. If people around you are focusing their stories on team dynamics but not on how to produce the outcome, that may indicate there is a problem with being accountable for the outcome. Also watch for behaviors that seem at odds with people's statements and with company policies. For instance, look for unusual factions or alliances as well as informal authority relationships that differ from the organizational chart. These may indicate where informal authority within the system is placed. Finally, notice whether there are any

disproportionate reactions to proposals regarding possible solutions to the problem. A response that seems out of scale with the suggested idea or initiative is a strong sign that something else is going on, something more than a simple solution to this one issue.

ON THE BALCONY

- Think about the formal and informal interactions you have had recently with your boss to address an adaptive challenge or other problem. Try to identify the song beneath your boss's words. What story might your boss be telling others to convey who she is or what she is already doing to solve the challenge? What would be her version of the encounter with you? Ask yourself what steps you could take or data you could collect or observe that might confirm or challenge your hypothesis regarding what your boss's song is about. Try to discover the people tugging at her sleeves and talking in her ear. What stakes and loyalties do they represent to her?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- During your next retreat or staff meeting, ask members of your team to write a sentence or two expressing the song of each other participant. That is, how does each person wish to be seen by the others? For example, we have a colleague who always usefully sings a purpose song: "Why are we doing this? What is our mission?" Reading others' descriptions will give everyone the opportunity to understand that they may be communicating unintended messages or may be overplaying a message.

Four Adaptive Challenge Archetypes

Adaptive challenges come in many shapes and forms. Often, they represent complex shifts in the organizational landscape (such as changes in technology, customer preferences, or market dynamics) that require a complex response. We have seen four basic patterns that are particularly

common. Usually these overlap in any setting, and by familiarizing your-
self with these archetypes, you can more easily identify and begin to
diagnose the adaptive challenges facing your own organization. The four
archetypes outlined will help you distinguish a complex, primarily tech-
nical problem from a complex, primarily adaptive challenge, allowing
you to marshal the right resources and strategy.

Archetype 1: Gap Between Espoused Values and Behavior

How you behave can at times differ from what you say you value and
believe about yourself. For example, our friend Harold thinks of him-
self as someone who wants to end world hunger. Yet when he looks
back over the past year to see how he has invested his time and energy,
he realizes that, in actuality, he has done little to mitigate the problem.
A CEO we know named Alice always tells her family, and us, that she is
committed to balancing her nonwork obligations with her professional
duties. But when she steps back and compares how much time she is
spending at the office or on business trips versus at home with her fam-
ily, she realizes the scales are tipped heavily toward work. Roberto, a
member of the management team at a professional services firm,
assured us and his employees that a key part of his job is to help them
develop their professional skills. But when he analyzed how much
effort he really put into activities such as giving them stretch assign-
ments and coaching them, he saw that he had actually done little in the
way of developing his people. In all three examples, there's a gap
between the person's espoused values and his or her behavior.

   After Alexander and his wife, Yasuko, had their first child, our col-
league Jeff Lawrence advised him, "Worry not that your child listens to
you; worry most that they watch you." Jeff was riffing on the old saw
"Actions speak louder than words." And research shows that the human
brain responds more to visual cues (including what a person is doing)
than to auditory cues (such as what they're saying they intend to do).

   Just as individuals can have a gap between what they say they value
and how they actually behave, so can organizations. Why? Closing that
gap might well be painful, traumatic, impossible, or disruptive. And mak-
ing a long list of "core values" (such as "treating one another with utmost
respect," "appreciating differences," "putting the customer first," and
"making the world a better place") makes people in the organization feel

good about themselves and their enterprise, even if they are actually doing little beyond the bare minimum to live those values.

In many organizations, particularly often in large professional services firms, there is a gap between the organization's espoused values and its actual behavior when senior authorities advocate collaborative behavior but reward individual performance. Operating across boundaries to break down the silos will not be achieved just by telling people at staff meetings they should do it. Closing that gap is a difficult adaptive challenge because people in the organization have been successful through their patterns of behavior and will want to continue to do what earned them success, especially when they still are recognized and rewarded for doing so.

Individuals and organizations alike come face-to-face with their real priorities when the gap between their espoused values and their behavior can no longer be ignored. You know whether you and your company really care about something when that value collides with preferred behavior. "Closing the Gap in Civil Rights" shows an example from American history.

Closing the Gap in Civil Rights

Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights initiative pushed Americans to face up to a yawning gap between their espoused values and their actual behavior. When King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 and delivered his renowned speech, he was giving voice not just to his own dream but to America's: "I . . . have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." That dream had first been articulated by the nation's founders (even though some owned slaves) and was expressed powerfully again in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The country was dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal. And by giving this dream such powerful language, King made it come alive. His work on behalf of civil rights for African Americans forced people to acknowledge the contradiction between the espoused, shared dream of equal opportunity and the reality of segregation and racism in daily life. The disturbing images of racist conflicts depicted on television brought that contradiction home, literally. People could no longer ignore the fact that the country was not living up to its most cherished values.

ON THE BALCONY

- Think of a gap between an espoused value and an actual behavior that currently exists in your organization. In what way does the gap's existence fulfill a need or desire for the individuals whose behaviors do not reflect the espoused value (such as your boss, yourself, your peers, and your employees)? What do these individuals stand to lose if they were to change their behaviors to better reflect the espoused value?

- Put yourself in your boss's shoes. Better, get into your boss's head. Describe the story the boss recounts at night about what happened that day, about what is most important, and why things are the way they are. Now look at a piece of what you experience as "dysfunction" in your team. In what way does it serve you or your boss to let it continue the way it is? How does it make your or the boss's life easier to have it just the way it is? Which of the boss's needs, interests, loyalties, or values are served by the current situation?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- Over the next two weeks, track your team's activities in thirty-minute increments. For each increment, identify the type of challenge you are working on (primarily technical or primarily adaptive). Then track the values motivating the team to work on this activity. Review the record to see how you are spending your time across different challenges.

- Think of an important change that people in the organization have been talking about for a long time. Now one-on-one, engage them in a conversation about why the organization, and maybe they in particular, haven't done more to make it happen.

Archetype 2: Competing Commitments

Like individuals, organizations have numerous commitments. And sometimes these commitments come into conflict. For example, a multinational consumer products corporation with operations in numerous

countries tries to create one unified brand while also seeking to preserve the unique brand associations it has in each country where it operates. A law firm wants to grow its practice while also allowing older partners and those with family responsibilities to work shorter hours. A human rights organization needs to raise more funds, which requires additional staffing, but it also wants to cut costs.

To resolve such competing commitments, organizational leaders must often make painful choices that favor some constituencies while hurting others. And this constitutes another adaptive challenge archetype. Because these decisions are so difficult, many leaders simply avoid making them, or they try to arrive at a compromise that ultimately serves no constituency's needs well. As a result, the organization's commitments continue to be in conflict.

The hard fact is this: when an organization's commitments are in competition with one another, people in authority can resolve the situation perhaps only by making decisions that generate losses for some groups and gains for others. There is rarely a way to get around it (except through avoidance). Win-win solutions are ideal, but not common with strategic choices. When we hear someone talk about "win-wins," we wonder whether anything really lasting is going to change. When competing commitments need to be resolved, the questions are, how will the decision be made: through a mandate from on high, by majority rule, through consensus where everyone involved must agree? What groups are going to lose something as a result of this decision, and what precisely are they going to lose?

ON THE BALCONY

- Think of several commitments that are currently competing in your own organization. How are people in your organization currently dealing with this situation? What are the consequences, positive and negative, of this way of coping?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- The next time you're in a staff meeting and you realize that there are several commitments competing with one another in your

> team, acknowledge the situation verbally. Name the commitments
> that seem to be in competition, and ask meeting participants to
> add their own impressions. Keep the conversation focused on the
> commitments themselves and not on the people, not on who is
> supposed to be fulfilling them and how they are falling short.

Archetype 3: Speaking the Unspeakable

Whenever members of an organization come together and have a conversation, there are actually two types of conversation going on. One is manifested in what people are saying publicly. The other is unfolding in each person's head. Only a small portion of the most important content of those conversations (radical ideas, naming of difficult issues, painful interpretations of conflicting perspectives) ever gets surfaced publicly. Most of the time, the public discourse consists primarily of polite banter or debate that falls short of naming, let alone resolving, conflict.

There are always a thousand reasons not to speak the unspeakable. For one thing, the organizational system does not want you to say these things out loud; doing so will generate tension and conflict that will have to be addressed. Indeed, anyone who has the courage to raise unspeakable issues may become immediately unpopular and could lose standing in the organization (or even her job).

The presence of a senior authority in the room makes it even riskier (and thus less likely) that someone will give voice to the unspeakable.

But getting people to share what seems unspeakable is essential for an organization that hopes to move forward in the face of changing priorities or external conditions. Only by examining the full range of perspectives can a group of people increase their chances of developing adaptive solutions.

ON THE BALCONY

- Think back to the last tough conversation you had in which you or
  someone else gave voice to the unspeakable. What enabled this to
  occur? (For example, did someone else ask each person to give voice
  to a heartfelt but unpopular perspective? Was there a disturbing

incident that everyone noticed was undermining the rest of the meeting? Did someone just get fed up?) What happened as a result of the conversation?

Then think of a recent conversation in which the unspeakable remained unspoken. What results came from that conversation? How do the results of the two conversations compare in terms of their usefulness to your organization?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- During your next conversation with your boss, purposefully share more of what you are thinking than you would normally share. For instance, if you do not typically express concerns about ideas your boss is proposing, try expressing one. Frame it in neutral rather than judgmental language, such as "I'm worried that these design changes you are describing will put the project behind schedule and over budget. Can you tell me more about how this would work?" not "We cannot make these changes; they're too expensive and time-consuming." See what happens.

- The next time you are attending a meeting, draw two vertical columns on a piece of notepaper. In the right-hand column, write down statements or questions voiced by you in response to someone's comment. Write these contributions word for word. In the left-hand column, write what you were really thinking when you made your statements or asked your questions. Look at the two lists, and ask yourself what differences between the two columns suggest about what might be considered unspeakable in your organization.

    For example, suppose you work for a mobile telecommunications firm whose established markets have become saturated. The company is considering ways to generate new revenue streams. You manage the company's North American regional operations. You're in a meeting attended by other regional managers as well as the vice president of strategy development. Table 5-2 is a quick example of how your left-hand/right-hand column writings might look.

TABLE 5-2

What I thought and what was said

What I thought	What was said
	Joe, VP: "So, we really need to think about how we can generate new kinds of revenue. Expanding into emerging markets is one idea I'd like us to explore."
"Oh no. If we expand into emerging markets like China, Africa, and India, where will that leave me and my team? We'll get a lot fewer resources if the company steps up operations in those other regions."	**Me:** "There's a lot of potential in emerging markets."
What's unspeakable: the loss of status and power that could happen to my group (and other groups managing established markets) if our company dramatically changes its growth strategy.	

Archetype 4: Work Avoidance

As we discussed in part I, in every organization people develop elaborate ways to prevent the discomfort that comes when the prospects of change generate intolerable levels of intensity. For example, managers form a new subcommittee that has no real power or influence to effect the proposed change. Executives hire a diversity officer so no line manager has to take responsibility for increasing diversity in his or her own department. People blame external forces (fickle consumers, an unscrupulous new competitor) for the company's loss of market share. They change the subject or make a joke when someone insists on discussing the problem. Or they treat an adaptive challenge as a technical problem—for example, by moving a retail item to a more prominent position in a store when sales are down due to better competitors' products in the marketplace. These behaviors are all ways of avoiding the harder work of mobilizing adaptive change.

We find two common pathways in the patterns by which people resist the potential pain of adaptive change: diversion of attention and displacement of responsibility. Such defensive behaviors are sometimes deliberate and strategically protective against the threats of change, but sometimes they are unplanned, poorly monitored or unconscious reactions. Reality testing, the effort to grasp the challenge fully, is often an

early victim of the social and personal unrest associated with adaptation. People may initially assess and address problems realistically. But if this does not pay early dividends, moving into a protective posture may take precedence over enduring the prolonged uncertainty associated with weighing divergent views, running costly experiments, and facing the need to refashion loyalties and develop new competencies.

With sustained distress, people may focus on just getting by. They often produce misdiagnoses: a society may scapegoat a faction because of a dominant perception that it is indeed responsible for the problem. More severe patterns of avoidance are generated by prolonged periods of disequilibrium. In a classic study of thirty-five dictatorships, all of them emerged in societies facing crisis.[1] The Great Depression of the 1930s generated such deep yearnings for quick and simple solutions in many countries around the world that groups in them lost the capacity to critically and open-mindedly reality test different strategies for restoring their own local and national economies. A reversion to narrower identity groups took hold. Charismatic demagoguery, repression, scapegoating, and externalizing the enemy were all in play, leading to the catastrophes of World War II.

Here's a list of work avoidance tactics:

Diverting Attention

- Focus only on the technical parts of the challenge and apply a technical fix.

- Define the problem to fit your current expertise.

- Turn down the heat in a meeting by telling a joke or taking a break.

- Deny that the problem exists.

- Create a proxy fight, such as a personality conflict, instead of grappling with the real problem.

- Take options off the table to honor legacy behaviors.

Displacing Responsibility

- Marginalize the person trying to raise the issue—that is, shoot the messenger.

- Scapegoat someone.

- Externalize the enemy.

- Attack authority.

- Delegate the adaptive work to those who can't do anything about it, such as consultants, committees, and task forces.

ON THE BALCONY

- What are the work avoidance tactics most often used in your team, department, or organization?

- What routines has your organization developed to leap to action by throwing a technical fix at a problem without addressing the underlying adaptive issues?

ON THE PRACTICE FIELD

- Discuss work avoidance tactics with members of your team. Together, identify a complex problem your team is currently facing, and list all the tactics the team is using to reduce the stress associated with dealing with the issue. During an upcoming meeting, encourage team members to point out instances when anyone in the group is using one of the techniques. For example, a team member might raise her hand and say something like, "When John put up the graphic showing our decline in client-satisfaction ratings, Sheila made a comment about how we can't keep up with our clients' ever-changing tastes. In my view, we can't afford to blame external forces for the problem we're discussing."

- Sometimes, work avoidance mechanisms are easier to identify than the issues being avoided. The timing and nature of the work avoidance mechanism often provide a clue to the conflicting perspectives on the adaptive issues that remain hidden. What issue was surfacing or being discussed at the time when the group generated a work avoidance mechanism? What was the work avoidance mechanism? Did anyone intervene to redirect the group's attention to the issue, or try to surface conflicting perspectives?

- When your organization or team goes through a period of stress and discomfort, where do the symptoms appear? Who is embodying the stress for the team? Interview that person to learn what that person is dealing with on behalf of the team; discover the sources of stress: competing values, suppressed perspectives, protecting against losses?

| GLOSSARY |

The definitions in this glossary have been developed and refined over twenty-five years, primarily by Riley Sinder, Dean Williams, and the authors. They are not definitive statements. They are meant to be useful, first-approximation concepts that serve as a resource for thinking more deeply and broadly about the subject and practice of leadership.

act politically Incorporate the loyalties and values of the other parties into your mobilization strategy. Assume that no one operates solely as an individual but represents, formally or informally, a set of constituent loyalties, expectations, and pressures.

adaptation A successful adaptation enables an organism to thrive in a new or challenging environment. The adaptive process is both conservative and progressive in that it enables the living system to take the best from its traditions, identity, and history into the future. See also **thrive**.

adaptive capacity The resilience of people and the capacity of systems to engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium.

adaptive challenge The gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality that they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment). See also **technical problem**.

adaptive culture Adaptive cultures engage in at least five practices. They (1) name the elephants in the room, (2) share responsibility for the organization's future, (3) exercise independent judgment, (4) develop leadership capacity, and (5) institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.

adaptive leadership The activity of mobilizing adaptive work.

adaptive work Holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew; i.e., the learning process through which people in a system achieve a successful adaptation. See also **technical work**.

ally A member of the community in alignment on a particular issue.

ancestor A family or community member from an earlier generation who shapes a person's identity.

assassination   The killing or neutralizing (through character assassination) of someone who embodies a perspective that another faction in the social system desperately wants to silence.

attention   A critical resource for leadership. To make progress on adaptive challenges, those who lead must be able to hold people's engagement with hard questions through a sustained period of disequilibrium.

authority   Formal or informal power within a system, entrusted by one party to another in exchange for a service. The basic services, or social functions, provided by authorities are: (1) direction; (2) protection; and (3) order. See also **formal authority** and **informal authority**.

bandwidth   The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **repertoire**.

below the neck   The nonintellectual human faculties: emotional, spiritual, instinctive, kinetic.

carrying water   Doing the work of others that they should be doing for themselves.

casualty   A person, competency, or role that is lost as a by-product of adaptive change.

classic error   Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem.

confidant   A person invested in the success and happiness of another person, rather than in the other person's perspective or agenda.

courageous conversation   A dialogue designed to resolve competing priorities and beliefs while preserving relationships. See also **orchestrating the conflict**.

dance floor   Where the action is. Where the friction, noise, tension, and systemic activity are occurring. Ultimately, the place where the work gets done.

dancing on the edge of your scope of authority   Taking action near or beyond the formal or informal limits of what you are expected to do.

default   A routine and habitual response to recurring stimuli. See also **tuning**.

deploying yourself   Deliberately managing your roles, skills, and identity.

disequilibrium   The absence of a steady state, typically characterized in a social system by increasing levels of urgency, conflict, dissonance, and tension generated by adaptive challenges.

elephant in the room   A difficult issue that is commonly known to exist in an organization or community but is not discussed openly. See also **naming the elephant in the room**.

engaging above and below the neck   Connecting with all the dimensions of the people you lead. Also, bringing all of yourself to the practice of leadership. *Above the neck* speaks to intellectual faculties, the home of logic and facts; *below the neck* speaks to emotional faculties, the home of values, beliefs, habits of behavior, and patterns of reaction. See also **below the neck**.

experimental mind-set   An attitude that treats any approach to an adaptive issue not as a solution, but as the beginning of an iterative process of testing a hypothesis, observing what happens, learning, making midcourse corrections, and then, if necessary, trying something else.

faction   A group with (1) a shared perspective that has been shaped by tradition, power relationships, loyalties, and interests and (2) its own grammar for analyzing a situation and its own system of internal logic that defines the stakes, terms of problems, and solutions in ways that make sense to its own members.

faction map   A diagram that depicts the groups relevant to an adaptive challenge, and includes the loyalties, values, and losses at risk that keep each faction invested in its position.

finding your voice   The process of discovering how to best use yourself as an instrument to frame issues effectively, shape and tell stories purposefully, and inspire others.

formal authority   Explicit power granted to meet an explicit set of service expectations, such as those in job descriptions or legislative mandates.

getting on the balcony   Taking a distanced view. The mental act of disengaging from the dance floor, the current swirl of activity, in order to observe and gain perspective on yourself and on the larger system. Enables you to see patterns that are not visible from the ground. See also **observation**.

giving the work back   The action of an authority figure in resisting the pressure to take the responsibility for solving problems off of other people's shoulders, and instead mobilizing the responsibility of the primary stakeholders in doing their share of the adaptive work.

holding environment   The cohesive properties of a relationship or social system that serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work. May include, for example, bonds of affiliation and love; agreed-upon rules, procedures, and norms; shared purposes and common values; traditions, language, and rituals; familiarity with adaptive work; and trust in authority. Holding environments give a group identity and contain the conflict, chaos, and confusion often produced when struggling with complex problematic realities. See also **pressure cooker** and **resilience**.

holding steady   Withholding your perspective, not primarily for self-protecting, but to wait for the right moment to act, or act again. Also, remaining steadfast, tolerating the heat and pushback of people who resist dealing with the issue.

hunger   A normal human need that each person seeks to fulfill, such as (1) power and control, (2) affirmation and importance, and (3) intimacy and delight.

illusion of the broken system   Every group of human beings is aligned to achieve the results it currently gets. The current reality is the product of the implicit and explicit decisions of people in the system, at least of the dominant stakeholders. In that sense, no system is broken, although change processes are often driven by the idea that an organization is broken. That view discounts the accumulated functionality for many people of the system's current way of operating.

informal authority   Power granted implicitly to meet a set of service expectations, such as representing cultural norms like civility or being given moral authority to champion the aspirations of a movement.

interpretation   Identifying patterns of behavior that help make sense of a situation. Interpretation is the process of explaining raw data through digestible understandings and narratives. Most situations have multiple possible interpretations.

intervention   Any series of actions or a particular action, including intentional inaction, aimed at mobilizing progress on adaptive challenges.

leadership with authority   Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge from a position of authority. The authority role brings with it resources and constraints for exercising leadership.

leadership without authority   Mobilizing people to address an adaptive challenge by taking action beyond the formal and informal expectations that define your scope of power, such as raising unexpected questions upward from the middle of the organization, challenging the expectations of your constituents, or engaging people across boundaries from outside the organization. Lacking authority also brings with it resources and constraints.

leap to action   The default behavior of reacting prematurely to disequilibrium with a habituated set of responses.

lightning rod   A person who is the recipient of a group's anger or frustration, often expressed as a personal attack and typically intended to deflect attention from a disturbing issue and displace responsibility for it to someone else.

living into the disequilibrium   The gradual process of easing people into an uncomfortable state of uncertainty, disorder, conflict, or chaos at a pace and level that does not overwhelm them yet takes them out of their comfort zones and mobilizes them to engage in addressing an adaptive challenge.

naming the elephant in the room   The act of addressing an issue that may be central to making progress on an adaptive challenge but that has been ignored in the interest of maintaining equilibrium. Discussing the undiscussable. See also **elephant in the room**.

observation   Collection of relevant data from a detached perspective and from as many sources as possible. See also **getting on the balcony**.

opposition   Those parties or factions that feel threatened or at risk of loss if your perspective is accepted.

orchestrating the conflict   Designing and leading the process of getting parties with differences to work them through productively, as distinguished from resolving the differences for them. See also **courageous conversation**.

pacing the work   Gauging how much disturbance the social system can withstand and then breaking down a complex challenge into small elements, sequencing them at a rate that people can absorb.

partners   Individuals or factions that are collaborators, including allies and confidants. See also **ally**, **confidant**, and the distinction between the two.

personal leadership work   Learning about and managing yourself to be more effective in mobilizing adaptive work.

pressure cooker   A holding environment strong enough to contain the disequilibrium of adaptive processes. See also **holding environment** and **resilience**.

productive zone of disequilibrium   The optimal range of distress within which the urgency in the system motivates people to engage in adaptive work. If the level is too low, people will be inclined to complacently maintain their current way of working, but if it is too high, people are likely to be overwhelmed

and may start to panic or engage in severe forms of work avoidance, like scapegoating or assassination. See also **work avoidance**.

progress   The development of new capacity that enables the social system to thrive in new and challenging environments. The process of social and political learning that leads to improvement in the condition of the group, community, organization, nation, or world. See also **thrive**.

purpose   The overarching sense of direction and contribution that provides meaningful orientation to a set of activities in organizational and political life.

reality testing   The process of comparing data and interpretations of a situation to discern which one, or which new synthesis of competing interpretations, captures the most information and best explains the situation.

regulating the heat   Raising or lowering the distress in the system to stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium.

repertoire   The range of capacities within which an individual has gained comfort and skill. See also **bandwidth**.

resilience   The capacity of individuals and the holding environment to contain disequilibrium over time. See also **holding environment** and **pressure cooker**.

ripeness of an issue   The readiness of a dominant coalition of stakeholders to tackle an issue because of a generalized sense of urgency across stakeholding groups.

ritual   A practice with symbolic import that helps to create a shared sense of community.

role   The set of expectations in a social system that define the services individuals or groups are supposed to provide.

sanctuary   A place or set of practices for personal renewal.

scope of authority   The set of services for which a person is entrusted by others with circumscribed power.

social system   Any collective enterprise (small group, organization, network of organizations, nation, or the world) with shared challenges that has interdependent and therefore interactive dynamics and features.

song beneath the words   The underlying meaning or unspoken subtext in someone's comment, often identified by body language, tone, intensity of voice, and the choice of language.

taking the temperature   Assessing the level of disequilibrium currently in the system.

technical problem   Problems that can be diagnosed and solved, generally within a short time frame, by applying established know-how and procedures. Technical problems are amenable to authoritative expertise and management of routine processes.

technical work   Problem defining and problem solving that effectively mobilizes, coordinates, and applies currently sufficient expertise, processes, and cultural norms.

thrive   To live up to people's highest values. Requires adaptive responses that distinguish what's essential from what's expendable, and innovates so that the social system can bring the best of its past into the future.

tuning   An individual's personal psychology, including the set of loyalties, values, and perspectives that have shaped his worldview and identity, and cause the individual to resonate consciously and unconsciously, productively and unproductively, to external stimuli. See also **default**.

work avoidance   The conscious or unconscious patterns in a social system that distract people's attention or displace responsibility in order to restore social equilibrium at the cost of progress in meeting an adaptive challenge.

| NOTES |

Chapter 5

1. J. O. Hertzler, "Crises and Dictatorships," *American Sociological Review* 5 (1940): 157–169.