

Adaptive Leadership in a Time of Crisis: Insights from Ronald Heifetz

Leadership matters, and it matters now more than ever. Unprecedented crises, imperfect and incomplete information, and high stakes have altered our state of play indefinitely. Ronald Heifetz, the Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, offers us language and a framework for thinking about our work as leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This resource is intended to provide you ways of thinking, talking, and leading during crises.

Adaptive Leadership

A couple of decades ago, Heifetz introduced into our collective vocabulary the expressions “adaptive challenges” and “adaptive leadership.”

Heifetz makes a fundamental distinction between technical versus adaptive challenges. A technical challenge is one for which a solution is already known—the knowledge and capacity exist to solve the problem. Meeting such challenges is not necessarily simple. Nor should the results be presumed to be trivial. Learning to remove a person’s appendix is a remarkable feat. It may be hard to do, but by now an established and proven procedure exists to gradually teach someone how to do it. An “**adaptive**” challenge, on the other hand, is one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist. It requires creating the knowledge and the tools to solve the problem *in the act of working on it*.¹

COVID-19 and the related impact on our schools and economy represents an adaptive problem, and it will require new forms of leadership to create space for new kinds of problem-solving and knowledge-generation. At this early phase of the crisis, we likely have yet to recognize the new forms of knowledge and tools we will ultimately have to develop from scratch. For a single-page summary of Heifetz’s theory and its application to education, [click here](#).

Leadership in a Permanent Crisis

Adaptive problems are themselves complicated, but they are made even more complex when they land in the midst of a massive crisis or emergency. A decade ago, Heifetz took stock of the post-9-11/post-recession realities around the world, and he began to write and speak about the leadership necessary when we are in states of permanent crisis. These ideas are particularly salient for us right now.

Key ideas from Ronald Heifetz on Leadership in Crisis:

- During emergencies there are two basic goals: (1) to stabilize the situation and (2) to buy time to work the real, underlying adaptive problem(s).
- The emergency phase is a daunting task in and of itself, and it requires a special kind of leadership that addresses some basic human needs.
- In moments of crisis and disequilibrium, it is human nature to look to authority for comfort and direction. During this phase, leaders should take on these essential five tasks:
 - ⇒ Be present
 - ⇒ Speak to people’s experiences
 - ⇒ Maintain poise

- ⇒ Drive the prepared organizational response
- ⇒ Improvise as needed (to the extent it is possible)

- After you buy time, then you can begin to address the underlying problem.

Watch the following video to see and hear Ron Heifetz address these issues in a short presentation to the UMN Humphrey School of Public Affairs. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9G37A-X7C8>

Individual Reflection:

If time allows, review the provided summary of adaptive leadership and watch the short video on leading in a time of emergency.

- What do you see as the nature of the problem in this crisis? Which aspects do you see as technical? Which aspects do you see as adaptive? Why?
- To what degree have you been able to accomplish Heifetz's five tasks during this current crisis?
- Are there particular tasks that you and your team could be doing more powerfully?
- Are there additional tasks beyond what Heifetz enumerates that you think are critical during this pandemic?
- How well are you tending to your own health and well-being so that you can provide effective leadership for others?

Team Discussion:

Invite your team to read the [summary](#) and watch the short [video](#). Then facilitate a conversation on leadership during this crisis. Below is a suggested flow of the conversation.

- I. *Turn and Talk in Pairs or Triads (10 minutes)*: What struck you in the one-page article and the video as relates to our current situation.
- II. *Whole-Group Sharing: (15 minutes)*: What are the big ideas that seem most relevant to our current situation?
- III. *Working the Emergency (20 minutes)*: Heifetz offers five tasks for leading in a time of crisis. What can we do to strengthen our leadership in these given areas right now?
- IV. *Buying Time to Work the Underlying Problem (15 minutes)*: How can we support each other in creating space and time to look beyond the current emergency phase and begin to plan long term, ultimately tackling the underlying, adaptive problems COVID-19 presents?
- V. *Final Thoughts (5 minutes)*: What are you personally committing to doing as we leave this conversation?

¹Wagner, T., Kegan, R., Lahey, L. L., Lemons, R. W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D., ... & Rasmussen, H. T. (2012). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.