

# Technical Problems, Adaptive Challenges and Approaches to Learning

Psychologist Ronald Heifetz has made a distinction between two kinds of challenges we face in our work: Technical problems and adaptive challenges.

A **technical problem** yields a right answer through the application of an appropriate and pre-made plan. Many problems in mathematics, science, engineering or business feature technical problems that have right answers that “fit” the problem.

An **adaptive challenge** doesn’t have a clear, pre-made particular or certain answer. Adaptive problems are real world problems where data is uncertain, conflicting or ambiguous; where people can reasonably disagree about appropriate actions to resolve the problem or where personal ethics or values are in conflict.

## Characteristics of Technical Problems

- Easy to identify
- Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict
- Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions
- Often can be solved by an authority or expert
- Require change in very few places; often contained within clear boundaries
- People are generally receptive to technical solutions

## Examples of Technical Problems

- How do you refer a family for services?
- How do you fill out a foster care referral form?
- How do I log a note in an IT system?
- How do I make a mandated report?
- What kind of ‘release of information’ needs to be signed to invite network members to a family team meeting?

## Characteristics of Adaptive Challenges

- Difficult to identify
- Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to learning
- People with the challenge have to be involved in the work of solving it
- Require change in numerous places; usually cross organisational boundaries
- People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.
- “Solutions” require experiments and discovery; usually an approach to learning

## Examples of Adaptive Challenges

- What kind of services will be most effective for this family?
- Will this young person do better in this foster care placement?
- How do I document all the nuances of what occurred on this home visit in the IT system?
- Do I tell the family I am making a mandated report?
- Who from the network should be invited to this family team meeting? How can I work with the parents to make some agreements about who will be invited?

## **Responding to Adaptive Challenges:**

*“There is nothing trivial about solving technical problems. Technical challenges can be life threatening and technical problem-solving can be life-saving. But the urgency or importance of the challenge is not what distinguishes an adaptive problem from a technical one. An adaptive challenge is primarily one that requires people to develop brand new ways of thinking or doing things.” - Heifetz*

Responding to both technical problems and adaptive challenges isn't easy. Technical problems were once adaptive challenges that we have now found more direct and clear solutions for – but it doesn't mean it is simple or easy. What distinguishes adaptive challenges is that they essentially require an approach to problem solving similar to experimentation – where you as a practitioner have to set yourself and the challenge up for observation, testing and learning.

In some ways the heart of responding to adaptive challenges requires a humility – there is no way to know at the outset of your work what the impact of your intervention is going to be. It is not dissimilar to “feeling your way” in the dark – hands outstretched trying to make sure you don't hit your head or stub your toe.

Some of the key questions you can consider when approaching adaptive challenges:

- What are the areas you are hoping to have an influence on?
- How can you set yourself up in a position to have the maximum influence possible?
- Whose help will you need to do this?
- How will you be in partnership with them?
- How will you know if what you are doing is having the desired effect?
- What kinds of actions will become available once you take your first steps?

## **Helping Others Respond to Adaptive Challenges:**

*“When you obtain a position of significant authority, people inevitably expect you to treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical - to provide a remedy that will restore equilibrium with the least amount of pain and in the shortest amount of time. That puts an enormous amount of pressure to have an ‘answer’ rather than raise (and sit with) the really tough questions.” - Heifetz*

People who are thought of as leaders in organisations are often sought out by supervisees or learners when they are faced with adaptive challenges. These people can be seeking a technical or “simple” solution to their adaptive problem, and the pressure to provide that can be great.

While there undoubtedly will be moments you need to provide direct, immediate ideas and next steps, learning to recognise when people are approaching you to provide for technical solutions to their adaptive problems can help you learn how to best coach and support new learning.

Some questions you can consider at moments like these:

- How urgently is a solution needed? Is there time to slow down and help the person seeking help to see this is an adaptive challenge?
- What's at the heart of what the person seeking assistance is looking for? What part of that might they already have an answer for?
- How are they approaching the problem? What parts of their approach recognise it is an adaptive problem and create conditions for experimentation and learning?
- Who are they working with to help solve it? Who are they in dialogue or partnership with? Who else would they need to be connect with in order to help move forward?
- How would they know if they were doing was working?

### **Next Steps:**

Thinking about this distinction can open new possibilities in your leadership and help you confront new dilemmas. As you move forward you might consider these questions:

- What are the technical problems you are faced with every day, the ones that you hear about over and over again? What 'simple solutions' might help people be better prepared to respond to these without your aid?
- Which adaptive challenges do you get faced with more regularly? The ones that make you 'stop in your tracks'? Are there patterns in the adaptive challenges you am facing? With families? With staff? What do you notice coming up again and again?
- When you are at your best, how do you approach those adaptive challenges?
- Who or what helps you to do this?
- Whose help do you need to continue to do more of that?
- How will you know when you have been successful?

### **For more information see:**

Heifetz, Ronald (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.

Heifetz, Ronald; Grashow, Alexander and Linsky, Marty (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.