

Article 16: Adaptive Leadership aka Dynamical Leadership

There are no silver bullets for today's complex leadership dilemmas. If we accept the assumption that humans together act as 'complex adaptive systems', we come to realise that our conventional understanding about the concept and practice of leadership is certainly incomplete if not fundamentally flawed. Starlings flocking and moving as one and shoals of fish are examples of complex adaptive systems. Humans in groups are also – even though we would like to believe we are 'above' the fish and birds.

Complex adaptive systems: A collection of individual agents who have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways, and whose actions are interconnected such that they produce system-wide patterns, which in turn influence the behaviour of the agents

(Dr Glenda Eoyang, founder of Human Systems Dynamics Institute)

The above definition juxtaposition to this statement below about 'Adaptive Leadership' by Ron Heifetz (who has made this progressive concept increasingly common currency) reveals something worth exploring:

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive

Implicit in Heifetz' statement is a sense that some can mobilize others ie. can 'make' others - 'tackle tough challenges and thrive'. And yet enough of us in the learning and development field know (at least intellectually) that the only thing we can ever really change is ourselves – and even that is a challenge for many of us! We say to ourselves 'I can only change myself' - and yet STILL we get frustrated and mad when others do not do what we want or expect them to do. We find it indescribably hard to let go of our need/ desire to want to control ourselves, others and the world around us and more importantly, the belief that we CAN.

The realization that we can't is paramount to working effectively with complex adaptive systems because it brings us face to face with the paradoxical limits and full extent of our power to effect change in any system in which we may find ourselves. We are simply one agent among many, all of whom have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways. Perhaps this shifts the focus from 'leaders' to 'leadership acts' within a particular landscape. She who exerts greatest influence on the system does so, not by forcing people to do things but by doing things that change conditions in/ of the system which results in people adapting to the shifting conditions. This happens all the time in our families, communities, organisations etc. The ability to adapt is actually in each and everyone of us – so we mobilize ourselves in response to the conditions around us and the 'consequences' we are willing to endure.

DYNAMICAL LEADERS

So what might distinguish adaptive/ dynamical leaders from the rest of us? Arguably, the most effective 'adaptive' or 'dynamical' leaders know they can't truly mobilize by force of character or ascribed titles. They know that their role is to create the conditions in which people mobilize themselves – ideally in ways that are coherent with the purpose, desired direction etc of the system in which they are operating. In other words we are talking about creating the conditions for people to empower themselves.

So what enables a dynamical leader to create the 'right' conditions? Back to the silver bullet; there is none. And it can't be pulled out of a book or taught by rote. It takes ongoing learning and mindful practice to grow our own and our systems' adaptive capacity.

Dynamical leader in action: When something does not go the way she hoped for, she doesn't get aerated by it. She is able to see and accept the situation for what it is and doesn't rage about it not being how she wanted it to be. Yes, she had worked hard and well for the desired outcomes, and it didn't happen. She is disappointed and she doesn't get hung up on shame and blame of herself or others. She is curious about what has resulted. She is interested in understanding more of the context. She enquires and seeks perspectives and feedback. She asks of herself and others 'so what does this mean?' She with others, considers new options for action and in a timely decisive way, takes further choice-ful action that is aligned to purpose, chosen direction of travel and cultural context. In essence, she is...

...SENSITIVE ENOUGH TO SEE SHIFTING PATTERNS...

This 'seeing/ noticing' capacity is the first crucial aspect of, what in Human Systems Dynamics, we call adaptive capacity; and it enables us to go beyond observing obvious macro changes, to notice subtle internal and external shifts which continue to inform our sense-making in any moment. From an organisation-wide perspective it is vital to draw on what other parts of the system notice before launching into sense-making...



...RESPONSIVE ENOUGH TO ADAPT COHERENTLY...

The second dimension of adaptive capacity is about our sense-making of the situation. This is less about digging around trying to find out justification about why something happened from an historical perspective; and it is certainly not about hunting down scapegoats to blame. It is about seeking to understand the current situation and what it means for the future we are hoping to shape, given the general sense of purpose and direction we might have decided on. In this sensing-making phase we may be exploring options for action and considering possible consequences. We know however, that whatever we finally choose to do, we will not be able to predict or control the outcomes; at best we will be able to anticipate and influence. This takes us into the third dimension of adaptive capacity which calls upon our being...

...ROBUST ENOUGH TO WITHSTAND MULTIPLE CHALLENGES....

By committing to work in ways coherent with complex adaptive systems, we are choosing the road less travelled in our traditionally (mis)managed world. This means it cuts against conventional thinking and traditional ways of approaching change. So we need to call upon vast courage and deep faith in the assumptions underpinning our approach to change: in the paradoxical knowing that whatever actions we take, they are always and inherently experimental and that the anticipated 'results' of each action are ultimately unknowable until they become manifest in the system. If we can stand surely and firmly on ground where we know that we can't know the future and are curious to see, learn and discover more.... that is an essential foundation for becoming an adaptive or dynamical leader.

So as leaders in complex adaptive systems, these are some of the tough yet liberating lessons to learn: there is no such thing as perfect – only what is 'fit-for-purpose' and 'true and useful enough'; there is no 'there' there; things are messy and uncertain - and ultimately infinite and unknowable; change requires tension so the ride will be bumpy; patterns will repeat in different parts of the system – see them before seeking to change them; power is the 'ability to influence' and everyone in the system has this – ignore this at your peril; sustainability of the system cannot be measured by externally defined indicators – the system by its very existence defines it.

WHY DO WE NEED DYNAMICAL LEADERS?

Adaptive capacity is what enables us to be personally and collectively sustainable. To be sustainable over generations we need to pay attention, not only to our self-interest but to those around us and our impact on the wider global system. Currently our global system is giving us macro and micro messages that it is out of balance. Not enough of us are being Sensitive enough to see the shifting patterns.... Responsive enough to adapt coherently..... nor Robust enough in taking a stand for change. More Dynamical Leaders could be the difference that would make the difference.

To explore how HSD can transform you, your leaders and your organisation, contact: Louie Gardiner, who is the only Certified HSD Professional in Scotland and one of only 8 in the UK

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