

Are You an Adaptive Leader?

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by Gina Riley, creator of the
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Adaptive Leadership Model

An Overview

The Adaptive Leadership model incorporates the Systems, Biological, Service Orientation, and Psychotherapy perspectives.

The seminal book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, by Ronald Heifetz, provides the first description of the modern Adaptive Leadership approach from the early 1990s. At its core, Adaptive Leaders constantly strike a balance between the ability to pull people into solving complex and previously unsolved problems and the ability to manage people's resistant behaviors.

Adaptive Leaders use their authority to diagnose problems to serve and help people directly face and resolve complex problems within dynamic, ever-changing systems. The leader strikes the balance of seeing the big picture and working with people to help them adapt to personal (internal) and external (organizational) change.

Those in leadership roles are faced with one of three situational challenges: Technical (clearly defined problems and known solutions), technical and adaptive (clearly defined problems without straightforward solutions), and adaptive (challenges that are not clear-cut or easy to identify, and can't be solved by the leader's authority).

The Six Principles of Adaptive Leadership

While leaders may strive to exemplify all six principles of the Adaptive Leadership model, it is more likely they exhibit a range of strengths or abilities. Here are the six principles:

1. Get on the Balcony – “finding perspective”
2. Identify the Adaptive Challenge – “pinpointing the real challenge”
3. Regulate Distress – “psychological safety”
4. Maintain Disciplined Attention – “encouraging focus on the ‘right things’ ”
5. Give the Work Back to the People – “empowering people”
6. Protect Leadership Voices from Below – “pulling in diverse perspectives”

The following sections give an overview of each principle as well as question prompts to help leaders create stories and their professional narrative about how they move teams into action.

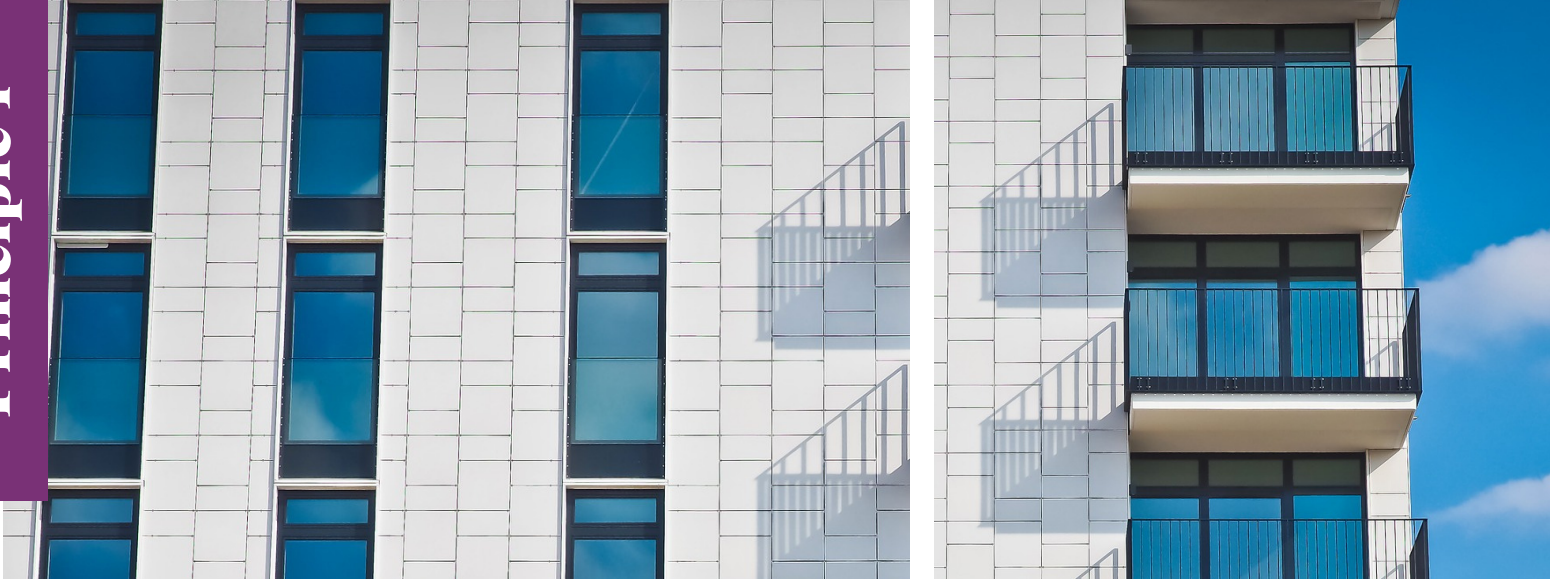


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Get On The Balcony

The first principle is “Get on the Balcony,” a metaphor for finding perspective by stepping away and getting a clear view of reality. This perspective is not just about thinking long term; rather, it allows leaders opportunities to identify value and power conflicts among people.

Identifying conflicts is the first key to unlocking solutions for dysfunctional relationships and exposing areas that either slow down or circumvent goal attainment.

How do Adaptive Leaders gain perspective and get on the balcony?

Find quiet time to observe and reflect

Consider what is going on inside and outside the organization. Stepping away allows leaders to take stock, consider complex situations at a higher level, and find ways reduce friction and conflicts that impede organizational progress.

Form a group of external trusted advisors or hire a consultant

We all need alternative perspectives and insights. As “Get on the Balcony” suggests,

finding perspective is about fluidly moving back and forth from observer to participant. One way to get this critical perspective is by pulling together trusted people to give outside perspectives. From this viewpoint, leaders can make better choices on how they participate within their organization.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Get on the Balcony”

- **How have I demonstrated effective change-management strategies?**
- **What are ways I’ve actively stepped back to evaluate the bigger picture? What did I do and who did I consult?**



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Identify the Adaptive Challenge

Many failures in leadership occur because managers fail to diagnose challenges accurately.

Through the lens of this model, we know there are three types of challenges: technical, technical and adaptive, or adaptive.

A leader's success depends on diagnosing what type of challenge their organization is facing and applying the right leadership approach to suit the situation.

Examples of common technical challenges that could be handled with the leader's expertise could be dealing with manufacturing equipment failures, struggles with scheduling, challenges in acquiring materials, expanding or shrinking facility footprints, etc.

On the other end of the continuum, people facing adaptive challenges will be confronted with having to change their beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Successful leaders identify whether a challenge is adaptive and then provide guardrails to allow

people to make changes they would otherwise not be able to handle themselves.

Adaptive Leaders are collaborative, allowing management and employees to generate new solutions required to solve these complex problems.

They provide support to enable people to keep doing the work they do.

There are four types or archetypes of adaptive challenges to be aware of:

1. Gaps between current values (what we say we do) and behavior (what we do). This is about mixed messages or when an organization says one thing but does another.
2. Competing commitments, like expanding a manufacturing footprint while laying off the workers who would staff the facility.
3. Speaking the Unspeakable. This may be the "elephant in the room" where it is risky

Identify the Adaptive Challenge

to discuss delicate issues as it might harm people's feelings.

4. Avoiding work where people retreat to their comfortable ways of working and operating.

In short, Adaptive Leaders first recognize whether they are dealing with an adaptive challenge and then set out to first deal with emotions so real work can begin.

An example of this type of challenge would be post-acquisition, whereby one company may be required to overhaul its processes and procedures to align with a new parent company.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Identify the Adaptive Challenge”

- Describe a challenge or problem your organization faced, where the solution was not obvious and no prior experience was applicable to the solution. What was the problem? How did you provide ways for your employees to generate ideas that were applied to a successful outcome?
- What were the challenges you faced in helping people overcome their assumptions, perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes?
- What were the hard decisions you had to make? What were the hard decisions your team had to make? Explain the tradeoffs.



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Regulate Distress

Many executives make the mistake of glossing over and underexplaining HOW they achieve results by harnessing their team's potential.

It is all too easy for leaders to describe WHAT they were doing in the context of past situations, but then fall short when talking about the real work of leading people through difficult circumstances.

A vital leadership skill for successful executives is the ability to lead people through organizational transition.

One reason this is exceptionally demanding is that humans resist these transitions. They are hard-wired to seek psychological safety and consistency in line with their beliefs, attitudes, and values.

“Regulating Distress” cuts to the heart of psychological safety and the desire to seek personal comfort with familiar ways of working. Managing the distress that comes along with these challenges is paramount to organizational success.

Leaders, employees, and organizations do not perform in a vacuum; they are all part of a constantly changing, complex, and dynamic system. Leaders must nudge the system and encourage real change that scales across individuals, the organization, and even the community.

Successful leaders engage and activate people to face adaptive challenges by helping them explore ways to make internal changes.

These leaders then take additional steps to motivate their team behind a shared goal.

Adaptive Leaders recognize adaptive challenges require organizations to change, which causes insecurity and distress for people. They prepare and help employees to understand the need for the change and help them overcome feelings of being overwhelmed by the change itself. The leader monitors and balances the levels of stress people are experiencing and keeps it within a tolerable, constructive range.



**The adaptive leader helps
followers confront their
PERSONAL VALUES and
adjust as needed
for adaptive change
to occur.**

Regulate Distress

There are three ways Adaptive Leaders can regulate distress:

Create a holding environment or “atmosphere”

Tackling difficult problems requires leaders to create safe ways for employees to engage in problem solving and build cohesive working relationships with each other.

Considerations might be the physical spaces people share, the common organizational language or vernacular, team history, or previous rules and processes that were clear that allowed people to work together with psychological safety.

Adaptive leaders understand trust is built on effective communication and will demonstrate empathy. They create a safe holding environment and help people focus on issues and resolve conflicting perspectives in order to facilitate decision making.

Provide direction, protection, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms

Adaptive Leaders help employees manage ambiguity and the discomfort that comes with adaptive work.

The key to reducing the distress people feel while working through adaptive challenges is for leaders to provide the framework, goal clarification, and the environment for

productive work to take place. A new normal must be formed with new roles, responsibilities, norms, and ways of productively managing conflict in order to create maximum organizational health.

Regulate personal distress

Finally, Adaptive Leaders need to make sure they are grounded, so they have the capacity to lead and exhibit the confidence needed to handle conflict.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Regulating Distress”

- **When faced with an adaptive challenge, what are ways you created an environment where people were able to build trust and psychological safety so they could focus on moving work forward? Describe the environment and what you specifically did to address issues of distrust or lack of communication.**
- **When faced with ambiguity, people become distressed and**

Regulate Distress

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engage in conflict, which disallows productive work to take place. As a leader, how have you helped orient employees into a “new normal” following a transition? What were the behaviors people exhibited that you needed to course-correct? What became the new ways of operating?

- What do you do to stay grounded and committed to your organization’s mission? How do you replenish your reserves, so you can meet the conflict and challenges you face while people are working through difficult transitions?



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Maintain Disciplined Attention

It is the CXO's job to point out the elephant in the room and help people focus their attention on the right things, especially when the work is hard and in conflict with the way they are accustomed to operating.

In times of transition, people engage in avoidance behaviors like ignoring, blaming, or attacking others.

They may dream the problem does not exist or work hard in areas misaligned with new goals. Change has a tendency to make people feel vulnerable.

It throws off people's day-to-day work rhythm, creating resistance and friction against the changes required to pivot and drive to new goals.

There is natural tension that comes with changing our day-to-day ways of doing business. Adaptive Leaders show people what to do and exhibit understanding about why the work is hard.

They assume responsibility to help employees confront adaptive challenges and inspire people to concentrate on the hard work that needs to be done.

They understand this work is not easy, because people naturally avoid making major changes in the way they do their work, especially when they must change their beliefs or values.

There are a few ways leaders can help maintain focus and disciplined attention.

First, they can listen and empathize, allowing it to be "normal" to air concerns by creating an environment where people do not feel the need to blame and attack each other or avoid adaptive challenges.

Instead, people are encouraged to recognize ways they may be acting defensively and to constructively confront issues.

Maintaining Disciplined Attention

Next, leaders gently nudge the system forward, giving guidance and support by constantly reminding people about the benefits of the team coming together and what it will look like when the collective goals are achieved.

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INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Maintaining Disciplined Attention”

- Think of a time people resisted change during an organizational transition. What did you need people to STOP doing and START doing? What were the old ways or habits that needed to be changed, and how did you help them start new behaviors?
- Changing work habits is one thing – dealing with conflict between people is another. How have you helped bring disparate parties together and helped them confront issues and concerns in order to achieve organizational goals?



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Give The Work Back To The People

Adaptive Leaders are in the tricky position of needing to strike a balance between giving employees autonomy while providing direction needed to face challenges they have never faced before.

Autonomy to make decisions is one key component to employee happiness; however, employees may expect more structure when faced with adaptive challenges.

During uncertain times that come with extreme stress and pressure, employees may try to defer to leaders because they may feel more secure in their jobs when given more direction.

If leaders provide too rigid of a structure, it can decrease the confidence people have in their own decision making and tamp down creativity needed to solve problems.

Understandably, it may be tempting for leaders to assume and shoulder the responsibility of finding answers to adaptive challenges on their own.

Adaptive Leaders find ways to shift problem solving back to the people doing the work by providing ways for them to tackle adaptive challenges that lead to creative solutions.

What are ways Adaptive Leaders can give work back to the people?

- Increase self-awareness by finding ways to censor themselves and reflect on the sway or influence they have on their employees.
- Remain attentive by consciously watching for opportunities to step in and knowing when to drop back.
- Provide direction by asking the right questions and facilitating ways for people to come up with their own solutions.
- Empower people while they confront ambiguous situations and help their team take responsibility for problem solving and meeting goals.

Giving Work Back To The People

Leaders are responsible for ensuring their employees thoroughly understand the mission and the pathways to get there.

Adaptive Leaders will strive to “give the work back to the people” by empowering them to solve these challenges.



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INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Giving Work Back To the People”

- **Instead of resolving an issue with your position power, share a story about a time when you empowered employees to resolve a challenging problem together. What was the problem and how did you engage with your employees? What solution did they land on?**
- **Do you have a framework or “go to” question you ask employees when they are stuck resolving complex problems? Walk me through it.**
- **What are the ways you encourage risk-taking and show employees you believe they have the capability to find solutions to complex problems?**



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Protect Leadership Voices From Below

This principle has Adaptive Leaders disrupting the usual way of doing things by putting lower-status employees on equal footing with other members of the organization.

“Protecting Leadership Voices from Below” is an open-minded approach. The leader seeks out and listens to people on the margins or in the minority of the organization.

These are previously unheard voices that have been drowned out for a number of reasons.

One reason is the leader may have found it easier to maintain the usual way of gathering data.

However, the convenient path of leadership is not always the best path.

Convenience can lead to upholding the status quo. In today’s market, the status quo can be a dangerous space to play in.

Another reason is the voices “on the margin” do

not rise because they are uncomfortable sharing opinions. Sometimes, they have not articulated opinions in a way to get heard.

In this model, leaders are cautioned to be open-minded and listen to ideas from people on the fringe, even when they express themselves in ineffective ways.

Finally, Adaptive Leaders recognize that pulling in minority voices may upset the social equilibrium within the organization and are cautioned not to minimize these voices for the comfort of the majority.

In fact, it requires leaders to give up some control to allow space for other organizational members to take more control. This can be a difficult process.

Adaptive Leaders consciously create a safe space for these people’s voices to be heard by resisting the urge to shut down ideas in order to appease the majority.

Protect Leadership Voices From Below

Leaders draw them in, listen, and create ways that allow them to play to their strengths. By allowing “low-status” members more opportunities to participate, they empower people with confidence to take responsibility for their independent actions and more fully engage with work.

Often, ideas generated by these team members can be leveraged to strengthen the whole enterprise.

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INTERVIEW PREPARATION – “Protecting Leadership Voices From Below”

- **Hearing from people on the outskirts of your organization can give rise to fresh ideas or ways of solving problems the leadership team may not have considered in the past. Share a story about a time your organization was confronted with a challenge and how the solution came from someone “not in the boardroom.”**
- **How have you created ways for people in the minority or “on the fringe” of your organization to voice their opinions and ideas in order to solve a complex problem faced by your organization?**



**The Adaptive Leader
knows there will
be resistance.**

**Adaptive challenges usually
require changes in people's
assumptions, perceptions,
beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.**

What is Adaptive Leadership?

A Recap

While traditional leadership models focus on leadership TRAITS, the unique emphasis of the Adaptive Leadership model centers around helping FOLLOWERS (employees) face the inevitable resistance and internal struggle when they need to adapt to new ways of doing business.

Adaptive Leaders mobilize employees to face adaptive challenges, for which there is no known solution or previous way of solving the problem being confronted.

Drawing from the six principles, Adaptive Leaders do the following:

1: “Get on the Balcony” by removing themselves to find the perspective needed to engage with people and problem solving.

2: “Identify the Adaptive Challenge” by pinpointing the real challenge – technical challenge or adaptive.

3: “Regulate Distress” by creating a psychologically safe environment where people are free to manage the inner conflict felt during times of change and transition.

4: “Maintain Disciplined Attention” by encouraging people to focus on the “right” things.

5: “Give the Work Back to the People” by empowering employees to take responsibility for their own goals.

6: “Protect Leadership Voices from Below” by pulling in and listening to diverse perspectives from previously unheard people.

Applying the Adaptive Leadership model to interview preparation:

Leaders should be asking themselves how they stack up across these six principles and plan to describe how they move teams into action to solve complex problems. Here are a few more questions leaders could use to prepare their stories:

- When faced with a problem no one in our organization has seen before, how did I engage and activate people? What creative ways did I construct for them to solve problems and direct their own work?
- How have I helped people explore ways to make internal changes needed to manage transitions and motivate people around shared organizational goals?
- How does my leadership approach demonstrate that I am a good steward of people and organizational culture?

What is Adaptive Leadership?

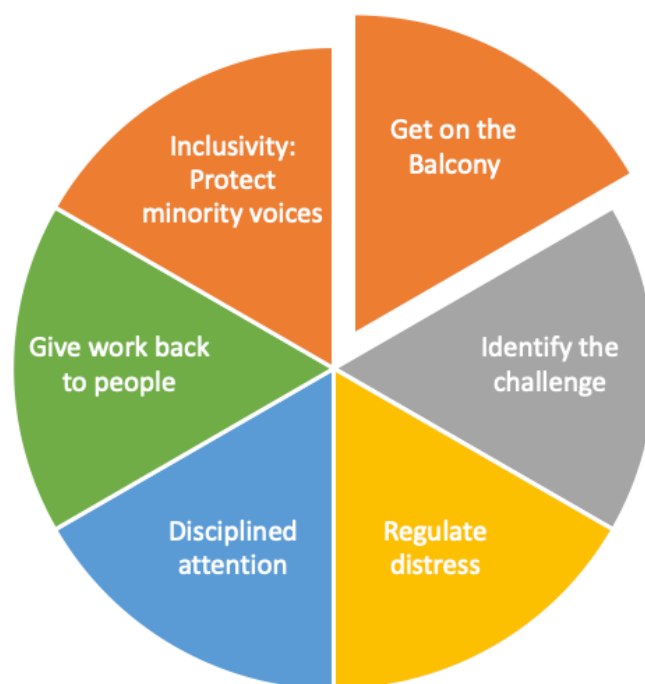
A Recap

Executive-level candidates should understand it is their responsibility to clearly communicate and showcase professional stories demonstrating their leadership capabilities.

Preparing and authentically delivering these stories is paramount to breaking through the interview process and winning coveted leadership positions.

Adaptive Leaders are those who are able to work with their teams to diagnose problems and help them directly face and resolve complex issues within dynamic, ever-changing systems.

They help mitigate stress caused by uncertainty and transition, and keep the organizational engine moving forward.



Reference: Article references the seminal work of Harvard professors Ronald Heifetz (author of Leadership Without Easy Answers) and Marty Linsky as well as Peter Norhouse's Leadership, Theory, and Practice (7th ed).