

# Using Heifetz's principles of adaptive leadership to diagnose and take action in your system

## Principle 1 Get on the balcony

## Principle 2 Identify the adaptive challenge

### Summary

- Getting on the balcony is the mental activity of stepping back from the action and asking, "What's really going on here?"
- Adaptive leadership requires learning the art of alternating between being an observer and participant.
- On the 'dance floor' we are in the fray, we are listening to the music, taking care we don't stand on people's toes. We often don't see the patterns and behaviours in the system from the dance floor.
- On the balcony we can see who is dancing with whom, how and the energy, and who is sitting out.
- To diagnose our system and then take action we need to move between balcony and dance floor repeatedly.
- Seeing ourselves from the balcony can be the hardest task of all!
- An adaptive challenge exists when there is a difference / gap between the shared values people hold and the reality or a difference between the values people hold around an issue.
- The internal conflict caused by the challenge to values, causes distress so seeing the nature of the distress and getting underneath the multiple values held may help to diagnose the adaptive challenge.
- It's possible to use yourself and your organisation as a mirror for the wider system and to understand the nature of the distress and therefore challenge.

### Questions to support your partner observing from the balcony

- If you step on to the balcony what 'data' are you noticing from your picture?
- What is your interpretation? What patterns are you seeing from the balcony?
- What is the 'song beneath the words'? What are people saying and doing; body language and emotions; what is not being said?
- What might the gap or difference be in values around your issue? What sort of distress are you noticing?
- How might you frame the adaptive challenge? What might your personal leadership challenge be in relation to this challenge?

## Key Concept: Distinguishing Technical/Adaptive Challenges

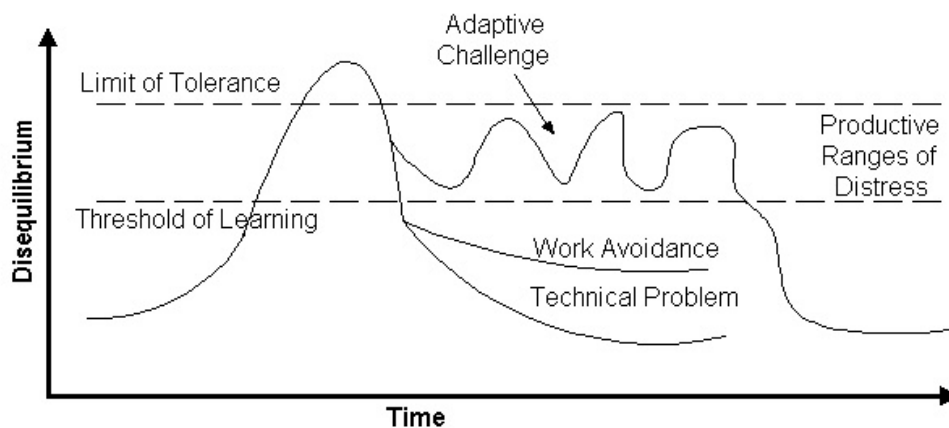
Concept	Identifying Flag
Persistent gap between aspirations and reality.	The language of complaint is used increasingly to describe the situation.
Responses within current repertoire inadequate.	Previously successful outside experts and internal authorities unable to solve problem.
Difficult learning required.	Frustration and stress manifest. Failures more frequent than usual. Traditional problem-solving methods used repeatedly, but without success.
New stakeholders across boundaries need to be engaged.	Rounding up the usual suspects to address the issue has not produced progress.
Longer time frame necessary.	Problem festers or reappears after short-term fix is applied.
Disequilibrium experienced as sense of crisis starting to be felt.	Increasing conflict and frustration generate tension and chaos. Willingness to try something new begins to build as urgency becomes widespread.

Distinguishing technical problems from adaptive challenges			
Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	CLEAR	CLEAR	AUTHORITY
Technical and adaptive	CLEAR	REQUIRES LEARNING	AUTHORITY AND STAKEHOLDERS
Adaptive	REQUIRES LEARNING	REQUIRES LEARNING	STAKEHOLDERS

## Principle 3: Regulate distress

### Summary

- Conflict is a necessary part of the change process.
- If handled properly, conflict can serve as the engine of progress and bring a more integrated approach.
- Leader's imperative is to manage differences in ways that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy.
- Surfacing the relevant conflicts is essential and to do well requires an approach that teases out the unacknowledged differences in perspectives on the issue and that are stopping progress.
- To orchestrate conflict you need to tolerate hostility, which can be very uncomfortable for many of us.
- Leader must keep the distress of others within a productive level and monitor the tolerance for heat and regulate the temperature accordingly.



Source: Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald C. Laurie, "Mobilizing Adaptive Work: Beyond Visionary Leadership," in Jay A. Conger, Gretchen M. Spreitzer, and Edward E. Lawler III, eds., *The Leader's Change Handbook: an Essential Guide to Setting Direction and Taking Action* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998)

### Questions to support your partner observing from the balcony

- What are your personal reactions to conflict and the idea of 'cooking the conflict'?
- What behaviours have you seen in response to previous disequilibrium in your system? E.g. to external threats; to confusion about future direction?
- What are the unacknowledged differences of perspective that are stopping the system moving forward? What therefore is the nature of the conflict?
- What mechanisms to regulate distress are currently within your control, given your authority?
- What are the ways you might 'cook the conflict' and then regulate distress so surface all the values, visions and views that lie beneath your adaptive challenge – then encourage people to collaborate on experiments to learn?

# Principle 4: Maintain disciplined attention

## Summary

- Work avoidance is a common human response to a perceived threat or the prospect of loss. It diverts attention and restores equilibrium.
- A key balcony task is to identify patterns of work avoidance at the same time as affirming the significance of the real work. Work avoidance can include scapegoating, use of authority, externalizing the enemy.
- Once the patterns are visible try to understand the impact of new directions on the factions within your system - focus on the threat or loss that these factions perceive and develop a strategy for dealing with.
- Cultivate and work with allies who share your perspective.

## Questions to support your partner observing from the balcony

- What work and work avoidance patterns do you see in your system and that are helping to maintain the equilibrium?
  - What clues do the authority figures provide?
  - Are there any scapegoats and what distressing perspective might they represent in the system?
- What perceived threat or loss might result from the perspective of each of the factions within your system? How could you deepen your understanding of their perspective?
- Who might you cultivate as allies to help you keep the focus on the adaptive work?
- What ways are you taking away to counteract the expected work avoidances and help people learn despite resistance?

Faction	Perceived Threat	Perceived Loss	Action for deepening understanding

# Principle 5: Give back the work

## Summary

- Adaptive change requires major adaption in people – so resist the reflex reaction of providing people with the answers otherwise change will not occur
- There is a strategic challenge to give the work back to the people without abandoning them. Overload and they won't learn. Underload and they will be dependent.
- Consider ways you might be holding on to work that falls to someone else or resisting doing the work that falls to you?
- Resist resolving conflicts yourself – people will blame you for the conflict that results.
- Identify where the work really belongs. Mobilize others to solve problems by placing the work where it belongs.

## Questions to support your partner observing from the balcony

- Changes in whose values, beliefs or behaviours will allow progress on your adaptive challenge?
- What are the perceived threats and losses to the different factions?
- Given my role how am I likely to be holding on to the work that belongs to someone else and what are the consequences of this? Or resisting doing the work that falls to me and my team?
- Where does the work really belong and what steps might I take to give the work back to these people?

Faction	Perceived Threat	Perceived Loss	Action for deepening understanding

## **Principle 6: Protecting the voices of Leadership from below**

### **Summary**

- Our authority in the system is a resource and a constraint. We have the power to hold things together and harness potential. With this comes that people expect answers and have expectations of us.
- We also have the power to silence and squash people who speak out. Voices speaking beyond their authority may feel self-conscious.
- Leaders have to rely on others within the organisation to raise questions, to point out contradictions, provoke rethinking.
- Protect the voices from below by asking them questions, giving them cover,

### **Questions to support your partner protecting the voices from below**

- How are the voices from below heard in the system currently?
- Whose voices do you think might need to be heard? How might you engage with them?
- How can you give cover to those who raise hard questions, generate distress and point to contradictions?
- Do you have an idea about what they might say about your adaptive challenge?
- What might the implications of protecting the voices from below doing be for you?