

Management Matters

Understanding the Adaptive Challenge and the Role of Leadership in Times of Change and Innovation

Hello, I'm Ellen Kagen, director of the Georgetown University Leadership Academy and its Leadership Development Program for Professionals and Civic Leaders. On behalf of the office of Head Start and the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations I'd like to welcome you to this segment of Management Matters, the third in the Leadership Series entitled Understanding the Adaptive Challenge and the Role of Leadership in Times of Change and Innovation. I'm looking forward to being your guide through this Management Matters session as we consider the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges, how to know what kind of challenges you're facing, the limitations of technical solutions in adaptive work, the need to create the context and opportunity for learning and growth, and the need for reset.

Within the past decade, surveys of how our leaders are doing have shared a similar story. According to recent polls taken by Gallup and the Washington Post, Americans have low confidence in the leaders of today. Today, deeply held beliefs about leadership are being challenged. The traditional belief is that leaders always have the solutions. We look up to leaders to make decisions and to provide direction.

From the time we are in grade school, teachers ask a question and we are to provide the answers. We are encouraged to know facts, and to be able to share what the teacher and the books had taught us. However, the challenges you face today do not have easy answers that you can memorize. In order to solve today's challenges it will take a different perspective on the role of leaders in leading change and innovation.

Also shifting are traditional leadership values, such as being highly educated or experts in a particular field or being the strong protector. And that same is true for skills. You may even be noticing that the skills which once made you successful may now be less relevant. Leaders in innovation can't only be problem solvers or public speakers, delegators or strategic planners. The need for innovation requires us to create new pathways and to thrive in complexity. All of this leads us to understand that beliefs, values, and skills of leaders at every level are going to need to expand if we are to take hold of the opportunities of the 21st century.

Professor Ron Heifetz at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in his groundbreaking book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, identified two very different kinds of challenges faced by leaders today and urges us to make sure we are clear about the distinction between the two. He suggests that unless we know what kind of challenge we are facing, how do we know what kind of leadership behavior to provide? So let's look at these two types of challenges and make sure we're clear about their differences.

He calls the first kind of challenge technical. It has nothing to do with technology. You are facing a technical challenge if the problem or what needs to be done is clearly defined. Therefore, the solution and how to implement it are also clear and everyone's perspective are aligned. In other words, they all see it in the same way.

For example, planning the logistics for a multi-agency meeting or running a training are technical challenges. To solve technical challenges we use skills that are already in our skill set such as budgeting, defining objectives, organizing the work, creating the brochures, or delegating, things we know how to do. The task maybe large and complicated, but we have the necessary knowledge and skills and

everyone is on the same page. They simply need your good direction. So when facing a technical challenge, the formal leader has both the ability and the primary responsibility for mobilizing the work.

The second type of challenge is called adaptive. You know that you are facing an adaptive challenge if the problem is not clearly defined, thus, not seen as important or even understood by all. Therefore, the solution and how to implement it are also not clear. And perhaps the most important, people have legitimate yet competing perspectives and therefore they are not aligned.

For example, imagine that you're participating in a community multi-agency meeting with partner organizations from child welfare, children's health, and other child serving agencies. The stated goal of the meeting is to integrate programs from all the agencies in order to better coordinate services for children and their families. But it is clear that each agency wants to maintain its own independence rather than truly integrate as is your vision. Your vision and theirs are legitimate competing perspectives.

And when you are in this type of situation, no matter how much you want to solve it or fix it or use high advocacy to explain why your idea will be the best for the community, you do not have the ability, or more importantly, the full responsibility to solve the challenge, even if you are the formal leader. The primary locus of responsibility to facilitate the conversation might stay with you, but it is not solely your responsibility for resolving it. So if not you, then who?

It is the responsibility of this amazing entity called the collective intelligence. So let's unpack what that means. Collective intelligence is about listening to understand the perspectives of others, of the collectives, of their intelligence, wisdom, experience, and perspectives are now even more important than your own. Why? Because you already know what you believe, now you need to collect the data from others. Test your mental models and see the challenge from their eyes. The collective intelligence is composed of people at all levels, regardless of their department, position, or level of education.

When I think about collective intelligence I often think about crime solving programs or characters like Sherlock Holmes who constantly investigate to find the clues to solve the puzzle, or doctors as they go beyond the surface and use strong diagnostic skills. They are collecting intelligence. They listen and ask questions. They never know what piece of data will make the whole picture become clearer, the piece of data that leads them to the next set of steps. They can't have a tight plan, per se, because the plan requires information that does not yet exist in our knowledge set.

Collecting intelligence helps leaders figure out what to do next. And in this case, it is essential if we are facing adaptive work. Thus, you now see all individuals as necessary resources to the work of change. No one person can have all the knowledge, experience, and perspectives needed to create the best solution to an adaptive challenge.

Gathering the collective intelligence requires you to work across boundaries. It means getting out of your office or your agency and talking to HR, IT, operations, or the early intervention program staff of your city or county, or the directors of other preschools in the community, or the child welfare director in charge of well-being. And of course, it means speaking across boundaries with families and policy council members on a regular, ongoing basis.

Finally, the collective intelligence is about learning your way to new solutions. Because unlike technical challenges, adaptive challenges are specific to each situation and context. And therefore, the best solution may not exist and has to be generated into existence.

Imagine what could be gained when you reframe the term "learning" from something that happens in training or formal learning environments like school, to learning as a way of growing and expanding one's mind and perspective. If you only talk to people in your own sphere, you only reinforce your own way of thinking. In Stanford University's Design Thinking program this is a required skill for leaders to make sure we get out of our own way. We gain true wisdom by being open and learning from all people, especially those who think differently than us.

As you mobilize the collective intelligence, you encounter the mental models of others, and most importantly, the need to recognize and to manage your own. It requires great self awareness and deep humility to understand that you are only one person in the situation, and you only see it the way you see it, no matter your position. For more explanation on mental models, I strongly encourage you to view the Management Matters presentation in the leadership series entitled Why Did I Do That? Mental Models and their Influence on Your Work as a Leader.

When collective intelligence gets to work, the group can shift from competition to cooperation, from individual achievement to group success, and from horizontal solutions to vertical solutions. In adaptive work, together you can create great things. As a leader, it is critical for you to understand the kind of challenge you're facing in order to know what type of leadership to provide. To help me do that in my leadership work, I kept the following question on my computer until I had it firmly implanted in my thinking. Does your challenge require that people need to change their values, attitudes, or habits of behavior? If the answer is yes, then my fellow leader, you are facing an adaptive challenge.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make however, is to try to use a technical solution to solve an adaptive challenge. Technical solutions are things like making decisions in isolation, telling people what to do, or prescribing the solution. When things are clear, you as a leader can be clearer by telling people or prescribing solutions. But that is not the case in adaptive work. Let's look at some examples.

Let's say you want to respond to the diversity in your community and increase cultural and linguistic competence in your agency. Many leaders may simply publish brochures and materials in Spanish, and if you are really culturally competent they will have been translated into a second language like Amharic, spoken by the Ethiopian community. An adaptive approach would be to do the hard work of truly learning the ways of diversity in one's community and building substantive relationships.

Or what about the desire of the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership to use integrated enrollment forms across multiple agencies to make it easier for parents? They could put multiple logos on the documents, staple them together, thus making one packet. However, this is certainly a technical solution to the underlying adaptive challenge of integration. An adaptive solution would be for organizations to truly collaborate. Bring in the parents to get their perspectives and have the deeper conversations about what each entity means when they say the word "unified" and "integrated," and to ensure that the materials are on a single form and are actually unified in their approach with all perspectives aligned.

On a lighter note, in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, writer Anne Lamott says, "If your wife locked you out of the house, you don't have a problem with your door. If you see this

only through a technical lens your initial response might be to try to fix the door or get another key rather than dealing with your adaptive challenge, the person behind the door." Adaptive challenges are difficult because their solutions require people to change not, in this case, getting the door to change. What makes adaptive work even harder is that often you are the one who has to change, or at least change first.

I imagine at this point you're beginning to see what Heifetz is talking about. So let's look at one final example from our field. Juan is one of the only males working at a Head Start program. Most of his colleagues on the education staff are female.

Parents drop their children off at the center before school and pick them up on their way home. In addition to providing early education and child care, the center offers programs and services in the evening to help the parents prepare for college and employment, provide classes on how to budget, and address landlord/tenant issues. Mothers, grandmothers, and even great grandmothers regularly participate in those programs. But few, if any, fathers do.

Fathers may drive their child to the center, but they never come in. Juan has the vision to bring in fathers as active participants in their child's education. As Juan talks to his female coworkers, he is surprised that they don't see the lack of participation by the fathers as a problem, and that their attitude differs from his own. Juan sees a huge lost opportunity and he wants the fathers to be involved, so he actually has three leadership challenges. Can you see what they are?

The first, how to get fathers involved in the programs and services offered by the center. And two, to help his fellow female staff members even notice that there's an opportunity. And then three, how to align their perspectives with his.

To solve this challenge Juan could tell or with motivation try to sell his female co-workers into seeing what they need to do to get the fathers involved. Or he could even send them journal articles about the importance of fatherhood involvement. Or Juan could approach the fathers while they waited outside in the parking lot, telling them that they need to participate by passing out beautifully crafted flyers extolling the importance of fathers in their child's life. Juan has spent hours perfecting these fliers using vivid colors and even great pictures, but to no avail. All of those are technical solutions, and they are unlikely to work because the challenge is an adaptive one. In order to solve it, values, attitudes, and habits of behavior will have to change.

Now imagine that you are Juan. What would you try? Without a clear understanding of adaptive leadership, Juan might have gone on with trying to put technical solutions to an adaptive challenge and have ended up frustrated, blaming the lack of forward momentum on his female colleagues or on the fathers themselves.

It needs to be said that as a leader you, of course, will do both technical and adaptive work and both are important. You can use technical work strategically to gain short term wins and to move a process forward. Engaging your team in technical work like developing a training or creating a brochure can generate learning among your team. Those kinds of things can support adaptive work, but by themselves will not solve the adaptive challenge. Whether you start with technical or adaptive work is not important. The key is to use both strategically, and to not put a technical solution to an adaptive challenge.

In order to foster adaptive work, leaders have two primary roles. First, creating a context, a space for learning and growth. And secondly, to foster reset. Because you need to mobilize the collective intelligence in order to create opportunities to address adaptive work, one of your primary roles as a leader is to create a safe space where diversity is welcome and thus, different perspectives can emerge. By doing so you provide an opportunity for learning and support so that people can grow and the innovation you are seeking can be generated, understood, absorbed, and ultimately acted upon by all.

Your second primary role as a leader is to foster reset. Resetting means revising or adopting new values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors based on an openness to hear new information, perspectives, or truths. It means providing the space for the legitimate competing perspectives to emerge. Resetting happens because you honor the diversity. You need the diversity and you have created a space for learning in which those legitimate competing perspectives can be heard.

Most of the time, however, we think we are right, and that can become the most important thing to us. When you have a new idea you may be thinking, if they would only think like me we could do anything. When you bump up against someone with a different mental model you may need to reset yourself as you move into the innovation space. You may need to let go of your rightness or your frustration with certain individuals or the very attitude that you have about others who don't see it the way you do.

As Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky put it in their 2009 Harvard Business Review article, resetting is the hardest leadership work. It means figuring out, "what of all that you say you value, is really important and must be preserved. And what, of all that you value, you must leave behind in order to adapt to a fundamental new reality."

Remember our story of Juan? He wanted the fathers to be involved in the center's programs and services, and he wanted to help the female staff realize that the lack of participation by fathers was an opportunity lost. He was frustrated, and he was irritated with his female colleagues. They were doing nothing much to support him.

What was wrong with them, he thought. Why didn't they see what he saw? The technical solutions that Juan tried were simply not going to work. Instead, Juan needed to reset. His reset was realizing that simply telling his colleagues what he wanted and advocating for change would not work. Juan was good at cheer leading and motivating others, but in this case his strength was actually his liability, and it was not going to work.

Juan needed to reset. But Juan wasn't the only one. The female staff would have to reset as well. They must expand their view and stop assuming deep down that it's not important for fathers to participate in the center. They must stop being prisoners of their own experience where only mothers were involved with raising the children.

And the fathers would also need to reset, to open up, take a risk, and consider how their participation could benefit their children. And yes, finally the center itself would need to reset to truly provide an environment that is welcoming and father friendly, engaging to, for, and with fathers themselves. This was truly an adaptive challenge all around.

So to summarize, the pressure to put technical solutions to adaptive challenges is real, and will be maintained unless we shift. It seems that there is so much pressure to perform, to solve, to do. It is often the approach that most leaders use, at least at first. However, when facing an adaptive challenge

you must step back to see the adaptive work ahead. Don't make the mistake over and over again of thinking that technical solutions suffice. As Albert Einstein said, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Technical work will not replace the need for the deeper engagement required when you are in adaptive work. Always remember to take a look at yourself first. As the leader, you may be the one who has to shift, to reset, to stop falling into the same patterns, the same habits over and over again, and then blaming others like Juan for not changing. Like all leadership skills, shifting to adaptive work is like breaking your own habit and is a process, one you make over time.

Like me, now that you know the distinction between technical and adaptive work, you will see it everywhere. The question for you is, what will you do next? I'd like to close with a poem by Portia Nelson entitled "An Autobiography in Five Chapters," which illustrates the journey of providing effective adaptive leadership.

"Chapter One. I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it, I fall in again. I can't believe I'm in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter Three. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there, I still fall in. It's a habit. My eyes are open, I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter Four. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Chapter Five. I walk down another street."

Addressing adaptive challenges takes courage, focus, and risk. With ongoing leadership learning we will see the day when all leaders who yearn for change and innovation take the necessary steps to see the adaptive work ahead, stop themselves from falling into the same technical patterns and solutions, and walk down another street by resetting and creating safe spaces for diverse perspectives and innovation to emerge.

Thank you for joining me today, and all the best in your leadership journey.

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