**Adaptive Change & Adaptive Leadership**

(A book summary written by David Egan - updated 23rd December 2019)

This is a summary of key points on the above topic that I gleaned from reading the book titled “**Leadership on the Line** – **staying alive through the dangers of change**” by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Press 2017.

**Introduction**

The book was written for 3 reasons

1. to show that productive change must be adaptive to be sustainable,
2. to offer tools and a framework that lower risk so people can see how to lead and stay alive through the dangers of change and
3. to encourage people to seize within reach every day opportunities to exercize leadership.

It acknowledges the world today demands a new form of leadership to deal with the complex uncertain challenges of change. It also acknowledges the “transformation dilemma”, saying transformation on its own tends to be problematic as it:-

* encourages self-referential grandiosity (“I have a vision” instead of a shared approach),
* tends to be “ahistorical” starting with a change idea or “best practice” with little respect for the soil in which it needs to take root, and thirdly
* encourages passionate and courageous people to seek big systemic change risking the day to day leadership at every level which is necessary for culture change.

**The authors say sustainable change needs to be adaptive** and that sustainable transformative change is more evolutionary than revolutionary, conserving more cultural DNA than it tosses out.

* Fundamental in this view is that transformative change needs to take root in its own culture with a healthy respect for the values, competence and history of people as well as the changing environment; capacity to respond needs to be built up over time.

As in our personal lives where we must adapt due to significant changed circumstances e.g. death of a loved one, business failure etc., one must preserve what is necessary to go forward, leaving the rest and sustaining oneself in the process of loss....what do you give up? what do you hold onto? Having some guidelines that help us lead effectively and survive in such adaptive challenges is what the book is all about. The following is a summary of the key messages:-

**Adaptive Leadership** requires disturbing people, **but at a rate they can absorb**.

* Adaptive leaders take the opportunity to lead but it is perilous and you have to stay alive in the process – there are many dangers!
* It is a most worthy thing to do as the goals of true leadership extend beyond oneself, beyond material gain and beyond personal achievement.
* It requires inspiration AND perspiration, but it is perilous; so how does one survive?

**The Heart of the Danger**

* The sustainability of change depends upon getting people with the problem to internalise the change itself – it’s about helping them manage the losses.
* It is much more than managing technical problems - at the heart adaptive challenges is loss.
* Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges peoples habits, beliefs and values asking them to take a loss, experience uncertainty and even express disloyalty - and on top of this, it makes them feel incompetent!
* The dangers of exercizing adaptive leadership derive from the above situation - it is no wonder people resist!
* Adaptive leaders realise that the resistance is designed to get them to back away and they recognise the trap before it’s too late.

**The Faces of Danger** (to be aware of)

* There are several paths people take to restore the equilibrium and preserve the status quo – they seek to shut down those who exercize leadership and these include
  + Marginalisation – being moved aside with no authority and sometime we comply with it. If we take on challenges personally, that can marginalise us as conflict develops.
  + Diversion – being given another issue to work on, broadening the leaders agenda to disrupt the game plan and making them too busy.
  + Attack – this can take the form of character, style and bodily assassination and/or misrepresentation of a change leader.
  + Seduction – actions are taken to seduce an adaptive leader with side issues
* The above manifestations of resistance must be recognised by adaptive leaders hopefully before they occur. They must develop skills and practices to respond to them, all the while seeking to bring people with them on the change journey.

**5 Key Responses**

The are several practices adaptive leaders develop in order to succeed and these include:

1. **Getting on the Balcony** – called the “observers perch”. It’s about staying in the game under pressure but being able to “take yourself out of the dance” to see the bigger picture; avoiding the worrying diagnosis but keeping in it. To do so one needs to:-
   1. Distinguish technical from adaptive challenges - the group will prefer technical challenges and will seek to avoid the adaptive ones which are more about hearts and minds changing than being technical. If problems persist and conflict develops the challenges are more likely to be adaptive ones.
   2. Find out where people are at – seek first to understand.
   3. Listen to the song beneath the words to deepen understanding – don’t take at face value, consider big picture/game plan, don’t make out loud interpretations and take into account the culture at play.
   4. Take into account the culture of the organisation
   5. Read authority figures for clues – their words and behaviours. Their job is to restore equilibrium/order and politics comes into it. A cooling attitude from an authority figure usually indicates resistance to an initiative providing an essential clue to staying alive! Read behaviours and adapt!
   6. In summary – sustain your leadership by developing capacity to see what’s happening as its happening, hear what’s said but don’t take it at face value, hear the song beneath in order to address real stakes, fears and conflicts and read authorities to gauge the pace and manner in which to push forward.
2. **Think Politically** – adaptive leaders need to find partners, keep the opposition close, accept responsibility for your piece of the mess, acknowledge others loss, model the behaviour and accept that unfortunately there will be casualties.
   1. The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide; a psychological attachment leads to trouble; to manage as adaptive leaders one needs:
      1. partners and allies, as no one is smart enough to do it alone.
      2. to relate to people to stay alive - remain close to understand their difficulties.
      3. to make efforts to gain the trust of the uncommitted.
      4. to own up to one’s own mess and acknowledge the losses people may have to sustain then model the losses felt by oneself.
      5. the heart to engage in some costly conflicts in order to keep the change going and bring the organisation with them.
3. **Orchestrate the Conflict** – adaptive leaders accept conflict will happen when tough decisions are made and that it can generate casualties. They recognise that deep conflicts are rooted in deeply held beliefs and that differences of opinion are the engine of human progress. **The challenge in generating change is to work with the differences, passions and conflicts** in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy. Four pathways to do so are:
   1. Create a holding environment – space where people can tackle a diverse problem. May include outside facilitation and design as a strategic challenge.
   2. Control the temperature – raise it to get people to sit up and deal with challenge, lower it to reduce counter-productive tension (refer page 111 on how to raise and lower).
   3. Pace the work – add emotional as well as conceptual work as it helps to relinquish beliefs held dear and to manage loss, and let ideas seep out slowly.
   4. Show the future – communicate a positive vision, embody hope not fear- having confidence in the future is essential.
   5. In summary – build structures of relationship to work the tough issues and establish norms of practice that make passionate disagreement possible and permissible...but keep hands on temperature control, don’t provoke people too much at any one time and orchestrate the conflict, don’t become it!
4. **Give the work back** – shouldering the adaptive work is risky in that you can become the issue in the eyes of many and you will be held responsible for disequilibrium, **so** place the work where it belongs and make interventions short and simple.
   1. Name the “elephant in the room” and assist those who need to take responsibility, within and between the factions, to face the challenge.
   2. Tailor interventions so they are unambiguous and have context then you can act, assess, take corrective action, reassess and intervene again.
5. **Hold steady over time** – holding steady in the heat of action is an essential skill for staying alive and keeping people focused on the work - wavering under pressure or acting prematurely can lead to the initiative being lost in an instant. **To avoid this:-**
   1. Take the heat in the face of anger– doing so without becoming defensive generates trust. Must stay true to the purpose beyond self and standby people compassionately even when they unleash their demons.
   2. Let issues ripen – if you get too far ahead others will try to sideline you so instead help others to ripen the issue. If challenged hold steady and give yourself time to construct a strategy to make it ripen. Take the immediate heat and the time needed to find out where people are at so you can refocus on key issues. Keep interventions short and clear and remember putting yourself on the line increases peoples respect for you.
   3. Focus on the issue - there will be many deflections such as “if it ain’t broke why fix it”, “ sweep it under the carpet” and “out of sight out of mind” and remember people in authority may seek to deflect the matter requiring you to take a personal risk to escalate the matter. If so focus on the issue!
   4. In summary – Holding steady and taking the heat allows adaptive leaders to maintain a productive level of disequilibrium or creative tension as people bear the weight of the responsibility for working conflicts - this allows attention to be focused on the key issue/s. **It involves courage and skill** and places challenges on your body and soul as you deal with the stresses.

**Body & Soul Challenges**

The danger is leaders think they are not susceptible to the emotions and tensions that can destroy one’s capacity to lead in stressful situations. These include:-

1. Power & Control – such hunger can get one into a lot of trouble. Power needs to be for “service” and when seen as service in action restores adaptability.
2. Affirmation & Importance – people will invest in you to provide the magic to relieve their stress but you need to avoid being thought of as grandiose and give up the idea of being a lone heroic warrior.
3. Intimacy & Sexual Pleasure - leaders get into big trouble not managing these needs.
4. We need anchors to manage all the above tensions.

**Anchors** to manage challenges and keep an open heart include

1. Distinguish the role from self
2. Keep confidantes but don’t confuse these with allies
3. Seek sanctuary to:-
   1. Maintain innocence, curiosity and compassion – the virtues of an open heart!
   2. Avoid cynicism, arrogance and callousness.
   3. Don’t allow self to be numbed - heart must remain open despite pressures.

**Conclusion**

Adaptive leadership is an everyday activity at any level in an organisation. It is a noble thing to do and its outcomes are beyond measurement. Its difficult work and the dangers are real but there are some practical things one can do to avoid these, and achieve sustainable change. The challenge is to survive whilst bringing people along on the journey. It takes time, skill and mutual support.