Adaptive Leadership: A perspective on transforming education

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Leading educational thinking and practice

Background

In February 2023, global thought leaders Valerie Hannon and Anthony Mackay established a powerful adaptive challenge in their paper, *A new politics for transforming education: Towards an effective way forward.*[1] A challenge can be considered 'adaptive' when there is a gap between our current reality and our desired future, and when the shift requires adjustment of deeply held norms or values.[2] Hannon and Mackay clearly made the case that there is such a gap and that the adjustment required is far more than behaviour change – it is a change of world views. They used the language of paradigm to characterise the movement from our current reality of individualistic, tracked, economies-oriented and knowledge transfer mode of education (20th century paradigm) to a desired future, where learners are empowered, are assessed on their competencies, and the purpose is thriving people, places and planet (21st century paradigm). The failure to shift, despite passionate advocacy and the global shock of the COVID pandemic, is the focus of Hannon and Mackay's paper in their analysis of the pressures on political education actors.

Introduction

My paper is written in direct response to the Hannon and Mackay paper. However, in its capacity as a stand-alone paper, I shall be seeking here to explore how an Adaptive Leadership perspective might further strengthen our understanding of the failures they identify, and elucidate options for leadership practice on this transformation agenda.[3] My intention is to articulate, in plain language, the foundations of this leadership framework, make connections to our education context, and pose provocative questions, so that we can see the challenges in greater depth and become inspired to have new conversations.

Interestingly, Hannon and Mackay (2023) begin the work of Adaptive Leadership within their paper itself, by strengthening our empathetic imagination and seriously examining the perspective of a major constituent – in this case, governments – with a view to understanding the loyalties, lines of code, and systemic challenges of that constituency (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009).

> We look to authority figures to respond to our challenges with thoughtful, wise answers, to keep us safe, and to establish a clear direction for our activities

What is Adaptive Leadership?

The term 'Adaptive Leadership' is not always clear, given the common mental models we all tend to hold around the word 'adaptive'. When used as a tool for the practice of leadership, it has a precise meaning; it is a systemic model or framework that helps to organise the social processes of change, and to explore the roles and beneficial action that individuals and groups can take within the social system. Those of us energised by the transformation agenda quickly understood this was a systemic challenge. Indeed, Hannon and Mackay (2023, p 4) cite educators who say that they want to operate differently but 'the system will not let them'. At its most broad it is a method of thinking contextually, systematically and politically about the nature of change itself.

We must engage with two foundational concepts prior to moving into an Adaptive Leadership practice. These concepts are often overlooked but are necessary as all Adaptive Leadership activity is predicated on them, as 'pillars' – firstly, the differentiation between 'leadership and authority,' and secondly, identifying 'technical and adaptive' work (Heifetz, 1998).

Pillar One: Leadership and authority

The authority figure, in agreeing to take on a role or title, is tasked with providing direction, protection, and order. It is useful to see this as a transactional relationship, where we give people power (be it money, time, our attention) and in exchange we expect them to keep the ship running. We look to authority figures to respond to our challenges with thoughtful, wise answers, to keep us safe, and to establish a clear direction for our activities (Heifetz, 1998). We see excellent classroom teachers provide this in classrooms; we see highly effective principals do this for their schools; and we see capable administrators

do this for their systems and sectors. While appropriately we thank and praise people for this, however, do they really have a choice? Consider what happens when, on occasion, some fail to do what is expected of their position. Their authority diminishes rapidly and, if they continue to fail us, we will inevitably replace them. The system cannot tolerate an authority vacuum (noting of course, with perhaps a hint of irony, that we call these people 'leaders').

Holding the thought experiment a little longer, before we apply it to our context, what is 'leadership' then? There is a highly specific definition for the practice of Adaptive Leadership. It is 'to mobilise others to face the complex challenges that help us move to a better future' (Heifetz, 1998, p 15). Let us note a few things. Adaptive work requires 'others' to do the hard work of moving from one state to another; that is, the people themselves directly impacted by the changes must be mobilised to action. Leadership belongs to the world of the complex, where the work itself demands more from us than just hard work but, rather, new ways of being and operating. Most people are disinclined to face complexity and we do not tend to thank people for drawing our attention to it. Also, note that the work of leadership is always about 'the better future' and contains a powerful moral purpose. Using this definition of leadership suggests there is no 'bad leadership', there is only 'leadership' or the lack thereof. Indeed, the risks of leadership are so great that it might be imprudent to practise it without a powerful moral requirement.

In our case who are the key authority figures? While there are many, at differing levels of the system, Hannon and Mackay (2023) focus on politicians. As these two authors rightly identify, the political level is where the gap between our two paradigms becomes clear. If we apply our framework

we can see further into the problem. We are asking these authority figures to practise leadership when the boundaries and incentives of their authority encourage them not to. Hannon and Mackay (2023) ably illustrate the mechanics of these incentives in their original paper. It is easy to feel frustrated with our authority figures for not mobilising us to face the tough work of paradigm shift – but why would they? One might imagine that, in taking on a role, not only do we sign the usual contracts of salary and deliverables, but also an 'invisible contract', where we promise to keep providing direction, protection and order – no matter what. We find ourselves in a real bind if those deliverables include 'transformation' and our tangible and invisible contracts are pitted against each other. Now, imagine this playing out, over and over, at every level of the system – not only with politicians, but with district leaders, school principals, middle-level managers and teachers themselves.

What then to do with this impasse? Heifetz (1998) encourages us to dance on the edge of our authority roles – to see authority as **a tool** in the practice of leadership. The great advantage of authority, beyond decision making, is attention. Attention comes easily to those who hold power. Leadership is understanding the boundaries of our authority and taking small, strategic, and deliberate risks. Heifetz's use of the word 'dance' is also intentional. It is seeing our leadership very much as an improvisation, responding to the pressures and people we find ourselves operating with, and improving our moves. If we push too far beyond the boundaries of our authority – well, they might sing songs about us in the future, but the invisible contract will likely be stretched beyond what the system can tolerate. The other alternative is to stay within these authority boundaries for an entire career. Think of all the highly

impressive and effective people who do their jobs and do them well. An Adaptive Leadership approach suggests we must all, as individuals, come to a reckoning with these choices and determine what our lives and careers are all about. Once made, **if** our choice is to practise leadership, we then examine the boundaries of our authority and how we might find this edge.

> **Questions for consideration include the following.**
>
> - How can we give bureaucrats more permission to 'dance on the edge of their authority'? It is evident from Hannon and Mackay that many of them want to.
>
> - What are our own authority boundaries? Have we ever pushed on these edges? Have you ever pushed too far? What was that experience like?

Pillar Two: Technical and adaptive elements

The second foundational pillar to the Adaptive Leadership framework is to recognise and articulate which parts of the challenge we face are either technical or adaptive.

- A technical challenge is characterised as difficult but answerable, if the right experts gather to solve the problem.

- In contrast, an adaptive challenge is not 'solvable', rather, we can only hope to make progress on the issue when we move into realms beyond our own competencies and know-how, and when at heart, we face into and dare to shift our norms and belief systems.

    (Heifetz, 1998)

Applying these ideas to our own education context, it is straightforward to see just how our transformation hopes are indeed highly adaptive. The complicating issue the framework illuminates is that we have attempted to treat this adaptive challenge as though it is technical. Smart technocratic solutions abound (and of course they do when we look to authority figures to solve things) because providing answers and expertise is a hallmark of a successful authority figure. Indeed, as Hannon and Mackay (2023) acknowledge, these technocratic solutions have led to significant improvements in many school systems. However, technical solutions will always ultimately fail if our goals are values-based at core. An adaptive challenge requires a different conversation, one that puts our norms and values up for discussion.

Where to from here?

In the remainder of this paper I shall set forth some of the core techniques and practices one might deploy in the practice of Adaptive Leadership, apply them to our context and continue to ask questions for consideration.

Factions and constituencies

The first step in applying these ideas might be to get even clearer on all the factions and constituencies. Hannon and Mackay have done the hard work of articulating the pressures on a key group (politicians), but what about all the other groups? Unless we understand each group's pressures and loyalties through a systems analysis we cannot hope to shift from a technical to an adaptive approach. Doing so requires us to get better at speaking each faction's language – not so we can strategically 'win them over' but so that we fully

comprehend what each group stands to lose. Each faction and constituency (in Adaptive Leadership language) has a 'stake', and a different perspective on the challenge and leadership requires us to do the work of understanding the differing pressure points and loyalties (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). For illustration of the relative elements, see Figure 1.

**Questions for consideration include the following.**

- What are the internal and external pressures placed on each faction, such as school leaders, parent representatives, students and employers?

- Can we potentially expand our perspective to broaden who is in the system?

Figure 1. How factions and constituencies can focus on the work at the centre of the diagram.

Adaptive challenge

Faction

Constituencies
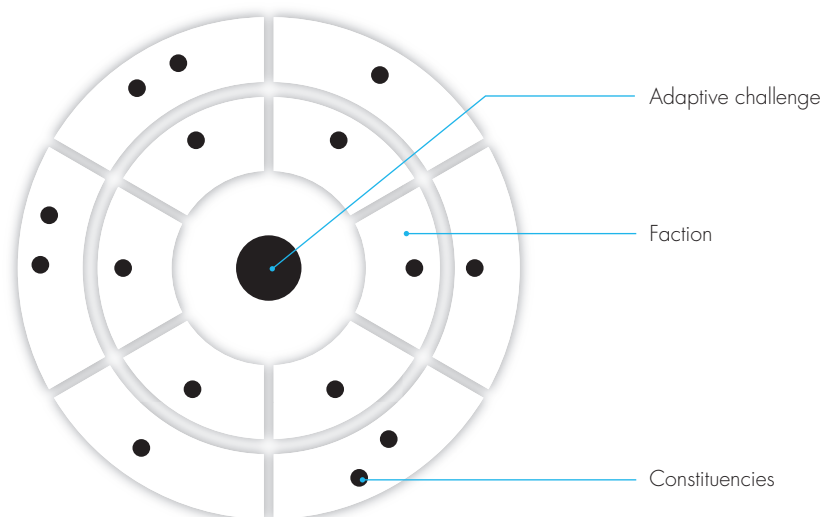
Source: Modified from Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, p 95.

Loss

Adaptive thinking recognises that if change is hard to bring about, then it presents a loss in some way. In moving from reality to desired future, it is essential to articulate and acknowledge the grief of loss. Our leadership work is to engage with those losses, name what they are, and figure out who is experiencing them. Heifetz suggests that if we are going to try to bring about a change we must become 'diagnosticians of loss' with deep reverence for the pain of this process. This flips the usual 'fear of change' narrative to a 'fear of loss' disposition (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002).

Perhaps, we, the readers of this paper, have often been successful in the very paradigm we are trying to do away with. It is feasible that the very beneficiaries of a 20th century perspective are many of the people around the table. An Adaptive diagnosis explores this. If there is resistance then it may be that moving away from this model may create a sense of disloyalty to the people we admire, respect and even love, our teachers and schools for all the effort and toil they have put in under this model.

Feeling disloyalty is a significant loss. If there is truth in this, then we must first honour and respectfully acknowledge all that the previous paradigm has given us – only then we can begin to let it go. Our leadership work becomes helping groups see that it is worth enduring the pain of loss for what we care even more about: the values that underpin the next paradigm.

Purpose and work avoidance

A core tenet of an Adaptive Leadership practice is to keep purpose at the centre. Hannon and Mackay (2023, p 20) also echo the effectiveness of this approach in their section on lessons learned from the climate movement (the first being a relentless focus on purpose). Keeping purpose at the centre is a sound strategic move, and one that is core to many leadership approaches, unsurprisingly. Adaptive Leadership helps us see that when pursuing change, purpose not only helps keep our constituents engaged, but also helps us identify and name the thorny issue of 'work avoidance'. This refers to the moments when we lose our focus on purpose or 'the work' (see Figure 1) and become distracted by issues that move us away from making progress. It behoves us to remember that by our nature we all want to become distracted! Adaptive work is hard; we are all avoiders of loss, and a distracting issue (whether truly important or not) relieves us from the difficult work of figuring out how to adapt in a changing environment.

Viewing events through the lens of work avoidance may reveal motivations and drivers hidden below the surface. In Australia, what might happen if we saw the occasional inflammation of sectoral divisions as work avoidance? Could identity politics in the USA be sometimes characterised as work avoidance? Adaptive leadership practitioners are on high alert for the hot, inflammatory issues that seem to land 'mysteriously' on the table just as the work progresses into the more uncomfortable space of competing values. The issue might be charged, but we might also feel a sense of relief and that we are no longer 'on the hook', and that we can sink into our entrenched positions. Other examples of work avoidance that we want to be alert to include blaming authority, holding on to the past, scapegoating, externalising the enemy, denying the problem and jumping to conclusions. All of these activities restore the equilibrium (Heifetz, 1998).

Questions for consideration include the following.

- Consider your own context, be it national or local, and ask yourself what are the distracting issues in education that enflame passions but yet somehow also restore us to the status quo?

- What is wonderful about the 20th century paradigm of education? What will be hard to let go of? Who taught you these things and how can we honour those lessons, while also leaving them behind?

Holding environment

To make progress and learn the way forward we need to shift into 'the zone of productive disequilibrium', where things are unsettled enough for us to understand that change is required, and there is a need to create spaces for discovery and exploration, but not so stressful that we throw our hands in the air and check out. The leadership work is to keep adjusting the temperature to help us all stay engaged (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). Hannon and Mackay's (2023) paper turns up the heat. It demands from us a new identification with a group that is easy to scapegoat. We also have ways to cool things down, and will need to do so

intentionally at times. Our technocratic solutions are excellent ways to regulate, helping us to recognise the more manageable parts of transformation.

The leadership work, along with deliberately adjusting the temperature, is to create a holding environment. A holding environment is a space (literal or not) with boundaries and purpose that keeps people in the conversation (Heifetz, 1998). Once the holding environment is established, the conversation around paradigms might become a discussion of what we should **keep** from the 20th century paradigm, what is core to a humanistic, thriving people, places and planet that we already have, and what can be changed or discarded. In the holding environment we can reckon with the values that sit in conflict with one another. Ironically, this reorientation – to what we bring with us – serves to make far clearer that some things will need to be let go of, to move forward. It is these conversations that will reveal the heart of the matter – and that the losses will be borne unevenly.

Diversity

The 21st century paradigm, by its nature, is a new world beyond our current experiences and know-how (noting the many frustrations people have with this label, twenty-three years into the 21st century). While there are visionaries amongst us, most of us understand that we will need to flex new, untested competencies in both getting to a new paradigm and finding success there. If none of us really knows exactly what to do there, and how to get there, we must adopt an experimental mindset and expand and diversify our experimentation. Diversity works because it increases the chances that new and different individuals or groups will have a successful experiment. It is the source itself of creativity and innovation. Indeed, this is why 'adaptive' leadership is named so. It mirrors the experimental model of adaptation in nature, where greater diversity strengthens the chances that a species will thrive in a new environment (Heifetz, 1998).

Questions for consideration include the following.

- How else can we turn up the heat? What opportunities exist for us to keep drawing attention to the difficult parts of the challenge? How do we draw attention to and disturb our prevailing patterns? Can we continue to name the dynamics between constituencies? What provocations will get us working enough to be in the zone, but can be tolerated by the system?

- What holding environments exist for this work? Are the right people in them? Are these environments psychologically safe enough for people to have the difficult conversations around trade-offs?

Questions for consideration include the following.

- How can we locate and harness more variety, a greater range of thinking, new patterns of behaviour in the ecosystem, to run experiments and amplify their learning? Who are we not listening to?

Sustaining through leadership

As stated at the start of this paper, pushing on the boundaries of authority and the practice of leadership poses risks. What risks we can tolerate is ultimately a private decision, but the model has advice for us too. Perhaps the key here is the separation of 'role' and 'self'. If we separate these we can see that our roles both limit our capacity to lead (recall the pressures on authority figures to not practise leadership) and enable us to lead (authority as a tool) – ultimately it is just a role. If we are praised or if we are criticised, it is often the role, rather than the self, that people are responding to. This helps protect leaders from the seductions of power and fortifies us to keep going in the face of criticism (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). Hannon and Mackay (2023), along with others, have been in the game for decades. Staying in it, and enlisting others, will mean taking care of self, and each other, in the tough work ahead.

Final comments

This paper is my attempt to clarify some of the most foundational parts of a model, which, while conceptual to grasp, have deep practical implications. I have asked questions more than provided answers, because it must be the collective group who grapple with the questions, and doing so would seem not in good faith with the very model I have outlined above. While the status quo holds ground, we must humbly accept that the pressures to keep operating as we have, are far stronger than a desire for change. An examination of these pressures, as initiated by the leadership work of Valerie Hannon and Anthony Mackay (2023), may be the first step in our new collective practice of leadership. Our progress will not be some arrival point, but perhaps will be about how we harness each other to learn together, make progress and build momentum on our most worthy pursuit, for young people to thrive into their futures.

Endnotes

1. This paper is written in response to Hannon and Mackay's original paper, published by Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, 2023.

2. The ideas in this paper rest on the work of Ronald A Heifetz and Marty Linsky, firstly gained from Heifetz's book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press, 1998), but also from my own personal notes and memories, following both class time and conversations with Professor Heifetz.

3. Undoubtedly readers of this paper will make connections to other writers and thought leaders. In this paper I seek to narrow the focus to just that of Adaptive Leadership, to enable a deeper dive into what this perspective might offer us.

References

Hannon, V and Mackay, A (2023) *A new politics for transforming education: Towards an effective way forward*, CSE Leading Education Series Paper 14, Centre for Strategic Education, Melbourne, Victoria, February.

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Additional reading

Although not cited specifically in the text, the following were used in preparing this paper, and may be of interest to the reader.

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About the author

Penelope Brown is one of Australia's leading specialists in the practice and teaching of adaptive leadership. She first studied under Professor Ronald Heifetz at Harvard University, where she completed her Masters degrees (MEd/MPA). The following year she worked for Professor Heifetz as his lead teaching assistant and has remained a part of the Adaptive Leadership Network community. In 2021, Penelope was invited to audit Professor Heifetz's most recent leadership teaching program for Harvard postgraduate students, and her final paper was selected as a showcase for future students.

Penelope is now a Senior Leadership Consultant in the AISNSW (Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales) Leadership Centre. Prior to this, she worked as an education advisor for several of Australia's leading social sectors, for the United Nations in New York City and for the World Bank in Washington DC. She has worked within education faculties at universities in the USA and Australia, was a teacher and leader in NSW independent schools, and is a Teacher's Guild Award recipient.

About the paper

Penelope Brown's paper is written in direct response to the February 2023 CSE paper by Hannon and Mackay, *A new politics for transforming education: Towards an effective way forward.* She explores how an Adaptive Leadership perspective might further strengthen our understanding of the failures identified by Hannon and Mackay and help elucidate options to leadership practice on the transformation agenda they propose. Her purpose is to articulate, in plain language, the foundations of this leadership framework, make connections to our education context, and pose provocative questions, so that we can see the challenges in greater depth and become inspired to have new conversations.