

# ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP:

## TOOLS AND TACTICS FOR CHANGING YOUR ORGANIZATION AND THE WORLD

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY  
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### MICROSOFTY

#### CONCEPTS:

- **Get on the balcony** to observe patterns and **diagnose** the problem
- **Interpret** accurately through listening for the “**song beneath the words**”.
- **Intervene up to the** “**zone of productive disequilibrium**”.
- **Change**
- **Thrive**

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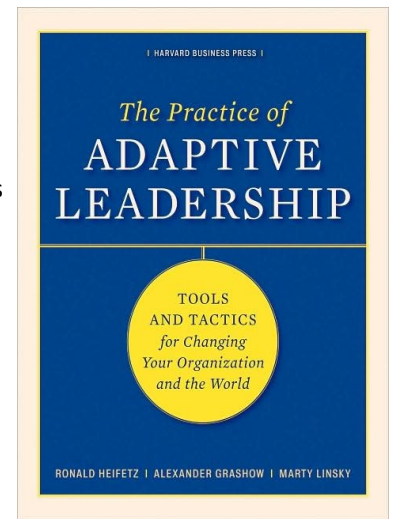
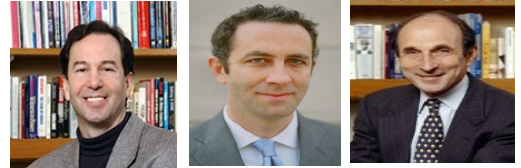
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### A Brief summary

Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow in *The Practices of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* ask readers to act courageously and engage in continued reflection as they want to become agents of change. The authors explain leadership as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (p. 14). The main message of adaptive leadership practice is the idea that if a system is broken, it must be diagnosed and fixed by taking risks and challenging the status quo in or-

der to provoke change.

This interactive book consists of five sections with twenty-three chapters. Each section provides many practical steps for practicing adaptive leadership. Two common elements found of this book are the “On the Balcony” and “In the Practice Field” features. Throughout each section the authors provide these tools to enable readers to provide recommendations in relation to their own personal situations.



**RONALD HEIFETZ,  
ALEXANDER GRASHOW,  
& MARTY LINSKY**

Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Press (2009)  
Hardcover, 326 pages

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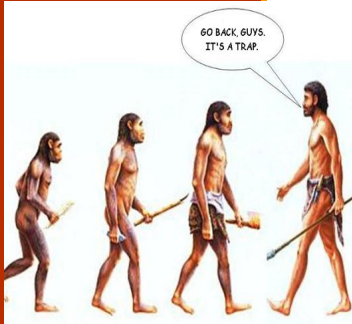
### Adaptive Leadership’s basic assumptions:

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

The word *leader* comes from the Indo-European root word *leit*, the name for the person who carried the flag in front of an army going into battle and usually died in the first enemy attack. His sacrifice would alert the rest of the army to the location of the danger ahead (p.26)

# Part One

# Theory Behind the Practice



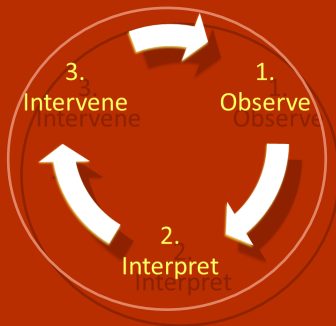
One of the most important framings of adaptive leadership is the idea that leadership is not a job or based on authority but it is a practice that can be done by anyone. Leadership is not based on authority, it is “radically different from doing a job really, really well” (p. 23). Adaptive leadership focuses on the need for change within organizations and encourages actions that disrupt the status-quo in order to incite forward momentum.

Adaptive leadership is rooted in leadership theory but also has significant links to scientific theory. The focus on adaptation comes from biology and evolution. Views taken from the study of evolution shape much of the approach of the book. The authors explain that successful adaptation requires building on the past and observing what is expendable or extraneous as changes are made while still recognizing the

“heritage” of an organization. Moreover, adaptation relies on experimentation and diversity in order to succeed. Successful adaptation also recognizes the need for loss and that such changes require time. The authors also make use of biological terminology in their analogies. They instruct readers to “**diagnose**” the challenges before acting and compare organizations to ecosystems.

Adaptive leadership is not about meeting or exceeding your authorizers’ expectations; it is about *challenging* some of those expectations, finding a way to disappoint people without pushing them completely over the edge (p.26)

Adaptive leadership process



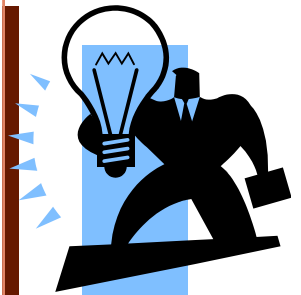
Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. (p. 14)

## Pre-conditions of being an adaptive leader

1. Get rid of the broken system's illusion.
2. Distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges
3. Differentiate leadership from authority
4. Learn to live in the productive zone of disequilibrium
5. Observe, interpret, intervene
6. Engage above and below the neck
7. Connect to purpose

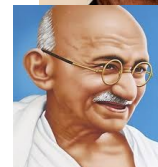
Main difference between technical and adaptive challenges

Challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders



## Four tips before stepping in to the process

1. Don't do it alone, involve others and distribute responsibilities.
2. The best leadership laboratory for learning adaptive leadership is life itself.
3. Resist the leap of action and stay reflective like Mandela, Mother Teresa and Gandhi
4. Make hard choices and enjoy it.



## Part Two



On the Balcony

“Take some time to get on the balcony and consider your own organization’s structures and their impact.”  
(p. 56)



Look for adaptive challenge indicators either early on or midstream... you have to be on the balcony, not in the “field” to get this perspective.



# Diagnose the system

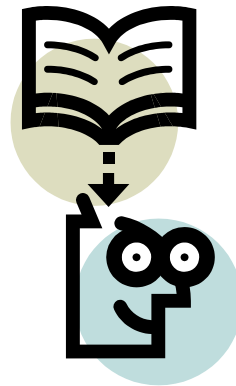
\* Get on the balcony and see how your organization is responding adaptive challenges.

\* Consider three major components : Structure, Culture, Defaults.

\* Discover structural implications and find supportive and impeding structures for adaptive leadership.

\* Understand the cultural norms and forces within your organization

\* Recognize your organization’s default interpretations and behavior to understand its adaptability.



### 4 Unique characteristics of adaptive challenges:

1. Input & output are not linear.
2. Formal authority is insufficient.
3. Different factions each want different outcomes.
4. Previously highly successful protocols seem antiquated.

## Diagnose the Adaptive Challenges

- ◆ Separate a problem’s technical elements from its adaptive elements through looking for two characteristic signals: a cycle of failure and a persistent dependence on authority
- ◆ Look beyond what people are saying about adaptive challenges
- ◆ Distinguish the challenge from four archetypes that are: 1. gap between espoused values and behavior,

2. competing commitments, 3. speaking the unspeakable,



## Identifying a primarily adaptive challenge

Questions and identifying flags that help to diagnose adaptive challenges:

Concept	Identifying flag
1. Persistent gap between aspirations and reality.	The language of complaint is used increasingly to describe the current situation.
2. Responses within current repertoire inadequate.	Previously successful outside experts and internal authorities unable to solve the problem.
3. Difficult learning required.	Frustration and stress manifest. Failures more frequent than usual. Traditional problem-solving methods used repeatedly, but without success.
4. New stakeholders across boundaries need to be engaged.	Rounding up the usual suspects to address the issue has not produced progress.
5. Longer time frame necessary.	Problem festers or reappears after short-term fix is applied.
6. 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.

## Diagnose the Political Landscape

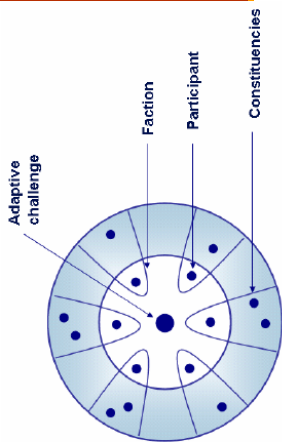
Understanding the political relationships in your organization is key to seeing how your organization works as a system. To think politically, you have to look at your organization as a web of stakeholders.

**For each stakeholder, you need to identify her:**

- Stake in the adaptive challenge at hand. How will she be affected by resolution of the challenge?
- Desired outcomes. What would she like to see come out of a resolution of the issue?
- Level of engagement. How much does the person care about the issue and the organization?
- Degree of power and influence. What resources does the person control, and who wants those resources?

**Equally important, you must identify each stakeholder's:**

- Values. What are the commitments and beliefs guiding the behaviors and decision-making processes?
- Loyalties. What obligations does the person have to people outside his or her immediate group?
- Losses at risk. What does the person fear losing if things should change?
- Hidden alliances. What shared interests does the person have with people from other major stakeholder groups that could lead the person to form an alliance that could build influence?



### The politics of change

*To mobilize stakeholders to engage with your change initiative, you have to identify their strongest values and think about how supporting your program would enable your stakeholders to serve those values (p. 92)*



## Why resistance to change?

Resistance to change stems from a fear of losing something important. Identifying the losses is not easy. These are some losses that might happen:

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Identity   | <input type="checkbox"/> Money         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Competence | <input type="checkbox"/> Power         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comfort    | <input type="checkbox"/> Control       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Security   | <input type="checkbox"/> Status        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reputation | <input type="checkbox"/> Resources     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time       | <input type="checkbox"/> Independence  |
|                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Righteousness |
|                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Job           |
|                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Life          |



## Five key characteristics of adaptive Organizations:

- Elephants in the room are named: In a highly adaptive organization, no issue is too sensitive to be raised at the official meeting, and no questions are off-limits.
- Responsibility for the organization's future is shared: In an adaptive organization people share responsibility for the larger organization's future.
- Independent judgment is expected: An organization will be better equipped to identify and grapple with adaptive challenges if its people do not expect the CEO and other senior authorities to always have the answers.
- Leadership capacity is developed: Organizations enhance their ability to handle adaptive challenges by ensuring a healthy pipeline of talent.
- Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized: Adaptation requires learning new ways to interpret what goes on around you and new ways to carry out work.

## Part Three



Mobilize the System

### 7 Steps of Effective Interpretation:

1. Get on the balcony
2. Determine the ripeness of the issue
3. Ask "Who am I in this picture?"
4. Think hard about your framing
5. Hold steady
6. Analyze the factions that begin to emerge
7. Keep the work at the center of people's attention



# In Making Accurate Interpretations:

- Notice when people are moving toward technical or adaptive interpretations: People gravitate toward interpretations that are technical rather than adaptive
- Reframe the group's default interpretations: name the default interpretation you are seeing, and invite people to explore how it inhibits their creativity and adaptability.
- Generate multiple interpretations: encourage people to come up with more than one
- possible interpretation.
- Audition your ideas: think of yourself as in the role of auditioning your interpretation rather than advocating it energetically.
- Generate a variety of interpretations: Adaptive work involves orchestrating multiple and passionately held points of view.

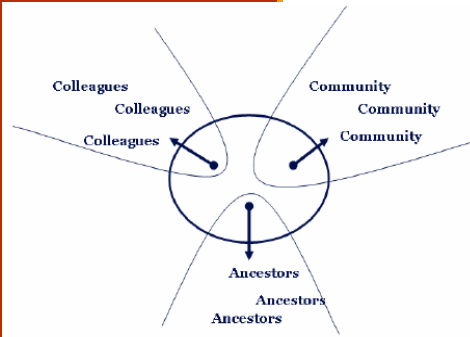
## Signs of Unproductive Interpretation

This kind of comment ...	Suggests that people see the problem as ...	You can encourage a shift by asking questions such as ...
"If we only had better direction from the CEO ..."	A deficiency in the authorities, not the organization's vision, mission or strategy	"What pressures is the CEO up against? What are his constituencies, and what do they expect him/her to deliver?"
"We'll have this worked out in no time ..."	Short-term, not long-term	"Do you think we have the will to try to deal with the causes of the problem rather than the symptoms?"
"This will be an easy fix."	Technical, not adaptive diagnosis	"Maybe this is a problem that a consultant cannot fix?"
"We can't seem to carry out our good ideas."	Incompetent execution, not a problematic business model	"Maybe our product, even though we love it, is not what the market wants?"
"This will be a win-win."	No one needs to suffer any pain to solve this problem	"What losses to the people who oppose this step think they are going to take?"

## Other factors of Mobilizing the System

- ⇒ **Act politically** through expanding informal authority, finding allies, staying connected to the opposition, managing authority figures, being responsible for casualties and engaging the voice of dissent
- ⇒ **Orchestrate the conflict** through creating a holding environment, selecting participants, controlling the temperature and challenges and giving the work back to the people.
- ⇒ **Build an adaptive culture** through nurturing shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity and creating a learning organization.

# Part Four



Depicting your royalties

*“Let yourself be  
silently drawn  
to the stronger  
pull of what  
you really love”*

Rumi



## To See yourself as a system you should:

- ⇒ **Identify your many identities:** You need to accept that there are different but authentic selves required for you to be effective in each role you play.
- ⇒ **Identify and prioritize your loyalties:** To better understand yourself as a system, examine your colleagues, community and ancestors.
- ⇒ **Know your tuning** through knowing your triggers and paying attention to your hungers and others' expectations.
- ⇒ **Broaden your bandwidth and discover your tolerances:** Exercising adaptive leadership requires that you be willing and competent at stepping into the unknown and stirring things up.
- ⇒ **Understand your roles** and know your scope of authority.
- ⇒ **Articulate your purposes and prioritize them.**



## Personalize the adaptive challenges

In order to see yourself as a system and to be a good adaptive leader, you should personalize the adaptive challenges. This table can help you to identify and recognize your unspeakable loyalties.

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5
What things, if they happened more frequently, or less frequently, would help make progress on the adaptive challenge I am working on?	What loyalties or values underlie your column 1 responses? For each response in column 1, complete this sentence: « This response suggests that I am loyal to ... »	Pick the two loyalties or commitments in column 2 that are most important to you. For each of them, answer this question: « What am I doing, or not doing, that is keeping me from more fully honoring this commitment? »	For each behavior you listed in column 3, identify the commitment driving that behavior by completing this sentence: « I may also be loyal to... »	Identify what bad outcomes you are protecting yourself from by engaging in the behaviors you listed in column 3. Ask, « If I did not do (column 3 behavior), then (list of horrible things that would happen). »
Example: We were more open with each other at work.	Example: I am loyal to the value of transparency and to my professional colleagues.	Example: I consistently oppose sharing salary information.	Example: I may also be loyal to the value of not having people be angry at me and the idea that money is a private matter, both of which my spouse deeply believes in.	Example: people would be angry at me, and my spouse would be embarrassed and disappointed in me.

**Exercising adaptive leadership is at its heart about giving meaning to your life beyond your own ambition (p.224).**

## Five practices to keep your purposes alive while leading adaptive change

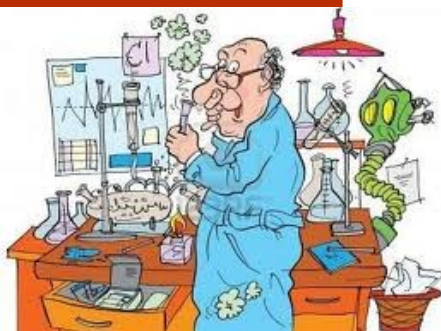
### Part Five



### Deploy Yourself

How can you ease the constraint presented by your loyalties?

1. Watch for Gaps between your words and actions
2. Stay in the present
3. Identify the Loyalties You Need to Refashion
4. Conduct the Needed Conversations
5. Create Rituals for Refashioning Ancestor Loyalties



- ⇒ **Negotiate the ethics of leadership and purpose:** calculate your intervention's potential damage to others, assess the damage to your self-image and your espoused values and keep the question itself alive in all its forms asking do the means justify the ends?
- ⇒ **Keep purposes alive:** you can help maintain this connection through physical reminders and rituals.
- ⇒ **Negotiate your purposes:** you are not abandoning your purposes when you take an angled step toward them rather than move along a straight line.
- ⇒ **Integrate your ambitions and aspirations:** you can have both ambitions and aspirations, and you can actively serve both.
- ⇒ **Avoid going blind and deaf, becoming a martyr and being the self-appointed chief purpose officer**

## What makes a tough decision?

Characteristic	Example
It is a close call	Two potential interventions for tackling a particular adaptive challenge have different (and seemingly equally important) strengths and weaknesses. And you can implement only one of them.
You must choose between the known and the unknown	You believe things could be better. But you know the current reality, how to navigate it, how to make it work for you, what the rules and rewards are. The other choice, the unknown, is a mystery. It might be better, but it might be worse. So you cannot decide whether to embark on a change initiative.
Doing the right thing would incur significant losses	The intervention you have in mind for tackling an adaptive challenge will incur losses for you and/or those around you. You are not sure whether those losses will be worth it, or whether you are capable of managing the casualties. For example, you believe you need to divest a business division that's underperforming. But you are worried that the resulting layoff would seriously erode morale in the rest of the organization.
Several of your values are in conflict	Several values that you believe in strongly are in conflict, and you would need to subordinate one of them to move your change initiative forward. For example, you believe in consensus decision making, but your team is deadlocked on an issue that is critical to the future.

### To inspire people:

In leading adaptive change, ask people to open their hearts to you and the purposes that you believe you share with them. Inspiring people calls for you to speak from the heart and express what you feel.

### Run experiments:

Everything you do in leading adaptive change is an experiment. When you view leadership as an experiment, you free yourself to see any change initiative as an educated guess, something that you have decided to try but that does not require you

to put an immovable stake in the ground.

### To run experiments you should:

- Take more risks
- Exceed your authority
- Take up the heat
- Identify your contribution to the difficulty

# Thrive

Take care of yourself not as an indulgence, but to help ensure that the purposes you join have the best chance of being achieved, and that you are still around to enjoy the fruits of your labors.



**Grow your personal support network:** find your own confidants, satisfying your hungers outside work so your opponents cannot use them to take you out of the game and involve in multiple communities.

**Create a personal holding environment** by creating sanctuaries that enable you to restore yourself.

**Renew yourself:** To thrive you need resilience (shock absorbers to remain steady over the bumps of the journey), robust strength (health and stamina), and renewal. Renewal is an active process of removing the plaque of tough experiences and scars from the journey and returning to the core of your values and being. Renewal requires transformation of the heart and guts as well as the head.



*Thriving is much more than survival; thriving means growing and prospering in new and challenging Environments (p. 295)*



## Critical evaluation of the book

The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world has several important strengths. It is intended to be read, understood, and applied. The authors approach the writing with straightforward language. Their approach is refreshing in this way. The utility of the book is furthered by the incorporation of thoughtful reflective questions, exercises, charts and other tools to help readers make meaning of the authors' strategies and recommendations as they relate to specific situations from their own lives. Although the authors had insisted on distributed form of leadership and emphasized on engaging people in adaptive leadership, the recommendations and most of practices are about an individual as a leader. In addition, the concept of "getting on the balcony" supports individual leadership rather than distributed form of leadership.

The authors have attempted to make the book as practical as possible that could encourage participative leadership but the question is that what would happen if several people in an organization want to use this book and follow its recommendations and practices simultaneously. It seems that there would be a conflict between adaptive leaders because the book does not tell anything about the division of roles in such cases and keeps focusing on a single person who can play the role of adaptive leader.

## Discussion Questions:



1. Is it possible to apply adaptive leadership in changing policies rather than changing organizations? What are the policy implications of adaptive leadership?
2. How ethical is the adaptive leadership?
3. In what ways does the adaptive leadership build trust in an organization?