

Getting real about leadership

"Adaptive leadership" is an emerging model of leadership that contests traditional paradigms and has particular relevance for the nonprofit sector. **Liz Skelton** asks us to front up to the personal responsibility that effective leadership demands.

Leadership is possibly one of the most over-used, misunderstood and misrepresented terms around. People aspire to be good at it, we say we need it, we often have a crisis around it. There are countless approaches about how to lead effectively, yet very few people can agree on what leadership actually is.

Authority, power, influence, collaboration, management – these are all words you will hear if you ask people their definition of leadership. If you probe a bit deeper you might find what they really mean is manipulation, persuasion and "just getting people to do things".

Rethinking Leadership

We are currently in a period of great uncertainty and complexity. Many of our systems of operating appear to be breaking down: our health, education, financial, safety, environment, social and family systems are all reported to be under threat.

Despite all the progress we have made in technology and innovation we still struggle to make progress on these major issues. In the face of such complexity and uncertainty, traditional thinking on how to lead and make change limits our ability to find innovative solutions to the challenges we now face.

We need another way of thinking about leadership – one that goes beyond an over-reliance on someone in authority to fix the problem for us.

We constantly hear "if only we had the right leader or the right person". We believe that someone, somewhere, will fix the problem when things get tough and we can't. Buying into the myth of the great heroic or charismatic leader allows us to avoid the hard work involved in making painful changes and facing the reality that we may have to solve our own problems.

Understanding Authority

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive, challenging us to see leadership as an activity or process rather than a position or status. This means an-

one is capable of taking action and trying to make change. Adaptive leadership separates the function of authority from the activity of leadership.

Positions of authority play an important function, by providing us with protection, direction and order. We reward people who have authority by giving them the title of leader. All human systems from the family to a large corporation require someone to hold the role of authority to maintain and sustain their systems. When we fail to deliver those services we lose authority.

This traditional model of authority works well when we are working with systems or problems that we know and understand, and where the changes required come from our existing repertoire. These 'technical problems' have a tried and tested solution, e.g. we break our arm and the doctor will know how to fix it, there are established procedures to deal with this problem and it is not a time for experimentation.

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Complex Issues Require Adaptive Solutions

Challenges that require leadership (and not just authority rolling out technical solutions) arise when there is greater complexity, uncertainty and our environment is changing. In these circumstances, existing knowledge is insufficient to solve the problem. Let's return to the medical metaphor, but replace the broken arm with a more complex diagnosis.

For example, if we are feeling depressed, the doctor may have to ask questions that explore what's happening for us before trying to 'fix' the problem. For a complex condition such as depres-

sion, there may be many different solutions, such as medication, counselling, or even changing our way of life. Often we misdiagnose the problem and jump straight to the solution, avoiding the real work that is needed to make change.

Working adaptively means the patient has to start working to solve their own problem, instead of simply turning to an authority figure for a quick (and probably short-lived) fix.

Exercising leadership requires us to lead by asking questions and having clarity of purpose, rather than immediately jumping to solutions.

In Social Leadership Australia's current work with a major bank, we are challenging senior leaders to grapple with questions of their social purpose and how they can make a difference in the broader community. By working together and asking each other some difficult questions, they have been able to start conversations about their real leadership work.

Holding our Values up to Scrutiny

What makes leadership hard, and why it is often avoided, is that real leadership work involves looking at personal values and holding them up to scrutiny. Most of us don't welcome having our values challenged and will go to extreme measures to protect them. For example, we want to believe that Australia is the most tolerant country in the world: the country of the 'fair go', egalitarian in spirit, where we look after our mates. Yet we are often faced with a reality that challenges those values.

There's a glaring and growing gap between the values we talk about and the values we live. How

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do we address this gap between what we say and what we do? To step into that space and start asking the hard questions is to exercise leadership. To name, and challenge, 'work avoidance' (i.e. avoiding the hard work involved in making required change) is to exercise leadership. To take on the adaptive work rather than jumping to the easy technical fix is to exercise leadership.

If we need a new way of thinking about leadership, then we also need to think differently about what it would mean to build that capability in ourselves. To work adaptively requires us to work flexibly yet purposefully; to draw on our values and beliefs yet be willing to work with others; to be strong yet vulnerable.

Moreover we need to be able to withstand the heat our interventions may generate and to be ready to experiment and fail. That may not sound easy, but we know from our own leadership work that it can be done. That is the challenge that we all face.



Liz Skelton

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Case Study – When Worlds Collide

When two vastly different worlds collided in a corporate partnership, the adaptive leadership model helped navigate the turbulent waters. Antonia Ruffell, senior manager, corporate and community partnerships at Mission Australia relates her tale.

I have found the adaptive leadership model a great support in the work I do brokering corporate partnerships. One of these programs involved staff from a corporate acting as coaches to marginalised young people to develop leadership and employability skills.

Ultimately the program delivered huge results to the people involved - but it was at times a very tough journey.

One of the constant challenges was that the young people were so different to the teams the corporate coaches were leading in their day-to-day work lives.

For example, a key part of the program was goal setting. A coach could spend hours setting goals with their young mentee and would expect these to be achieved when they next met. But when they next got together, often nothing had been done.

For the corporate coaches this came as a shock - they were used to telling staff what to do and then having that followed through accord-

ingly. Very quickly they had to learn that authority wasn't enough to lead. They had to develop and rely on other leadership capacities such as asking questions and listening, as well as moderating their expectations of what 'success' looks like.

We had a lot of tough conversations during the years we ran the program. I found myself walking a fine line at times, mobilising the corporate partner to face the reality that the issues experienced by marginalised young people were complex and often ugly.

I also needed to convey the corporate view to my own organisation and not shield them from the different expectations that arise from a partnership like this. Sometimes this meant making tough decisions and taking risks in speaking up where it would have been easier to let things drift.

The ability to keep having these tough conversations has meant that the partnership has endured. Both organisations have learned and changed through the experience of working together. It has required us to let go of the idea that either of us has the right answer, but that together we can work with a shared purpose.

One of the key lessons I learnt from the adaptive leadership model and from this corporate partnership project was the importance of being authentic and acting with integrity.