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The Power of Adaptive Leadership

How can you improve your decision making in times of crisis and unpredictable change?

BY LOUIS L. MARINES AND CHERYL MAY

Leaders increasingly confront challenges they have never seen before. To master them, they need a high level of self-awareness as the basis for confidence. The leader must have the courage to do the right thing in a calm, reliable, persistent manner, even when everyone around them may be running away, doing nothing, or embracing old solutions to new problems.

Adaptive challenges happen in both business and private life. These directly affect each other and require largely the same skills: ability to ask good questions to assess what's really going on, a sound awareness of how to make good decisions, and the ability to build trust before and while the adaptive challenge is occurring. Great leaders empower those affected by the challenge to help discover, make decisions about, and implement solutions.

Leaders face challenges in the unexpected results of faulty major predictions. These can include the growth of disparity between predictions and actual occurrences, as well as unexpected transitions in both the firm and the leader's home life. In his book *Transitions*, William Bridges points out four key challenges we can expect to face during our lifetimes: 1) loss of relationships, 2) changes in home life, 3) personal changes, such as health, and 4) inner changes, such as values, self-image, or vocation.

Leaders must respond to these challenges through "adaptive leadership." An adaptive leader is someone who:

- Focuses on the right questions,
- Clarifies the decisions to be made and how those decisions are made, and
- Builds collaboration and trust.

These three qualities are of key importance to adapting successfully.

1. The Power of Questions

Great leaders, above all, have a questioning mind and learn how to ask the right questions in any situation. Asking the right questions brings leaders new information, a diversity of options and viewpoints, and

the understanding to make sound decisions about needed actions.

Great leaders understand that the right questions

- Are a pre-requisite to learning,
- Are a window into creativity and insight,
- Motivate fresh thinking,
- Challenge outdated assumptions, and
- Lead us into the future.

A powerful question is one that stimulates reflective thinking and challenges our assumptions. It is thought provoking, energizing, and it evokes more questions. Economic forecaster and author Ken Fisher says only three questions count, whether making economic forecasts, leading a firm, or negotiating: What do I believe that is actually false? What can I discern that others do not see? And what is my brain doing to blindside me?

2. Sound Decision Making

Adaptive leaders must hone their decision-making skills and understand when the time for gathering information and opinions needs to turn into action. Adaptive leaders encourage consideration of multiple alternatives, discourage people who champion only a single idea, and evaluate alternatives objectively.

Adaptive leaders must also watch out for "bad decision traps." Among these are

- Confirmation bias—Recognizing only information that confirms one's current opinions.
- Sunken cost fallacy—The inability to let go of a lost investment or admit that the investment is, indeed, lost.
- Escalation of commitment—The more lost our cause becomes, the more tightly we embrace it.
- Anchoring and adjustment—The tendency to rely too heavily on one piece of information, for instance, choosing a used car mainly by the odometer reading. People tend to adjust information to make their estimates agree with a suggested "anchor."

These decision traps are all emotion-based. Great leaders develop the self-awareness and self-management to recognize when they are caught in a bad decision trap. They learn to fight the temptation that leads to an emotional downward spiral into a negative outcome.

3. Trust and Collaboration

Adaptive leaders generate high levels of collaboration. Collaboration is based on people's awareness of each other's skills and expertise, timely access to each other, and reliance based on interpersonal experiences. Great collaboration is based on trust, developed through the leader exhibiting integrity and authenticity.

Authentic leadership that cultivates trust says that "we will tell each other the truth as soon as we know it." The underlying principle is that the truth will change, so the leader must be attuned to such changes and convey new "truths" as they become known.

The adaptive leader has two tools: an inner gyroscope and outer radar. The inner gyroscope focuses the leader on self-awareness—the ability to read one's inner insights and recognize one's impact while using intuition to guide decisions. The outer radar focuses on social awareness—the ability to sense, understand, and respond to others while comprehending the larger social context.

Adaptive challenges are mastered with the above skills, which can help leaders discover more about who they are. This self-awareness forms the basis for the confidence and courage to face adaptive challenges and use them as learning experiences. It is also the strongest foundation for leaders facing the unexpected business and personal challenges that require us to expand our perspectives and develop new expertise.

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