

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

1. Easy to identify
2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert
4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions
6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work
3. People with the problem do the work of solving it
4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries
5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.
6. "Solutions" require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

EXAMPLES

- Take medication to lower blood pressure
- Implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions
- Increase penalty for drunk driving
- Change lifestyle to eat healthy, get more exercise and lower stress
- Encourage nurses and pharmacists to question and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physicians
- Raise public awareness of the dangers and effects of drunk driving, targeting teenagers in particular

Adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1997; and Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002

WHAT IS AN ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE?

The following is an introductory list to help you identify Adaptive Challenges.

The quality of your ability to make progress on your leadership challenge is first to determine what is Technical vs. what is Adaptive.

1. **No Known Solution** — There is a gap between the current reality and aspiration that you don't have the skills or knowledge to close.
2. **People Would Rather Avoid the Issue** — Balancing two ideas is not possible; therefore, working on the challenge creates tension and conflict.
3. **Reason and Logic Alone Won't Get You There** — There are competing values at play or there is a gap between what people say and what they do.
4. **Recurring Problem** — Challenge reappears after fix is applied.
5. **Emotional Response** — Working on this challenge makes people feel uncomfortable; they experience an emotional response such as a feeling in their gut or a knot in a muscle.
6. **Failure to Resolve Competing Priorities** — You are being asked to do more with less instead of making tough trade-offs.
7. **Moving Forward Feels Risky** — Making progress on this challenge means putting your reputation, relationship, and job at risk.
8. **Casualties** — In order to move forward, some people may be left behind.
9. **People Must Work Across Boundaries** — No one person or group can fix the problem alone.
10. **Progress Is Not Linear** — No direct path to get to a better outcome; trial and error is necessary.