CASSA Conversation Starters: Leading in Times of Ambiguity

Leaders and those who work at the system level are problem solvers, creative thinkers, and innovators. As individuals and in teams, you are called upon to address a vast range of issues. You are likely highly skilled in collaboration, communication, and your ability to do analysis and to problem solve. All of these skills are technical skills. They are competencies that you refine over time as you learn to work in different ways and with different groups of people. What do you do when you encounter situations where you don't know what to do? Times when things happen that you have never faced, that you have never seen, and your normal structures and strategies don't apply. This is leadership in times of ambiguity.

The acronym VUCA has been used many times to describe our current and evolving world. A world surrounded by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. This would most certainly be a apt description of the past few years. In Leadership on the Line (2002), Heifetz and Linsky describe the leadership necessary for such a world and were early leaders in defining adaptive leadership. To understand adaptive leadership, it is important to identify the difference between technical problems and adaptive problems.

Technical problems are where you have the skills, structures, and networks to address the issues at hand. This does not mean that technical challenges are straight forward. Very often these challenges require substantial tenacity, resilience, planning and perseverance. School closures, grade reconfiguration, boundary changes, the initiation or reduction of programs, and addressing budget challenges. These are all tasks that are difficult, complex and yet we perform them routinely, often on an annual basis.

Adaptive challenges are where the knowledge, structures and currently established ways of working do not yet exist. To lead in times of ambiguity requires the establishment of new ways, new networks, new knowledge, and the ability to be vulnerable, flexible and yet steadfast in the resolve to find a way together. Adaptive leadership emerges where people don't know where, they don't know how, and there is both anxiety and uncertainty in terms of how the challenge will be met, yet normally it is acknowledged that we must find a way.

Heifetz and Linsky offer several key considerations for adaptive leadership. At its core, they believe that a common source of failure of leadership is when people fail to adequately analyze an issue at hand. They state: "Indeed the single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify — in politics, community life, business, or the non-profit sector — is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems."

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There is little doubt in our minds that the past few years have provided a series of adaptive challenges. The research on adaptive leadership helps system leaders face such challenges in a series of ways and provides a framework for how to begin to address issues:

1. Learn to recognize the difference between adaptive and technical challenges. If the challenge is technical, existing strategies, structures and processes will apply. If the nature of the issue is adaptive, new methods, new structures, and new networks will have to be created along with new knowledge to be learned.

2. Accept the responsibility that comes with leadership and your part of the mess. Heifetz and Linsky say "leadership is a dangerous business." Leaders must understand their role and the responsibility to act. They must model courage and compassion and they must consistently work to keep people focused on the issue at hand and to strive for collaboration on solutions together.

3. Get on the balcony and the dance floor at the same time. Understanding and adjusting to adaptive challenges must include reflection in amongst the action. Leaders need to be able to both step back, and to get right into the action to see what is unfolding at hand.

4. Listen to the song beneath the words. When working with individuals, with groups, pay careful attention to not only the content of what is being said, but the meaning and, more importantly, the underlying values behind the words being used. This is the three-legged stool of conversations and collaboration, where attention must be given to the process of the dialogue, the content of the dialogue, and the emotion of the dialogue.

5. Place the work where it belongs. Consistent with the CASSA paper on Contextual Literacy and the work of Michael Bungay Stanier, leaders often are quick with solutions to issues which can be counter to the importance of the work and growing leadership from within. Placing the work where it belongs engages those who are doing the work directly in the solution to the issues. The "leader" is not the source of the solution, the solution comes from within and through collaboration. Regardless, leaders play a key role in keeping groups focused on the task, reading the values, the political aspects of issues, and bringing needed resources to the solutions or helping adjust systematic barriers to solutions.

6. Leadership comes from action not from authority. In adaptive leadership, resolution to adaptive problems is a construct of engagement, collaboration, analysis, and knowledge creation. Leadership is also not the sole domain of one charismatic, heroic individual. Leadership is a practice, an activity and can be exercised by anyone within an organization. If people care, they will step up and meet the challenge. The task of system leaders is to recognize and mobilize such individuals and groups.

Adaptive leadership begins with recognizing that one does not always have the skills, knowledge and ability to quickly seek resolution to tasks at hand. Over the past two years, all system leaders have had to face new challenges, new obstacles, and have had to create new knowledge and structures as we moved ahead in support of learning for all children.

The world does not appear to be getting less complex. The Adaptive Leadership framework, with its recognition of the difference between adaptive and technical challenges, provides one lens through which to view the complexity of today and to help us prepare for our ongoing uncertain future where new and unforeseen challenges will emerge.

Table Questions:

1. When you consider the challenges system leaders have faced over the past two years, what new knowledge have you been required to learn, what new structures did you create to address the challenges at hand?
2. Which portions of the Adaptive Leadership framework resonate most strongly for you? When you faced unknown challenges that you would categorize as adaptive, what leadership skills did you find most helpful?
3. Adaptive leadership provides the opportunity to form new networks and to build trust through transparency and collaboration. How might you use adaptive challenges to strengthen the cultures of your organizations?

Further Resources:

Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.

Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2002, June). A Survival Guide for Leaders. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2002/06/a-survival-guide-for-leaders

International Leadership Association. Innovating Leadership. Ron Heifetz on Adaptive Leadership and His Journey. https://ilaglobalnetwork.org/podcasts/ron-heifetz-on-adaptive-leadership-and-his-journey/

Meier, J.D. *Leadership on the Line Book Summary.* Sources of Insight. https://sourcesofinsight.com/leadership-on-the-line/

Minneapolis Foundation. Conversations with Chanda. *Leadership in a Crisis: A Conversation with Ron Heifetz.* [Audio Podcast] https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/podcasts/conversations-with-chanda/leadership-in-a-crisis/