

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IN A VUCA WORLD

WHAT PSYCHOSYNTHESIS ALREADY BRINGS TO THE CONVERSATION

'Leading in the voluntary sector feels like juggling on a unicycle'

(Pat Armstrong, ACOSVO Chief Executive)¹

INTRODUCTION

In the above quote, Pat Armstrong is referring to the task of leading within today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, where old certainties and responses no longer work. Organisations across all sectors are recognising the need for a leadership philosophy and approach that helps us both survive and thrive in our 'VUCA' world.

This note outlines the underlying philosophy and principles of 'Adaptive Leadership', a framework evolved over thirty years by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky at Harvard University, which is popular with organisations who are developing leadership capacity in a VUCA environment. Although Adaptive Leadership has a language of its own, its philosophy and principles overlap with psychosynthesis concepts. This note highlights some similarities, to support psychosynthesis coaches in aligning their approach with organisational and client thinking about leading in a VUCA world.

VUCA

When organisations talk about VUCA² they mean:

Volatility: change is happening on a large scale. Although the 'white water' of change has been recognised for twenty years, change is speeding up and driven by simultaneous factors, i.e. turbulent world economies, unprecedented social and political events, demographic trends and climate change.

Uncertainty: because of volatility, predicting the future based on past events is no longer possible. Old planning, forecasting and decision-making systems are increasingly irrelevant.

Complexity: outcomes are unpredictable because there are few single cases of 'cause and effect', and no one has the ability to see all contributing factors.

Ambiguity: data is incomplete, confusing, and quickly out of date, which can speedily invalidate decisions and choices.

Adaptive Leadership is specifically designed to support personal and organisational leadership in this context.

¹ Armstrong, P (2017) Resilient Leaders, Resilient Sector: Nonprofit: A project of Xarxanet <http://nonprofit.xarxanet.org/opinion/resilient-leaders-resilient-sector> (Accessed 07/11/18)

² Turnbull, S (2017) Leading NGOs in the VUCA World: UK : Caplor Horizons

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS CREATED BY VUCA

The psychological needs created by each element of VUCA are shown below.

Aspect	Psychological need
Volatility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need: 'good enough' secure attachment (<i>the earliest attachment figures in our life are not stable, we are less likely to develop a secure, functioning ego - Object Relations Theory</i>)
Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need: acknowledge existential anxiety, survival & fear of non-being.
Complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need: see the whole picture (<i>systems theory</i>), develop an independent sense of self (<i>Mind Development</i>)
Ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need: interpret and understand relative meaning (<i>Deconstruction of language & Critical Theory</i>)

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Given the business orientated nature of its audience, Adaptive Leadership is largely presented as a practical model. However, in their definitive text 'Leadership on the Line'³ Heifetz and Linsky ask: *why lead?* In response they identify leadership as a call towards meaning through relationship: *'meaning involves... contributing to the worldly enterprise of enhancing quality of life - the source of meaning most essential to the human experience is drawn from our yearning for connection with other people'*.

They also emphasise that *'our essential and inviolable identity'*, or our *'self'* is the *'source'* of leadership, which must not be confused with leadership *'forms'* (i.e. designated roles, career paths). To lead in a VUCA world, we must constantly *'anchor self'*, or connect with our essential core. It is our relationship with self, not external strategies and frameworks that will stop us being swept away by volatile change.

This call towards meaning that emanates from our essential identity resonates with the psychosynthesis concept of the *'I-Self relationship'*: the indivisible relationship between our unique *'I-amness'* and the *'deeper source of being'* that connects us all.⁴

³ Heifetz, R & Linsky, M (2002) *Leadership on the Line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*: Boston, USA: Harvard Business Review

⁴ Firman, J & Gila, A (1997) *The Primal Wound: A transpersonal view of trauma, addiction and growth*: USA: State University of New York Press

A significant consequence of the above philosophy is that in Adaptive Leadership everybody is created to lead. As with the psychosynthesis journey of self-realisation, by acting from our anchored selves, there are daily opportunities to create meaning and connection, drawing on our unique gifts.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Adaptive leadership is defined as 'the practise of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and do the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress and thrive'.⁵ In a VUCA world, the task for those in formal leadership roles is to a large extent psychological: they must create an environment that encourages authentic expression of Self. Core principles are outlined below.

Get off the dance floor onto the balcony

We must continually move from the 'middle of the action' (the dance floor) to the 'observer position' (the balcony) and back again. From the balcony, we can see what is happening more clearly, including patterns that are obscured in the volatility of the dance, and novel connections. From the balcony we can make conscious choices about action before returning to the dance floor. The ideal, achieved through practice, is to be on the dance floor and the balcony virtually at the same time, which Heifetz and Linsky call 'reflect in action'.

Heifetz and Linsky emphasise the vital importance of 'getting on the balcony' to anchor ourselves. The pressures of a VUCA environment can easily trigger old survival patterns. Rather than encouraging leadership in others, we might focus on, for example, becoming a grandiose charismatic leader or a 'Rescuing Leader'. By constantly visiting the balcony we can distinguish between the roles we occupy and 'self', and act from our deepest values.

'Getting on the balcony' mirrors the psychosynthesis practice of identification and disidentification. It also highlights the indivisibility of 'awareness' and 'will', the two functions of the 'personal self'. Heifetz and Linsky assert that in western organisations, action is privileged over self-reflection, to the detriment of both. Leadership in a VUCA world requires a much higher ratio of observation and self-reflection to action, to help us see multiple patterns, form multiple hypotheses, and design multiple, piloted, interventions.

⁵ Heifetz R, & Linsky M (2009) [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world: A fieldbook for practitioners](#): Boston, USA: Harvard Business School Publishing

Distinguish adaptive challenge from technical problems

In Adaptive Leadership, treating adaptive challenges as technical problems is the main cause of failure in a VUCA world. Differences between these concepts are summarised below.

Technical Problem	Adaptive challenge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to identify • Cut and dried, linear solutions • Solved by expert/authority/edict • Change is in one place • People generally accept solutions • Limited communication <p>Example: prescribing medication for high blood pressure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to identify (easy to deny) • Exploration and change of beliefs, values & relationships • Change is in numerous places, across boundaries • Causes loss and resistance • Everyone affected by the challenge addresses it • Ongoing, open dialogue <p>Example: persuading people to change their lifestyle to prevent heart disease.</p>

In reality, most challenges are usually a mixture of the technical and adaptive. Traditional leadership approaches have focused more intensively on technical solutions. Adaptive Leadership places most emphasis on diagnosing and hypothesising the adaptive challenge. Adaptive Leadership recommends that we discipline ourselves to see every challenge through both lenses as a matter of course.

In a world of uncertainty and little stability, designated leaders must support people in learning how to tolerate loss so they are able to access their problem-solving creativity. This seems to parallel the dynamics of the Egg Diagram, where we expand the middle unconscious through exploring lower unconscious material and releasing gifts from the higher unconscious.

To address adaptive challenges, formal leaders require deep understanding of psychological change and the impact of loss. They must also be able to tolerate and work with diverse emotional responses from others. The philosophy, skills and attributes required in Adaptive Leaders are therefore radically different from those required in more traditional leadership models, as summarised below.

Traditional versus Adaptive Leadership

Traditional Leadership	Adaptive Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Directs, uses formal authority to deliver clear strategy and goals• Instructs• Makes most significant decisions, using expertise• Minimises conflict• Continually clarifies roles and structure• Maintains stability as a goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assumes those affected by challenge will address it• Creates collective conversations to observe, diagnose, interpret and intervene• Coaches and influences• Encourages 'functional conflict'• Roles and work are fluid• Creates environments where people tolerate uncertainty

In a VUCA world with no clear answers, the people directly affected by an adaptive challenge address it, rather than experts or formal leaders. They understand the context most directly, are invested in sorting it out, and, it is assumed, have the necessary internal resources. The Adaptive Leadership principle that formal leaders consciously practice is: **'give the work back to the people'**. As in psychosynthesis coaching, Adaptive Leadership trusts that the unfolding agency of individuals and groups will find the best response.

The Adaptive Leadership problem-solving model is non-hierarchical and works across boundaries. Problem-solving groups spend time 'on the balcony' before deciding how best to intervene. Interventions are set up as small scale pilots, which enables further adaptation in light of new data. This mirrors, within a group setting, the ongoing development of awareness and will that underpins the psychosynthesis coaching process.

Coaching is integral to Adaptive Leadership. In a complex world that requires everyone's creativity to find solutions, peer, team and self-coaching become embedded in organisational culture so people can access this.

Orchestrating conflict

Maintaining equilibrium is rewarded in traditional leadership models because keeping the organisation stable is a goal in itself.

Adaptive Leadership recognises that in a volatile, uncertain and complex world, interests, needs and priorities are diverse and limitless. Conflict, caused by clashing needs is therefore both inevitable and desirable. Conflict is also essential to the creative process - clashing ideas eventually synthesise into innovative, meaningful solutions. Adaptive Leadership therefore seeks out and nurtures conflict rather than neutralises it.

The combination of limitless diversity that creates deeper meaning resonates with the psychosynthesis belief that our unique, inviolable individuality contributes to something greater than ourselves.

Adaptive Leadership invests time reaching consensus on purpose, and then surfaces diverse perspectives in relation to this. Dialogic process then identifies the solution that best addresses the identified challenge. Adaptive Leadership acknowledges that loss in a VUCA environment is inevitable. Time is given to 'honouring the reality of loss', e.g. power, security, status, beliefs and treasured projects. Loss needs to be absorbed and digested if people are to manage their distress and stay engaged with the challenge.

The 'stages of orchestrating conflict' within Adaptive Leadership, include recognising diverse positions, describing each faction's needs and end goals, inclusive dialogue, experimentation with new ways of operating, and agreeing new norms. This process, applied to conflicting groups, seems similar to the recognition, acceptance, inclusion and synthesis model used to explore subpersonalities.⁶ This raises the possibility that this model could be used in conflict resolution beyond the individual.

The term 'orchestrating conflict' comes from the world of music. Heifetz and Linsky observe that composers use dissonance as well as consonance to provide harmony. Dissonance creates tension, causing the listener to engage with the music and seek resolution. In Adaptive Leadership, orchestrating conflict is a discipline that helps us tolerate the moments when people are not working well together and work through rough patches to deepen collective effort and commitment.

Orchestrating conflict demonstrates the importance, in the VUCA world, of staying in relationship with each other. Without relationship we cannot tolerate the loss, uncertainty and anxiety that emerges in relation to adaptive challenge. Adaptive Leadership identifies that the formal leader's key task is to 'maintain disciplined attention' to group process so that individuals and groups do not lapse back into the easier status quo of stability and superficial harmony.

Regulating the disequilibrium

Creating a holding environment

People addressing adaptive challenges need a holding environment – a space that feels safe that helps them tolerate uncertainty. Adaptive Leadership defines a holding environment as '*a space formed by a network of relationships within which people can tackle tough, sometimes divisive questions without flying apart*'.⁷ Effective holding environments differ according to context, but might include:

⁶ Firman, J & Gila, A (2002) *A Psychology of the Spirit*: USA: State University of New York Press

⁷ Heifetz, R & Linsky, M (2002) *Leadership on the Line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*: Boston, USA: Harvard Business review

- A protected physical space for a team to work in
- Processes that give minority voices confidence that they will be heard
- Time for reflection and learning
- Deep listening
- Time together identifying what helps individuals stay resilient.

Turning the temperature up and down

Adaptive Leadership recognises that disequilibrium catalyses change. When we are out of our comfort zone but not overwhelmed by uncertainty and loss, we are more likely to forge creative solutions than return to the status quo. Formal leaders must 'turn the heat up' so people are in '*the productive zone of disequilibrium*'.

However, if the temperature is too high people focus so strongly on their potential losses that they cannot learn or access their creativity. The thermostat needs to be turned down before people reach this point.

The Adaptive Leader must track the group process and turn the thermostat up and down accordingly. Eventually, with everybody leading, groups take on this role for themselves. Ways in which the temperature can be changed are summarised below.

Turning the temperature up	Turning the temperature down
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naming the challenge • Asking incisive questions • Exploring difficult group dynamics • Exploring conflicting perspectives • Ask people to do things outside their comfort zone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing technical issues • Taking a break • Providing structure • Slowing down the process of challenging norms and expectations • Temporarily taking back responsibility for tough choices

Turning the temperature up and down seems to reflect the psychosynthesis archetypes of Will/Change and Love/Maintenance, and the coach's responsibility to track the client's process to ensure that they have the optimal balance that ensures learning.

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Adaptive Leadership identify ways in which we need to anchor ourselves in a VUCA world so we can participate effectively in collective leadership. Key practices are identified below. Psychosynthesis coaches will be familiar with these, and will apply them to themselves and explore them with clients.

- Regular reflection on what gives us meaning and purpose, and how this can be translated into the world

- Exploration into our personal relationship with conflict and loss, and the parts of us that might close these subjects down when they need opening up
- Understanding of our 'Zone of Insatiability' in relation to power, control and intimacy: know ourselves, identify what we need, and find ways of meeting these needs appropriately and ethically so they are not met in a distorted way in the 'adrenaline flow' of VUCA
- Have a 'Transition Ritual'. Similar to psychosynthesis' concept of spiritual practice, this is a 'ritual with mindful intent' that regularly takes us of 'roles' and restores us to 'self'
- Keep confidants - trusted people who have nothing to do with your leadership role who care about you, give you honest feedback and deepen feelings of self-worth
- Seek 'sanctuary' - an identified physical place where we conserve, gather and restore ourselves: it can be the therapist/coach's office, a friend's kitchen table or the car journey between work and home
- Recognise that exercising leadership is an expression of our aliveness. We must be prepared to encompass the entire range of human experience without hardening or closing ourselves. We must be prepared to lose and be challenged, and model our capacity for this to others.

CONCLUSION

Adaptive Leadership requires us to have a deep sense of purpose and connection with *'our essential and inviolable identity'* if we are to survive and thrive in a VUCA world. To share in the leadership task we must value and develop relationships, and have the courage to challenge ourselves and the comfort of the status quo.

There are many ways in which psychosynthesis philosophy and models mirror this key leadership approach. Our coaching clients will benefit from the connections we make between the two, and will increase their capacity to navigate today's VUCA world.

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