



HSD @ Work:

Patterns of Adaptive Leadership

Royce Holladay

Adaptive leadership, as a concept, has become popular, based strongly in the teachings of Ronald Heifetz (*Leadership Without Easy Answers*; Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994). Leaders recognize the world is changing quickly and successful leaders today and in the future are more able to respond to those changes. They ask questions; they seek and speak the truth; they listen deeply. Descriptions of adaptive leadership from Heifetz and others have set leaders on a path that helps them think differently about their roles as leaders in today's turbulent landscape.

So what more can HSD offer to inform leadership in complex systems? The theory and applications of HSD help leaders explain how local action brings about system-wide change in the fractal nature of today's environment, pointing to the need for leadership at all levels in a system. HSD explains that, since leadership is necessary locally as well as on a broad scale, adaptive capacity of the whole depends on the ability of individuals throughout the system. Adaptive leaders at any point establish patterns of behavior and decision making that enable the whole system to adapt to day-to-day changes, challenges, and opportunities.

HSD teaches leaders to use Adaptive Action to set the conditions for successful performance in highly diverse, open systems that change constantly. Regardless of the formal or informal nature of their roles, adaptive leaders build capacity in their systems as they set conditions for the following patterns of leadership to emerge.

Build professional efficacy – Adaptive leaders first “know their stuff.” They realize the interdependent social context of their work, which requires that they see and respond to emergent needs, opportunities, and challenges. These leaders are consciously competent because they work from a grounded theory base that draws them to deeper learning, informs decisions and actions, and generates creative insights and new learning about the work they do. Adaptive leaders stand at the cutting edge of their work, seeking to increase and hone necessary skills to create and sustain patterns of productivity and growth.

Understand systems at all levels – Adaptive leaders see, understand, and influence massively entangled patterns at all levels of the systems where they live, work, and play. They know the complex nature of highly diverse, open systems at all levels of their existence—in their personal and family lives, in their communities, and in a national or even global arena. Because they understand how patterns emerge in these complex systems, they can take action to adapt toward greater fitness and sustainability.

Treat individuals with respect – Adaptive leaders value individuals around them and interact in ways that honor difference and contribution. Their moment-by-moment decisions about engaging with others move them toward generative patterns. They are authentically involved in inquiry and action as they collaborate with others to ensure fairness and equitable access to the system's wealth and opportunities.

Establish collaborative, robust networks – Adaptive leaders understand the power of participating in a robust network that gathers and shares information from across the environment. They recognize the need to establish and nurture multiple nodes and hubs for listening deeply, both locally and in the broader environment; for understanding and sharing what is learned; and for responding appropriately to local conditions. They understand the interdependent nature of these hubs and nodes, and help to establish shared agreements to guide individual action that is coherent across space, time, and system differences.

Create useful, ethical decisions – Adaptive leaders understand that the degree of inherent complexity determines how a decision can best be made. For instance some decisions are easily “yes/no,” “up/down,” “buy/sell” decisions that are about simple change from one static point to another. When engaging with this type of decision, adaptive leaders can easily weigh the options against desired outcomes and make a choice. Some decisions involve predicting the path and outcome of a change—in much the same way one can measure the speed and path, to predict the destination of a pitched baseball. In those decisions, adaptive leaders look at what they want, make the choices that accommodate pertinent variables, and move toward the most effective outcome.

Most decisions in life, however, are not so simple. In systems that are diverse, open, and constantly changing, the most effective, most ethical decisions depend on what is the best fit for the greatest good at any given point in time. This is why adaptive leaders need deep and abiding knowledge about their work; about seeing, understanding, and influencing patterns at all levels of their systems; about creating generative relationships with individuals around them; and about building and sustaining healthy networks. In most decisions adaptive leaders face, these are the multiple factors that shape their challenges and opportunities; they are the considerations that must be made to determine how best to move toward fitness and sustainability of the whole.

HSD helps adaptive leaders stand in inquiry at the intersection between theory and practice. It offers models and methods to see, understand, and take adaptive action that moves their systems toward greater productivity and sustainability. For more information about how we work with groups, individuals, and communities to develop powerful leaders, visit www.hsdinstitute.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

Patterns of Adaptive Leadership

