

# The Importance of Adaptive Leadership: Management of Change

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to analyze the considerations of an adaptive leader that are related to the management of change. To better understand what adaptive leadership is, the intent of this study is to offer a description of adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory; analyze the concerns, which affect an adaptive leader as they relate to the management of change, assess the key factors of adaptive leadership, and adaptive work theory as they influence followers in implementing change.

**Keywords:** Leadership Styles; Adaptive Leadership; Management of Change; Adaptive Work Theory.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In light of today's changing work environments, many leaders are encouraged, challenged, and even expected to demonstrate their leadership skills. Leaders are faced with the responsibility of becoming more adept at leading and finding solutions. Hence, through adaptive leadership, which is perceived as a forward and practical approach to helping organizations adapt to new or existing realities (Jamison, 2006); leaders can encourage management of change via direct guidance and application of uniting resources. To better understand what adaptive leadership is, the intent of this paper is to offer a description of adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory; analyze the concerns, which affect an adaptive leader as they relate to the management of change, assess the key factors of adaptive leadership, and adaptive work theory as they influence followers in implementing change.

### **Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, and Adaptive Work Theory:**

Throughout the history of leadership, numerous traditional leadership styles and theories have been applied and used to cope with management of change. Many of these leadership styles and theories afford leaders with the ability to form and guide a group of people toward the achievement of a common vision or set of goals (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Today, businesses face uncertain times and even though traditional leadership styles and theories are still considered for guidance; a more assertive and resourceful approach, such as adaptive leadership can be applied to many organizational problems.

### **Leadership:**

Before addressing the considerations of an adaptive leader and his or her relation to the management of change, one must understand what the term "adaptive leadership" means and what roles an adaptive leader plays in an organization. For the purpose of establishing a background and description of adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory, traditional leadership theories were examined.

Coldwell, Joosub, and Papageorgiou (2012) cite Crumpton (2011) as observing four generations of leadership theory that influences management of change: the first generation concentrates on "who" leaders are, these theories include the great man, charismatic man and trait theories of leadership which focus on individual traits, demeanor, and personal characteristics that outline who the leader is as a human being; the second generation of leadership theories directs its attention on "what leaders do," these theories include behavioral theories of leadership, which explain how individuals act

and respond to various situations; the third generation of theories calls attention to “where leadership happens,” this generation is represented in theories, such as the contingency and situational theories, which discuss the various platforms in, which leaders exercise their abilities; the fourth generation of leadership theories stresses the essential significance of “values and actions,” such as those practiced via transactional, transformational, servant, and principled leadership that focus on personal and organizational morals and integrity.

These theories encompass personal and occupational values (Coldwell et al., 2012). A fifth and final generation of leadership can be included; adaptive leadership, leadership that has the wherewithal to adapt and thrive in new realities (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009). A leadership style that uses the best aspects of established leadership styles, and theories. A leadership style that can be taught (Parks, 2005), and learned (Northouse, 2004) and can change when and as needed to fit the needs of an organization.

#### **Adaptive Leadership:**

Current literature on adaptive leadership demonstrates a linkage with a majority of the leadership styles and theories noted above; specifically with the more conservative behavioral and contingency leadership theories. For example, behavioral theories embody new perspectives that focus on the behaviors of the leaders and the manner in which they delegate and deploy assignments when overcoming challenges. Meanwhile, the contingency theories express that there is no correct or incorrect way of leading; that each leadership style should be based on specific situations and changed on an “as needed” basis dependent on the situation and challenge. This allows leaders to designate and mobilize followers as needed and when needed. The common thread among behavioral, contingency, and adaptive leadership is their “mobilization of people” foundation (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14).

According to Heifetz et al., (2009) “adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle through challenges and thrive.” (p. 14). In the book, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz (1994), professor, lecturer, and co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University embellishes on adaptive leadership by presenting an adaptive leadership model that helps mobilize followers under the direction of leaders. The model encourages that leaders and followers face their problems and their decision options through a win-win process where leaders and followers can learn, experiment, and adapt to new ways of coexisting, and accomplishing favorable outcomes.

Adaptive leadership is based on the premise that leadership is more of a process rather than a personal capability (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). Hence, adaptive leadership requires learning new ways to interpret what occurs around individuals in both a personal and organizational context, and by incorporating new ways to carry out work (Heifetz et al., 2009). Through adaptive leadership leaders and followers will focus on the specific problems at hand and will work collectively to fine-tune the process of solution. This can be accomplished by revising the way in which the problem is approached and handled. Moreover, this type of leadership approach should lure all parties involved to work towards a common solution through creative thinking, identification of rewards, opportunities, and any challenges that may surface.

Hence, the adaptive leadership model explores three key activities: (1) examining events and patterns surrounding individuals in both a personal and organizational context, (2) translating what individuals are observing by developing numerous theories about what is taking place, and (3) creating interventions centered on the observations to address the adaptive challenge one has identified (Heifetz et al., 2009). These three model components offer leaders the opportunity to determine and evaluate situations through repeat improvement of observations, interpretations, and interventions (Heifetz et al., 2009). By engaging in such process the adaptive leader can define the problem and engage accordingly.

#### **Adaptive Work Theory:**

Existing literature reveals that “adaptive work theory” stems off theories, such as complexity and situational theories and leadership styles much like adaptive leadership, and participative leadership styles. Such theories and leadership styles are quite interchangeable as they uniquely focus on complying with leader and follower synchronicity. Situational theory is described by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) as being “task-relevant” and applicable to “successful leaders that adapt their leadership style to the maturity of the individual or group,” (p. 37) he or she is attempting to lead or influence.

In contrast, complexity theory provides leaders with a new and fresh method of inquiry as they strive to enhance work issues and concerns via results available through traditional leader and follower methods (Swanson & Zhang, 2011). In

the meantime, adaptive leadership, and participative leadership styles afford adaptive work theory with the convenience of including followers in making decisions by encouraging strength and recognition of individual capabilities that encourage people to pursue in engaged performance. Such competencies harvest success, work completion, and creative thinking to solve complex problems.

#### **The Adaptive Leader and Follower Relationship:**

Leader and follower coexistence is increased through adaptive leadership, and adaptive work theory as both the leadership style and theory offer a rounded relationship between relationship behavior, task behavior, and maturity (Graeff, 1997). Though task-relevant adaptation and decision-making; leaders use their adaptive leadership skills to lean toward functional change (cognitive and behavioral) when responding to anticipated changes in management (Banks, Bader, Fleming, Zaccaro, & Barber, 2001). Heifetz (1994) refers to functional change as mobilization to motivate, organize, orient, and focus attention suggesting that a more simplified and evolving definition for adaptive leadership would be; change that enables the capacity to thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009).

#### **Conduct:**

Adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory also emphasizes on significant themes of leader and follower conduct: behavior, initiation, consideration, and success. These themes enable leaders and followers to assume joint responsibility in decisions, and outcomes generated. By exercising adaptive leadership skills, leaders behaviors tend to create "learning by example" and mimicking on behalf of followers, followers willingness, and readiness to adapt to their leader's capacity to challenge new circumstances begins to surface as working collectively inspires motivation, and productivity (Gilley, Dixon, & Gilley, 2008). Through their behaviors leaders are afforded the opportunity to promote cohesive interactions to enhance their own thoughts and vision goals. By incorporating such interaction with follower's the leader is more prepared to expedite creative and practical results.

#### **Responsibility:**

Through adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory the leader is deemed successful when the level of follower readiness is accomplished; this is done through joint responsibility. Responsibility can be anticipated when leaders and followers use a flexible leadership style, such as with Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership theory, which offers: (a) direction that provides specific instructions and management of performance, (b) coaching, which clarifies the choices made, (c) support that allows leaders and followers to share ideas and facilitates decision-making, and (d) delegation, which assists leaders in turning over of responsibilities.

The outcome of applied adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory demonstrates that leader and follower are capable of confronting difficult problems in unison by assuming responsibility for tasks delegated with both clarification of values and generation of progress (Heifetz, 1994). Therefore, the responsibility is shared among all individuals involved and not solely the leader.

#### **Adaptability:**

One must note that adaptability among leader and followers is a critical aspect of adaptive leadership because it implores the basic premise that group performance is contingent on the interaction (communication) and adaptability of both parties. The situations are often individually selected by the leader; hence, they appear to be the most favorable to the leader (da Cruz, Nunes, & Pinheiro, 2011); however, as Heifetz (1994) suggests that the measurement of leadership lays in the progress made toward resolving the problem; followers accomplish resolution because their leader's make a conscious effort to challenge and help him or her throughout the process.

Assisting followers in becoming adaptive and productive individuals are central underpinnings an adaptive leader focuses on as well. The adaptive leader's chief purpose is to retain the ability to affect others (Bethel, 1990) and promote guided direction to his or her followers, which assists in management change through behavior, and facilitation of collaborative and adaptive attitudes. Furthermore, adaptive leadership, and adaptive work theory are profoundly influenced by leader adaptation, interaction, and guidance. Such collaboration allows the adaptive leader the capacity to communicate and guide management change by joining core values and the capabilities of participants, which in-turn fosters and influences group attainment of common goals (Armandi, Oppedisano, & Sherman, 2003).

**Goal Attainment and Success:**

Even though the definition of “success” varies among individuals and organizations, the adaptive leader finds success through having reached organizational goals via adaptive change intervention. Adaptive leaders foremost objective is to thrive on progress and management of change, which initiates on the grounds of capabilities and adaptability in performing at expected levels by integrating change to their leadership approach at any given moment to fit unique contexts (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002).

**Approaches to Management of Change:**

Sherron (2000) argues that retaining engagement and remaining committed to adaptation is what differentiates great leaders; hence, through adaptive leadership leaders can influence followers to adopt changes with different degrees of deviation (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Organizations currently need leaders who advocate change (Kotter, 1990). When management of change is approached and supported as a result of adaptive leadership, leaders and followers are influenced to work toward the development of innovative ideas and embrace change as a source of strength and opportunity (Napolitano & Hendersen, 1998). Management of change also can be approached by including problem solving, restructuring, and forced change techniques. These techniques motivate followers to work accordingly with leaders and initiate and execute changes that assist in successfully adhering to leadership entrustment. Henceforth, the challenge to leaders is in leveraging opinions to meet organizational ends; this is why adaptive leadership plays such a critical role in management of change.

In addition, management of change can be mastered through use of additional adaptive leadership skills, such as Larwin’s (1951) three-step model, which indicates that (1) leaders can afford change to overcome the pressures of both individual and group resistance, and conformity, (2) putting into practice a change process that transforms the organization current situation to a desired end state, and (3) stabilizing a change intervention by balancing both driving and restraining forces (Larwin, 1951). The use of such model allows the adaptive leader to build on the past, experiment with resources that assist in improvising, and familiarize oneself with diversification.

**Considerations of an Adaptive Leader related to the Management of Change:**

Presently, organizations need to successfully encourage effective management of change; leaders must demonstrate adaptive leadership proficiencies. Management of change implementation within an organization can thus be theorized as practice in social influence, defined as the “alteration of an attitude or behavior by one actor in response to another actor’s actions” (Marsden & Friedkin, 1993, p. 131). Hence, “adaptability has become increasingly important to leaders at all organizational levels as the nature of work grows in complexity, change, and ambiguity” (Nelson, Zaccaro, & Herman, 2010, p. 140).

**Confronting Challenges:**

Because leaders are confronted with many challenges; these challenges require competent leaders who can undertake and resolve multifaceted issues and concerns within a collaborative and efficient environment (Cojocar, 2008). Through adaptive leadership, which Heifetz et al. (2009) describes as the activity of mobilizing adaptive work; leaders not only share responsibility but also facilitate management of change through independent judgment, development of leadership capacities and institutionalization of reflection, and continual learning (Heifetz et al., 2009).

**Competencies:**

Many studies assert that there are particular considerations that adaptive leaders should employ as they pursue and develop strategies when implementing management of change. For example, Abraham, Karns, Shaw, and Mena (2001), discovered that leaders whom pay attention to skills, such as team building, problem-solving, communication, and decision-making play a significant role in effective adaptive leadership. Such skills afford adaptive leader leverage amongst followers. Furthermore, research indicates that followers believe that such skills as those mentioned by Abraham et al. (2001) are associated with the creation of new ideas and social influence (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012) when contemplating management change.

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Meanwhile, Brownell (2008) examined a range of leadership competencies and found active listening, team leadership, training, mentorship, feedback, and conflict resolution management as well as trustworthiness and integrity among the most important skills, and abilities to effectively execute management of change. Not only should a leader be flexible and adaptable to managerial competencies but also to personal competencies that reveal individual characteristics.

In contrast, Propp, Glickman, and Uehara (2003) argue that other leadership proficiencies such as experience, technical skills, relationship management, and knowledge of organizational structure are crucial when implementing management of change through adaptive leadership. In their research, Propp, Glickman, and Uehara believe that these traits afford leaders with flexibility when adapting to change.

### **Behavior:**

Ideally, when considering management change implementation, adaptive leaders must consider all relevant factors, including timing, and sequencing of whom and how tasks will be delegated (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Building on this argument, adaptive leadership plays a critical role in the making of thriving leaders, followers, and organizations; adaptive leadership behavior is a major influence in management of change as it requires familiarization and changes in value, attitudes, and habits of behavior (Heifetz, 1994).

### **Personal Influence and Attitude:**

According to Larsson and Vinberg (2010) when one uses personal leadership practices, such as a positive attitude and self-assurance; the surrounding culture in the workplace expresses interest, perseverance, and adaptability on a personal level. Personal leadership in conjunction with adaptive leadership serves to maintain a positive relationship and attitude when workplace culture is transitioning into management change. In addition, Larsson and Vinberg (2010) indicate that personal leadership has been described as an important cornerstone in adaptive leadership and as an important tool for continuous leadership development when encouraging management of change (Blanchard, 2007; Covey, 1990; Senge, 1990).

Further review of the existing literature on adaptive leadership and its relation to management of change suggests that positive influence is communicated to followers when: (1) leaders are attentive of followers, (2) leaders induct structure, (3) leaders allow followers to control their work environments – increasing autonomy, participation, and direction, (4) leaders encourage followers by valuing their work, (5) leaders provide intellectual stimulation, and (6) leaders are engaging (Nyberg, Bernin, & Theorell, 2005).

### **Factors of Adaptive Leadership that Impact Management of Change:**

According to Torres and Reeves (2011) as changes in today's environment occur, leaders are forced to reconsider strategies, organization, and leadership. Hence, there are two crucial factors of adaptive leadership and adaptive work theory which are capable of impacting implementation of management of change. First, leaders must understand that adaptive leadership is an approach to making progress and seeking solutions on a collective level, to maximize the chances of success and minimize the chances of being taken out of action (Heifetz et al., 2009). Second, adaptive leadership orchestrates giving people more responsibility. Hence, the principal function of adaptive leadership is to direct challenges and to seek innovation, and to provide opportunity for growth, development, and prosperity not only within an organization but also among followers (Sherron, 2000).

The basis behind adaptive leadership is in understanding that "leadership is about coping with change" (Kotter, 1990, p. 104) and being proactive. Furthermore, proactivity is among the important factors that influence implementation of management change. Through proactivity, adaptive leaders create a shared sense of purpose, manage through influence, enable people to learn through experimentation, build platforms for collaboration, and are open to unpredictability. Unpredictability is a major driver for adaptive leaders and affords them the opportunity to define performance outcomes, organize work, plan goals, and use resources appropriately.

Adaptive leadership uses knowledge and abilities to resolve problems that are comparable or different from the context in which the knowledge was first encountered. In comparison, Galdwell's (2010) study of the traditional work of leaders found that making important decisions, reviewing and coordinating the work of others, collecting and disseminating information, subtracts rather than adds value to management of change if key elements of adaptive leadership are not taken under consideration. Therefore, by applying the basic rules of adaptive leadership, leaders can inspire followers to

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grow and create continuous learning, influence, and motivation. Consequently, Heifetz's theory of adaptive leadership argues that adaptive leadership allows leaders to manage in intractable, virtually impossible situations when leaders are practical and open to change (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Hence, when practically, and adaptation are implemented management of change and resolution takes place more rapidly.

### 2. CONCLUSION

It has been suggested throughout this paper that adaptive leadership (adaptive work theory) is "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive," (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). Such challenges can be faced through proper conduct, assuming of responsibility, adaptation, and attainment of goals. In addition, by way of adaptive leadership, leaders can correspondingly allocate responsibilities to meet common organizational goals and visions, and approach management of change in a tactful manner. Furthermore, adaptive leaders and followers can meet goals through building relationships, sharing responsibilities, encouraging management of change via direct guidance and use of connecting resources, such as thoughts, opinions, and behaviors. In agreement with adaptive leadership, adaptive work theory uses the groundwork of complexity and situational theories to enable leaders and followers in possessing the understanding of moral (personal) and ethical (organizational) interactions that stand to make a positive difference when implementing management of change.

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