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Heifetz talks here with James Nelson about the distinguishing features of adaptive leadership: its similarity to the principles of evolutionary biology, how its conservative aspects are often overlooked, the kinds of resistance it evokes, and how it differs from the challenge of technical leadership.

Please describe what adaptive work involves.

**Ronald Heifetz:**

In biology, an adaptive pressure is a situation that demands a response that is outside the organism’s current repertoire. In an evolutionary sense, the organism must distinguish what DNA to keep, what DNA to discard, and what innovations to build on in order to thrive in a new and challenging environment. Applying this biological metaphor to cultures helps us understand that adaptive work is conservative as well as progressive.

In the 1930s, for example, Konosuke Matsushita refashioned the mission of Panasonic from being just a profit-making company to being a company that had the larger social mission of combating poverty by making products that were widely affordable and that would improve the lives of the masses of people around the world. That social mission was anchored in a set of deeply conservative principles – among them, working toward the common good and serving your community with selflessness – that were rooted in Japanese history and culture and spiritual discipline.

Adaptive leadership, in other words, is not just about change. It’s also about identifying what you want to hold on to. In biology, most of the DNA’s worth keeping. That’s also true in organizational and political life. It would be stupid to do radical surgery when it’s unnecessary. Yet many leaders forget to remind people that a change process also involves a lot of hard thinking about what to preserve.

That’s why I prefer to talk about leadership as the mobilizing of adaptive work, rather than as transformational change. The word transformation connotes creating something altogether new, rather than grafting an innovation onto the best from our history. Talking about transformation can lead to grandiosity – a failure to respect the enormous wisdom frequently accumulated over an organization’s cultural history.

The challenge with adaptive work, in biology and in organizational life, is to figure out how to capitalize on history without being enslaved by it. 99 per cent of a human’s DNA is the same as the DNA of a chimpanzee. God didn’t do zero-based budgeting when God got frustrated that chimpanzees couldn’t quite carry on a conversation with the divine in the way that perhaps God had hoped. Instead, God kept experimenting and tinkering. The resulting 1 per cent change that produced human DNA was very significant. It gave human beings an adaptability to thrive, in environments from the Arctic Circle to the Antarctic Circle, that chimpanzees could never attain. But it required changing only about 1 per cent of a human’s total genetic makeup – not 50 per cent.
But attempts to change 1 per cent of an organization’s DNA typically get billed as “leading the revolution.”

Ronald Heifetz:

The problem is that revolutions usually fail. Evolutions, in which a dramatic innovation is grafted onto the best of the core competences of the past, have a much better chance of succeeding.

When a revolution tries to eradicate everything from the past, it ends up making the mistake that James Wolfenson made when he came on board as head of the World Bank: he discounted the enormous dedication and hard work of people who had devoted their whole careers to fighting poverty. If you have the notion that leadership is only about change, then you’re likely to increase the sources of your resistance. You step on a great many more toes than is necessary, because you devalue the good things that people have been doing rather than simply getting them to discard part of what they’re doing.

What else does adaptive leadership entail?

Ronald Heifetz:

After leaders have helped people sift through the past to distinguish the essential from the expendable, they must mobilize people for a set of innovative experiments. The goal of these experiments is to graft onto the best of the organizational DNA so that the organization can thrive in the future.

In biology, the adaptive process is experimental. Adaptation does not occur through a central planning mechanism. It occurs through reproductive processes that generate a high rate of mutation. Each of these mutations is an experiment, and most of them fail. However, the high rate of mutation generates a lot of diversity in the gene population, and that increases the odds that as the environment changes, some member of the population will have a capacity that is needed in order to thrive.

Similarly, in organizational life, adaptive leadership requires an experimental mindset rather than an “I’ve got the answers” mindset. It’s not enough to have a vision for the future and to identify a critical path for moving forward. Adaptive leaders have to understand that today’s plan is simply today’s best guess. They must be able to deviate from the plan when they discover realities they hadn’t anticipated.

So how does adaptive leadership differ from technical leadership?

Ronald Heifetz:

With a technical challenge, the problem and the fix are already known. That is, you’re facing a challenge to which you have already developed a successful adaptation. So the job really is to coordinate behaviour and mobilize people to perform at their best what they already know how to do.

Now there’s nothing trivial about solving technical problems. Technical challenges can be life-threatening, and technical problem solving can be life-saving. But the urgency or importance of the challenge is not what distinguishes an adaptive challenge from a technical one. An adaptive challenge is primarily one that requires people to develop new ways of doing things. It requires people to suffer the losses of sifting through what DNA to discard from their past.

Technical challenges don’t have the same demand. They require you to know the state of the art so that you can implement and mobilize organizational expertise.

The most common source of failure in leadership, you write, is treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Why is that so?

Ronald Heifetz:

Two reasons. First, when you attain a position of significant authority, people inevitably expect you to treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical – to provide for them a remedy that will restore equilibrium with the least amount of pain and in the shortest amount of time. That puts enormous pressure on people in authority to have the answer rather than to raise the tough questions. We see that dilemma even for a doctor having to tell a patient, “I can only solve part of the problem by operating – by doing surgery on your heart. The other part of the problem you’re going to have to solve by changing your diet, your exercise regime, and by quitting smoking.” Doctors are wonderfully trained in being technical experts, but they are very poorly trained in mobilizing people to change their ways.

An aspect of adaptive work that distinguishes it from technical work is that you cannot take the problem off people’s shoulders. In adaptive problems, the people themselves are the problem; the solution, therefore, lies within them. If they don’t change their ways, then you have no solution – all you have is a proposal.

The psychology of the leader also plays into this tendency to treat adaptive challenges as technical ones, doesn’t it?
Ronald Heifetz:

That's the second reason: people in positions of authority pride themselves on being able to fix the problems that other people can't solve. In the face of an adaptive challenge, it's hard for them to acknowledge that they've come to the edge of their expertise, that they no longer have the capacity to provide answers. And that the best they can do is to frame up the right questions, identify the key realities that need to be addressed, and then challenge people to take responsibility for tackling those problems.

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Can you point to any specific businesses that excel at adaptive leadership?

Ronald Heifetz:

Many people are doing a good job at adaptive leadership, but they're not always in the highest positions of authority. There are countless people scattered throughout organizations, including people at the periphery, who raise the tough questions without knowing the answers, and then mobilize people to tackle those tough questions and generate innovations.

For example, it was people on the periphery of Nokia, who were using walkie-talkies to coordinate work in far-flung forests, who made the startling suggestion that this lumber company would be more likely to thrive going forward by concentrating on its walkie-talkie technology.

You're careful to point out that adaptive leadership generates resistance by its very nature – regardless of how much authority the leader has or what her personality is like. What forms does the resistance take?

Ronald Heifetz:

Sometimes adaptive leaders are simply marginalized; their good ideas aren't adopted because they represent challenges to standard operating procedures. The classic example here is Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). In the 1970s, PARC developed the mouse, the graphical user interface, and the Ethernet, but they were all were taken up and used by other companies. Xerox didn't have the adaptive capacity to take on board these innovations, which, of course, would have meant discarding some of its old DNA.

Sometimes adaptive leaders are labeled as whistleblowers or deviant voices and are thrown out of the organization. Another classic form of resistance is seduction: people who raise the tough questions in a company often get promoted and given a nice, cushy office in exchange for being silent. Or they're seduced into taking a job in an area that's not relevant to the challenging or critical questions that they had been raising.

What helps a leader identify the ways or directions in which an organization needs to adapt?

Ronald Heifetz:

A deep appreciation of the context. If you want to change between 1 per cent and 10 per cent of the DNA in a sales force so that it's more effective in the local culture, you've got to think a little bit like an anthropologist. You've got to understand the nature of the market you're competing in before you can see which adaptations are going to enable that sales force to thrive in its microenvironment.

That requires a far different form of leadership at the central office. It requires the willingness to give managers the latitude to tailor the company's procedures to suit the demands of those local contexts.

Ten years ago, the US electronic retailer Best Buy made a radical move to establish highly standardized operating procedures so that it could compete with companies like Circuit City. But after becoming the leading company in its industry, Best Buy soon reached the limits of what it could achieve with standard operating procedures. So today it is developing procedures that enable local adaptability.

In a sense, Best Buy has realized that it only exists in people's minds during that brief time when people walk into a store, see how the products are arranged on the shelves, and interact with the sales force. To maximize the value of that interaction, Best Buy is trying to
unleash the creativity of its store managers, giving them the freedom to alter the shelf arrangement depending on whether the store is catering primarily to kids who want to buy iPods and CDs or to adults who are looking for washing machines, televisions, and stereo systems.