



Heads & Board Chairs: Leading in a Complex Era

Independent Schools Association of the Central States

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Adaptive leadership in four minutes...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRMOLKGFLJk>

2

Technical Issues v. Adaptive Challenges

3

Technical issues	Adaptive challenges
Easy to spot	Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
'Know-how' exists; someone has "the answer"	There is no right answer
Can be solved by management	Require different lenses/multiple stakeholders
Solutions can be implemented quickly, by edict	"Solutions" take time, not by edict
People are receptive to technical solutions	People often resist even acknowledging
Changes have simple boundaries	Changes cut across boundaries; complex
Can be fixed solo	Require collaboration and learning
Have tools and experience necessary to solve	Needed responses are outside repertoire

- ▶ Technical "fixes" exacerbate adaptive challenges.
- ▶ Recognize that there is enormous pressure on Heads to solve problems quickly and decisively—to treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.
- ▶ Leaders must resist the temptation to seek authoritative and absolute "right" answers. If any are found, they are almost certainly solutions to technical problems, not adaptive challenges.

Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*.
Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Ways to Know if You Are Facing an Adaptive Challenge

1. The solution requires operating in a different way than you do now.
2. The problem AND the solution require learning.
3. The solution requires shifting authority and responsibility to the people who are actually affected.
4. The solution requires some sacrifice of your past ways of working.
5. The solution requires experimenting.
6. The solution will take a long time.
7. The challenge connects to people's deeply held values.

Heifetz, R. And Linsky, M. (Spring 2001). "Becoming an adaptive leader," *Lifelong Faith*. pp. 26-33.

Some Examples

5

Technical issues	Adaptive challenges
Declining enrollment	Value proposition
Balancing the budget	Business model
Program offerings	Program viability
Short-term solutions	Long-term sustainability
Diversity	Inclusion
Strategic plans	Strategic thinking and adaptation
Mission statement	Mission relevance
Fundraising issues/declines	Donor engagement
Master plans	Optimal use of space / rethinking campus

Huddle up in Head-Chair pairs:
What comes to mind for you in terms of your school?

What Does this Mean for Heads and Chairs?

HEADS

- Bring mission-critical, strategically important issues to the Board
- Help the Board prepare by providing the right information
- Ensure the Board knows what you want from them
- Create meeting agendas that allow the Board to add value
- Ensure effective communication between meetings to keep the Board informed and engaged

CHAIRS

- Be poised to engage the Board in mission-critical, strategically important issues
- Ensure that the Board is prepared and willing to read, study, learn
- If unclear about what's needed, seek clarity from the Head
- Help trustees bring expertise to bear as appropriate (when asked, on committees)
- Be self- and group-aware
- Facilitate productive dialogue

NO SURPRISES BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU!

Board chair as “engagement” facilitator

~~Are there any questions?~~

~~Let's go around the table and hear what everyone thinks.~~

sweetspot

~~Head of School...
What do you think?~~

~~Here's what I think~~

Board Blind Spots



Losing sight
of the mission

Not translating the
mission into the
board's work



Not finding the
common frame

Asserting opinions
without
understanding the
big picture



Rushing to
treatment—
"the right answer"

Forcing
"expertise" on
adaptive
challenges

Head of School Traps



Bringing prepackaged solutions to the board to rubberstamp

Not bringing adaptive challenges to the board



Not spending time discussing what's messy and ambiguous

Not wanting to be vulnerable

*Let's Assume I'm Right
it'll save time*

Thinking *you* have all the answers

Overactive ego investment in having all the "right" answers

Shared Pitfalls



Q & A / Discussion

We'll cover more in the next session: for now, what's on your mind?

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