

Adaptive Leadership

1. **Leaders need to be capable of adaptive leadership** – a name given to this critical aspect by Ronald Heifetz who has researched and written about leadership for over two decades at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. He has developed a model of leadership which addresses the different types of leadership task, whilst at all times recognising that equal attention has to be paid to maintaining the health and vitality of the leader themselves. We have applied the ideas and approaches in many local government settings and found them practical and useful.
2. Heifetz sees leadership as first **'getting on the balcony'** to know what's going on strategically and operationally, what's happening now and what's on the horizon. From that perspective you can then decide what the 'adaptive challenges' are. Heifetz differentiates **technical change** (which is familiar and often accomplished with limited disruption of the organisation's culture) from **adaptive change** (which will challenge, disturb or destabilise the organisation, its culture and those in it). This requires a series of leadership activities as set out in the diagram (and more detail given in the first chart below).



3. Leadership wherever it is located is to spot and lead the adaptive and technical challenges facing the council; grasp the full range of change it requires in terms of values, culture and innovation; and lead people through the resulting turbulence. This is the territory of the top teams in the organisation: political, board or managerial, e.g. managing budget cuts, renewal of areas, delivery of the Localism Bill and the place-shaping agenda.
4. The following two charts summarise Heifetz's suggestions as to what adaptive leaders do toward others (*leading in a time of change*) and consider internally for themselves (*leadership without easy answers*).

Leading in a time of change; Ron Heifetz and Don Laurie:

Leaders need to:

Get on the balcony	See the whole picture, the environmental challenges, the boundaries and relationships within the organisation and between it and other providers, suppliers, communities, stakeholders. Make sense of and see the connections between changes, pressures, objectives
Identify the adaptive challenges	Identify those challenges which cannot be met by continuing to work in the same way – that challenge the underlying beliefs, and culture of the organisation. Recognise when the values that made us successful are becoming less relevant and we need to develop different ways of thinking and behaving
Regulate distress	Understand the impact of change on people's work and help people to make sense of the purpose and outcomes of the change, to see the big picture. Provide clarity even if you cannot provide certainty. Do not inflict change unnecessarily.
Maintain disciplined attention	Ensure that even in times of change the detailed demands of customers and other stakeholders are met – do not lose sight of the real business.
Give the work back to the people	Ensure that people are able to get on with their work without 'interference' from above, build trust, support people in reaching up to take on bigger challenges and do not lean down to do the work of more junior people (just because you can do it well)
Protect the voices of leadership from below	Recognise that the people who challenge are demonstrating a concern for the organisation and a commitment to its goals – take care of the people who bring contentious issues into the open they may have an important perspective.

'Leaders do not need to know all of the answers. They need to ask the right questions'

Leadership Without Easy Answers; Ron Heifetz

Personal advice to those leading change:

Distinguish self from role	Be sure to understand that you are not your role. People will respond to your role with a variety of emotions and behaviours. At in times of change these can be quite powerful and sometimes irrational. Do not take these personally. Indeed a good tactic is for you to imagine yourself in the other person's shoes.
Externalise the conflict	By distinguishing self from role you can externalise any conflict, focusing attention on the issues not the personalities. You can redirect attention back to the challenge, staying strategic and emphasising where you want to get to, what you want to achieve.
Use partners	"The lone-warrior model of leadership is heroic suicide" Every person who leads will, from time to time, need support and challenge in distinguishing self from role and keeping the issues impersonal. Find and use people who you can trust both as a confidant (to offload emotionally) and as a critical friend (to test your thinking)
Listen, using oneself as data	Self knowledge is key to being able to understand how you might distort incoming communications and how you might interpret data and make decisions based on your personality preferences. Reflecting on daily actions, living with a certain degree of doubt about whether we are making all the right decisions, behaving in the most appropriate ways, using others to feedback to use the consequences of our actions and any blind spots.
Find a sanctuary	Leaders are busy people with multiple demands being placed upon them by others as well as themselves. Leaders need time and space to reflect upon the direction, the challenges, the actions. Either with trusted others or with themselves they need to build into their busy schedules space where they can fulfil the inner tasks of leadership
Preserve a sense of purpose	"Leadership requires a sense of purpose – the capacity to find the values that make risk-taking meaningful". Returning on a regular basis to the question "what is our purpose?", holding it dear, assists in times of discomfort and, along with the necessary reflection on the course of action and consequences of that action, creates a golden thread running through the leadership of change.