

Introduction

Educational Leadership at a Crossroads: Integrating an Adaptive Leadership Framework to Address the Challenges Faced by Education in the Second Half of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The consequences of the recent unprecedented catastrophes experienced throughout the world have highlighted the fact that leadership, particularly in the context of education, has proven to be ineffective at dealing with the challenges faced by the world in the second half of the 21st century. In response to this concern, the adaptive leadership framework provides a viable model to address the current challenges faced by traditional models of leadership and education around the world. Adaptive leadership consists of guiding groups to confront complex challenges that necessitate a shift in fundamental beliefs, values, and, sometimes, identities. It addresses issues that cannot be solved with simple (technical) solutions. Adaptive leadership is about navigating change and complexity by fostering a collaborative environment where people can experiment, learn, and adapt to overcome significant (adaptive) challenges. The unique principles of the adaptive leadership framework make it an ideal tool to address the heart of the current challenges faced by traditional approaches to leadership and education, rather than providing superficial, unsustainable solutions to complex problems.

Keywords: leadership, education, educational leadership, adaptive leadership, leadership framework, adaptive challenges, 21st century

Introduction

The recent unprecedented global pandemic and the unparalleled natural and artificial disasters experienced throughout the world have demonstrated that leadership, as we know it, has not been effective at dealing with the challenges faced by the world in the second half of the 21st century. Concurrently, education, understood as the ultimate entryway to growth and development, has also been found wanting in its ability to deliver enlightenment and advancement.

While there are challenges facing both leadership and education, effective leadership is still a critical factor in improving educational outcomes. Leadership is, indeed, at the heart of quality education. It is well documented that, after engaging teaching, educational leadership is the second most important factor explaining learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Louis et al., 2010). This means that, as we increase our efforts to promote intellectual development, in addition to focusing on preparing teachers for classroom effectiveness, it is imperative to widen our perspective and recognize the significant role leadership plays in the improvement of overall academic performance.

The challenge: Providing opportunities for educational leadership development, allowing space for both efficiency and flexibility

Unfortunately, since the inception of the principal's office at the beginning of the twentieth century, there seems to exist a collective understanding that the work of teachers and administrators is separate and antagonistic. Individuals "crossing the boundary" towards leadership positions in schools are often perceived as transgressing into the adversary's domain. Perhaps, this collective negative perception of leadership in education could be the result of the inspiring nature of teaching versus the disciplinarian nature of the principalship. Additionally, entire learning communities have also developed a collective understanding that individuals taking up leadership positions in schools are entitled to function as autocrats and dictators rather than being role models, setting the tone and pace for educational ideals (Rousmaniere, 2007).

A probable cause for this distasteful distinction between leaders and oppressors in education may be the uncritical inception, in the late nineteenth century, of the division between pedagogical progressives with a student-centered approach to education and administrative progressives advocating for values of efficiency, scientific management, and organizational accountability in schools. The early twentieth century ushered in the realignment of the principal's office away from supporting educational endeavors. This resulted in its moving towards an analogous position to that of the president of a company or the commanding general of an army. The office of the principal was then caught between unclear and often conflicting identities, such as that of the professional leader and the teacher of teachers, resulting in the school leader being neither an administrator nor a teacher (Bogotch & English, 2011).

Perhaps the postmodern thought prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century has incited a generalized rejection of scientific management in education. This perspective often views leadership and authority negatively, thus fostering a strong aversion to systems of efficiency and accountability in education, labeled as out of touch with reality and inconsiderate. One might speculate that this is a response to ill-designed models of efficiency and accountability in education, lacking in their accounting for individual differences, learning styles, and personalities. However, the fact that most

efficiency and accountability systems in education are flawed does not cancel out the possibility of properly designed efficiency and accountability systems accounting for the individual characteristics and the needs of those they are designed to serve.

The proposition: Incorporating the adaptive leadership framework into the context of education

Drawing upon the preceding backdrop, the adaptive leadership framework (Heifetz, 1994) may be suggested as a feasible feature to be incorporated into the context of education, thus providing opportunities for educational leadership to develop in ways that allow space for both efficiency and flexibility. Adaptive leadership refers to the idea of navigating change and complexity by crafting a collaborative environment where people can experiment, learn, and adapt to overcome significant (adaptive) challenges. Unlike approaches to leadership, which define it as a personality trait or a professional function, adaptive leadership understands leadership as an activity that requires engagement of many people at different levels of an organization to make progress happen (Braselton, 2023).

Adaptive leadership recognizes that transforming things through technical interventions is easier than addressing the heart of the issue. Traditional authority tends to rely on individual expertise and self-reliance, resulting in a generalized, clouded understanding of what true authority means, and thus, distorting our perception of its meaning. Adaptive leadership proposes a rehabilitation of the notion of authority and the rebuilding of a clear, healthy understanding of the concept. Within the framework of adaptive leadership, “leadership becomes a function of a social system and a relational activity exercised by people within that system” (Steffensmeier & Chrislip, 2019, p. 63).

Adaptive leadership is unique in how it focuses on the dynamics of mobilizing people to effectively address change. It moves beyond leader-follower dynamics and considers leadership as a behavior that anyone can engage in to foster progress (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership emphasizes the importance of engaging multiple stakeholders and collectively working to make progress on tough challenges (Chrislip & O’Malley, 2013). Adaptive leadership moves beyond a managerial, hierarchical view of leadership to conceptualize leadership as a practice, rather than a position or role within an organization.

Adaptive leaders understand that a technical challenge is one whose demarcation is clear, its solution is known, it is solved through the expertise of a few individuals, and it is only limited by money and resources, while an adaptive challenge is unclear and requires learning, its solution is unknown and also requires learning, it is solved through the intervention of stakeholders and authorities alike, and it is limited by deeply held beliefs, values, identities, loyalties, and losses of all parties involved (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Outcomes of adaptive leadership implementation in the education context

Adaptive leadership, within the context of education, is understood as a framework useful to educational leaders facing challenging situations (Baker, 2023). The adaptive leadership framework provides a unique set of tools empowering individuals to facilitate

sustainable change in ways traditional leadership has failed to effect (Dustin, 2022; Harris & Jones, 2020; Heifetz & Laurie, 2001).

Concurrently, educational leaders exposed to the adaptive leadership framework have been observed to 1) generate holding spaces in their schools that encourage staff to take action concerning educational challenges presented to them, 2) offer opportunities for change and adaptation ensuring the implementation of new strategies, processes, and initiatives, and 3) implement policies that facilitate additional adaptive changes in their schools (Busakwe, 2023).

The principles of adaptive leadership

While adaptive leadership is understood to be an organic, intuitive process, understanding the basic principles upon which this framework is built would be useful for its implementation in the contexts of the multiple adaptive challenges faced by educational leaders. These principles are 1) a clear understanding of the difference between leadership and authority, 2) differentiating technical and adaptive challenges, 3) understanding different levels of abstraction by *getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony*, 4) organizing learning and orchestrating conflict, trust, and disequilibrium through the creation of holding spaces, and 5) giving the work back.

Understanding the difference between leadership and authority

A clear understanding of the difference between leadership and authority is key for anyone aspiring to work with the adaptive leadership framework. The fact that virtually every leadership theory and book in the market offers a different definition of the term can be disorienting. For the most part, leadership theories define this concept as either a personality trait or as a position within the ranks of an organization (Lozano, 2023). Within the adaptive leadership framework, leadership is understood as a practice, not as a position. Just like an electrician using tools and skills to work problems with electricity, a leader uses tools and skills to mobilize a certain type of work, the work of leadership, which may or may not be attached to any level of formal authority or position (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Authority, on the other hand, emerges when individuals authorize others to teach, direct, or intervene in their lives in exchange for different levels of provision and/or protection. Both formal and informal authority, a police officer and a parent, fit the same pattern: Party A grants Party B authority over their lives in exchange for provision and/or protection (Heifetz et al., 2009). Lamentably, at present, there exists a generalized distrust in authority. This is the result of authority figures repeatedly failing to protect, teach, or guide, and thus disappoint, those putting their trust in them. Trust is, therefore, built when authority figures are believed to be capable of providing guidance or protection. Trustworthiness is asserted when individuals have proven to possess and maintain competency and integrity. Important to trustworthiness is the ability to know what one knows and what one does not, and the ability to communicate it patiently and clearly. Authority, though important, is insufficient in tackling the tough challenges faced by adaptive leaders (Parks, 2005).

Differentiating technical and adaptive challenges

One of the greatest struggles faced by leaders addressing complex challenges is the lack of understanding of the difference between technical and adaptive work. Technical challenges have known solutions and can be addressed through current know-how. A technical challenge can be resolved through the application of existing processes and methods (O'Malley et al., 2014). Technical challenges can indeed be extremely important and complicated, like providing routine maintenance for a spacecraft. However, technical challenges do not require deviating from established norms and procedures.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, live in people's hearts and guts (Green & Fabris McBride, 2015). They have the potential to interfere with the beliefs, values, identities, and loyalties of those involved. Adaptive challenges are unclear and require learning to be defined as well as to be solved. Progress in navigating adaptive challenges requires a departure from reliance on authoritative expertise to embrace experimentation, tolerance of losses, and the development of new competencies for continuing success. In general, adaptive challenges are 1) systemic – they do not belong to a particular person or group, 2) stubborn and persistent – technical solutions might quiet them down, but they continue to emerge, 3) outside our common repertoire, and 4) beyond business as usual (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Understanding different levels of abstraction by getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony

Getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony is a metaphor that refers to the process of gaining perspective on a perceived challenge. In practical terms, this idea captures the mental exercise of stepping back amid action and asking, “what is really going on here?” before generating any interpretations or offering any solutions to the perceived challenge (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). In general, individuals with high levels of formal authority are challenged by this notion. The challenge resides in the fact that traditionally, leaders are expected to, single-handedly, provide solutions to every single challenge faced by the organization.

Getting off the dance floor, where the challenge resides, and going to the balcony provides a dispassionate perspective on a challenge that is impossible to detect while on the dance floor. Practically speaking, while on the balcony, we must ask, among others, the following questions: 1) Is this a technical or an adaptive challenge? 2) Who are the stakeholders (gatekeepers, endorsers, resisters, fence-sitters) and what is their role in the system/challenge? 3) What are the individual and organizational beliefs, values, identities, and loyalties? 4) What are the individual and organizational losses? 5) What is stressing the system? 6) What is the environment like at the micro, meso, and macro levels? 7) What is the timeline concerning the challenge(s) being observed? 8) Who needs to learn what? (Heifetz et al., 2009).

In addition to providing a clear understanding of the challenge, one of the main benefits of going to the balcony is that it allows for an understanding that when a problem organically finds its way into the internal world of a person, it can be disorienting and potentially confusing at levels that surpass the space of a particular individual within the organization. As such, keeping the work, and not groups or individuals, at the center of people's attention is paramount for the successful implementation of the adaptive leadership framework (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Organizing learning and orchestrating conflict, trust, and disequilibrium through the creation of holding spaces

To effect considerable change in adaptive work, at some point, one needs to get down from the balcony and return to the dance floor, engage, and contemplate the multiple interpretations of the potential challenge before moving into action. This is accomplished through the creation of a holding space. A holding space is where different, and often conflicting, beliefs, values, identities, loyalties, and losses are held. A holding space is equally strong and flexible for all different components to exist. A holding space is where the discomfort of collective and individual disequilibrium can coexist in an environment of trust and safety for all.

A holding space provides a place in which collective and individual losses are acknowledged and respected. In this context, it is important to establish that a fundamental feature of adaptive work is to be able to disappoint individuals and groups, at a rate they can tolerate. This is the result of the experimental nature of adaptive work and the process of figuring things out by getting them wrong before getting them right (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The disequilibrium and discomfort present in a holding space produce the heat that triggers potential conflict and subsequent resolution, resulting in a *productive zone of disequilibrium*. In this zone, heat is not particularly induced; it is the natural result of diverse beliefs, values, identities, loyalties, and losses existing within the same holding space. However, in conducting adaptive work, it is paramount that the productive zone of disequilibrium, where productive work takes place, is carefully maintained, avoiding the heat reaching levels beyond those tolerable by all stakeholders involved in the adaptive challenge (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

The productive zone of disequilibrium is where the questions of what needs to be kept, what needs to be changed, what needs to be removed, and what needs to be replaced find their most significant answers (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive work provides spaces where people can rationalize losses, understanding that their existence creates new spaces for collective, individual, and organizational growth and development.

Giving the work back

We have established that adaptive work deviates from a top-down, traditional approach to leadership; rather, it welcomes the participation of all stakeholders involved in and affected by the challenges observed. As such, when conducting adaptive work, the leader and follower roles are dynamic and fluid (Lovett et al., 2023). This can be challenging since, traditionally, leaders are paid to fix things, take a stand, and solve problems. Challenging people's expectations about what leadership is, and giving the work back to them, requires a great deal of courage and tact (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

To give the work back, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest four types of interventions: 1) observations, 2) questions, 3) interpretations, and 4) actions. *Observations* are statements that describe a particular behavior or current conditions. Observations are objective descriptions of what one sees; they take the group momentarily onto the balcony and provide a fresh perspective on their actions. *Questions*, on the other hand, encourage the group to rationalize statements made or behaviors displayed. *Interpretations*, when used in tandem with questions, might provide space for clarification on the reasoning behind words or actions. Interpretations may or

may not be accurate, but as they are inherently provocative (unless liked or agreed with), they raise the heat in the room and provide space for further discussions to take place. Lastly, *actions* have the potential to complicate situations, since they are susceptible to different interpretations. Therefore, to be effective, actions' intentions must be unmistakably clear; otherwise, they could distract people, potentially resulting in misplaced responsibility.

In giving the work back, adaptive leadership provides a space for all stakeholders to move beyond their current frontier of competence, challenge their technical expertise, and confront any established patterns of execution and management.

Final remarks and conclusion

Today's context demands a shift away from traditional leadership practices. This has become unmistakably evident in the light of the recent natural and artificial disasters experienced throughout the world. Education, like leadership, has also failed to deliver its promise to provide opportunities for enlightenment and advancement.

However, educational leadership is still a critical determinant of educational outcomes. Yet, the challenge of the transformation of school principals into effective leaders still exists. The adaptive leadership framework presents a valuable approach for developing effective educational leaders by 1) providing a clear understanding of the difference between leadership and authority, 2) differentiating technical and adaptive challenges, 3) understanding different levels of abstraction by *getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony*, 4) organizing learning and orchestrating conflict, trust, and disequilibrium through the creation of holding spaces, and 5) giving the work back. Unlike traditional leadership models that rely on technical expertise and hierarchical authority, adaptive leadership understands the notion of leadership to be an exercise that engages stakeholders with diverse, and often conflicting, beliefs, values, identities, and loyalties, to work together and tackle challenges that require learning and growth from all parties involved. Adaptive leadership prioritizes the creation of holding spaces where experimentation and learning are encouraged, and where individual and organizational losses are also accounted for, enabling communities to collectively address adaptive challenges, rather than solely focusing on technical solutions.

This framework is particularly relevant in education, where leaders must mobilize people to confront challenges that surpass the need for basic managerial solutions. Adaptive leadership proposes a shift from viewing leadership as a personal trait or hierarchical position to understanding it as a practice, enabling individuals at all levels to contribute to progress. By reorienting the concept of authority and fostering a collaborative approach, adaptive leadership equips educational leaders to effectively guide their communities through complex challenges, ensuring that schools can adapt and thrive in an ever-changing landscape.

Today, we come face to face with the pressing need to move beyond the development of educational managers and to develop adaptive leaders who can steer change and empower others to tackle the complex challenges faced by education in the second half of the 21st century.

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