

SESSION 5

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING CHANGE: ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

THEME

A Framework for Leading Change: Adaptive Leadership

Note to Facilitator: In the presentation on Adaptive Leadership, highlight *three* of the *seven* skills that are relevant for the group. Introduce the other four, but focus on the three you chose.

PREPARATION

Please read the following 8-page article before Session 5:

[Becoming An Adaptive Leader - Lifelong Faith](#)



We will also discuss your insights on awareness of biases and openness to other perspectives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Invite the Holy Spirit to guide our conversations
- Become aware of new ways of identifying and handling challenges
- Reflect on how complex problems require deeper diagnosis and new approaches
- Draw from their leadership and resources and learn from one another's lived experience
- Consider new attitudes and mindsets essential to a new way of leading
- Learn specific practices that enhance their adaptive capacity
- Commit to practicing synodality in daily life.

OUTLINE - 120 MINUTES *(150 minutes with optional additions)*

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| Overview | 5 Minutes |
| Opening Prayer | 5 Minutes |
| Revisit the Prior Session | 15 Minutes |
| Presentation: Leadership Challenges | 20 Minutes |
| Personal and Breakout Group Reflection | 15 Minutes |
| Presentation: Adaptive Leadership | 20 Minutes |
| Adaptive Leadership Examples | 10 Minutes |
| Personal and Breakout Group Reflection | 15 Minutes |
| Concluding Commitments | 5 Minutes |
| Closing Prayer | 5 Minutes |
| Looking to the Final Session | 5 Minutes |
| <i>Optional</i> Case Study of Adaptive Leadership | 15 Minutes |
| <i>Optional</i> Insights and Applications | 15 Minutes |

OVERVIEW

05 min



- Welcome
- Review the objectives and agenda for the session

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OPENING PRAYER

05 min



Prayer for a Synodal Church

Three volunteers from among the participants read:

- Person **1** : Here we are, Lord. Holy Spirit, teach us what and how to speak and when to keep quiet. Help us to be a synodal Church, capable of discovering and transmitting the mystery of walking together, finding each other, and supporting each other.
- Person **2** : Teach us to leave ourselves to join others and do good. May this group meeting be a healing and hopeful path. Spirit of God, who invites us to the risk of meeting others in an appropriate attitude: make us a synodal Church, in which we experience a home and a school of communion.
- Person **3** : Help us move the Church to go out of itself in mission, to taste the pure air of the Spirit that frees us from being focused on ourselves and invites us to seek out those who are indifferent, and those who don't believe.

As a group:

- Think of a word, phrase, or sentence from the prayer that is special to you?
- For two minutes, close your eyes and silently repeat the words that were special to you several times.
- At the end of the two minutes, you will be asked to open your eyes and pray the end of the prayer, together.

All: Bring us the Holy Spirit of God, keep us in unity, being aware that we are in the same boat and going towards the same port. Lead us to be Church in the street, full of life and peace, in the communion of solidarity and missionary fruitfulness. Allow us to meet again to listen to each other, dialogue, and make decisions.

REVISIT THE PRIOR SESSION

15 min



In a breakout group, discuss the following question: Were there any ways you observed how the Ladder of Inference showed that different people can have alternative versions of the “truth?”

PRESENTATION

20 min



LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

What is a VUCA environment?

- Volatile: The environment demands you react quickly to ongoing changes that are unpredictable and out of your control
- Uncertain: The environment requires you to take action without certainty
- Complex: The environment is dynamic, with many interdependencies
- Ambiguous: The environment is unfamiliar, outside of your expertise.

Are there any examples of how your organization has experienced an increase in VUCA a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment?

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

According to Professor Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University, leaders' biggest shortcoming is treating adaptive challenges as technical problems and looking for easy solutions. Technical challenges are those that experts can solve, whereas adaptive challenges are volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous. In addressing adaptive challenges, leaders must think systemically to understand the myriad stakeholders and contributing factors. The leader requires skills to lead changes in values, beliefs, roles, and relationships and adopt an experimental mindset.¹

PERSONAL AND BREAKOUT GROUP REFLECTION

15 min



Take **2 min** of quiet time and consider the main challenges you currently face in your life. Those challenges could be positive (a goal you are striving to achieve) or negative (a threat you want to turn into an opportunity). Write a list of two or three.

- Which one seems the most complicated?
- What makes it complicated?

¹Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading, Linsky and Heifetz, Harvard Business Review Press, 2002

- What do complicated challenges have in common?

For **10 min** share the most complex challenge with the members of your breakout group. The intention is to find commonality among our challenges, *and not to solve one another's challenges or offer advice.*

REPORT OUTS

Share a salient point from each breakout group about things challenges have in common.

PRESENTATION



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

The Seven Adaptive Skills Are:

1. Get on the balcony, Distinguish Subject from Object: Maintain perspective by observing the system above the action.
2. Think politically: What are each stakeholder's values, loyalties, risks of loss, and hidden alliances?
3. Orchestrate the conflict: Create a "holding environment" where people can tackle tough questions honestly.
4. Discipline attention to the real issues: Don't be distracted by the noise and confusion.
5. Give the work back: Avoid trying to handle everything and resist giving people the answer.
6. Regulate disequilibrium: Increase or lower the heat/pressure/motivation.
7. Infuse the work with meaning: Focus on *why*, not just *how*. Connect tactics to the mission.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP EXAMPLES



- Don't attempt to lead on your own. Move toward a more distributive leadership with teams working collaboratively.
- Focus on followers' beliefs, needs, and values to get people to want to change and lead change.
- Conduct a "listening tour" of people in your organization to know what motivates them. People want to be seen, heard, and understood.
- Remind people of the mission and vision (what and why) when they are distracted by "noise."
- Always put a human face on what you and your team do and the contribution you make.

- Share success stories to communicate to everyone their role and importance in achieving mission success.
- Explore differences and creatively solve problems through collaboration. Defining the problem and finding a solution require collaboration and co-creation.
- Practice listening, being open-minded, dialogue, and discernment.
- Ask reflective questions (e.g., What are the three biggest challenges we face that may undermine mission success? What are two things we could change to make us more effective?).
- Create small and diverse groups for dialogue and collaboration to identify problems and create solutions.

PERSONAL AND BREAKOUT REFLECTION



In breakout groups, we will discuss the following questions:

1. What is one example of how you are leading adaptively?
2. How could you apply one of these practices to your most complicated challenge?

CONCLUDING COMMITMENTS



What commitment do you want to make to practice adaptive leadership for the next two weeks? (Each person answers both questions in the large group.)

CLOSING PRAYER



Does anyone have a prayer request, perhaps for someone you know who is struggling or celebrating a blessing?

LOOKING TO THE FINAL SESSION



Session 6: Building Bridges in the Church

At the beginning of the final session, you will be asked: How have you experimented with using one of the seven practices of Adaptive Leadership?

View the following three-minute video from Pittsburgh University before Session 6:
[Cultural Humility](#)



Please read this short document from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) *Cultural Diversity In The Church, Intercultural Competencies* Module 2:
[Intercultural Competencies Module 2 | USCCB](#)



SOURCES

[The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World](#), Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Press, 2009.



[A Survival Guide for Leaders](#), Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Review, June 2002.



OPTIONAL CASE STUDY OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP



Stefanie was a competent, well-respected, and admired Holy Wisdom Catholic School principal. She was professional yet empathetic in her approach to work. Stephanie cared for the faculty and staff with tremendous respect and gratitude. She also had high expectations and did not accept inferior performance.

Stefanie resigned, and school employees were saddened by her exit. The replacement principal (David) came soon after. Faculty and staff were apprehensive about the new principal's capabilities; they thought he could never fill Stefanie's shoes.

David took an adaptive approach, knowing he had big shoes to fill. He could have led from the position of authority but chose to be inclusive in making decisions. He sought the employees' feedback and ideas to ensure they felt valued and respected, just like Stefanie made them feel.

David was not appreciated by some parents, who wanted him to respond quickly and decisively with an easy solution to a drop in some standardized test scores. Instead, he assembled an ad hoc committee of teachers and parents to investigate the contributing factors. One action he took quickly was to heighten the

teachers' awareness of the long-term detrimental effects of bullying when he observed an attitude of "they're just kids being kids" among the faculty.

Even his administrative team members didn't expect him to be so inclusive and adaptive from the onset. In a couple of months, the results of his adaptive leadership approach were evident. David continued to take fresh ideas seriously from the employees. He didn't need to prove he was a competent boss. David asked many questions and encouraged everyone to be attentive to emerging trends in education. When a personnel problem arose, he rejected quick judgments about a person's competency and motive and considered it systemically.

It didn't take long for his faculty to trust and respect him for fostering collaboration and continued development. He successfully navigated the school through ups and downs and enjoyed success throughout his tenure.

INSIGHTS AND APPLICATION



In the large group, we will discuss the following questions:

1. What elements of adaptive leadership do you observe in David's actions?
2. What is one example of how you are leading adaptively?

THE END OF
SESSION 5