



Adapting to the Challenge at Hand

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According to Ronald Heifitz, Director of the Leadership Education Project at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University and author of the landmark classic *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, “adaptive challenges” are complex, and problems and solutions require experimentation, the learning is difficult and deeply value-laden, no one person or group has the answer, everyone must learn together, solutions to the problem must be shared by the entire group, there is loss and conflict, and an unclear time frame. Heifitz believes that we live in an era which requires more, not less, adaptive work. There is isolation among thought groups, political polarization, distance between have and have-nots, identity and generational divisions.

Humans wince at adaptive problems. They make us anxious. In a recession they make us even more anxious and anxious people respond without thinking. (Studies of humans under stress and primitive thinking). What happens when 300 adults become anxious and work from this brain area? Of my six former intern colleagues I met in Concord two weeks ago, five of us are in the parish and four of us have had significant conflict in our congregations in the last three years. Our country and congregations are swimming in adaptive change.

Substance abuse is an adaptive problem. There is not a pill to take to make it go away. Relapse is common, new learning is required and it takes years. If you have been through this you know it can be agony. Adaptive problems cause pain. The pain comes because the problem is adaptive.

According to Heifitz, the other kinds of problems are “technical.” Humans like technical problems. Technical problems have easy answers, they are understandable, authority figures can fix them, and everyone is happy with the solution. We like these problems. These are the blown lightbulbs of our lives. Just replace the light bulb and everything works again. No stress, fast, easy. Done. The roof leak in the Fisher Room? A drain spout broke off, can be replaced, and will leak no more. A technical problem. Ah. I feel more relaxed already. Humans like technical problems so much that they try to treat all problems as if they were technical. It doesn’t work.

According to Heifitz, most people try to avoid adaptive problems by focusing on “fixing” people, programs, and policies. Does any of this sound familiar yet? If we can just get that perfect staff person or shiny curriculum, or policy with complete consensus, it is all good. No. None of those things will

fix adaptive problems. Certainly many adaptive problems come with technical problems and working on technical problems helps, but it will not get to the root of the issue with any permanent resolution and improvement.

Recently I met with a professional trainer who is working with the staff at First Unitarian Church on supervision skills and working with volunteers. This is a technical solution to some of the strife we have had and it will help. While preparing she asked me “Which volunteers does your staff need help working with?” I paused and replied quite honestly, “Everyone here. Every member.” At this point she burst out laughing and said, “OK, you have more going on that just staff work with volunteers as an issue.” She immediately saw, that we have technical and adaptive issues and working on just the technical ones is fine, but at the end of the day the adaptive ones will still be lingering over us.

According to Theresa Cooley, Director of Congregational Life at the UUA, in our current adaptive climate many congregations are struggling with how to “govern” and who is in charge, inclusivity vs. decisiveness, and a vision of scarcity of resources vs. a theology of abundance. I saw Theresa Cooley present this material a month ago and my jaw dropped when she listed how to govern and who is in charge as a typical adaptive challenge, the very first one on our list. I think that is one of the adaptive challenges we have been facing in the past year. This question is full of deep values for many of us, and we are torn.

The issue of inclusivity vs. decisiveness is one that I come across in my work all the time. In order to write a job description (first there is always a long conversation among many about who will start it) then I or whoever else is doing it consults with the Board, the HR Committee, any other committee, stakeholder or staff person that would relate to this person. Now, we are corresponding with volunteers, and we need their answers, but they are volunteers with jobs and families, and they don’t respond as fast as employees and they don’t agree among themselves and we spend time talking more, scratching our heads and wondering who is the “decider.”

To many of you this description might be ideal, but if you knew the hours I can spend in a week responding to email and making phone calls for one question such as a job description, you would know this is not efficient and a waste of your money and our mission. Hours of my work week because we are so torn by the values of inclusivity and decisiveness.

Here is a big signpost as to whether a problem is technical or adaptive: does it return without resolution? Can you think of any problems like that here?

John Crittendon thoughts on music (We have been disagreeing on it for 10 years).

RE committee member and roles “We have been doing this for eight years!” Why not enough members volunteer in RE. Volunteer recruitment the dreaded job. Adaptive question – “What relationship do members think religious education has to our faith life? Only church I know of our size that pays RE teachers.

According to Heifetz our best leaders today lead with questions, one deep question at a time. And they create a holding environment so that people can wrestle with the values and new learning. Slowly, so that people can think and reflect, listen, talk among themselves.

When people are anxious, in pain they want some person or group to “fix” things. Make it better now. According to Heifetz adaptive leadership involves handing the problem back to the people, the whole group, and sometimes there needs to be real pain so that enough people will stop avoiding the problem and realize it needs addressed.

Selma March 1965 Americans witnessed black Americans being brutally beaten on their way to insure voting rights. For a week President Lyndon Johnson weighed his options. For a week people protested demanding that the President protect the marchers. Similarly, others protested just as vehemently that the President should stay out of it.

Heifetz sees Johnson’s genius, his leadership, in waiting a week to take action. This surprises people, who assume that leadership always means taking decisive action. Fix my pain. That is what you are paid for!! That is what leaders are paid for if there is a solid technical problem. That is not what it means if there is an adaptive problem. Sometimes leaders need to hand the pain back to the people, not rush in immediately. Let the people sit with painful images of black Americans being beaten to struggle successfully with the conflicting values inside of them. The President of the United States can not solve racism. It is an adaptive challenge that takes the effort of the majority of people involved.

“No authoritative presidential decision would “fix” this kind of problem. This problem existed in the minds and hearts of citizens, and only an adjustment there would resolve the value conflict. What the President could do was animate and prod people across the nation to address the internal contradiction between the values of freedom and equality they espoused and the mode of suppression they lived or permitted.” (138-139).

Heifetz notes that “The pains of change deserve respect. People can only sustain so much loss at any one time” (241). As you have named, we have a lot going on around here. I think we might have maxed out on change for the moment and might need some time to regroup in a positive fashion. According to Heifetz adaptive leaders need to move groups through disequilibrium at a pace that they can stand. I think that we as a congregation might have exceeded the pace we can stand. Congregations that have too much adaptive work often avoid the issues, or start scapegoating individuals, attack authority, focus only on technical problems, or engage in unnecessary debate (when dialogue is to lift up the adaptive challenge and work on it as a group).

I hope you will stay for the congregation meeting at 12:15 today. The Board has been working very hard to consider inclusive and decisive ways to ask questions, hold the anxiety, and lead us through our adaptive challenges. And we need you to stay because together we have the answers. Everyone’s voice is needed. Not that everyone is going to get everything they want. But everyone’s voice in dialogue is needed. No one person can fix our adaptive challenges – not the Board, not me, not Strategic Planning, no one member. We do this together, listening to all.

I’m actually optimistic, and actually looking forward to the coming year because I think we have some opportunities to dialogue about adaptive challenges that have flummoxed us for decades, and figure out how to move forward better together. In the process we will come back to the core of our existence, what is our purpose, why are we here, what is our mission? I can not serve 300 individuals and 100 children.

First of all, that would make me a servant and that does not match our values. Second, it is not possible, because as you may have noticed, you don't all agree. So in serving one, I would be sure to infuriate another. So I don't serve people. I serve the mission of this congregation as well as my best understanding of God. I truly look forward to coming to a deeper understanding of our mission, together within this beloved community in the coming year, and learning how to continue that dialogue year after year. May it always be so.

*Adapted from what was preached on May 22, 2011 to protect the innocent 😊