

Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Reviewed by Robyn Baylor

Introduction

The Practices of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World asks readers to act courageously and engage in continued reflection as they seek to become agents of change. The authors explain authentic leadership as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (pg. 14). At the heart of adaptive leadership practice is the idea that if a system is broken, it must be diagnosed and remedied by taking risks and challenging the status quo in order to provoke change.

The book is comprised of five sections with twenty-three chapters. Each section walks the reader through many steps on the journey to adopting adaptive leadership practices. The chapters are comprised of a series of short sections that all have directive subheadings. These commands such as “Name the Elephants in the Room,” “Find Allies,” or “Get Past the Past,” provide mini lessons within each chapter.

Two common elements found in the book are the *On the Balcony* and *In the Practice Field* features. Throughout each section the authors provide these tools to help readers synthesize the recommendations in relation to their own personal situations. *On the Balcony* asks questions that encourage reflective thought and application of the ideas in the book to one’s own situation. *On the Practice Field* provides suggestions for “mini-experiments” to begin implementing the lessons from that section. For example, in a section titled “Discover Your Tolerances”, the *On the Balcony* section asks “What do you do when you are feeling overwhelmed by chaos, confusion or conflict or when you sense others are feeling that way...what do these tactics suggest about your tolerances? (pg. 208). *On the Practice Field* suggests that readers ask coworkers to observe them closely in a meeting and provide feedback related to the ways they respond to conflict. These concrete strategies for implementing adaptive leadership are prevalent throughout.

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership is an interactive book that provides many strong examples from the field. It incorporates more than advice, but also tools and guidelines that help apply the content to specific scenarios relevant to the reader’s life. This review provides an overview of the theoretical frameworks that guide the book, a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of content, suggestions for use in practice and a critique.

Theoretical Frame

In 1994, Heifetz’s adaptive leadership was introduced to the world of leadership studies. One of the most important framings of adaptive leadership is the idea that leadership is not positional or based on authority but rather a practice that can be pursued by anyone. The authors explain that while leadership is not based on authority, it is also “radically different from doing

your job really, really well” (pg. 23). Adaptive leadership focuses on the need for change within organizations and encourages actions that disrupt the status-quo in order to incite forward momentum.

Adaptive leadership is rooted in leadership theory but also has significant links to scientific theory. As the authors explain, the focus on adaptation is drawn from biology and evolution where plants and animals evolve (or adapt) over time in order to survive and thrive. Tenets taken from the study of evolution shape much of the approach of the book. The authors explain that successful adaptation requires building on the past and observing what is expendable or extraneous as changes are made while still recognizing the “heritage” of an organization. Moreover, adaptation relies on experimentation and diversity in order to succeed. Successful adaptation also recognizes the need for loss and that such changes require time. The authors also make use of biological terminology in their analogies. They instruct readers to “diagnose” the challenges before them before acting and compare organizations to ecosystems. This theoretical foundation undergirds much of the strategy that is provided throughout the book.

Elements of the Book

Section One: Introduction – Purpose and Possibility

The authors explain that this book does not necessarily need to be read from cover to cover in order to be utilized but the first section provides a wealth of helpful background information. It has three chapters, How to Use This Book, The Theory Behind the Practice and Before You Begin. Chapter One introduces the reader to the language used throughout the book and makes suggestions for using the book in practice. Chapter Two provides an introduction to the type of leadership practice that the authors advance and the scientific theories that support their approach. Chapter Three serves as a bit of a pep talk for readers before they jump into the bulk of the text with subheadings like “Don’t Do It Alone,” (pg. 41) “Resist the Leap to Action,”(pg. 44) and “Discover the Joy of Making Hard Choices” (pg. 45).

Section Two: Diagnose the System

Diagnose the System contains four chapters and focuses on the observation and planning stages of adaptive leadership practice. Chapter Four – Diagnose the System looks at understanding organizational missions, strengths and weaknesses to provide context for change. The next chapter, Diagnose the Adaptive Challenge, helps readers identify gaps between organization values and behaviors as well as other contradictory actions. Next readers are invited to Diagnose the Political Landscape in Chapter Six. Here, there are several areas of focus including uncovering loyalties and alliances, recognizing the values behind the actions of others and assessing the losses and risks associated with potential actions. In the final chapter of Section Two, the authors present Qualities of an Adaptive Organization. On page 101, five qualities are discussed: Elephants in the room are named, responsibility for the organization’s future is shared, independent judgment is expected, leadership capacity is developed and reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized. At the end of the chapter, a rubric is provided to help readers assess how adaptive their organization is based on these five key components.

Section Three: Mobilize the System

Part three focuses on actions that leaders should take to enact change. The five chapters include Make Interpretations (8), Design Effective Interventions (9), Act Politically (10), Orchestrate Conflict (11) and Build an Adaptive Culture (12). Chapter Eight discusses the ways that people in an organization must change in order to interpret situations in an effective manner. They must view things adaptively rather than technically, think about systemic rather than individual factors and be willing to engage with elements of conflict as well as those that are more benign in relation to change. Chapter Nine provides several tips for defining interventions that will receive support from others and lead to impactful change. These include using thoughtful framing, appealing to individual values, be patient and listen well to feedback and be prepared for resistance but do not settle for avoidance. Chapter Ten explores the reality that adaptive leaders will have allies and adversaries throughout their process. It provides insights about managing these different factions and engaging voices of dissent and recognizing the value of their difficult and skeptical questions. Chapter Eleven invites the reader to manage conflict in order to enact change. The authors explain, “If you want to generate progress...you have to seek out, surface, nurture, and then carefully manage conflict toward resolution, rather than see it as something to be eliminated or neutralized... Conflict is an essential resource in getting to the real, as opposed to superficial, harmony” (pg. 151). In many ways, Chapter Twelve mirrors Chapter Seven. Here the authors go beyond naming qualities of adaptive organizations and provide guidance for building an organizational culture that is adaptive. The chapter suggests that an adaptive leader must always model such behavior and proactively encourage qualities like those discussed in Chapter Seven such as independent thinking and professional development.

Section Four: See Yourself as a System

The fourth section delves into the personal side of developing adaptive leadership practices. In Chapter 13, See Yourself as a System, the authors explain, “You are a system as complex as the one you are trying to move forward” (pg. 181). They present the idea that each person has multiple identities and they must bring forward when exercising adaptive leadership. The following chapters invite readers to dig deeper into this theme in by engaging in the following: Identify Your Loyalties (14), Know Your Tuning (15) and Broaden Your Bandwidth (16). Chapter Fourteen discusses the importance of loyalties on many levels: those in the workplace, those in the community and what they call ancestors, referring to one’s cultural, national, ethnic or spiritual roots. Chapter Fifteen provides reflective questions to help readers recognize issues and actions that act as triggers for them and how to manage strong reactions when they arise while Chapter Sixteen encourages readers to explore their tolerances and broaden their networks. Chapter Seventeen, Understand Your Roles, asks readers, “What roles do you play?” and provides tools to help one identify the scope of one’s authority. It also explores the differences between formal and informal authority. Finally, Chapter Eighteen, Articulate Your Purposes, helps readers prioritize their purposes for engaging in this work and reminds them to connect to their personal impetus for wanting to create change through adaptive leadership.

Section Five: Deploy Yourself

The final section provides instructions for continuing to expand one’s adaptive leadership practices and connection and how to sustain oneself through such action. The authors explain, “the next three chapters focus on leading from your own emotional reservoir and the risks and

vulnerabilities that come along with operating in that territory” (pg 232). Chapter Nineteen, Stay Connected to your Purposes, discusses ethics, helps readers synthesize their personal goals and how they change over time and names common pitfalls for this personal approach to leadership such as becoming a martyr or appearing self-righteous. In Chapter Twenty, readers are reminded to Engage Courageously. The focus of this chapter is to provide an understanding of some of the most challenging aspects of leadership such as dealing with feelings of incompetence, contemplating difficult decisions and making mistakes. Chapter Twenty-One, Inspire People, provides a list of ways for people to enhance their charismatic appeal. These include listening with compassion, speaking from the heart and making each word count. The *In the Practice* section here suggests taking an acting class or improvisation workshop in order to practice expressing emotions. Run Experiments, Chapter Twenty-Two encourages risk taking. Subheadings in the chapter include Exceed Your Authority, Turn Up the Heat, Name Your Piece of the Mess, and Display Your Own Incompetence. The final chapter, Thrive, highlights important steps for maintaining a capable adaptive leadership style over time. These include maintaining personal networks, finding confidants, living a satisfying life outside of the office, and maintaining a sense of optimism for the future.

Recommendations

Best Target Audience

This book was written as a “field book.” The authors designed it in hopes that readers would use the book to respond to pressing issues at their organization and for it to be “of day-to-day utility” (pg. 5). With this in mind, the best target audience for this book would likely be professionals who are seeking to create change in their workplace. Some of the lessons are certainly applicable to other scenarios but there is a decidedly corporate tone throughout much of the book. Published by Harvard Business Press, this focus is not unexpected but it may be limiting for use with students in leadership programs that are not housed in business schools or do not focus on leadership in highly structured situations.

Uses of Book in Student Leadership Program

If this book were to be used successfully in a student leadership program, it would need to be connected with an experiential component where students were able to apply the lessons presented in the book to a real scenario. It could be used quite well as a source of support if students participated in an internship component or other active and prolonged engagement that provided a space for testing the strategies. The *On the Balcony* reflections and *On the Practice Field* assignments that accompany each section could be adapted for students to apply to hypothetical scenarios through group activities and discussions but this would not provide the same rich experiences that could be had through actual application.

This book would also be best used in a leadership program with a management or business focus. While there is not the strict sense of hierarchy or leadership from an authority standpoint, the general tone of the work along with the examples used throughout favor a more corporate model. Examples that extend beyond CEOs generally center on politics and large law firms. Much of the language focuses on raising performance, working with clients and enhancing efficiency. A student leadership program that was developed based on the social change model or Greenleaf’s servant leadership would not be likely to incorporate this book. While the authors

advance the need for change, the decidedly Darwinian approach that provides the foundation for their approach to leadership does not promote the tenets of the previously mentioned models.

Critique

This book has several important strengths. It is intended to be read, understood, and applied. Rather than a text laden with theory and jargon, the authors approach the writing with straightforward language and candor. Their approach is refreshing in this way. The utility of the book is furthered by the incorporation of thoughtful reflective questions, exercises, charts and other tools to help readers make meaning of the authors' strategies and recommendations as they relate to specific situations from their own lives.

While there are certainly situations where this book would prove useful, there are many areas where its effectiveness is limited. In general, the book favors a corporate tone that advances a stereotypical and antiquated view of leadership. While the authors explain that anyone can "do leadership," and that it is not dependent on a position of authority, much of what they recommend privileges charismatic personas, masculinity, and Western culture. The strategies they suggest encourage risk-taking and creating a sense of disequilibrium in order to force a change within an organization. Several of the *On the Practice Field* recommendations highlight this weakness. For example, the authors challenge readers to "During your next conversation with your boss, share more of what you are thinking than you would normally share" (pg. 83). In another section it tells readers to "give people more responsibility than they're comfortable with and bring the conflicts to the surface" (pg. 160). While these strategies may be effective in some cases, they would be much harder to apply for those outside of a traditional position of authority and without some level of the charismatic confidence that would likely accompany such actions. Moreover, such behavior may be outside of the spectrum of possibility for people who cannot risk negative consequences for such risk-taking behavior if it means losing their job.

There is also an inherent assumption behind the majority of the directives presented in the book that any reader would already have the self-confidence and ability to engage in such ways. Considering that this the book relays the sense that leadership is a practice anyone can partake in, it is problematic that they do not recognize the more personal skill and building self-efficacy that may be needed in order to effectively use the recommendations presented throughout the book. While the practices are technically something that anyone could do, the authors oversimplify the complexities that lay behind many of these actions. They would do well to recognize that this is not necessarily a book for "beginners." The general tone of the book and the way each chapter and sub-section is presented as a command also seems to streamline many of these ideas and actions that are actually multi-faceted and quite open to interpretation. There is an especially simplistic approach to the final section of the book that focuses on the more human aspects of leadership such as relating to others and maintaining a sense of personal balance. Here, the tools and suggestions provided are much weaker than those in the previous sections. Overall, this book would have been stronger if the authors followed the same advice they give to their readers: to embrace ambiguity and explore the complexities that arise rather than looking the other way.

Reviewer

Robyn Baylor is a master's graduate of the Higher Education program at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her interests in the field focus on community engagement and international education.

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