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Dunn, R

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Contents

Editorial Note DAVID GURR	1
Speak a Different Language: Reimagine the Grammar of Schooling YONG ZHAO	4
Leadership of Special Schools on the Other Side BRIAN J. CALDWELL	11
Inclusive Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic: How to Respond Within an Inclusion Framework ELAINE FOURNIER, SHELLEYANN SCOTT AND DONALD E. SCOTT	17
Leadership for Challenging Times DAVID GURR AND LAWRIE DRYSDALE	24
Adaptive Leadership: Leading Through Complexity RYAN DUNN	31
Leading With Empathy and Humanity: Why Talent-Centred Education Leadership is Especially Critical Amidst the Pandemic Crisis HENRY TRAN, SUZY HARDIE AND KATHLEEN M. W. CUNNINGHAM	39
Educational Inequality and the Pandemic in Australia: Time to Shift the Educational Paradigm TERESA ANGELICO	46
A Policy Maker's Guide to Practical Courses of Action for Current and Post COVID-19 Effects in Liberian Schools BOLUMANI SONDAH	54
Understanding Educational Responses to School Closure During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case for Equity in Nigeria IDOWU MARY MOGAJI	59

Home Education as Alternative to Institutional Schooling in Nigeria: Lessons From COVID-19 ADELEKE AYOBAMI GIDEON	66
The Role of Local Authorities in the English School System: Why Did the Coronavirus Pandemic Subvert 30 Years of Neoliberal Policy? IAN DEWES	72
Academic Integrity During COVID-19: Reflections From the University of Calgary SARAH ELAINE EATON	80
Can Ghanaian Universities Still Attract International Students in Spite of COVID-19? FESTUS NYAME AND EKUA ABEDI-BOAFO	86
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Work of University Administrators in Ghana GEORGE KWADWO ANANE, PAUL KWADWO ADDO, ABRAHAM ADUSEI AND CHRISTOPHER ADDO	93
Transitioning to Online Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Era: A Call for Skilled Leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) DARCIA ROACHE, DINA ROWE-HOLDER AND RICHARD MUSCHETTE	103

Adaptive Leadership: Leading Through Complexity

Ryan Dunn

Abstract: *There is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the complexity schools are encountering. Complex environments lead to considerable ambiguity around what solutions might be effective. Added to this, complexity can mean challenges may not be able to be solved with the knowledge and skills that currently exist within an organisation. There is an inherent need to test ideas and learn from early implementation. Organisations that work within complex environments often utilise adaptive approaches as a response to uncertainty. This paper explores adaptive leadership as one possible approach school leaders could consider during times of significant change. It explores how the military cultivate adaptive practices to respond to complex environments as well as highlight key principles and practices school leaders could consider leading an adaptive organisation.*

Keywords: Adaptive leadership, adaptive challenges, adaptive mindset, team mental models

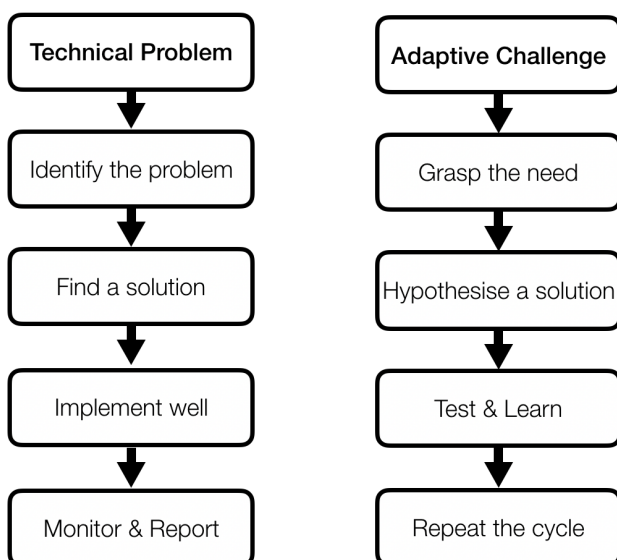
Our Current Context is Complex

A decade ago, Mulford and Edmunds (2010) described the Australian education context as a complex, challenging and changing landscape, with schools being influenced by advances in science and technology, changes in demography, globalisation, and pressures on the environment. We can now add global pandemics to this list. Harris (2020) highlighted the current predicament school leaders find themselves in by stressing ‘the evidence base on school leadership practices within a pandemic is non-existent’ (para. 3), however she urged schools that drawing upon the research literature would offer ‘some pointers, some ideas, some reflections for those currently leading in schools and classrooms’ (para 3). Drysdale and Gurr (2017) had previously outlined that in times of great change, complexity, and uncertainty, school leaders are challenged to adapt and navigate their way through the tide of internal and external forces to create the best positive outcome for students and the school community. So, while we might be dealing with increased uncertainty and complexity in both our professional and personal lives, there are specific practices we can consider to work through the ambiguity.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) popularised the idea of two distinct types of improvement efforts in any organisation: *technical problems* and *adaptive challenges*. A technical problem is one that can be solved with existing knowledge and skills. However, not all school-based improvement efforts should be approached as technical problems and some improvement efforts are adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are when we are moving beyond what we, as a school or individual, currently know, understand and do. While we might be able to hypothesise a possible solution, we will still need to test and learn through iterative cycles to reach a point where we establish a workable context specific solution (see Figure 1). By definition, complex problems do not lend themselves to obvious solutions. It is necessary therefore to consider how approaches and solutions are going to be developed. That is, the organisational strategy for dealing with complexity.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example of a global adaptive challenge for nations across the globe. This incredibly complex problem meant we could not rely on implementing a previously identified solution or response. The problem of how to influence the development of complex situations towards favourable outcomes, and away from unfavourable ones, is arguably at the core of most of the important and difficult challenges we currently face. As nations across the world rapidly attempted to design solutions based on emerging evidence and needs, it was often approached as an iterative testing and learning cycle. As new evidence emerged, solutions were hypothesised, strategies were implemented, and evidence of implementation and impact was sought. This cycle enabled a rapid response but also created an environment where we knew things could change based on new emerging evidence.

Figure 1: Technical Problem and Adaptive Challenges: Two Different Approaches



Leading Through Complexity

Adaptive practices are best suited to complex environments, like educational settings, where there is a need to test and discover. Ideas and solutions may have been formulated in advance, yet there is still a great deal of learning, reflection and understanding that is still required. In this instance making a detailed linear plan will only make limited sense, because we know things will most likely turn out differently when we begin learning from early implementation. A clear goal is still necessary, but the pathway to achieve it will be difficult to pre-determine with specificity. Think of a sailing ship heading north using Polaris, the North Star, to guide its journey. The ship has a clear direction in mind but may veer in other directions as needed to catch the wind that will most effectively move it in the proposed northerly direction. The destination is clear, but a linear pathway is not the most effective to take. An adaptive mindset understands that taking the first step is important, as by taking that first step we then discover what the most appropriate second step could be. Research has illustrated that adaptive practices, where school-based solutions are collaboratively designed, implemented, and evaluated have benefits for teaching practice (Dunn, Hattie & Bowles 2019).

Adaptive approaches are capable of dealing with complexity, unpredictability and change. These are all aspects educational leaders recognise are evident every day in their improvement work, well before COVID-19. Initially, adaptive approaches developed and gained traction as a way to respond to the complexity of large-scale software development projects (Sutherland 2014), however they are now prominent and successfully used in many organisations and a diverse range of industries. Adaptive leaders seek to mobilise knowledge quickly, are responsive to contextual needs, and seek to empower their colleagues to act, even when the path is unclear, and the journey might be messy. Due to this, an adaptive organisation is able to respond swiftly to rapidly changing opportunities and demands as they occur. Ultimately, making them efficient to be able to respond to the learning needs of their students in an ever-changing context.

The Military, Complexity and Adaptive Teams

Theory on how complex systems function can provide insights into the nature of adaptation and how it might operate at a team level. The military in Australia and the US for example, have systematically developed more adaptive ways of working. While the strict rigid nature we sometimes associate with the military might be true to a certain extent, it is also true the military realise rigid adherence to rules and procedures can have catastrophic consequences on the battlefield. They understand key contextual factors at the coalface should shape decision making as the battlefield environment is complex. Soldiers need to know the rules and procedure well enough to recognise when they may need to move outside of these and adapt to the context specific situation. So, while the armed forces may not first appear to be a

place that educational leaders could learn and develop parallel practices, it may actually be fertile ground for the complexity we are experiencing.

The Australian Military considered adaptation in natural systems in an attempt to develop general principles of adaptation. The idea was to look to nature for inspiration because nature has solved countless complex problems through adaptation. Grisogono (2010) suggested replacing the commonly used plan for military action Observe, Orient, Decide, Act developed by American military strategist Col John Boyd with the Act, Sense, Decide, Adapt (ASDA) model. Grisogono (2010) was attempting to ensure the language of the model was accessible and recognisable to soldier-implementers, the shift to Adapt, while subtle, is important. 'Act' can be viewed as a repetitive activity, while Adapt explicitly recognises the need to change. This approach assumes that the leader may not know what the perfect course of action is and must do something to acquire information so that the team can adapt his or her actions to correspond more directly with the context they are working within. This model has many connections to how educators can conceptualise implementing evidence-informed approaches in complex environments.

It should be noted that adaption may not be as intuitive as we might like to think it is. Often the natural human desire is to 'set and forget'. Humans tend to want to make decisions and then move on to the next problem. This can work well in a complicated environment, but not so well in a complex one (Green 2011). Furthermore, by developing a framework with adaptation at the centre, we are intentionally attempting to circumvent or counteract cognitive biases that invariably sneak into the decision-making processes. This is achieved by forcing leaders and team members to continually test their assumptions and knowledge in context specific environments. Brookfield (2003) discusses how transformative experiences force us to confront the possibility that our assumptions may not actually fit. In this way, teachers and leaders will voluntarily, albeit sometimes reluctantly, critically evaluate their pre-conceived notions and practice.

Future Proofing Your School to Deal With Complexity: Cultivating Adaptive Teaching Teams

Organisation and operational adaptability require cohesive teams. Teams that are able to exhibit critical thinking, have comfort with ambiguity and decentralisation, a willingness to accept prudent risk, and an ability to make rapid adjustments based on a continuous assessment of the situation (Grisogono 2010). Recent research has advanced the notion we can create shared mental models among team members as an underlying mechanism of effective team processes and performance (Marks, Zaccaro & Mathieu 2000). Team mental models are collective knowledge structures that enable team members to understand and form expectations about other team members' responsibilities, needs, and behaviours (Mohammed, Klimoski & Rentsch 2000). They are established by taking the time to build the way the team works to a point where team members begin to organise and interpret

information in a similar manner. Teams will begin to become more adept at processes such as communication, decision making, action and contextual awareness.

Marks et al. (2000) found that leaders who spent time establishing group norms around interaction and routine ways of working, develop teams that have a sustained impact. Added to this, and which is pertinent to the current pandemic, is team mental models and communication processes strongly predicted performance when the teams encountered novel complex problems. Adaptive teams with well-developed mental models are well-positioned to perform in environments that present novel problems in which their responsibilities take them into areas that may be different from their previous experience or technical solutions they may have applied in the past. Team mental models provide teams with a common framework from which to perceive, interpret, and respond to novel situations. Adaptive teams are empowered to focus on the work they perceive as most important providing them a higher level of agency and autonomy. The underlying premise is that being adaptive enables teams to focus on the key challenges they have identified with a view to building an effective solution through iterative testing and learning cycles.

Principles and Practices to Cultivate Adaptive Ways of Working and Thinking

Many organisations are actively exploring methods in which they can become more adaptive and nimble in their approach as a response to a rapidly changing and complex world. While they might be drawing on similar guiding principles and approaches there is no one way this looks in practice. Adaptive is both a framework and a capability that includes a set of principles and practices. While working with school leaders over the past decade who have sought to utilise adaptive ways of working, some key tenets to consider have become apparent:

- ***Developing a mindset of acceptance.*** We need to accept the complexity of the environment we are working within. As a leader we need to accept the ambiguity and uncertainty, by doing this you can begin to understand that nothing remains static and we are constantly evolving. This mindset allows you to deal with the unexpected, because you accept this as a normal part of working within complexity.
- ***Develop the situation through action.*** Effective leaders understand that solutions are being developed from an incomplete evidence base. There is inevitable uncertainty with complex situations. As such, school leaders should be prepared to develop the situation through action. An adaptive mindset understands that taking the first step is important, as by taking that first step we then discover what the most appropriate second step could be.
- ***Focus on teams, not individuals.*** An adaptive leader continually searches for impediments that may be hindering growth of their teaching teams and endeavours to solve these. An adaptive leader supports teaching teams to make rapid progress by

assisting the team to self-organise and make decisions responsive to their context and based on best evidence. This is achieved by exhibiting practices such as deep listening, self-awareness and commitment to others. Studies undertaken by the MIT Centre for Collective Intelligence (<http://cci.mit.edu/>) illustrate that although the intelligence of individuals affects team performance, the team's collective intelligence is more important. They also suggest it is easier to change team behaviours rather than individual behaviours as a driver for improvement.

- **Design lean improvement processes.** By keeping the process as lean as possible the aim is to prototype a practice by minimising the required resources to rapidly discover if the proposed practices are proving to be effective in your unique context (or not). This can be thought of as a Minimal Viable Practice (MVP). An MVP is achieved by seeking formative feedback on the new practice or approach you are prototyping. Don't try to do too much, work on some key areas and try to get them working before moving onto other areas. By working in this way, you will see it can expedite the improvement process and results are often realised much sooner
- **Foster psychological safety.** Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea (Edmondson 2004). This is expressed through specific behaviours such as encouraging teachers to express opinions and ideas, promoting collaborative decision making, supporting information sharing and teamwork, and being non-judgemental (Chen, Sharma, Edinger, Shapiro & Farh 2011).

Leading With an Adaptive Mindset

Leading an organisation to become more adaptive requires developing specific personal skills necessary to enhance adaptive performance, and it requires having in place attitudes and collaborative structures that enable and foster adaptive performance. School leaders may need to develop an *adaptive stance*; constantly looking for ways to test their knowledge about the teaching and learning within their unique school context. The concept of complex adaptive systems provides a valuable tool kit for understanding and addressing a broad range of educational issues that are currently arising. There is no doubt that complexity has always permeated the educational space, but there is also no doubt COVID-19 has significantly increased the complexity and uncertainty.

An adaptive stance is both an intellectual stance that creates the preconditions for being adaptive, and a particular pattern of decision making in complex situations (Grisogono & Radenovic 2011). Operational adaptability is essential to developing situational understanding and to be able to work through complex situations as they arise. While it is

impossible to anticipate the precise dynamics of the future, cultivating adaptive teams should enable schools to adapt quickly to rapidly changing conditions and seize upon previously unforeseen opportunities. It would seem these are going to be critical attributes for every organisation to consider as we continue down this road of increased uncertainty.

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Author Details

Ryan Dunn
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Email: dunn.r@unimelb.edu.au