

Adaptive Leadership Toolkit

Introduction

Framed by our *Pathways* initiative and supported by an array of resources, APHSA envisions a health and human services field that is successfully driving a range of outcomes and impacts for the people and communities we serve- supported by innovative and collaborative practice and service strategies that often require a great deal of creativity and flexibility to achieve. This in turns requires a leadership approach that balances setting clear direction and expectations supported by efficient methods of operating, with empowering others to solve problems and generate solutions across the lines of traditional authority and within an ever-evolving environment.

In the June 2012 issue of *Policy & Practice*, the article “The Art of the Possible” details the importance of adaptive leadership to lead change effectively in this current era of public human services.

Adaptive leadership is ideally suited to drive creative approaches in such a complex environment. Adaptive leaders are well-positioned to create cultural norms, tangible plans, and expectations in which continuous improvement and transformative change will occur. Adaptive leaders set up and use systematic mechanisms for monitoring progress, impacts, and lessons learned, creating a “learning organization” to drive outcomes.

The following tools are intended to complement the above-referenced article and provide additional information and resources to support the identification and development of adaptive leadership skills. It is not prescriptive, but instead is intended to identify the adaptive leadership fundamentals, provide a snapshot of strengths and areas for growth around those fundamentals, and offer examples of strategies and considerations to develop one’s adaptive leadership approach.

The toolkit takes into account the multiple levels of a change process, including:

- One’s own leadership role
- Leadership within the organization (the team of leaders within the organization)
- Agency culture regarding change
- The approach to the organization’s work (service delivery, continuous improvement, and outcomes)
- Engagement of staff (line staff, case workers, etc.)

In addition to highlighting the fundamentals of an adaptive leadership approach, “The Art of the Possible” also provided a snapshot of three variations of adaptive leaders through examples – the Silo Smasher, the First Mover, and the Future Driver. This toolkit provides a framework for building on these variations and an approach to adaptive leadership based upon an individual leader’s strengths and growth areas.

Reflective Thinking Questions

Below are questions to encourage your thinking around adaptive leadership qualities that you and the other leaders with whom you work possess or may want to strengthen.

1. How well do you and your organization’s leaders know your organization, for example, in terms of similarities and differences between individuals and groups, staff attitudes (toward innovation, clients, partner organizations, management, each other), organizational climate, and organizational strengths and gaps?
2. To what extent do you and your organization’s leaders track societal trends (for example, in budgets, demographics, politics, economics, and technology) and organizational trends (for example, staff performance and stability, client outcomes) and reflect on their potential future impact on the organization? If you do not track trends, why not?
3. How well do you and your organization’s leaders collaborate with peers in other divisions within your agency and other public or private agencies that affect your organization’s operations and clients? To what extent do you (and/or your senior leaders) champion collective strategies toward improved outcomes for your clients and work to break down turf divisions and build common purpose?
4. To what extent do you and your organization’s leaders shake up the organization when needed? What are some examples when leadership changed long-standing processes or policies or made key staff changes to pave the way for new ways of working? What drove those changes? Were you “proactive” or “reactive” in those examples? Can you think of a time when leadership helped your organization develop new competencies and let go of old ones that no longer served the interest of the enterprise?
5. How able are you and your organization’s leaders to adjust mid-course when new information is revealed or when economic, technological, or social changes occur that require a different approach? What are some specific examples? What inhibits your organizational adjustments?
6. How effectively do you and your organization’s leaders ensure that mid- and longer-term changes get planned and implemented effectively? How does leadership:

- a. Secure staff, client, and external stakeholder buy-in for change?
 - b. Empower staff at all levels, clients, and external stakeholders to co-create changes?
 - c. Set clear expectations for staff, clarify boundaries for staff and empower them within those boundaries, support staff in their implementation work, and hold staff accountable for follow-through?
7. To what extent does leadership ensure that plans get adjusted based on lessons learned during implementation? How effective is the communication of the mid- and longer term changes to staff, customers and stakeholders?
8. How sensitive are you and your organization's leaders to the deep impacts on staff, clients, and external stakeholders of changes in the organization and environment? To what extent does leadership reflect on those impacts and make adjustments as needed to, for example, the pace and scope of change and the way they communicate about organizational changes? To what extent does leadership reflect on their own strengths and barriers, and work to leverage their strengths and overcome their barriers?

Strengthening an Adaptive Leadership Approach

The following elements are fundamentals for adaptive leadership and offer a framework to measure your strengths and identify areas that you might want to develop further:

- Knowledge of the organization
- Willingness to project into the future (assess trends and environmental factors)
- Breaking down barriers
- Being disruptive
- Being agile to get to the goal
- Empowering the organization
- Ability to sense and respond

A scenario is provided below with additional “facts” that follow, aligned with each adaptive leadership fundamental element. To provide practical examples of each of the fundamental elements, potential strategies and considerations are included in the tool that follows. The potential strategies and considerations below are merely examples, and are not at all exhaustive. These examples are intended to reinforce ways you currently approach leadership and also suggest ways that you can strengthen your adaptive style and that of those whom you supervise and coach.

In the last column, there is a self-assessment aligned with each fundamental element for you to identify your (or your leadership team’s) adaptive leadership strengths and potential areas for development. A space has been provided in the self-assessment for you to reflect on the nuances of your answers- why they may not be simple or straightforward.

Scenario – You are a new senior leader in a human service organization and have been asked to lead the implementation of recent state legislative reforms within the organization that will impact how families are served, what data is collected about services, and how outcomes are defined.

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Knowledge of the organization</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders know their organizations as ecosystems bound together by a common purpose, but steeped in difference. They understand that their agencies include stakeholder groups that overlap, but that each group has its own unique characteristics.</i></p>	<p>The organization has integrated a new practice framework within the past two years, and there have been considerable challenges within middle management to clearly articulate the rationale for the practice framework to those staff working with the organization’s clients.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather information about the messaging and inclusion of middle management in the prior practice framework implementation to inform this current implementation strategy. • Ask key internal (example - line staff) and external stakeholders (example - clients/customers) how middle management is perceived across the organization and how that level of leader has been engaged in prior change efforts to involve and motivate middle management in the reform effort. • Ask middle management to be actively involved in the current reform effort and gather specifics from them about what has worked and not worked with engaging that level of leadership. • Assess the “why” middle management is challenged with this task...could be lack of “buy-in”, lack of clear understanding, lack of communication skills...each of these would lead to different adaptive or technical remedies. 	<p>Is the organization’s prior effort to implement a new practice framework a key consideration in developing your implementation approach for the recent legislative reforms?</p> <p>1 No</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Possibly</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Yes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Willingness to project into the future (assess trends and environmental factors)</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders get ahead of change before it happens because they take the long view of all impacts. This approach includes a willingness to consider longer term strategies for change, despite the short political cycle, and an evolutionary rather than a short-term results orientation.</i></p>	<p>The reform effort has been led by a small number of state legislators who were able to gather support for a reform agenda based upon research for another sector/industry. While similar reform efforts are being considered in other states, to date, no other state has moved similar reforms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of the reform principles and the ability to articulate those principles could provide credibility in establishing relationships for a new leader and get buy-in for the reform effort. • Connect the reform effort to the overall organizational vision in the short and longer-term to promote a sense of understanding of how things fit together, motivate and engage the organization’s staff and external stakeholders, and create a shared vision with a near and long-range view. 	<p>With respect to developing your implementation approach, how important is it to understand how these types of reforms are being thought of in the field?...in other states?</p> <p>1 Not important</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Somewhat important</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Very important</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Breaking down barriers</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders are not turf oriented. They focus less on championing an organization’s place in the larger enterprise than on championing across the enterprise.</i></p>	<p>There has been a long-standing “work-around” relationship between your organization and another public agency that serves many of the same clients. The legislative reforms do not require any collaboration to achieve the desired outcomes, but if the two organizations identified a data-sharing strategy for clients, some cost-savings and streamlined processes might be achieved to further the reform implementation efforts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to forge a relationship when previously not successful for the organization could motivate other barrier-busting to further the reform effort. • Gather input from your organization’s staff about what precipitated the “work-around” orientation with the other organization to identify a root cause for the challenging relationship and potential new remedies. • Partner with the other organization to concretely identify shared interests and define a “win-win” approach to outcomes • Label any “elephants in the room” that serve to inhibit collaboration 	<p>Is this potential collaboration an area to invest your time (your organization’s time) to move the reform implementation forward?</p> <p>1 No</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Possibly</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Yes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Being disruptive</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders privilege outcomes-focused goals and principles above all else, even if they require major changes to organizational norms and sacred cows.</i></p>	<p>In your ongoing implementation planning with your leadership team, concerns have been raised repeatedly about the impact of the reforms on the organization’s infrastructure, particularly updates needed for the data management system, additional time that line staff will need to collect new client information and data, and updates needed for all related operational tools, instruments, and systems. While the legislative reforms identify six months to prepare for implementation, the leadership team is indicating that the organization needs at least 12-18 months.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the leadership team together to think through the design of the infrastructure needed to move the reforms without a timeline and without focusing on what is currently in place; then prioritize the critical elements from that design and strategize which of those priorities could be accomplished within the 6 months. • With the entire staff, talk through the experience of clients within the context of the reforms and ask the staff to identify what infrastructure is needed and by when to ensure that experience. • Identify with your leadership team one approach to test (example - collecting one additional piece of data across client contact, data collection forms, and data management systems for the next 30 days); this test offers the opportunity to experiment and fail, which you feel is just as significant as the opportunity to experiment and succeed, to assess and manage to your organization’s strengths and gaps in readying for this reform. 	<p>What would be your focus in addressing the infrastructure concerns?</p> <p>1 Seek to adjust implementation timeline</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Make your team comply with the timeline</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Plan with your team a test with a novel and unorthodox approach to make the changes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Being agile to get to the goal</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders adjust mid-course if new information is revealed or if economic, technological, or social changes occur that require a different approach.</i></p>	<p>In developing the implementation approach, you and your leadership team identify an opportunity to provide a new service that is not required by the legislative reforms. No harm would come to clients if this additional service is NOT provided. But if provided, clients would have an enhanced service experience and potentially be less likely to need future services from your organization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being informed by varied perspectives (leadership, staff, clients), assess the cost and benefit for integrating this new service into the service array. • Discuss/debate with leadership team, staff, and other key stakeholders how the new service (and the broader required reforms) fits into the overall vision for the organization. • Plan to move forward to integrate the additional service with a clearly defined monitoring component and timeline to assess impact and make adjustments accordingly • Develop communication plans that articulate the purpose for the new service and expected outcomes • Set up benchmarks and a monitoring plan as part of implementation 	<p>Should providing this new service be explored and pursued in implementing the reforms?</p> <p>1 No</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Possibly</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Yes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Empowering the organization</p> <p>Definition - <i>Adaptive leaders focus on empowering and flattening the organization to deemphasize hierarchy and silos. They engage staff at all organizational levels in collaborative, cross-functional diagnoses of problems and solution identification.</i></p>	<p>From feedback that you are hearing from your leadership team, supervisors are concerned about how the reform strategies are going to be messaged. The feedback suggests that the supervisors are confused about what the reform effort is intended to impact and how it will connect to and change the current priorities and work of the organization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the supervisors to meet to identify their concerns and propose solutions to support the reform implementation moving forward effectively. • As the organization leader, meet regularly and frequently with supervisors as a group to update on, discuss, and ask them to inform the reform implementation. Ensure that your leadership team is providing the same messaging in communicating with supervisors and staff as a whole. • Have the supervisors be responsible for key elements of moving the reform effort, starting with the implementation planning stage, and integrate them fully as decision-making partners into the implementation planning process and throughout the implementation. With this being a model of how to engage all levels of the organization. 	<p>Will supervisors lead the design and implementation of strategies for staff communication about the reform effort?</p> <p>1 No</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Possibly</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Yes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

Adaptive Leadership Fundamental Element	Additional “Fact”	Potential Adaptive Strategies and Considerations	Self-Assessment Rate yourself (or your organization’s leaders) on the scale below for each of the related additional scenario “facts”
<p>Ability to sense and respond</p> <p><i>Definition - Adaptive leaders hold true to their understanding of other people and themselves. They consider deeper impacts of gains and losses, and perform self-checks, realizing they may have their own barriers to work through to reach desired outcomes.</i></p>	<p>A community advocacy group has been making statements through the media regarding concerns about your organization’s ability to effectively implement the reforms, basing those concerns on the organization having new leadership (you) and a perception that the organization has a poor reputation in the community. You have heard from your leadership team that this particular community advocacy group is very difficult to work with and that the organization has never been able to forge a positive relationship with this group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask a representative(s) of the community advocacy group to inform the reform implementation planning by participating in a workgroup. • Partner with the community advocacy group to cultivate and improve the relationship with the broader community using the reform effort as the key messaging around that relationship-cultivation. • Be transparent, vulnerable, and empathic about the concerns expressed by the community advocacy group and approach cultivating a relationship with the group from a place of gaining insight and recommendations for improvements. • Acknowledge the perceptions of the advocacy groups as valid and not just something you are listening to because you “have to” • Create a feedback loop for partners so that future concerns are raised with your agency directly prior to groups making statements to the media or others 	<p>Will making a connection with this community advocacy group be a priority as you prepare and begin to implement the reforms?</p> <p>1 No</p> <p>2</p> <p>3 Possibly</p> <p>4</p> <p>5 Yes</p> <p>Reflections:</p>

If your scoring is at or close to “5” on some or all of the self-assessment items, that suggests that you utilize a highly adaptive approach in how you mobilize around change, stay nimble and experiment through change, and team with your staff, external stakeholders, and other organizations questions.

Next Steps and Considerations for Strengthening an Adaptive Leadership Approach

After reflecting on all of the above, you will be in a position to answer these four reflective questions towards planning and implementing strategies to increase your adaptive leadership practices:

1. What are your major personal and/or organizational strengths and gaps in the area of adaptive leadership?
2. Why do you think you and/or your organization have those gaps?
3. Which gaps are most important to close quickly?
4. What resources are available (e.g., local Universities, retired public or corporate executives, outside consultants) to help you close your leadership gaps?
5. In regards to effective communication, who needs to know what, by when, and how?
6. How can you be a more effective purveyor of information and insights about your staff and stakeholders?
7. How well do your deeds matching the messages you’re conveying?
8. How can you ensure that you and your leadership team are sending consistent messages?

Additional resources and reference material are identified on the next page. For additional support, see information on APHSA’s OE Team http://www.aphsa.org/OE/about_OE.asp or email at: oeinfo@aphsa.org .

Resources/References

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