Adaptive Leadership: Leading When There Is No Established Playbook

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Technical problems versus adaptive challenges

The Adaptive Leadership framework, developed at Harvard, makes a distinction that changes how a leader diagnoses a problem. Technical problems have a known solution, even if it is difficult to execute: a broken process, a staffing gap, a compliance issue. Adaptive challenges have no existing playbook because they require people to change their values, habits, or ways of working, a culture that resists collaboration, a business model under structural threat, a team that has lost trust in leadership.

Many leaders apply technical solutions, new tools, new policies, restructured reporting lines, to what are actually adaptive challenges, and are then confused when the problem persists.

Why adaptive challenges are so often mishandled

Technical solutions are more comfortable because a leader can implement them unilaterally and see visible progress quickly. Adaptive challenges require the leader to give the problem back to the people who need to change, which feels slower, less controlled, and more exposed. It is tempting to avoid this discomfort by reframing an adaptive challenge as a technical one.

A practical approach

Diagnose before acting. Ask explicitly: does solving this require new information and better process, or does it require people, possibly including me, to change how they think and behave? The answer changes everything about the approach.

Get on the balcony. A core idea from the framework is stepping back from the immediate action to observe the patterns, who is avoiding what, where the real resistance is coming from, rather than staying fully immersed in the day-to-day.

Regulate distress, don't eliminate it. Adaptive change requires a degree of productive discomfort to motivate real change. Leaders who rush to remove all discomfort often remove the very pressure that was driving progress.

Give the work back. Resist the instinct to solve the adaptive challenge yourself. The people closest to the problem usually need to be part of defining the solution, or the change will not hold once you turn your attention elsewhere.

The leadership implication

Adaptive leadership is less comfortable than technical problem-solving, and it is also where the most significant, durable change actually happens. Leaders who can correctly diagnose which kind of challenge they are facing, and resist the pull to default to technical fixes, tend to navigate

organisational change with far more lasting success.