Changing Through Turbulent Times — Why Adaptive Leadership Matters

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As environmental factors continue to force organizations to adapt and change, researchers, practitioners, and leaders will be required to develop methods to more effectively handle the challenges of less predictability, increased uncertainty and complexity surrounding such changes. The adaptive leadership model (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) provides leaders with a unique perspective on how to motivate, mobilize, and engage individuals to respond positively to change in a variety of contexts, particularly when traditional change models fall short in addressing the human side of change that so often leads to failed change processes. This paper proposes a conceptual framework suggesting that researchers, practitioners, and leaders applying adaptive leadership to traditional, prescriptive organizational change models can develop competencies and behaviors among all stakeholders as they thrive and move towards a new normal. Further implications are also given for leadership practice, theory, and research.

With the increasing pace of change in both the workplace and the world, the need to develop adaptive leadership skills (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) as a competitive advantage is critical now more than ever before. While other leadership theories, such as transactional leadership, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and authentic leadership (Gardner & Avolio, 2005) are centered around the leader, adaptive leadership focuses on the leader's behavior and interaction with followers as well as the ability to mobilize and motivate followers to adapt to change (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). To that end, given the fast-paced changes occurring every day, it is important for individuals at different levels of any organization

to be equipped with the skills needed to lead adaptive change. Cawsey, Deszca and Ingols (2016), identify political, economic, social, technological, and environmental (PESTE) factors that may cause drastic changes to organizations. While some changes require a bit of fine tuning to normalize operations and systems, other changes may require complex solutions and systemic/paradigm shifts for organizations to reach a new sense of normalcy.

Unpredictability is at the heart of any change process because introducing something new to a situation may run counter to what previous experience conditioned one to expect (Combs, 2006), thereby creating uncertainty and less predictability. Traditional change models have been known to be prescriptive, thereby increasing predictability and giving change leaders a sense of control (Higgs & Rowland, 2005). However, these models have often failed to address the emotional and social aspects related to the human side of change which involves motivating and engaging those affected by change to adapt to a new normal (Gill, 2002; Kotter, 1996; Mulligan & Barber, 1998). This is alarming as research confirms that not addressing the human side of change is one of the most common reasons for organizational change failure as those leading change fail to account for how people react to disturbances in their routines (Palmer, 2004). Furthermore, leadership behaviors have a significant impact on the success or failure of the change process (Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Thus, a unique set of leadership skills and competencies are needed to effectively manage the unpredictable nature of organizational change while also attending to the human side of change. Adaptive leadership is one method that accepts the unpredictability of change and also focuses on the emotional and social side (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

With the current fast pace of change and its associated challenges, there is a scarcity of literature within organizational change on the importance of developing leaders who can mobilize, motivate, and engage individuals in organizations and societies to adapt to complex changes. Given the strategic role of leaders in organizations, not changing or learning how to successfully lead change will only hurt individuals and organizations in the long run. The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework that highlights how adaptive leadership skills

enhance the "human side" of change so often missing from more traditional organizational change models. More specifically, this paper argues that adaptive leadership skills will aid researchers, practitioners, and leaders in developing competencies and behaviors to more effectively handle the challenges of less predictability, increased uncertainty, and complexity surrounding organizational change.

What is Adaptive Leadership?

Adaptive leadership (AL) is a process of leadership where a leader seeks to engage, mobilize, and motivate followers to change. This change process requires people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). As there are different dynamics involved in a change process, adaptive leadership focuses not only on the leader's capabilities, but also on the leader-follower relationship, as well as internal and external factors that impact the organization (Glover, Rainwater, Jones, & Friedman, 2002; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). AL requires all individuals involved in the change process to see themselves as stakeholders, thereby compelling them to work towards positive change, also known as adaptive work (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Adaptive Leadership's Six Behaviors

When implementing change in a complex setting, Heifetz and Laurie (1997) have outlined six leadership behaviors that promote the adaptive leadership process. The adaptive leadership process involves the leader's ability to (1) "get on the balcony" to accurately assess the situation at hand. Through this process the leader can gain a bird's-eye view by detaching him or herself from the midst of the problem because it "does the leader no good to be swept up in the field of action" (p. 132). As a result, the leader can accurately (2) identify the adaptive challenges faced by the organization, which is a critical component of the process. The leader needs to differentiate between a technical challenge (one with identifiable solutions) and the adaptive challenge (one where there are no easy or straight-forward answers). Failures in leadership often occur because leaders fail to diagnose challenges and problems accurately (Cawsey et al., 2016).

Another essential leader behavior is to understand the emotional toll and stress the entire process of change will have on followers as they are being asked to take up challenges which they may not be ready for.

During this process, Heifetz and Laurie (1997) note that it is important to (3) "regulate distress" (p. 134). It is at this point when leaders must provide a holding environment where stakeholders feel safe to express their opinions without fear of judgement or retribution. Providing a safe environment for stakeholders can lead to creative ideas and solutions that serve as a driver for change (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Also, the leader's behavior involves (4) maintaining disciplined attention (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 135). This ensures the situation does not get out of control and followers stay focused on the work at hand. A leader's disciplined attention also helps to ensure a degree of structure that adds a sense of pre-dictability to a change situation otherwise characterized by uncertainty. Another important behavior is to (5) "give the work back to the people" by guiding them and empowering them to come up with creative and innovative solutions (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 136). From this standpoint, followers are encouraged to learn, challenge themselves, and grow through the process. Lastly, Heifetz and Laurie (1997) support (6) "protecting leadership voices from below" (p. 137). This emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the marginalized ones whose voices and concerns may be overshadowed in the process. Listening to all viewpoints, including those whom the leader disagrees with, offers an opportunity for growth. Thus, giving a voice to all people is a foundation of an organization that is willing to experiment, learn, and explore different options.

It is noteworthy that other leadership theories, such as the Leader Member Exchange Theory (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and Path Goal Theory (PGT) (House & Mitchell, 1974), also address the leader-follower relationships, albeit, to a lesser degree. The LMX theory focuses on the unique relationship that the leader must develop with each of their followers to avoid having in-groups and out-groups within the organization. In a similar vein, PGT theory suggests a leader must identify what motivates each employee and, as such, must work to remove or mitigate obstacles in the employee's environment. AL is unique in that when dealing with a high level of complexity impacting several individuals at the same time, the leader can draw on and combine certain behaviors, enabling the group to adapt to change without having to focus on what motivates each person. Additionally, the collaborative nature of the AL problem-solving process produces satisfying solutions for followers.

To further understand the uniqueness of the adaptive leadership model, there is a need to address its relationship to change leadership. Kotter (2011) notes that change leadership concerns the driving forces, visions, and processes fueling large scale transformation and affecting many people. Kotter further explains that due to the nature of transformation, situations have the potential to get out of control and, as such, a leader's role is to minimize risks and take the charge to lead the massive change process. Therefore, leaders must possess a certain set of competencies to lead large scale transformation. There are some similarities between change leadership and adaptive leadership. Nevertheless, while change leadership focuses on structures and processes as well as relationships among stakeholders, adaptive leadership focuses on driving the human side of change by nurturing relationships, understanding reasoning and emotions, and working together to do adaptive work. In essence, the leader does not do the work (of change) for the followers, but guides the followers to develop solutions to adaptive problems. Another distinguishing feature of adaptive leadership is that it does not always involve large scale transformation and masses of people. Any number of individuals, regardless of size, who are facing challenges where there are no easy answers can benefit from the guidance of an adaptive leader who understands how to engage and motivate others to change.

A comprehensive understanding of the different dimensions of AL underscores the importance of leadership as a learning process (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) whereby leaders and followers cooperatively experiment with ideas to come up with effective solutions. As a result, followers feel a sense of empowerment and engagement in the process (Gill, 2002; Northouse, 2015), which is critically important when overcoming the uncertainty and unpredictability of organizational change. To fully appreciate the adaptive leadership model, a further understanding of organizational change theory and humans' need for predictability and consistency is necessary.

Organizational Change Theory

Organizational change is defined as the "planned alterations of organizational components to improve the effectiveness of the organization" (Cawsey et al., 2016, p. 2). Organizational components include an

organization's mission and vision, strategy, goals, structure, processes or systems, technology, and its people. One of the most common reasons organizations (and individuals within them) may change is because of dissatisfaction with a status quo (Cawsey et al., 2016; Osland, 2009). For example, an individual dissatisfied with their current weight is likely to take steps to change their current weight (i.e. new diet, new exercise, etc.) similar to how a tire manufacturer will make changes to its production line when it discovers the tires it produces are consistently worn out after 10,000 miles rather than the 40,000 miles they were expected to have. Even dissatisfied consumers may opt to return the faulty tires and purchase new tires from other manufacturers. This is because "for change to be possible and for commitment to occur, there has to be enough dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs to mobilize energy toward change" (Beckhard, 1991, p. 664). Therefore, once an ineffective product or process is identified, organizations (and individuals) will often make changes, which they hope will lead to more effective products, processes, or outcomes in the future (Cawsey et al., 2016).

Organizational change is often difficult because it temporarily impairs one's sense of normalcy because of new changes taking place (Cawsey et al., 2016). This makes sense because people have a natural desire for predictability (Torbiörn, 1982) and consistency rather than uncertainty (Palmer, 2004). Humans tend to want consistency because it makes the actions of others more predictable, allowing for established routines and positive behavioral patterns, which is healthy (Palmer, 2004). To want consistency is to resist change, because without consistency, things become more unpredictable and chaotic. Thus, organizational changes requiring someone to consider alternative unfamiliar behaviors are often resisted because people do not want to deviate from behaviors that have already worked for them in the past (Palmer, 2004). Interestingly, many organizational changes that fail are the result of human reasons. In other words, the change leaders did not address the common reactions of normal people to disturbances in their routines (Palmer, 2004). These failures resulting from the human side of change highlight the importance and necessity of leadership skills that can engage, motivate, and empower followers to adapt to change. Furthermore, due to the high uncertainty and low predictability pursuant to organizational change,

several models (including, but not limited to Lewin's Three-Step Model, Greiner's Model of Organizational Growth, and Sterman's Systems Dynamics Model) sought to provide structure and processes aimed at improving predictability and decreasing uncertainty when diagnosing and implementing organizational change.

The most basic model created by Lewin (1951) stressed that environmental forces (political, economic, social, and technological) can lead to changes in individual behavior (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015). Lewin's Three-Step Model includes unfreezing (identifying old behaviors to change, which will destabilize the status quo), changing (replacing old behaviors with new behaviors) and then refreezing (practicing the new behaviors within the group until they become habitual, thus, being stabilized in a new quasi-equilibrium, or a new "normal") (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015).

While Lewin (1951) directed attention to replacing problematic behaviors with more effective behaviors, Greiner's Model of Organizational Growth showed that change leaders need to be more in tune with the shifts that organizations make over time, particularly when the organization is out of balance with environmental forces (Cawsey et al., 2016). This imbalance can lead to crisis, which requires a change to overcome, leading to new growth until a new crisis develops. Thus, Greiner's Model of Organizational Growth is a very prescriptive approach hypothesizing that organizations move through five stages of growth followed by five stages of crisis (Greiner, 1972). Greiner's model underscores the need for leaders to be sensitive to the dynamic nature of organizations, the interaction with their environment, and that organizational changes may not lead to planned results because of unseen variables. Kotter (1996) also outlined the eight-step process of organizational change, whereby a leader follows a specific sequence to move from a current state to a desired future state. While this process is widely used, it also assumes a linear pattern, whereby change is a top-down process (Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

By addressing the failure of some organizational changes due to unanticipated variables after a change has been implemented, Sterman's Systems Dynamics Model was developed and suggested that this failure is because leaders often take a linear view of the world — a rational causative

model where leaders identify a gap between what is currently happening and what is desired, then make a decision, take action, and expect rational results (Cawsey et al., 2016; Sterman, 2001). Sterman's Model argues that change is more complex than a linear view of the world and, therefore, requires non-linear thinking to make change successful. This supports Reynolds' (1987) observation that the presence of complexity does not easily allow for linear and predictable models, and as such, change leaders have to work with a sense of a general direction and few guiding rules.

Conclusion

Even as early organizational change models (Lewin's, Greiner's, and Sterman's) utilized prescriptive approaches to aid in predictability, these same change models failed to address the human side of change by not accounting for the reactions of normal people to disturbances in their routines, or utilizing the collective insight of all stakeholders involved. Thus, paramount to today's leaders is the ability to develop new competencies that harness and utilize the collective knowledge and skills of diverse stakeholders in meeting organizational change challenges. Applying adaptive leadership to organizational change models can enhance the human side of change by highlighting behaviors and
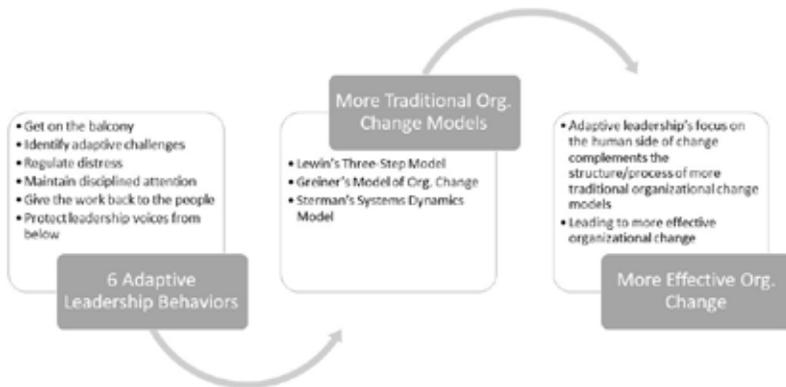

Figure 1. Complementing Organizational Change with Adaptive Leadership. This figure illustrates how the six adaptive leadership behaviors complement more traditional change models in achieving more effective organizational change.

competencies leaders need to exhibit for motivating and mobilizing followers to thrive in the change process. For example, while Lewin's Three-Step Model prescribes the idea of "unfreezing" the old behaviors, "changing" them with new behaviors, and "refreezing" the new behaviors until they are stabilized into a new normal, adaptive leadership allows change leaders to more effectively identify the old behaviors through their vantage point of "getting on the balcony." In its simplest form, taking a break from the hustle and bustle of the change by holding meetings in a different setting may be enough of a difference to clarify one's focus on the change process.

Adaptive leadership also promotes the non-linear thinking, diverse perspectives, and alternative approaches supported by Sterman's Systems Dynamics Model. For example, adaptive leadership's suggestion for leaders to understand the difference between adaptive and technical challenges requires leaders to gather all the necessary facts within and outside of the organization that make the challenge complex. When the factors of change and the process of change are misdiagnosed, leaders will end up developing technical solutions to the adaptive challenges. The process of gathering more information and including diverse perspectives are supported by adaptive leadership. Utilizing adaptive leadership is also beneficial for practitioners of Greiner's Model of Organizational Growth. The challenge of recognizing a traumatic crisis at each stage of organizational development and having the character, intelligence, and communication skills to propose and carry out successful changes to meet each crisis is only enhanced by adaptive leadership. For instance, the "regulating distress" and "maintaining disciplined attention" components of AL are important to help change recipients move through each of the crises. Clear and concise communication can help to regulate distress by providing information to increase predictability to address the uncertainty of the change situation.

Applying the basic principles of emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy (Goleman, 2015) helps to maintain disciplined attention among the leader and followers. Furthermore, "giving the work back to the people" as they address the crises may serve to empower change recipients when they see that their actions

can and do make a difference in the change outcome. Leaders can also give work back to the people by developing stakeholders' competencies through taking up different roles and tasks as they work towards devising solutions to the complex challenges they face. Equally important is the need for leaders to embrace diversity as a way of protecting leadership voices from below. This emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the marginalized ones whose voices and concerns may be overshadowed in the change process. As a result, change leaders utilizing AL can enhance the effect of traditional organizational change models by sharpening the human skills needed to carry out the prescribed steps of the models. To that end, AL can be positioned as an essential part of any change model as it addresses the challenges of the "human side" of change by encouraging adaptive behavior, commitment, and engagement among all stakeholders.

Implications

Change agents serve different roles within organizations and as such are involved in facilitating organizational development, leading or managing change, as well as developing training and other initiatives for leaders and followers. Thus, in addition to the kind of behaviors adaptive leaders need to exhibit when confronted with complex change, it is important to discuss implications on practice, theory, and research in organizations. For leaders, the imperative becomes developing the right skills and competencies to lead change. To that end, practitioners can offer training and learning initiatives where leaders are made aware of the benefits and implications of adaptive leadership and the kinds of skills required to partner with others in doing adaptive work.

A unique feature of the adaptive leadership process is the creation of a holding environment: a safe place with the right amount of tension whereby followers can actively debate issues and share their fears and frustrations without penalty, thereby generating new ideas and solutions that help followers adapt to complex change. This collaborative process offers learning opportunities to all stakeholders leading to enhanced outcomes. From an organizational development perspective, leaders can help shape organizational culture through an understanding of adaptive leadership. The exchange of ideas and appreciation of various perspectives encourage diversity within organizations, thus creating an organizational

culture where decision making stems from wider participation of stakeholders. Moreover, the adaptive leadership process enables leaders to understand how human behavior can affect performance in organizations and, by extension, how leaders can mobilize and motivate followers to change. This is particularly relevant as many established norms are being challenged in a fast-changing world. As a result, more information on effective leadership behaviors in solving complex problems is needed. Finally, leadership and change research can benefit from the renewed interest in leadership development during turbulent times.

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