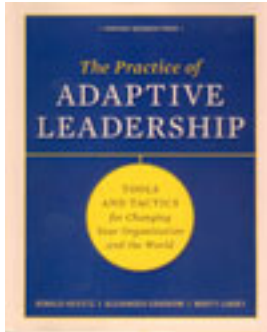


Book Reviews for Managers

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership Tools And Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

By Ronald Heifetz • Alexander Grashow • Marty Linsky



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REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Dealing with change and problem solving—these tasks are at the core of what leader/managers do. But there are two distinctly different types of challenges that precipitate change and bring on problems for managers. The authors of this enlightening book lay these out right at the beginning:

1. *Technical challenges* – problems that can be pretty clearly defined and can be addressed with known solutions or ones that can be developed by a few technical experts. These fixes can usually be implemented using the organization’s current structures and procedures. No big impact on people here.
2. *Adaptive challenges* – these forces require significant (and often painful) shifts in people’s habits, status, role, identity, way of thinking, etc.

For example, how do we change to put more decision authority in the hands of our front-line employees? Or, high tech communications and teleworking are transforming us into a virtual company but people feel they are losing touch with one another and with the corporate center.

Most managers come up through organizational ranks primarily on the strength of their professional or technical knowledge. Their strong suit is tackling *technical challenges* and solving them through analysis, logic, and experience.

This default response pattern will not work nearly as well on *adaptive challenges*, how-

ever, because these are less clear. They tend to impact the organization as a whole system of interrelated processes and human elements. They require the involvement of many or all stakeholders, especially employees, to come up with and implement an optimal solution. They call for an “adaptive leadership” which mobilizes people and units that frequently have different needs, priorities and perspectives toward new ways of working and ways of thinking.

This book is a roadmap for individuals at any level who want to lead “adaptively” in response to a complex change that is being faced. Rich with suggestions and examples, it divides the topic into three logical sections:

1. **How to diagnose your organization** (it’s current structure, culture, political dynamics and ability to adapt) **and the nature of the challenge you face.**
2. **How to mobilize the system** (interpreting the challenge, acting politically, surfacing and managing the inevitable conflict, experimenting, and making effective interventions to generate change.)
3. **Seeing how you, yourself, are part of the system** (as a leader, you have your own needs, vested interests, fears, perceptions and biases, connections with key others in the organization, etc., that will influence how you look at the problem and forge potential responses)

“With keen observation, the adaptive leader keeps adjusting the “thermostat” (applying more pressure for change or backing off temporarily) just enough”

I am going to highlight just a few of the authors’ ideas that particularly caught my attention and convinced me to recommend this book.

On the “Balcony” and “On the Dance Floor”

The two perspectives an adaptive leader must have. The “balcony” (looking down on the “dance”) is where you get a larger perspective of what you’re facing and how you are doing with your response. From here you do your observing of patterns, reflecting, option thinking, analyzing and monitoring of the change.

When you take action and make an intervention, you have stepped onto the “dance floor” and are participating in the “dance.” For example, you convene a meeting, announce a strategy, create a task force, restructure, reassign some staff. The point is you need to shift back and forth frequently as you plan and execute your response to the adaptive challenge, experiment with strategies and assess the results, solicit input from opposing factions and deliberate on how best to deal with them.

The “Productive Zone of Disequilibrium”...with your “Hand on the Thermostat”

Since this is an adaptive challenge you face, you will, of necessity, be taking your people outside their comfort zone. But how much “heat” should you create for them? The authors’ answer: as much as they can take! You want to get their attention and keep the change moving forward without causing them to totally resist. With keen observation, the adaptive leader keeps adjusting the “thermostat” (applying more pressure for change or backing off temporarily) just enough as the process unfolds. This surely must be where leadership becomes an art.

“Authorizers”

We all have authorizers. They are anybody who grants us the authority (formal or informal) to lead. Your boss is an obvious one. She gives you your job description and decides whether to intervene when she feels that you have gone outside your

mandate. Your staff, by their willingness to respond to your leadership, are authorizers too. A group of recalcitrant employees can really limit your influence to get things done.

If you decide to exercise adaptive leadership and you are not positioned at the executive level, here are three things you need to keep in mind about authorizers:

1. A big reason people resist your push for changes in their behavior, procedures, ways of thinking, etc., is that they feel loyalties to certain of their authorizers. For example, a resistant sales team may feel obligations to their own Vice President who is on record as opposing moving from a geographical to a product line organization.
2. How much latitude you have to intervene is greatly influenced by your authorizers above you. Being an adaptive leader means pushing the edge of your authority and taking chances, then asking for forgiveness (vs. permission) later on.
3. On top of this, adaptive leadership is all about challenging people’s expectations and comfort levels. That, of course, can include the expectations and tranquility of those powerful authorizers above you in the chain of command.

Signs that the challenge is Adaptive

Ron Heifetz and his colleagues offer some great indicators that the challenge you have taken on is indeed an adaptive one, one that triggers an emotional response in people:

- People’s talk about the situation sounds increasingly like complaining.
- Previously successful responses and/or the efforts of internal or external “experts” have not alleviated the situation.
- The situation festers or reappears following a short-term fix.
- Current, perhaps long-held, values or truths in the organization seem to be getting in the way.

“the adaptive leader who must be acutely aware of what is going inside himself”

Finally, this book drives home the point that **adaptive challenges are about people changing...**

- Often they must shift their behavior from what up to now has been guided by by deeply-worn neural pathways. They may have to learn new skills, take on new roles, adopt new beliefs, honor new values, and so on.
- Conflict between different stakeholders and groups that is inherent in the change process must be coaxed to the surface, mediated in a safe forum, and resolved.
- Then there is the adaptive leader himself who must be acutely aware of what is going inside him—his own doubts, feelings of incompetence, fear of failure, and apprehension about possible retribution or punishment for stands he takes.

If you have never read a book on dealing with change, I would start with William Bridges’ *Managing Transitions*. It lays out a simple framework for the (human) transition process, from “Endings” through the “Neutral Zone” to “New Beginnings.” Once you understand Bridges’ basic road-map, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* is a great next step.

Adaptive leaders are courageous leaders. And in this increasingly complex world we need a lot of them.

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Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps executives and managers get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

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