



Adaptive Leadership for Public Health Podcast Series

Episode #1: What is Adaptive Leadership?

Hello everyone, and welcome to Adaptive Leadership for Public Health, a podcast created to help you address the complex challenges of public health leadership by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. This podcast is sponsored by the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University.

My name is Brandy Walker and I am faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, a unit of Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia. I'll be your host as we explore various aspects of adaptive leadership through our podcast. In today's episode, we'll begin by answering the question "what *is* adaptive leadership?"

Before we get to that answer, let's start with a couple of broad statements about the field of public health: as a field of practice, public health requires the creation of procedures, protocols, and best practices, and the adherence to those in order to create a strong foundation to serve the public. But leaders in public health also need to have the creative and innovative thinking to address persistent problems in new ways, tackling those challenges that don't respond to established best practices. You also need the boldness and flexibility to respond to those new challenges with new and unknown solutions. That last part, in a nutshell, is adaptive leadership.

Each episode in this podcast will ask you, the public health leader, to consider how adaptive leadership strategies can help you become intentional and strategic as you lead your teams and public health initiatives, especially in uncertain times.

This episode will start us out with an introduction to adaptive leadership as a framework for your public health leadership journey. Our goal for you is that you will use this podcast as part of a larger reflective practice to assess where you are, and to grow as an adaptive leader.

First, a little background: The foundations of this leadership theory came from the research of Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky at Harvard University. Adaptive leadership is often referred to as a model or practical framework for organizations and individuals who are dealing with complex changes in uncertain times when there are no clear answers or known experts to rely

on. In such circumstances, the adaptive leader engages and mobilizes the people with the problem to tackle those complex challenges.

Let's pause on that for a moment, because that is a key concept for public health leadership: mobilizing the people with the problem and enlisting them to help tackle those complex challenges. After all, public health is not what the public health department does **to and for** communities. Public health is what the COMMUNITY does to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy. And the adaptive role of public health leaders is to create the conditions to empower communities to do just that.

This episode will introduce you to two of the critical first steps you need to take to understand what adaptive leadership is, and then a few additional foundational concepts that you can explore more on your own.

The first critical step is recognizing **what** an adaptive challenge is and **how** it is different from technical problems with known solutions.

The second step is understanding **how** to diagnose the **actual problem** in an adaptive challenge and how to **properly frame** the issue to set the stage for finding solutions.

Adaptive leadership requires a mindset shift from thinking that leaders and experts are the ones providing solutions, to recognizing that adaptive challenges require multiple perspectives to generate new solutions. Adaptive challenges call for leaders who can mobilize, motivate, organize, reorient, and focus the attention of the **people with the problem** to enact meaningful change. No public health initiative is successful without successfully mobilizing, motivating and focusing on **people** in the communities who have the public health problem.

Let's talk about what a technical problem is first. These are problems that are

1. Easy to identify and diagnose—there is generally no arguing about what the actual problem is.
2. Technical problems have “known” solutions -- they are part of existing protocols or best practices. The problem emerges, and there is a protocol in place to address it.
3. These known solutions *may* require changes within existing boundaries —but such changes don't cause you to really go outside of your comfort zone or think outside of an existing “box.”
4. These solutions come from experts or people in authority—you either know who to turn to or where to find someone who has the expertise for this problem.
5. And the *solutions* for technical problems are ones that people are generally receptive to because they are familiar, known, and expected. In other words, people aren't usually

suspicious or uncertain about these solutions. After all, they are coming from experts in authority that they trust because of their credentials and experience.

6. Finally, technical solutions have a quick or clear timeline for solving. (And the solution is one that can be a “mandate.” Leaders can pronounce: do this, and the problem is solved.)

Now, that doesn’t mean that technical problems are necessarily easy or always straightforward, but the key is, the work to address these problems is KNOWN, and you know exactly who or where to turn to for the solutions.

Generally speaking, we want to use best practices and technical approaches to problems... when they’re working! But when they’re not...well then, knowing how to spot that adaptive challenge and lean into adaptive leadership strategies is key. Most complex challenges that leaders face contain both technical and adaptive elements. And a big mistake that leaders can make is approaching an adaptive challenge with a technical solution mindset. Figuring out what the problem is, is not as easy as it may sound.

So, the first step for public health leaders and organizations to take when facing a problem to solve or a change to make is to diagnose where the technical part ends and the adaptive part begins. Why? Because we know what to do to solve the technical problem, but the adaptive challenge requires strategies to work towards that “unknown” solution, or towards the **solutions** that requires greater buy-in from the communities with the problem.

Let’s turn now to the characteristics of Adaptive challenges: they are

1. Difficult to put your finger on—actually identifying the real issue is part of the challenge, which is why we call these situations adaptive challenges. Agreeing on how to ‘name’ the problem is part of the struggle, and it can be easy for some people to deny that a problem even exists. For example, providing access to a vaccine that directly addresses a public health concern is a technical solution to solve a public health issue. But what do you do if people aren’t coming to get the vaccine? The adaptive challenge is why people aren’t getting the vaccine. But how do you name that challenge? Is it an access issue? Is it a trust issue? Is it a values and beliefs issue? How can you address vaccine hesitancy? These questions require more than technical solutions.
2. Adaptive challenges require a change in thinking—leaders have to take on a different perspective, which involves a significant change in their approach to seeking a solution, and often involves helping others grow in a way that changes not just behaviors but also beliefs and values.

3. Whereas technical problems might involve changes within existing boundaries that don't take you far from your comfort zone, adaptive challenges involve a change across **uncrossed** boundaries that tend to make people feel uncomfortable. (because of the unknown)
4. Unlike technical problems, adaptive challenges aren't best solved solely by experts or those in authority over a situation, but rather, the people *with the problem* are key to the solution.
5. Adaptive challenges are often met with **resistance** because people *are* suspicious or uncertain about where the solutions are coming from, given that the solutions are untested or not yet "proven" (draw arrow to denying the problem even exists)
6. And finally, addressing adaptive challenges requires experimentation (which involves trial and error, unpredictable missteps, and risk to get to the innovation needed). And they can be frustrating because they take time, and often no one knows exactly how long it will take. *Is any of this sounding familiar to you?* Solutions to adaptive challenges can't be mandated from on high; instead, they require buy-in from the people with the problem. And how you get that buy is often through adaptive leadership strategies.

Think of it this way: technical problems rely on the "best practices" with known solutions delivered in top-down leadership fashion, but adaptive challenges require a leadership which helps build the "**next practices**" that enable people to thrive in **new** circumstances.

Identifying the **presence** of an adaptive challenge is a huge first step.

But, once you've identified what part of your problem is technical that can be addressed by known solutions, and you recognize the presence of adaptive challenges that are persistent with no clear path, you're on to step 2, which is to understand how to **diagnose** the actual problem in an adaptive challenge and how to properly frame the issue to set the stage for finding solutions.

Now let's talk about those other foundational concepts to guide you as an adaptive leader. I'm going to refer back to the adaptive leadership experts Heifetz and Linsky, this time to a great short article they published in the Harvard Business Review entitled "A Survival Guide for Leaders." This article outlines two main areas that you should focus your attention when addressing adaptive challenges:

The first is how you manage your environment. And the second is how you manage yourself. Note, there is no reference to how you manage people, because an adaptive leader recognizes that you don't really have that kind of control.

I'm going to share a few concepts from that article on these 2 areas that you can manage to strengthen your adaptive leadership skills, but I highly recommend you read through the article yourself to see what resonates with you.

In order to manage your environment, one foundational concept is to operate both in and above the fray. This is a way of

1. **Seeing the situation from a new perspective:** This strategy is often referred to as “getting on the balcony”—this is a metaphor that describes how leaders need to elevate themselves above the messy “fray” of the situation to get a new perspective on what’s going on.

Getting on the balcony allows leaders to get outside of their “known” perspective and get a more expansive viewpoint. This allows them to see the “big picture” more clearly AND to see the people involved in the situation who may not have been in their line of sight before. It’s also important for leaders to see what role **they** were playing in the fray to see their **own** blind spots or missteps.

2. **It is from this balcony position that leaders can better diagnose the adaptive challenge.** Although the scope of the challenge can become more clear from the balcony, it takes more than just the leader to name what the problem actually is. From this position, leaders can see more than just the people around them, they can see those on the margins, those who might have been overlooked, people who may have innovative ideas that have not been shared but are relevant to the challenge at hand. It’s these people with different perspectives that can help name the problem, and become critical to finding the solutions.
3. **In order to set the stage for *finding* solutions, adaptive leaders must** recognize they can’t do it alone. They need to **create a safe space for new ideas to emerge.** Leaders do this by creating a holding environment where people who aren’t usually in the conversation can feel invited to enter in and comfortable enough to contribute to it. This is a space that expands the notion of expertise from those with training and education to those with different practical and lived experiences. *Remember, it’s not just the traditional “experts” but the people with the problem that are key to an adaptive solution.*

When it comes to managing yourself, well, this is an area that many leaders struggle with. We hear a lot these days about self-care, and for leaders, it is imperative. But this kind of self-care is a bit different. The 2 key areas for managing yourself in the “survival guide for leaders” are identified as

1. managing your hungers, and
2. anchoring yourself.

So, managing your hungers isn't a new diet fad. It points instead to managing your desire for control and importance. This isn't really about humility or arrogance, it's about the traps that leaders often fall into, even with the best of intentions.

As a leader, one trap that is easy to get caught up in is the trap of doing everything, and thinking that it will all fall apart if we don't. If it is true that it will all fall apart if we don't do everything, then we're not doing it right. Leaders have to surround themselves with teams of people who are ready, willing, and ABLE to do the jobs necessary. Part of being a leader is raising up people with the skills or capacity for growth needed to achieve the larger goals, and smaller tasks. Doing that work, and then letting go to let those you've selected, trained, and now trust do the work, is a sign of a confident leader, and one who is successfully managing those hungers.

The concept of “anchoring yourself” is a game changer. During turbulent times of change, which is a daily experience for adaptive leaders, it is critical that you find a safe harbor to reflect on your experiences and recharge your batteries. We can't go running from one fire to the next and realistically expect to have the stamina to lead through long-term change efforts. Leaders have to be reflective, not merely reactionary.

Finding people who can ground you and serve as confidants, can help you recharge and refresh.

And finding people who can listen to your experiences and give you perspective outside of your work context can often provide you with insight that you're too close to see.

Again, refer to the article “A Survival Guide for Leaders” to explore more of these adaptive strategies.

As we close this episode, let me stress that adaptive leaders recognizes that they don't have all of the answers. Because *if* the leader had the answers or could turn to an expert to guide everyone out of the challenge, it would be a technical problem.

But don't forget, keep that technical work going if it's working! AND, know how to recognize the adaptive elements, if it's not.

In summary:

Uncertain times and challenges without clear solutions call for a mindset shift to recognize the nature of the problems you're facing. Adaptive leadership requires that you know how to approach challenges for which the known solutions aren't working or just aren't there. Adaptive leaders know when to look at their circumstances from a different vantage point [getting on that balcony]. It's only when we see differently that we can think differently, and find those solutions that are not already known. And it takes more than one perspective to put all of these pieces together.

Remember, the first steps in answering the question "What is adaptive leadership" involve

1. recognizing adaptive challenges as different from technical problems, and then
2. understanding how to actually diagnose the problems you're facing.

This brief overview of adaptive leadership is just the tip of the iceberg. The leadership skills needed to navigate adaptive challenges involve much more. In the next episode of Adaptive Leadership for Public Health we'll focus on Leadership Principles and Practices, and we invite you to join us to explore how these concepts can add to your leadership journey. On behalf of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I want to thank you for listening. We hope this podcast will help you build your confidence and capacity to address complex challenges in your public health organization by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. Until next time, reflect on what you've heard and how it fits into your leadership journey.