

Adaptive Organizations

Need

Adaptive Leaders

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The leadership development challenge is clear: Corporate executives are concerned that their leaders are not ready to react to inevitable disruptions. They also want better outcomes from their investments in leadership development. For the chief learning officer (CLO) and learning and development (L&D) professionals, that means developing adaptive leadership capability and delivering this at an organization-wide scale.

There are two obstacles holding organizations back from adapting to new realities. First, hierarchical structures hinder team performance, slowing decision-making and communication. Second, most team leaders are actually process managers, comfortable in their technical operations zone but out of their element when disruptions occur. They try to apply operational skills to adaptive challenges and revert to patching problems rather than inventing novel solutions. To prepare for the future,

leaders need to leave their safety zone and tackle adaptive challenges where there are no clear answers.



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Now is the time for organizations to develop leaders who adapt themselves and their organizations

to address disruptions while doing their operational work. Here's how.

ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

How organizations adapt to changing conditions is pivotal. Leaders have two options: View disruptions as a threat and resist or see them as opportunities and adapt. According to Deloitte, organizations that adapt will win out. Becoming an adaptable organization requires a fundamental shift in operating and management philosophy that enables large-scale global organizations to operate with a start-up mindset and drive modern people practices that enable enterprise agility through an empowered network of teams.

Hierarchies need to take a back-room role empowering an ever-changing network of teams. These teams need adaptive leaders.



ADAPTIVE LEADERS

Long-term disruption and change will continually shape and reshape the way people live, work and do business. Adaptive organizations must think beyond incremental growth and continuously address weaknesses of current practices. Adaptive leaders must periodically get up on the roof to see what is coming over the distant horizon. When they see disruption potential, they must quickly prepare responses to act in unity with other leaders.

For instance, one such disruption is the explosion of consumer choices and the use of digital technologies to create distinction. It presents new opportunities with new challenges. It is not good enough to apply digital technologies around the edges. Organizations need to invent new ways of working with new measures of productivity.

Such new ways of working demand strength in leadership competencies that has not been emphasized and rewarded in the past. Confronted by disruption, leaders are tested and often respond in two nonproductive ways: Some sense danger and shut down, while others overconfidently apply unexamined know-how rather than taking an adaptive approach by defining or reframing problems, exploring new domains and innovating.

Adaptive leaders constantly look for ways to align moments of truth to changing customer desires. They seek to change customer preferences in ways that benefit their organizations and customers. They prepare their teams for planned and unplanned futures. They sense change coming and respond quickly. These adaptive leaders operate well, adapt quickly, invent new ways of working and transform their organizations seamlessly all at the same time.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A new schema for leadership development is needed. One that develops adaptive leaders at all levels, earlier in their careers and in the flow of their work — and can be delivered economically at scale. The new schema

emphasizes learning within the context of the organization's business conditions, workflows and goals with immediate application of learning.

There are six actions and several keys to developing adaptive leaders, starting with helping leaders understand the organization, including the goals, mission and the products and services it delivers.

Form an instructional design team of leaders at various levels and provide a framework for discussion and design of leadership training that senior leaders can use to provide core organization understanding of what is important to them and expected of all leaders.

Have business leaders provide essential goals to their instructional design team who leads human resources, corporate communications, employee relations, and other teams. Embed this into the entire employee journey from recruitment to retirement.

Empower the instructional design team to lead corporate strategy, program management, operational excellence and other teams to align objective setting, investment portfolio management and other goal-to-results methods to ensure alignment as conditions change.

Iteratively design, develop and deploy leadership development programs that are facilitated by the leaders who participated in one through three above. Iterate from essential aspiration and intentions and continuously extend content. Reengage leaders to continue their learning.

As deployment progresses, engage learners to refine learning content by providing application cases, additional application scenarios and pitfalls.

In this new schema, the CLO and L&D professionals drive value by enabling and coaching organization leaders at all levels, regardless of title or tenure.

Measure impact using baseline measures of employee engagement and employee sentiment, including individual experience with diversity, equity and inclusion, value of work, quality of leaders and teaming.

LEADERSHIP ROLES IN ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Successful programs result when there is cohesion among members of the C-suite, talent management, people leaders and individual contributors (like subject matter experts) who lead without direct reports and L&D professionals. The following bullet points outline the contributions of each group toward the development of the training program:

MEMBERS OF THE C-SUITE

- Describe business outcomes as quantified along a timeline.
- Describe outcomes of leadership development in terms of technical and social competencies. Ensure that competencies enable espoused purpose and values.

TALENT MANAGEMENT EXECUTIVES

- Describe stages of leadership proficiency for cohorts of leaders such as individual contributors, subject matter experts, project managers, executives, people leaders, high performers, emerging executives, etc.

- Incorporate delivery of expected outcomes into recruitment, onboarding, L&D and performance management practices.
- Ensure that leadership practices from thought leaders are adapted to your organization's desired outcomes.

PEOPLE LEADERS

- Actively engage in leadership development by teaching, coaching and mentoring other leaders.
- Produce and reinforce desired outcomes at team and individual levels.

INDIVIDUALS

- Own accountability for self-development and utilize available development resources.
- Seek opportunities to demonstrate, develop and leverage competencies.

L&D PROFESSIONALS

- Coach learners to address specific leader issues and challenges.
- Prefer integration over specialization. Integrate behavioral and technical skills and integrate doing and learning.

PARTING THOUGHTS

For the CLO, L&D and other talent management leaders to successfully build adaptive organizations, transformation

must start from within. Here are some emerging principles to consider:

- Cross-functional teams must adapt all organizational systems, including rewards and recognition, talent management and L&D to respond to opportunities and disruptions.
- Start with internal knowledge and skills. When adaptive leaders are attained, look outside for leadership, technology and management expertise to continue extending your adaptive leadership schema.
- To build scale, create a leadership team with one leadership system mindset. Build organization leadership capability and capacity into the flow of work of leaders.
- Embed critical thinking, leveraging diversity and other behavioral skills into the learning experience and content.

In this new schema, the CLO and L&D professionals drive value by enabling and coaching organization leaders at all levels, regardless of title or tenure. Members of the C-suite drive value by keeping direction and goals current and clear. ☺

Jim Dowling and Richard Lynch are co-founders of [Capable Company](#), an organization that designs and develops integrated models, methods, tools, guides and courseware to develop adaptive leaders at all levels at scale. They are also co-authors of several books and articles, including the e-book "[Prepare Leaders for Any Future](#)." Email the authors.

Keys to Successful Leadership Development Programs

- Clarify your organization's goals and document them to provide leaders with context regarding the goals of the organization.
- Declare your organization's intentions with sufficient detail to enable leaders to plan for long-term growth as they deliver on short-term promises.
- Define practices that create a pathway from intentions to the ability to produce expected outcomes.
- Define practices that drive investment based on the ability to produce desired outcomes making projects and processes enablers of results.
- Define results measurement and management methods to continually align your organization's goals.