

# A PROBLEM-SOLVING THEORY TO ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

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The focus of the symposium is adaption-innovation (A-I) theory, as it relates to solving problems with cognitive diversity. The intent of the current article is to introduce adaption-innovation theory; its beginning and key elements. The symposium specifically focuses on implications for adaptive leadership, inclusion, wicked problems, and business.

## Introduction

Everyone is a problem solver, and contemporary leaders tend to be those who can bring teams together to solve challenging problems that one person cannot solve alone. Adaption-innovation (A-I) theory, originated by Kirton (2011), is a problem-solving theory, with the aim of reducing conflict and improving collaboration among teams. It should be noted, while A-I theory offers insight into the study and practice of leadership, it has farther reaching implications as well, ranging from our health (e.g., predicting disease proneness, see Skinner & Fox-Francoeur, 2013) to product devel-

opment (see Puccio et al., 1995), to the science used to better understand the world around us (see Jablonski, 2005). As a problem-solving theory, it may apply to everyday problems and the continuous change in society.

## Beginning of Adaption-Innovation Theory

The first formal research leading Kirton to develop A-I theory was *Management Initiative* (Kirton, 1961). This grant funded research allowed for 2 years of data collection at four medium-sized businesses (1,400–3,000

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employees) near London, with the intent of learning how ideas are implemented successfully in a business (Kirton, 1961). Data collected included full access to letters, minutes, and documents within 5 years of the selected initiative being studied; and included at least one interview with every manager linked to the selected initiative. Data collection resulted in hundreds of interviews and thousands of data points to formulate a problem-solving process (Kirton, 1961). The study left Kirton with more questions than answers. He continued developing A-I theory, as evidenced in a report presented to the Social Science Research Council (Kirton, 1972). The results of a general population sample completing the Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI) were published 4 years later, providing the measure of problem-solving style to A-I theory (Kirton, 1976). Research continued internationally, further developing A-I theory and its measure, with a KAI practitioner base growing globally, using KAI to advance their work.

Each of the four articles in the symposium provides an overview of A-I theory and basic descriptors of character traits associated with more adaptive and more innovative individuals. These articles depict A-I theory in different contexts and provide different conceptual pieces; all of which can be traced back to the four key elements of A-I theory including:

- The separation of style and level—with the corollary that all people problem solve and are creative.
- The paradox of structure—all structures are both enabling and limiting, and the management of which is a principle difference between people.
- The management of diversity—as the key strategic element in the management of change (the principle diversities being opportunity, motive, level, and style).
- The resolution of cognitive gap—between one's problem solving preference and behavior in a specific context, as the key tactical element in the management of change (Sheffield & Friedel, 2022, pp. 2277001-1 and 2277001-2).

The four symposium articles were selected to showcase A-I theory as it relates to cognitive diversity in the context of leadership. Specifically, the articles present

A-I theory in the context of a conceptual framework, individual diversity, community problem-solving, and consulting practice.

Starting with Seibel, Kaufman, Cletzer, and Elliot-Engel's article, *Advancing Adaptive Leadership through Adaption-Innovation Theory: Enhancements to the Holding Environment*, the authors provide insight into how more adaptive and innovative individuals may interact given a group's makeup within the productive zone of disequilibrium as it relates to adaptive leadership. The second article, by Anderson, titled *Implicit Social Cognition: The Hidden Element Affecting Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging on Diverse Collaborative Teams*, presents Kirton's Cognitive Function Schema, and how it can be used to embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Third, is an article by Rodriguez and Bush, titled *Examining Complex Problem Solving in Communities through the Lens of Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Theory*, which brings awareness to how communities can use A-I theory to address wicked problems, such as food security. Finally, Sheffield, a long-standing KAI practitioner, is author of the fourth article, *Working with Adaption-Innovation in Leadership Practice: What Works and What's Missing?* Sheffield's article showcases three leadership case studies of how A-I theory was used successfully to increase productivity and ends with questions to guide future research.

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