

Introduction to adaptive leadership

Learn to recognize adaptive challenges and account for loss
to enable transformative change

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Healthcare leaders face complex challenges that often can't be solved with existing knowledge, skills, and approaches. The concepts of adaptive leadership, a framework developed by leadership experts Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, offer a new way to think about approaching complex challenges and transformative change.

This resource serves as an introduction to help leaders understand, internalize, and begin applying the core concepts of adaptive leadership.

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Introduction: Why adaptive leadership?

The limits of technical leadership

Imagine the following scenario:

You're the director of a hospital's cardiac care unit. Patients have reported they don't feel listened to by physicians. This has led to worse HCAHPS scores, financial penalties, and patients going to competitors in the area.

In response, you implement training on reflective listening to equip team members to actively demonstrate that they're listening to patients and trying to understand their situation.

All physicians participate in the training, but few seem interested in adopting reflective listening with patients. Some report they don't have time to ask additional questions during already busy days. Others say the new guidance is too much to keep track of. Many seem to feel they're forfeiting their role as the expert by spending more time listening than sharing information. Some physicians are communicating even more brusquely with patients, leaving nurses to try to smooth things over.

After hearing the complaints, you hire another physician to distribute the workload, hoping this will give the doctors more time to spend with patients. You establish a financial incentive system — physicians who fail to practice reflective listening will miss out on bonuses. You also create small job aids with tips on reflective listening for doctors to carry in their pockets and reference with patients. This seems to backfire even more; you find the job aids in the trash. Nurses report feeling overburdened, and some decide to leave. The challenges keep compounding, and patients and staff are suffering...

INTRODUCTION: WHY ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP?

There are many things that have gone wrong in this scenario, but perhaps one of the most significant is that the unit director has tried to address adaptive challenges — which require individuals to adopt new beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors — with technical solutions. The unit director has failed to account for the more complex components of the problem: the physicians' sense of loss related to their identity as the experts, the mindset shift required to prioritize listening to patients, the new behaviors that require giving up old workflows and habits. The unit director, in short, has focused on exerting authority rather than exercising true leadership — and they've run up against the limits of technical leadership.

The value of adaptive leadership

Technical problems have known solutions. The electricity goes out; an electrician makes the necessary wire repairs. An individual has a broken arm; a clinician sets it in a cast. A software platform has an error; a coder fixes the bug. These challenges vary in difficulty, but the solutions are clear and require minimal learning.

By contrast, healthcare leaders face complex challenges that we can't always solve with our existing knowledge, skills, and approaches. These challenges include shifting to value-based payment structures, managing mergers and acquisitions to bring together diverse capabilities, navigating workforce shortages, and adopting new models of care.

To navigate these challenges, we must adapt. The concepts of adaptive leadership, a framework developed by leadership experts Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, offer a new way to think about approaching complex challenges and transformative change.

This adaptation is crucial, but it can be painful, because with change comes loss. As the top scholars of adaptive leadership put it in the book *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*: "When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change... Adaptive leadership almost always puts you in the business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through those losses to a new place."

How to use this resource

This resource serves as an introduction to help leaders understand and internalize the core concepts of adaptive leadership, a starkly different approach to leadership than what most have grown up with. Leaders will learn the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Then, they'll practice assessing the losses associated with adaptive challenges.

This workbook contains three sections, each with guided exercises and reflection questions:

1. Understand the core principles of adaptive leadership
2. Reflect on adaptive challenges in your own life
3. Practice recognizing adaptive challenges and loss

While the exercises can be done entirely independently, we recommend finding a partner or small group of peers that you can debrief with after going through the exercises individually.

01 Understand the core principles of adaptive leadership

We'll start by understanding the core principles of adaptive leadership through a reflective exercise. Find a quiet environment where you can take 10 minutes to engage in this exercise on your own. Make sure you have somewhere to write down your responses, either in this workbook or on a separate piece of paper.

Once you're settled, read through the following scenario:

Your mother is 80 years old, widowed, living alone in a home built by your father who passed 20 years ago. A few years ago, your mother broke her hip and has shown signs of cognitive decline the past year or two. Lately, you've noticed her car has acquired new dings and dents every few weeks, evidence that her driving lacks the care and precision of her younger days. She is not very steady on her feet and she lives in a cold climate where walking and driving are made more difficult by icy conditions several months a year.

A few weeks ago, your mother fell and hit her head. She was knocked temporarily unconscious. When she came to, she did not call 911. Two hours later, you arrived at her home and found her sitting on her sofa, dazed, with the television blaring.

You call your sister. The two of you have known for some time that your mother was not doing well. While it was becoming clear that she could no longer take care of herself, neither of you had been willing to mention it to your mother or to each other. Now, it is unavoidable. Your mother needs a more appropriate care environment. Between the two of you, you have the means of finding and placing your mother in a terrific continuing care community.



UNDERSTAND THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following question: Why will this be hard?

Do not worry about complete or correct answers — simply write down whatever comes to mind. Try to spend at least two minutes here before moving on.

Reflection:

When you feel ready, move onto the next page.



UNDERSTAND THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Now, reread the scenario on page six with the following questions in mind:

- Why will this be hard for mom?
- Why will this be hard for you and your sister?
- Why have you waited this long to bring it up with mom? You know what needs to be done — why not just do it?

Take another three minutes to think through these questions. Add your responses to your written reflection. If you are working with a partner or in a small group, feel free to share and discuss your reflections.

Once you feel ready, move to the next page.

UNDERSTAND THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

There are no right or wrong answers, but here are some of the most common responses we have encountered through years of running this exercise with leaders about why this will be hard:

- This is mom's home — it's part of her. It's a really important connection to her husband.
- Mom really values her independence and she doesn't want to lose that.
- This is going to be hard for me and my sister because we have to tell mom what to do. It's a role reversal.
- Moving mom means we all have to deal with the fact that she's not going to live forever.

There are some common themes across many of these challenges: identity and loss. You know exactly what you need to do: move mom. But knowing isn't enough. You have to address all the emotions and loss wrapped up in this scenario.

That's what differentiates adaptive challenges and solutions from technical ones.



UNDERSTAND THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Technical vs. adaptive challenges

Most challenges have two components: technical and adaptive. The technical component is, essentially, what we need to do. We can use existing knowledge and beliefs to answer that question. But many challenges also have adaptive components. We need new knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs to manage these. And they are often accompanied by stakeholder loss or fear of loss.

Technical solutions won't work (or even get off the ground) if we don't address the underlying adaptive challenges and account for these losses. Next-level progress on business challenges will require leaders to acknowledge what makes this work hard — name the losses — and adopt a new leadership approach that moves people through those losses.

Authority vs. leadership

On its surface, the scenario about moving mom to the appropriate care setting isn't a "leadership" dilemma. But another core tenet of adaptive leadership is that you don't need positional power to lead.

This is the difference between authority and leadership. Adaptive leadership is about mobilizing others to purpose. In other words, it's about helping people remember why we're doing what we're doing. With the aging parent scenario, your purpose is to ensure mom is in a setting where she will be safe and still have a sense of independence and freedom. The leadership opportunity for you is to orient yourself, your sister, and mom around that purpose.



UNDERSTAND THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Authority	Leadership
Using positional power to direct others	Mobilizing others to purpose, regardless of one's positional power
Technical challenges	Adaptive challenges
Can be addressed using existing knowledge, perspectives, systems, and beliefs, and do not require much in the way of human adaptation	Require new perspectives, knowledge, approaches, and beliefs, and are typically accompanied by loss, or fear of loss, on the part of key stakeholders

Pause here. Did any of these statements spark interest or excitement in you?
Did you feel any resistance when reading the statements above?

Notice what you're feeling both emotionally and physically, and write your reflections down.

Reflection:

Shifting from authority and technical approaches to adaptive leadership is in itself an adaptive challenge that requires adopting new mindsets and behaviors and comes with loss. Take a few minutes to identify some of the losses you may be feeling. Write down or discuss why shifting toward adaptive leadership will be hard. Naming the losses is a crucial foundation when being able to account for them and move through them.

02 Reflect on adaptive challenges in your own life

Now that you understand the core principles of adaptive leadership, this exercise will focus on helping you internalize these concepts by writing your own scenario. Find a quiet environment where you can engage in 15 minutes of heads-down reflection and work.

Think about a situation in your personal or professional life where adaptive challenges may have been at play. If you're struggling to pinpoint a scenario to write about, think about the last time you or someone around you had a disproportionate emotional reaction — often these are times when we feel our identity is being threatened.

Once you've identified a scenario, write your own adaptive leadership vignette:

- Describe the problem, opportunity, or project. Describe how you tackled it and the results you achieved.
- Focus on the adaptive leadership challenges (rather than the technical challenges) associated with the problem, opportunity, or project. Use the following guiding questions to help articulate the adaptive components:
 - Why was this hard?
 - Why is this a leadership case?
 - What are the technical challenges?
 - What are the adaptive challenges?
 - What loss might stakeholders fear?



REFLECT ON ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN YOUR OWN LIFE

Personal leadership vignette:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing a personal leadership vignette.



REFLECT ON ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN YOUR OWN LIFE

If you are working through this resource with other leaders, take 15 minutes to pair up and share your adaptive leadership vignette with your partner. As your partner shares their vignette, share any other adaptive challenges or losses that you notice.

Then, reflect on the following question and share with each other (or write down if you are working individually): Armed with your understanding of technical and adaptive challenges, is there anything you would do differently in this scenario?

Reflection:

03 Practice recognizing adaptive challenges and losses

This section will help you get more comfortable identifying and naming the adaptive components of challenges. On the following pages, you will find three scenarios, each based on a real-life leadership challenge.

For each scenario, use the reflection questions below to practice identifying the adaptive challenges and losses present:

- Why will this be hard?
- Why is this a leadership case?
- What are the technical challenges?
- What are the adaptive challenges?
- What loss might stakeholders fear?

We recommend working through these scenarios with a colleague or small group. Take note of any themes that emerge around the reflection question. Where are your sticking points?

PRACTICE RECOGNIZING ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES AND LOSSES

Scenario 1: Care team model

You are the VP of Advanced Practice Providers (APPs) for a four-hospital system in the mid-Atlantic. For the past several years, you have been slowly building the organization’s advanced practice capacity. For the most part, APPs have been used more reactively than strategically, to relieve pressure when the system is overburdened. However, you see having APPs as an opportunity to improve access, elevate the care experience, and grow patient volume. All key stakeholders seem to agree in principle and cooperate in developing a comprehensive plan to greatly expand the use of APPs. Your plan requires all caregivers to work at top of license and assume different roles in the care process than they are accustomed to.

As you move from vision to action, you start to encounter passive and active resistance. Some patients think they’ve been dumped, handed off to lesser clinicians — and some physicians seem to agree. A few physicians are heard telling patients so. Some physicians chafe at the role of “team coordinator.” You have heard the expression, “this is not what I signed up for” more than you can stand. You hear through the grapevine that physicians are concerned about volume, revenue, and the ease of workload if they see only the sickest, most complex patients. Through all of this, your APPs report feeling roundly “disrespected” and dislike being called “mid-levels” or “extenders.” You are confident this is the right strategy and even the right plan. But you are struggling to make it work.

Reflection:

PRACTICE RECOGNIZING ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES AND LOSSES

Scenario 2: Moving from product to ecosystem

You are the Senior Vice President of Sales for a well-known medical device company. Your organization has experienced tremendous success for more than a century creating category-winning products that end users gravitate toward for their quality and technical superiority. While your products are still regarded as a cut above, the industry and ecosystem landscape have changed in several key ways. Affordability and value are large and growing imperatives that seem to be making commodities out of an extremely wide range of products, including your premium products. In addition, while your competitors' products are inferior to yours, they are packaging their products as solutions to broad-based organizational challenges, and supporting those solutions with a host of consultative services and related capabilities including data collection, analysis, and insight.

Your sales staff is best in the world at explaining the technical merits of their products to clinical providers and other clinical department executives. They have succeeded individually and driven impressive enterprise growth through deep product knowledge and mastery of the clinical terrain in which they operate. However, now they will have to develop an understanding of the broader challenges facing the organizations that they serve, establish deep and enduring relationships at the senior executive level, and be able to articulate why partnering with your firm solves your customers' biggest challenges.

Reflection:

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PRACTICE RECOGNIZING ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES AND LOSSES

Scenario 3: Moving toward value

You are the VP of Strategy for a 12-hospital regional system in the Midwest. Your organization has performed at a high level under the traditional economics of care. You have a strong payer and patient mix, your acute care facilities are preferred among area physicians (particularly surgeons), and you have operated with above-average margins for the better part of the past two decades. However, across the past few years you have noticed the evergreen financial pressure building throughout the industry, the national trend toward value-based care, and the rise of greater consumerism. You see clear signs of these forces in your market as well. However, your organization shows no urgency to change.

You recently told a colleague on the senior executive team, “Our senior team seems fixated on building more buildings and beating our major competitor. We’re doubling down on traditional volume strategies and we’re doing little to prepare for risk or extend our services beyond the moment of acuity. I’m concerned that we are setting ourselves up for a big fall.” Your colleague replied, “You may be right. But good luck delivering that message to a senior team that has done it this way for 20 years and is close to retirement.”

Reflection:

Conclusion

Adopting an adaptive leadership mindset will take time and intention, and you will consistently need to orient and reorient yourself and others to your purpose. But with practice, your ability to notice adaptive challenges will improve. Take a minute now to commit to one way to practice recognizing adaptive challenges. For example, consider putting a weekly 10-minute hold on your calendar to use the reflection questions in this resource to look at a leadership challenge in a new way, schedule time to discuss adaptive challenges with a colleague every week, or commit to defining and orienting to your purpose each week. Write your commitment down.

Of course, being able to identify adaptive challenges and losses is just a first step. Simply becoming aware of adaptive challenges does not mean we'll suddenly have the perfect approaches to address them — but it is a crucial starting point. We can't account for what we don't see.

Adaptive challenges are infinitely complex and oftentimes can't be "solved." But being aware of the losses puts us in a much better position to see why people (including ourselves) may be resisting change and help us identify new ways to move forward.

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Project director

Eva Knee

eknee@advisory.com

Research team

Rachel Zuckerman

Micha'le Simmons

Vandana Greczek

Program leadership

Matt Cornner

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