

Your Company's Doing Really Well. **YOU NEED TO CHANGE.**

BY MARTY LINSKY AND JEFFREY L. McEWEN

While staying with the tried and true strategies that have led to your current success sounds intuitively correct, it can easily lead to a reluctance to acknowledge the need for change and the inability to respond to it.

Highly successful organizations are often the most resistant to change, which is why the leadership challenge is a daunting one. These companies and their senior management are adept at handling technical problems, the ones for which answers exist, however complex they may be. Paradoxically, however, as these organizations settle into their success patterns and the culture becomes established, both the perceived need for change and the ability to adapt are diminished. It can become increasingly difficult for new ideas to sprout, much less take root and flourish beneath a forest of entrenched management hierarchy and a proven status quo.

This describes an adaptive challenge, one for which a solution does not exist but must be forged by stakeholders and participants. Dealing with an adaptive challenge is a very different kettle of fish from handling a technical problem. Treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems is perhaps the greatest reason for leadership failure we've encountered in our many years of experience teaching leadership and consulting to organizations on their leadership issues.

Adaptive challenges are fuzzy and confusing. They require close



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examination of the organization's mission in order to ascertain what values, beliefs, and behaviors are truly essential to the company's identity and success, and which must be jettisoned, regrettably and often painfully, if the company is to move forward and attain its most cherished goals. Adaptive challenges divide loyalties, block progress, and require that hearts and ways of being have to change. Adaptive challenges sit between the neck and the navel.

But your company is successful, right? Not only is everything going well, you already know you and your team will need to stay on your toes to ensure continued success. You have a game plan in place. You're not mired in intractable issues that are blocking your progress. But...are you able to implement initiatives as quickly as you'd like? Are there simmering conflicts that get discussed in the hallway, but not in meetings? Do you have ideas for the future that you hesitate to advance because you know they will rock a few boats, create conflict and resistance?

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP™

Exercising the kind of leadership that deals with such adaptive challenges requires new ways of thinking and acting for most executives—and eventually for everyone in the organization. To begin with, you may need to revisit your ideas about leadership. Leadership is not a matter of charisma, not a quality one is born with, not the rah-rah sentiment of “Win one for the Gipper.” The kind of leadership that moves organizations forward through these value-laden deadlocks and past roadblocks is Adaptive Leadership™, a way of thinking and a set of behaviors that anyone can learn and practice.

Four skills at the heart of Adaptive Leadership suggest both its practical nature and its conceptual departure from other approaches to leadership.

- ▶ “Get on the balcony™.” Step out of the action to gain better objectivity and understanding of what's really going on, what the words are beneath the music. Then move back into the fray.
- ▶ “Orchestrate the conflict.” Surface and manage conflicts, rather than repress or resolve them. Let issues ripen. Create a holding environment where even the most difficult and sensitive questions can be discussed without fear of repercussion. This may be tough to do initially, as few employees want to challenge those in authority, especially in large, hierarchical organizations.
- ▶ “Give the work back.” This requires more of executives than delegation. It requires staying back and letting involved parties work through their differences and come to crucial decisions together, without a “royal edict” that blurs the edges of accountability.
- ▶ “Anchor yourself.” Separate yourself from your role. Don't take attacks personally; they're not attacks on you, but on what you represent. Caring for yourself and sustaining your spirit are critical.

While this terminology is down-to-earth, practicing what it preaches can be extremely difficult—in fact, dangerous at times. Not only is it human nature to resist what's new and unfamiliar, the deep-systems change involved in moving an entire organization to a new way of thinking and behaving can be very threatening on a personal level. People fight back. They want to protect their turf and preserve a workplace that is comfortable and orderly. They may attack or try and marginalize those with the new ideas. Some people will not be able to make the transition and, frankly, accepting that there will be losses is also part of leadership.



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Take, for example, a large professional services organization universally considered to be a global industry leader. When a companywide branding initiative found little to distinguish the company from its other high-profile competitors, alarm bells rang for some members of top management. Would they eventually be forced to compete on price alone? In an industry where public images tarnish easily, would they be able to separate themselves from the pack if scandal struck close to home? How could they protect their success in a changing environment?

As the top team began to push their partners to explore new ways of working with each other and new approaches to engaging existing and potential customers, they met with skepticism and even hostility. Simply suggesting the need for new thinking and inviting input ran contrary to the organization's traditional top-down approach and created considerable disequilibrium among the partners. Changing the way of doing business was a sensitive and threatening challenge for the partners; they had been successful, they owned the company, and their fortunes and futures were dependent on the firm's continuing to grow and thrive. They did not welcome the idea of moving from a current reality they knew well into some unknown space.

By using the framework of Adaptive Leadership in meetings across the country to open up discussion and teach practical adaptive leadership skills, the firm is taking an honest look at its future, demonstrating the willingness to ask the toughest, deepest questions and seek answers that will determine that future.

In today's rapidly changing environment, every organization, even the most successful, must confront its particular adaptive issues and come to its own solutions, a process that takes time, courage, and persistence.

Change *is* the status quo in today's world. You need to build your organization's capacity for change in order to respond creatively, quickly, and preemptively. You can do this by promoting a culture that differentiates between technical problems and adaptive issues and that allows open, safe discussion of conflict and difficult problems.

You can also do this by recognizing the difference between authority and leadership. While management may have the authority to mandate change, leadership can come from anywhere within the organization, and you need to encourage it at all levels of the organization. [MW](#)

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