

Guide to adaptive challenges and action learning

Keith Johnston and Jennifer Garvey Berger

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Introduction

A central goal of our leadership development programme is to enable you to be more effective as a leader facing complex challenges and leading teams to work and think together in these situations. We are assuming here that good *managers* manage existing processes and procedures whereas effective *leaders* lead through the uncertain and complex settings that require experimentation and adaption. We need both, of course. Recognising this the leadership theorists Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky make a useful distinction between adaptive challenges and technical problems.

“Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways – changing attitudes, values, and behaviours – people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.”¹

In this guide we combine ideas about how to define problems and how to work with adaptive challenges. This is to help you select a challenge from the ones you are facing to work on with your colleagues in your action learning group. Part of the success of the programme arises through you (and your colleagues) applying the concepts to an adaptive issue that you are grappling with in your day job and also the learning that comes when you help think about your colleagues' issues.

¹ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive*

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When you have finished working through this guide you should have an initial understanding of the idea of adaptive challenges, an initial definition of the challenge (or challenges) that you might work on during the leadership development programme, and a sense of the action learning process.

1) Identifying an adaptive challenge

We suggest you start by compiling a list of challenges you are facing. Examples of challenges others have raised include:

- getting people outside or inside the department to agree to a policy change,
- designing a new system or procedure,
- implementing a new system or procedure (sometimes after discovering that there is a gap between the design and how people actually want to work),
- dealing with any number of complicated people management issues or stakeholder relationships.

Some other pointers for situations where you may have an adaptive challenge include:

- If you, or others, have already tried a number of procedures and the technical fixes have failed to do the trick, this cycle of failure signals an adaptive challenge.
- If people (even you) keep turning to the boss to fix things which don't seem to stay fixed, there are likely to be social issues that are creating a larger challenge.

Remember that where the challenge is adaptive there will need to be changes in people's values, attitudes, or behaviours to enable a sustainable solution.

It is almost certainly the case that an issue that faces you at work will not be purely technical or purely adaptive. There will be a mix of technical and adaptive factors. Don't worry about that. For now, just get a list of possible challenges. We will focus on teasing out the adaptive elements a little later.

2) Defining the challenge

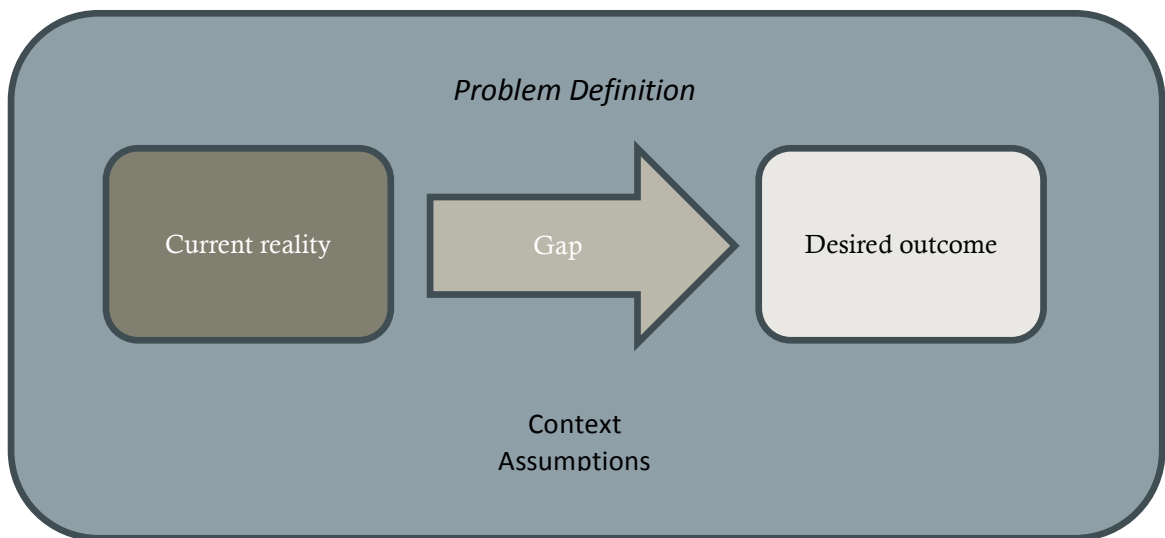
How can we better define the challenge? We have a simple approach to basic problem (and opportunity) definition. That is, it is simple to describe our approach but it is often harder to do in practice. It is also surprising how often we come across issues where the problem has not been defined or not defined well or where there is a beautifully crafted solution that is still searching for the right problem. As the saying goes, when you have a hammer then every problem can look like a nail.

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Here we will take problem definition in two stages:

- 1) Take a simple approach to problem definition
- 2) Then tease out the technical and adaptive elements of the issue and select the adaptive aspects to focus on in our work together

What we think of as a problem is a gap between the outcomes you want and the actual results or state of the system



Pick one of your trickiest adaptive challenges and try to write about it using the questions in the table below.

Don't feel held by the order we offer here; you can fill out this chart in any order you like, but know that each of the questions will add something new to your thinking about the problem.

Adaptive Challenge:		
Desired outcome	Describe what success might look like to you. How wide or narrow is your image of success here?	
	How much does success depend on others or is within your power to attain?	
Current reality	Describe the defining features of the current	

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	situation.	
	What holds you or the system back and needs to change?	
	What needs to be retained from the current reality?	
	What are the best features of the current situation that could be built on to make things much better?	
Gap	Review what you have above and write a first draft of the problem statement to describe the gap.	
Context	What are the main features of the wider environment that shape this issue?	
	Who knows about this issue? Who cares? How do key stakeholders see this?	

3) Focus on the most critical adaptive elements

So now you've got a problem and you see something about its context and the gap between what you have and what you want. The next step is to figure out which pieces of it are technical and which are adaptive. The technical bits are those that can be solved with the right expertise. These are recognisable because these are the things you know how to try—bring in a specialist, change the structure, create a new system. These are important, but they won't be as much of a challenge as the other pieces, so we should focus on the adaptive parts of your challenge and keep asking: *Where are the people and how must people change if this gap is to be closed?*

As Heifetz et al argue, work an adaptive challenge must be done by the people connected to the problem because the solution lies in the people, their attitudes, competencies and relationships and the new attitudes, competencies, and coordination that will be required.

A first step is to identify the people elements of the challenge and the potential conflicts involved. You will also need to develop an understanding about how the key people feel and think about the issue.

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A good place to start is to think about where the conflict is in the issue. Where does the conflict emerge? Who disagrees about the best way to do things? Who seems to agree but does not follow through?

Or you could ask yourself the related question: *If this all goes really well and is a great success, whose thinking or behaviour would have changed?*

A second set of questions you can ask yourself about the adaptive pieces of your adaptive challenge is about *level*. Heifetz et al suggest that you can think about the three different levels where people might reasonably disagree. Think about your adaptive challenge as it relates to these three levels:

1. Orienting values and purpose, mission
2. Objectives, strategy
3. Tactics, implementation

Often people in conflict over an issue will agree on the big ideas (values or objectives, for example) but disagree on more specific issues like implementation or tactics. It is helpful to get clear about the level where the main disagreement lies.

Ask yourself the following questions about where the disagreements might lie among different players in your particular adaptive challenge:

1. Do we all agree on the orienting values and purpose?
2. Do we all agree about the objectives or the high level strategy?
3. Do we agree about the ways to implement the strategy?

Heifetz et al offer a useful technique here for thinking about the adaptive challenge. They suggest you move down through these levels of abstraction as you think about your challenge. For example, if you think everyone agrees on the values, ask “*What would be needed to achieve that?*” That question will throw up some objectives or a strategy. Is there agreement at that level? If so, ask “*What would be needed to achieve that?*” Keep asking this at each level to get to the point where you think there is real disagreement. You may find that there is disagreement at the highest level—about where the leader wants to go in the first place—and in that case, it doesn’t make any sense to try and get the right strategy in place. On the other hand, everyone might agree on both the values that underlie the change and also on the high level strategy, but find the particular tactics a problem. In that case, hammering away at the importance of the strategy misses the point. Paying attention to the level at which the disagreement lies is key to understanding the adaptive challenge.

We suggest you take you adaptive challenge and make a first attempt at identifying at what level the real conflict emerges and at what level there is overall agreement.

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So now you've got the particulars of the problem—what you think it looks like and what the context is around it. And you've got the adaptive pieces. This is a great beginning! Then there is the big question: *How do you know?* Finding out what you know and how you know it will be one of the first things we focus on in the action learning groups.

“Anyone operating with a theory of leadership that assumes that experts know what is best, and that then the leadership problem is basically a sales problem in persuasion, is in our experience doomed at best to selling partial solutions at high cost.”

Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky²

Action Learning

Action learning is an important part of our leadership development programme, not just for the purposes of the programme itself, but for the longer term transformational hopes and wishes of the culture change for the future

Action learning has a long and well-researched pedigree, but it boils down to some fairly simple principles: that reflecting on some really tricky portions of the work and talking about your ideas with others will actually increase the odds that you'll learn from the work rather than simply solving the same sort of problems—in the same way—again and again. It seeks to undo our general desire for speed and solutions and to focus instead on the *process* of problem solving—on what's going on in our heads and how we can work with others to make sense of the increasingly difficult leadership issues we might be facing. At the same time, as our thinking enlarges about the particular challenges we face, our solutions become more creative and helpful, and challenges that have been issues for quite some time actually get solved for good. In this way, action learning has equal weight on both words: the action and the learning and we'll try to keep our attention from slipping too far into one space or the next.

If the various modules we engage in together and the thinking and work that happens there is meant to be the seed of new leadership practice, action learning is the nurturing that helps the seeds to grow. Action learning groups create the

² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, MA, 2009, p.70.

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space that helps leaders remember to try out new habits in their own practice. Better still, the new ways of engaging and thinking together in action learning groups create for each person the context of trying out new practices, not just in their work place, but also in the course of the action learning group itself.

In an action learning cycle, participants:

- Step back from their work to wonder about an adaptive challenge
- Develop action plans to test new ideas
- Talk these plans through with their colleagues, as their assumptions get tested, the original challenge is explored, and new solutions arise which shifts the action plan
- Carry through with the new, modified action plan
- Reflect about those actions and modify, expand, and refine the actions
- Report back to their colleagues about what has happened and how that has created new ideas and possibilities, etc. (see figure 2)

As you can see from figure 2, this process goes on and on and becomes a self-reinforcing cycle—and it helps you get your head around a new set of possibilities that help shape what action you can take to make progress on the adaptive challenge you're facing.

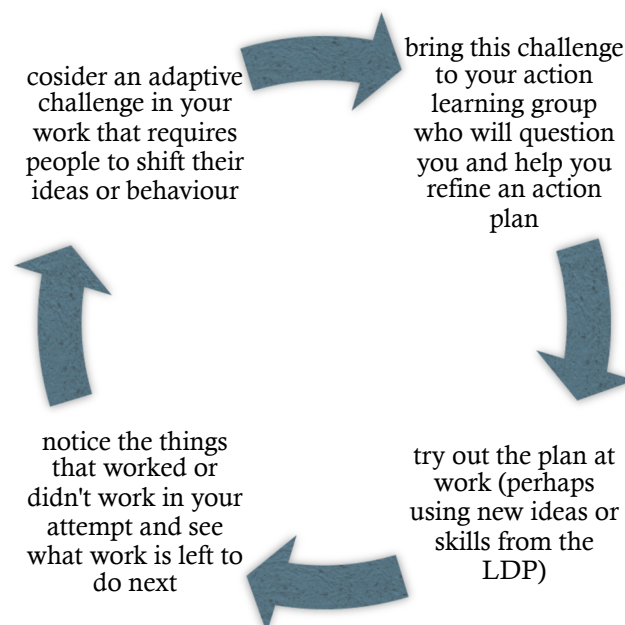


Figure 2

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So your responsibility is in part to be a good thinker and actor—to bring to the group your willingness to open to their questions, to share as much of your particular issue as you find helpful, and to spend less time than usual in a problem solving or cut-to-the-chase place, and more of your time in a question-considering and open-to-new-perspectives place. Your job is to choose an adaptive challenge that really pushes you to try new things, and then to work on it from session to session so that you have new perspectives and experiences to add. And when this challenge is sorted or becomes somehow less interesting to you, your job is to select something else that you might talk about.

Gaining traction on your adaptive challenge is only one piece of the benefit of the action learning group. The other main benefit is that the groups themselves allow you the chance to practice new ways of having conversations when it's not your issue but someone else's issue on the table. This is going to require you to try on new leadership actions and ways of thinking. Whereas many leaders listen to other peoples' problems with a focus on some experience or idea that might lead to a solution, in action learning groups with us, the point is not to offer suggestions or ideas but rather to ask genuinely curious questions of your colleagues so that they might come to new understandings on their own.

Asking questions is a leadership talent that is hard to develop but invaluable in those who are good at it. Asking questions of others—real questions that open them up to new possibilities or perspectives—can increase their ability to solve problems rather than creating their dependence on you. It can be frustrating at first to practice question asking rather than advice giving, but it is the frustration that always comes when you're learning a difficult but worthy skill. Previous participants tell us that the ability to ask really good questions changes who they are as leaders—and the core practice ground for that is in the action learning groups.

Participating in action learning groups brings benefits to the organisation and to the individual, and it is a piece of the commitment you make to your colleagues and to the Department when you sign up for this programme. We look forward to helping to support your success in these groups and in using action learning principles in your work long into the future.