

Chapter 71

An Adaptive Leadership Approach to Adult Learning and Organizational Research

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ABSTRACT

Adaptive leadership is presented as an effective approach to adult learning and organizational research, which encourages flexible thinking, double-loop learning, and transformative changes. The most comprehensive adult studies programs and applied research studies in the future will be those where researchers become immersed in the research process and engage with participants in the process of learning and knowledge creation. Through this process, researchers help unleash the creative potential of the organization and gain valuable learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Life is ever changing, and the way people respond to change influences how they interpret their surroundings and life circumstances, the way they solve problems, and the way they make decisions. When individuals possess the capacity for flexible thinking, conversations and every day interactions can gently nudge the system into new rhythms. When groups of people share this capacity for flexible thinking, an atmosphere of trust, collaboration, creativity, learning, knowledge creation, and innovation develops and becomes the underlying ethos of the community. As people interact with and adapt to one another (Stacey, 2001), new pathways open up and new ideas and insights emerge. In these environments, people experience the freedom to be themselves, freedom to examine without condemnation, and freedom to explore fearlessly.

Unfortunately, for certain people, the world is not perceived to be safe enough for being genuine, transparent, and real or fearless. There are worries, doubts, judgments, and criticisms perceived at every turn. These individuals may look for security in rules and routinized organizational environment

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because they may thrive in rules-based systems. Their ideal work environment is one where processes run similar to a finely tuned timepiece. Precision, exactness, and routine represent the pinnacle of peak performance where reliability, dependability, consistency, and operational flawlessness exist. Making changes are necessary to maintain order, correct problems, and restores balance and equilibrium to systems that become chaotic. When faced with challenges, their thinking may become rigid, and they may have difficulty thinking about things in different ways (Ashley, 2007). Changes that go beyond restoring stability may be experienced as threats or even mistakes. When rigid thinking guides an individual, a work unit, or organization, the culture becomes representative of “nonlearning, if not actually anti-learning” (Marquardt, 2002, p. 76). Opportunities for transformational change and genuine innovation are lost. Members may espouse a desire for change, but in reality their calls for change may represent desires to preserve the status quo (Argyris, 2006). Such faulty reasoning can result in the development of defensive reasoning mindsets and organizational defensive routines. Defensive reasoning blocks learning and knowledge creation (Argyris, 1990). When defensive reasoning mindsets and organizational defensive routines are set into motion, people may be open to single-loop learning because it helps to maintain existing patterns of relating and does not require change at the core. People can adapt to these types of changes without questioning their underlying assumptions.

The trouble with over reliance on single-loop learning is its inability to address novel or complex problems. Single-loop learning is sufficient when making course corrections to keep a system functioning effectively. Garcia-Morales, Verdu-Jover, and Llorens (2009) explain single-loop learning is “learning concerned primarily with effectiveness; in other words, how best to achieve existing goals and objectives. In such learning, single-loop feedback enables the detection and correction of existing errors by changing routine behavior so that the error does not recur” (p. 568). Single-loop learning is not sufficient to change structure, culture, organizational systems, or organizational theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Garcia-Morales, Verdu-Jover, & Llorens, 2009; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994; Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992).

In today’s organizational settings, most executive leadership challenges are inherently ambiguous (Goldberg, 2002), and require adaptive decision making. According to Sofo, Colapinto, Sofo, and Ammirito (2013), “*Adaptive decision-making* means having both a strategic and systems mindset with a capacity to continually adjust when dealing with challenges” (p. 15). The adaptive decision-making process involves going beyond single-loop learning and also requires double-loop learning. *Single-loop learning* is a process of detecting errors and choosing corrective action whereas *double-loop learning* involves recognizing a need for change, adjusting the basis for choice of action, and developing new frames of reference as a result of learning, and knowledge creation (Argyris, 1976, 1990; Stacey, 2001). The most successful organizational professionals integrate both single- and double-loop learning, use adaptive decision-making skills, and positively contribute to creativity, innovation, and knowledge creation within organizations.

Becoming an adaptive leader with a flexible mindset represents necessary competencies for 21st century business professionals; therefore, the question for business schools, administrators, and educators becomes one that is focused upon the way adaptive leadership skills can be developed. The challenge is that many business schools and professional training programs may espouse the value of creating learning activities that foster this double-loop learning and transformational change but in practice continue to design and integrate deterministic learning activities into the curriculum, which limits opportunities for the activation of higher-order thinking and use of adaptive decision-making skills. Vaill (1996) also observes the disconnection between theory and practice in management education, stating, “Everybody

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