

Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz, author of *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* believes leadership requires a learning strategy. This is where the leader engages people in helping them to face their challenges, adjust their values, to change their perspectives and develop new behaviours.

For those authoritarian type managers, understanding this concept can be a difficult concept to get their head around. On the other hand when they do it can be a revelation; it shows that effective leaders do not have to have all the answers, instead they can lead with no more than a question in hand.

Heifetz also draws a distinction between leadership and authority, claiming many people with authority fail to exercise leadership. On the other hand, many leaders lead without any authority to do so. Heifetz believes having authority can be an impediment to effective leadership. He arrives at this point by examining what is expected of those in authority; to provide direction, to protect, to orient role and place, to control conflict and to maintain the status quo. It is the expectation that those with authority will maintain stability that prevents them from providing leadership. Effective leadership can often require some form of destabilisation.

In reality our environment requires leaders to be highly adaptive - at least if they are to be perceived as contributing value to society. A CEO in an authoritarian type environment, where he or she can tell others how to act, must adapt when they enter a different arena, for example a process of community consultation, where they do not have control over others.

Adaptive leaders learn constantly, not only from the experiences of others but also from their own mistakes. Those managers that display an inability to say 'I was wrong' will have a great deal of difficulty gaining the trust and respect of those around them. An essential element in leadership.

Social Leadership Australia uses the adaptive leadership model developed by Heifetz. Social Leadership Australia is operated by the Benevolent Society. Liz Skelton, Senior Leadership Manager with Social Leadership claims we need to move beyond our current thinking where we expect someone in authority to fix our problems. . . Buying into the myth of the great heroic or charismatic leader allows us to avoid the hard work involved in making painful changes. . .

Kelly Eamonn, author of *Powerful Times: Rising to the Challenge of Our Uncertain World*, suggests adaptive leaders need to think differently. This includes being able to think from the **outside-in**. This is the ability to understand firstly those external events that may have an impact upon the organisation and then looking back inside the organisation to determine what needs to be done to minimise the impact or take advantage of opportunities. Eamonn also advocates **connective thinking** and **scenario thinking**. Connective thinking is the ability to link seemingly unconnected events. This is similar to systems thinking as advocated by Richard Hames, author of *Five Literacies of Global Leadership*. Hames takes the concepts of Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model and converts it into language the majority can understand. When you combine outside-in thinking with connective thinking you are often lead to ask What If? This is scenario thinking.

Leaders are not born. Leadership skills are learned. They are developed from our life experiences and thinking about this opens up a further question. Can leadership be taught? As consultants specialising in the development of leaders we might be excused if we were to emphatically champion the capacity to teach leadership. Yet after more than a decade in working with managers in the healthcare and community sectors I doubt we could point to single leader than we have 'created'. What we can point to is hundreds of people we have worked with that have changed the way they think and engaged in effective leadership. As Socrates was reputed to have said, "I cannot teach you anything, what I can do is help you to think". As a result of their ability to challenge their assumptions, to change how they think they have adapted their behaviour and become more effective leaders.

Adaptive leadership is not new or novel. There has been nothing new since Aristotle, just repackaging of the old. Adaptive leadership is a response to our changing environment, it is a reaction to our understanding that the command and control model of the past 80 year has its limitations in our current climate. Truly effective leaders have been adapting continuously for centuries. Those that have been unable to adapt can be found listed in the annals of failed organisations. It was Charles Darwin that introduced us to the concept of 'evolve or perish'.

Adaptive leadership requires constant experimentation. Just as the emerging environment doesn't evolve in a predictable manner or within selected parameters, nor

our response be predictive or always within the rules. As leaders and decision makers we should be comfortable with working on the edge of the unknown. This requires leaders that are comfortable seeking input from others.

Adaptive leadership occurs through making observations, forming interpretations and formulating interventions.

One factor that inhibits our ability to observe is that we 'look' from the floor level. Here our ability to see can be blocked by other activities that pass in front of our vision. Take a hint from coaches in football. Where possible the coaches box is located high up in the stands. Here the coaching staff have an aerial perspective. Not only do they see the players, they also see the relationships and the emerging environment. Let's call this a helicopter perspective.

Our interpretations can be impacted upon by our biases and preconceptions. More to the point, were six different people to observe the same scene they would likely form six different interpretations. The world is not absolute. Our observations may lead us to form multiple hypothesis. When this occurs we need to challenge our assumptions and ask ourselves what is it we are seeing that causes us to think this way? We then need to ask which of hypotheses is most likely?

Intervening is different to implementation. We intervene to change something. We intervene to help others adapt. When we intervene we take a risk; this requires leaders with courage.

Brad Zervas, Executive Director, Boys Club of New York has this to say about adaptive leadership. "*Shed what can be shed. We can't be all things to all boys*". His advice, focus on the 'core' aspects of your organisation. This can apply to community organisations in particular, where such organisations can take on 'to much stuff'.

Adaptive leadership can appear threatening to many organisations. Its not so much that people are resistant to change; they are resistant to the cost of change. All change comes with some cost. People resistant to the cost of change will try to marginalise those advocates of adaptive leadership, they may try to divert people's attention in other directions or they may simply go onto the attack. Another tactic may be to try an incorporate adaptive leadership into mainstream functions of the organisation. This form of co-opting is aimed at making adaptive leadership less visible.

Adaptive leadership on its own, while useful, is only a partial contribution if it doesn't lead to adaptive organisations. This is possible even for healthcare providers. Adaptive organisations are learning organisations. The have in place structures that encourage the sharing of information and they go out of their way to break down silo's and personal fiefdoms. Every person in an adaptive organisation clearly understand the organisations core values and every

action they take is in line with those core values. These core values revolve around how deeply the organisation and its people care for stakeholders and customers. The common behaviour of managers in an adaptive organisation is the way they pay attention to the needs of all constituents, especially customers, both internally and externally.

Organisations are complex adaptive systems (CAS) built around a network of relationships and multi directional communication. If you don't believe this, try drawing a map linking you with all the people you have some relationship with in your organisation and then start mapping their relationships - very soon you will get a glimpse of those networks. Now here is the interesting question. How well do you understand the value of these networks, how well do you collaborate and work together, how well do you share knowledge?

There is a bigger picture here. Good attracts good. This is an important concept. People talk about their workplace, they share stories of their experiences with colleagues and friends. An enjoyable workplace attracts the best people, who in turn attract other good people. A workplace that share knowledge and encourages collaboration attracts people that want to achieve good outcomes. These attractors all centre round values. These values underpin quality relationships.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, defined a learning organisation as one where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

Senge (1990, pg 340) believed that adaptive leaders are needed to build and develop learning, adaptive organisations; those adaptive leaders 'breath' life into adaptive organisations. They are leaders that design the process, are stewards of the vision and as teachers they empower others to achieve their best through defining reality.

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