



COMPLEX ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

ARTICLE-AT-A GLANCE SUMMARY

Great leaders adapt and help others do the same. With the accelerating rate of change, business leaders are working with increasing complexity on an ongoing basis. Leaders who have been successful with solving easy to identify technical problems can struggle with complex, hard to identify challenges since these solutions take time, require reflective learning, experimentation, empathy and buy-in from all involved. It becomes a crucial skill to lead in a complex adaptive style to remain competitive (referencing Heifetz and Linsky).

Financial services firm Alexander Forbes, under the leadership of CEO Dawie de Villiers, is a good example. De Villiers' style of leadership was described as authentic, engaging, and communicating clearly and empathically. His inclusive approach and willingness to listen, allowed him to pivot the organization, quickly and effectively, during the COVID-crisis. This invites the question- what else do great adaptive leaders do?

Experts at GIBS were polled on their views and responded that the ability to make sense of new information quickly by tapping into a variety of sources/ perspectives and then distilling complex ideas into accessible clear, empathic communication (with no ego) on concrete direction is a fundamental approach to leading people in complex times. They highlighted the ability to act now, but with the future in mind, to experiment and consider feedback. They emphasized that to gather multiple perspectives gave a significant advantage because it allowed critical urgent decision-making to be undertaken with long-range views in play.

In their article on Complex Adaptive Leadership, Stevens and Reid offer seven hallmarks of adaptive leaders; the approach required by leaders to navigate complex and challenging times.

The first – and essential – hallmark required by a leader facing complex challenges is the ability to hold steady- no easy ask. Here, the ability for the leader to deal with difficulty, push back and discomfort, maintaining steady thought and action, are essential traits.

In times of crisis, the importance of one's ability to think strategically and politically is elevated. There are multiple stakeholders to consider, and the needs of all need to be balanced and considered in decision-making. Adaptive leaders embrace debate, conversation and input from multiple stakeholders, enabling and building understanding and framing solutions that are as favourable as possible to all involved.

Through multiple perspectives and inputs, leaders sense make for a solution that enables the business to pivot to secure its future, and perhaps even its very survival.

This approach is underscored with a mindset that a single leader is unlikely to have all the answers and having the awareness that the best decisions are made when stakeholders are invited to be part of the solution. An attitude that the focus should always be on helping people (and not manipulating them) underpins this collaboration which also allows the leader to 'give back the work': moving from solving a problem for people to allowing them to be an active part of the solution.

Of course, a deep appreciation and understanding is needed of what is being asked of the people around the table, and in the larger business. What are people giving up and sacrificing whilst playing their role in the context? Grasping the extent of the investment being asked for by people is key to leading a team of cohesive effort that translates into successful adaptation.

And finally, and perhaps of greatest significance, is the importance for a leader to have sufficient mindfulness to recognize how to anchor themselves through these challenging times with clarity of thought and quality decision-making. Without a mindfulness and groundedness, leaders may exhaust their energy reserves and make low quality decisions that run the business aground.

At the end of the day, it's about getting off the dance floor and elevating your vision to what you can see from the balcony. This enables you to identify systemic trends. It encourages slower, reflective ability to spot patterns and perceive of opportunities. It's characterized by a capacity to pause, reflect and review; to absorb and navigate change, also enabling change to be embraced and achieved by your teams.

Under normal conditions, leading a business is challenging. Under complex conditions, the leadership skills required are dramatically enhanced. Adopting adaptive leadership skills for times of complexity and change can focus the leader on skills necessary for quality decisions and long-term success.

To read the full article go to:
<https://www.acumenmagazine.co.za/articles/complex-adaptive-leadership-11209.html>

