

# **When Leadership Terminology Collides: A Spirited Comparison of Adaption-Innovation Theory and Adaptive Leadership**

## **Abstract**

As researchers, scholars, and practitioners, leadership educators apply an intellectual inquiry process, identifying what is known and understood, and what is not. Often, this requires seeking clarity around terms and considering how similarities might be contextualized differently between theory and practice. Exemplified through research and teaching, both Adaption-Innovation (A-I) Theory and Adaptive Leadership share similar vocabularies surrounding the concept of adaption. Both are concerned with how individuals and groups solve varying types of problems and navigate change, but one emphasizes individual differences in cognitive style while the other prescribes a series of leader/group processes. This moderated panel affords opportunity for a deep dive into the nuanced overlap of terminology with the premise that leadership educators often teach and model theoretically sound concepts in practice-based contexts. An examined comparison of A-I theory to Adaptive Leadership may illuminate this valuable example of connecting rigorous, empirically supported theory and pragmatic practice.

## **Panelists**

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Moderator: Jeremy Elliott-Engel, The University of Arizona

## **Introduction**

Since Heifetz's (1994) book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Adaptive Leadership has consistently grown in popularity among practitioners and scholars. The Adaptive Leadership framework is a useful resource for leaders attempting to help organizations and communities adapt to change. However, Adaptive Leadership endures significant criticism surrounding its lack of theoretical underpinnings, empirical research, clear conceptualizations, and evidence-based support for the framework's basic tenets (Northouse, 2021). For all its popularity, few studies have supported Adaptive Leadership's tenets with either philosophical grounding or empirical evidence (e.g., Adams et al., 2013; DeRue, 2011; Mugisha & Berg, 2017). Both practitioners and scholars could benefit from greater understanding of Adaptive Leadership's inner workings.

Long before Heifetz (1994) wrote *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Kirton (1976) introduced Adaption-Innovation (A-I) theory, contending that all individuals are creative and must solve novel problems in their day-to-day lives. No individual leader is suited to solve a complete spectrum of problems. Kirton (2011) explains:

For a long time now we have searched for ideal leaders who can, with the help of their teams, be guaranteed to solve specific arrays of problems. But we have long known that such leaders cannot hope to solve any such increasingly complex arrays by relying on knowing enough personally to arrive at all the answers. It is the whole team that needs to solve the problems... (p. 312)

Kirton's (2011) A-I theory explains an individuals' innate cognitive style, based on preferences for more or less structure. More "adaptive" individuals prefer structured situations that allow them to develop creative ideas within an accepted paradigm for the purpose of making it more efficient (Kirton, 2013). More "innovative" individuals prefer less structured situations where they may develop creative ideas both inside and outside of an established paradigm for the purpose of making things different (Kirton, 2013). According to Stum (2009), "the leadership pendulum has shifted from valuing the adaptor over the innovator in the 1970s and 1980s to preferring the innovative leader in the 1990s and 2000s" (p. 75). In reality, a wide range of problem solving styles helps to solve a wider range of problems (Jablokow, 2008; Kirton, 2011).

Through an in-depth, facilitated panel discussion, participants will:

- explore similar vocabularies of A-I theory and Adaptive Leadership surrounding the concept of adaption;
- understand how A-I theory and Adaptive Leadership focus on the manner in which individuals and organizations solve varying types of problems and navigate change; and
- examine the application of A-I theory to the underlying mechanisms of Adaptive Leadership to connect a more rigorous, empirically supported theory to a popular practice.

## **Background**

Adaption-Innovation theory and Adaptive Leadership are the two major topics of this panel discussion. Below is a brief synopsis of each.

### **Adaption-Innovation Theory**

Kirton (2011) posits that all individuals are creative and solve problems. Over 40 years of research supports that problem-solving style, as it relates to A-I theory, is independent from intelligence, process, motive, attitude, situation, culture, and learned skills. We each approach

problems with an innate problem-solving style, either more adaptive or more innovative in one's preference. In A-I theory, more adaptive individuals prefer well established and structured situations, allowing them to develop creative ideas within the structure for the purpose of making it more efficient (Kirton, 2013). Often, the more adaptive are perceived by the more innovative as detailed, thorough, systematic, and traditional. A more innovative individual, on the other hand, prefers less structured situations where they may develop creative ideas as a chance to set up different structures outside of the current paradigm (Kirton, 2013). More innovative individuals are often perceived by the more adaptive as freethinking, rule-breaking, and unconventional. One's preferred problem-solving style cannot be altered or developed, but rather is constant throughout one's life (Kirton, 2013); this is in contrast to a person's understanding of, and approach to, leadership, which may shift as one changes his or her attitudes and beliefs on leadership (Hanks et al., 2015; Priest & Middleton, 2016). We can all operate more adaptively or more innovatively than our preferred problem-solving style, but this coping behavior (Kirton, 2011) is psychologically taxing. While preferred problem-solving style is innate and stable, individuals may learn skills to operate more adaptively or innovatively when the problem solver recognizes the need to do so, as driven by motive.

“Leaders are faced with complex challenges that call for leadership to span a broad context, create strategic alliances, share leadership responsibilities, and meet the demands of global citizenship” (Hanks et al., 2015, p. 3). Leaders are better able to face these challenges if they understand how we each differ in how we prefer to solve problems and manage structure. Additionally, it is not only individuals who can trend more adaptive or more innovative in their problem solving style. Organizations, units, or groups within organizations can also trend more adaptive or more innovative, creating a cognitive climate that privileges a particular problem solving style.

While A-I theory has not typically been considered a leadership theory, it may improve our understanding of leadership processes when used as a cognitive theory. For example, Friedel (2014) suggested that many definitions of leadership tend to be biased towards innovation, while definitions of management tend to be biased towards adaption. Friedel (2014) recognized leadership is the leveraging of cognitive diversity to solve problems, recognizing that cognitive diversity may impede work on solving the problem being tasked. In this connection of leadership and problem solving, Kirton (2013) offers that every time a group solves a problem, there are essentially two problems, *Problem A* and *Problem B*. Problem A is the main problem at hand and the initial reason why the team was formulated; whereas, Problem B is any problem that arises which does not help support the solving of Problem A (Kirton, 2013). One common Problem B that impedes solving Problem A can derive from individuals being unwilling to see fellow team members' viewpoints with respect to their differences in problem-solving style with the belief that the other's preference to solve the problem is not only a bad idea, but a bad idea that only benefits one or a few of the team members (Kirton, 2011). A team is therefore considered

successful if it is able to work together with mutual respect and contribute to solving Problem A and proactively try to prevent Problem Bs from getting in the way.

## **Adaptive Leadership**

Adaptive leadership is a popular prescriptive framework for leaders engaging followers in adapting their organizations to changing environments. While not a theory, the framework of adaptive leadership has evolved from situational, transformational, and complexity theories (Cojocar, 2009). It combines practical measures for the collectivistic-minded positional leader with an organizational perspective informed by complex adaptive systems theory (Northouse, 2021; Uhl Bien et al., 2007). Rather than focusing on the leader and his or her characteristics, adaptive leadership stresses the activities of the leader in relation to the work of the followers in the organizational change context (Northouse, 2021). Though the conceptual foundations of adaptive leadership have been developed by several theorists (e.g., Bennis, 2003; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2002), it was first described by, and most closely associated with, Heifetz and colleagues (e.g., Heifetz et al., 1991; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Heifetz's (2009) exposition of adaptive leadership contains dozens of discrete concepts and maxims for the would-be adaptive leader. However, Northouse (2021) has synthesized adaptive leadership into a few key principles, which will be core to our panel discussion. First, "get on the balcony" refers to the practice of mentally distancing oneself from an organization to better see its patterns of interaction, and thus gain perspective. Second, "identify the adaptive challenge" refers to parsing technical challenges, which are best solved with managerial expertise, from adaptive problems, which are best addressed with adaptive leadership. Third, "regulating distress" refers to maintaining a productive level of disequilibrium in an organization, such that members feel enough disequilibrium to be compelled to address the adaptive problem, but not so much that they are unable to address the problem. Fourth, "maintain disciplined attention" refers to keeping both leaders' and stakeholders' attention to the adaptive problem and avoiding defaults and work avoidance habits. Fifth, "give the work back" refers to engaging those individuals with the adaptive problem in solving it, rather than seeking a heroic individual leader to provide a solution. Sixth, "protect voices from below" refers to purposefully encouraging dissenting and negative views in an organization; this is an example of fostering a feedback loop to help a system learn about itself in order to adapt (Wheatley, 1992). Additionally, Heifetz attends to the context of leadership and proposes the "holding environment," which is the psychological and physical environment in which adaptive work is done (Heifetz, 2009). One of the primary roles of the adaptive leader is to create and maintain a holding environment.

## **Description**

This moderated panel discussion will feature four leadership education scholars and A-I-certified practitioners. The moderator, a leadership program director, will pose pre-established questions and discussion prompts, while welcoming input and questions from the audience. Contextual information and question-based dialog between moderator and panelists will last about 60 minutes, with the remaining 20-30 minutes dedicated to responding to audience inquiry. The panel format with content experts will allow for rich presentation of theoretical content toward developing understanding among colleagues in attendance, with the supposition that many in leadership education and programmatic practice are teaching and modeling theoretically solid concepts in practice-based contexts. And, to this end, an opportunity for open discussion and panel Q&A is a prime exploratory exercise when terminology is similar and nuanced across subject matter.

The proposed agenda for the 60-minute panelist discussion will start with a description of A-I theory and Adaptive Leadership's central principles, then expand on the theoretical and practical implications for leadership education and practice. We will discuss similarities and differences in terminology, addressing false and superficial parallels, and highlighting deeper underlying commonalities. Finally, we will discuss the ramifications of A-I theory on scenarios related to Adaptive Leadership's key concepts (e.g., getting on the balcony, holding environment, productive zone of disequilibrium).

With an assumption that the conference will utilize Zoom, this panel will engage attendees via the chat, interactive breakout spaces, and polling features in coordination with the host.

## **Foreseeable Implications**

The primary implications of this panel will be a clearer understanding of the commonalities between A-I theory and Adaptive Leadership, and also a more detailed and research-based understanding of Adaptive Leadership's own concepts by viewing them through the lens of A-I Theory. This will, of course, be beneficial to those teaching and practicing adaptive leadership. However, we also expect this panel discussion, and subsequent conversations, to spark research interests. Adaptive Leadership's dearth of empirical evidence is due at least in part to poor conceptual clarity; this discussion of A-I Theory's relevance to Adaptive Leadership may provide the conceptual foothold to begin empirical studies of Adaptive Leadership.

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