

Leading Adaptive Change: Ronald A. Heifetz

Summary

Heifetz identifies two types of challenges in leading change: adaptive and technical. The technical is defined as those challenges that can be solved by the knowledge of experts, whereas adaptive requires new learning. When the problem definition, solution and implementation are clear, Heifetz calls this technical change. For the adaptive challenge, change must come from the collective intelligence of the employees at all levels. So, together they learn their way toward solutions.

Level I: Technical	Level II: Technical & Adaptive	Level III: Adaptive
★ Problem definition is clear	★ Problem definition is clear	★ Problem definition, solution, and implementation require new learning
★ Leader or expert provides solution	★ Solution requires new learning	★ Responsibility for the solution resides within the followers
★ Easiest to resolve	★ Both leader and followers are responsible for the solution	★ Most difficult to resolve
		★ Second order change

“The mark of leadership in the competitive world is leading others in adaptive work.”

Six Principles for Leading Adaptive Change

1. Get on the balcony

- a. Leaders need to have distance to see the “big picture”

2. Identify the adaptive change

- a. Leader needs the ability to identify adaptive change when it is called for
- b. Must address it in order to turn it around
- c. Confront the brutal facts (Jim Collins, 2001)

3. Regulate distress

- a. Do not overwhelm but provide enough tension to maintain urgency
- b. Challenge unproductive norms
- c. Ask questions rather than give answers

4. Maintain disciplined attention

- a. Must be able to identify distractions and refocus the work
- b. Attention on tough issues
- c. People tend to slide back into old behaviours unless focus is maintained
- d. Reframing issues get at the heart

5. Give work back to people

- a. Getting others to assume responsibility
- b. Instil confidence in others through encouragement and support
- c. Be part of the change

6. Protect voices of leadership from below

- a. Protect rather than squelch those who risk speaking up
- b. Need to hear all voices including dissenters

Political Thinking

Heifetz stresses that leaders need to be able to think politically.

The following are highlights of political strategies as described by Heifetz:

- ★ Personal relationships are the key to successful leadership
- ★ Adaptive leadership is based on political thinking
- ★ Develop alliances
- ★ Keep the opposition close
- ★ Acknowledge the loss and difficulty
- ★ Accept casualties in order to make progress
- ★ Take responsibility for your piece of the mess