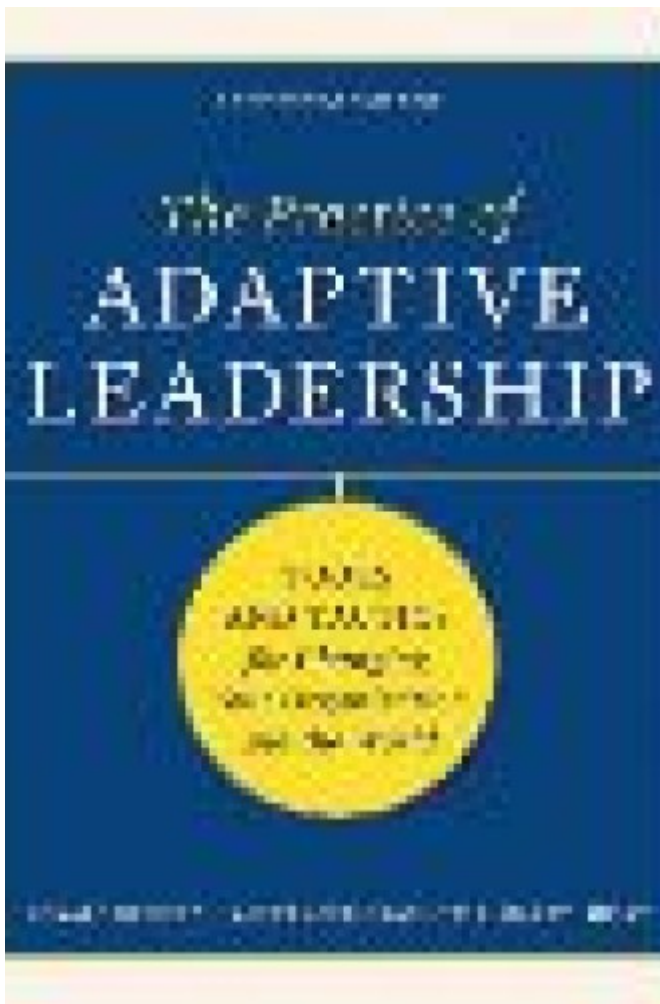


The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

reviewed by [Bill Kincaid](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World

Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky

Harvard Business Press

As Faith Covenant Church approaches its centennial, it is long on history and short on imagination. On the growing edge of the city at the time the congregation was founded, Faith Covenant's transitioning neighborhood now lies between a rejuvenated downtown area and popular, upscale suburbs. Many people drive through the area every day, but few stop.

The congregation was introduced to adaptive leadership as part of a visioning process wherein the members were encouraged to break out of predictable patterns informed by outdated assumptions and to think creatively about how they might live out their vocation in this new time. The leaders of the church sought to close this visioning conversation quickly by recommitting themselves to working harder in the future. When told that the real issues had to do with a reluctance to talk honestly about congregational values, an unwillingness to entertain new possibilities, an inability to tolerate ambiguity and pain, and a drastically altered religious and cultural landscape, the leaders' anxiety and defensiveness were palpable.

Adaptive leadership seeks to increase an organization's capacity to thrive by aligning the organization with its core values and purposes. Often organizations quickly settle on what Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow call technical fixes—modifications that address problems with the organization's present understanding, structures and procedures. Though technical solutions are sometimes necessary, nothing new is learned or implemented in such a move. The organization invokes answers for which it has current knowledge, even if those approaches continue to trap the organization in its own limitations and ineffectiveness. For example, when a staff person resigns, the technical solution is to hire someone else to fill that position without reviewing whether the position itself optimally contributes to the values and mission of the organization.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, can be addressed only through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties. While technical solutions serve to ease anxiety, adaptive change depends on some measure of anxiety to fuel organization-changing conversations, experiments and decisions. So, in the case of the staff opening, adaptive leadership would keep the space open for discussion, remain present to the disequilibrium and allow multiple interpretations, options and strategies to emerge.

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership does not refer to a single faith community. The four stages of the authors' recommended process would benefit any congregation willing to engage in difficult dialogue and take a few risks in order to live more fully into the future to which God calls it. In the first stage the system of the congregation is diagnosed from a balcony perspective. Just as we cannot see what is happening on the dance floor as long as we are dancing, congregational leaders often are so immersed in the activity of the system that they are unable to see how the congregation is or is not responding to various opportunities and challenges. The pastor might seem to be the most likely person to observe things from the balcony, but a team of leaders who will influence future discussions might become more vested in the process as a result of gaining a balcony perspective. What most discover from this angle is a tenacious status quo in which the congregational system has taken on a life of its own and, without reflection or awareness, perpetuates patterns that turn the congregation in on itself and stifle its life and witness.

The second stage is to discern the congregation's adaptive challenge. Where is the growing edge of the congregation? What needs to be addressed in order for the congregation to mobilize for ministry? For some, the adaptive challenge will come in closing the gap between the congregation's espoused values and its behavior. For instance, the people at Faith Covenant often talk about engaging their neighborhood more regularly, which might be fairly easy to do since the neighborhood association meets in its parlor, but no one from Faith Covenant ever attends the association's meetings. Instead, church members go to committee meetings on the same night in other parts of the building to talk about the neighborhood instead of with it.

Another form of adaptive challenge is that of competing commitments. Most congregations lack sufficient human and material resources to do everything they desire and have to choose two or three major commitments from a long list of attractive options. Still another kind of adaptive challenge has to do with speaking the unspeakable. Most congregations prefer to suppress difficult, controversial, troubling issues, even though they may be the very issues the congregation needs to resolve before it can move forward. The last form of an adaptive challenge is avoiding work, either by diverting attention away from the issue or placing the responsibility for it on someone else. Most congregations will recognize their adaptive challenges on this list and gain some understanding of the scope of work before them.

The third stage involves designing an effective intervention. Congregations frequently are more adept at observing and interpreting than at intervening because intervening requires painful prioritizing and courageous action. The authors encourage leaders to fall in love with making hard decisions, which will be difficult in those congregations where the tolerance level even for hard conversations is low. The notion that everything now and in the future rides on one decision is false. Effecting congregational change requires wading into situations where values are in conflict, where interventions carry weaknesses as well as possibilities, and where losses are sure to occur. Congregations seeking to change must proceed with the first courageous move of what will be an ongoing process.

The fourth stage calls for sustaining a safe, structured environment where enough conflict is present to energize a congregation without overwhelming it. The environment in which conflict will be orchestrated can be hostile, especially as people begin to see what they will lose, but eliminating or neutralizing the conflict minimizes the energy available for the changes ahead. Adaptive leadership brings to the surface, nurtures and facilitates conflict for the sake of sustained learning and change. Congregations that are already anxious will require a slow pace on their journey of incremental change.

The book's three authors have considerable teaching experience in leadership and executive education: Heifetz and Linsky at the Harvard Kennedy School and Grashow at Harvard, NYU and Duke. Heifetz introduced adaptive leadership with his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Later he joined with Linsky in writing *Leadership on the Line*.

In addition to thorough discussions and practical exercises on these four stages, the book includes two helpful sections that explore the self-understanding and renewal of leaders. Those who will lead effectively at congregations like Faith Covenant will stay connected to their purposes, recognize their own loyalties and triggers, anchor their searches for meaning in multiple communities and interests, and regularly engage in practices of renewal that keep the plaque and scars of hard experiences from distorting and damaging their core being.