



Remember, Respect, Reorient, and Renew: Adaptive Leadership for Christ's Church Today

# INTRODUCTION

**People do NOT fear/resist CHANGE . . . People DO fear/resist LOSS!**

Nearly 30 years ago, **Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky** developed **Adaptive Leadership Theory** to describe a kind of leadership that **works well in a rapidly changing world.**

- It is leadership for when technical expertise cannot be counted on to solve a problem.
- It is about leading the **learning process** of a group who must develop new beliefs, habits or values, or shift their current ones in order to find new solutions that are **consistent with their purpose for being.**
- It depends on experimentation, and expects to learn from failure.
- It invites **collaboration**; builds a culture of safe, healthy debates; trusts and empowers **all** people to generate their own ideas; models and increases independent thinking.
- Its leaders are **proactive** instead of reactive. They embrace uncertainty, diversity, and transparency; lead with **empathy**; and create a **shared sense of purpose.**

**Adaptive Leadership is an ITERATIVE Process. There are 3 repeated, refining activities:**

1. **Observing** events and patterns around you;
2. **Interpreting** what you are observing  
(developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on);
3. **Designing** interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified.

**These three steps parallel OUR MODEL: Remember - Respect - Reorient (then, Renew)**

**These steps parallel the ETHICAL LEADERSHIP MODEL of Walter Fluker:**

**Memory:** Remembering Our Story

**Vision:** Retelling Our Story

**Mission:** Reliving Our Story



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# REMEMBER

Adaptive leadership **starts with our deepest core values**, who we are as people or community. Then we ask, **what is the adaptation that will enable us to live out our calling as God's people in this changing world?**

## What

Every organization on the planet knows **WHAT** they do. These are products they sell or the services.

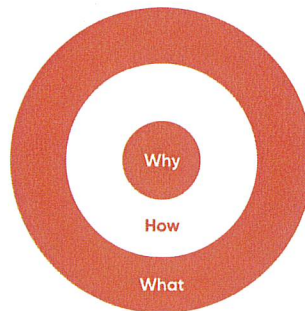
## How

Some organizations know **HOW** they do it. These are the things that make them special or set them apart from their competition.

## Why

Very few organizations know **WHY** they do what they do. **WHY** is not about making money. That's a result. **WHY** is a purpose, cause or belief. It's the very reason your organization exists.

## The Golden Circle



“People don't buy what you do, they buy **WHY** you do it.”

“The goal is not to do business with everybody who needs what you have. The goal is to do business with everybody who **believes what you believe.**”

*(Simon Sinek)*

It is critical to get a larger, systemic perspective of your Church and your larger community, what Heifetz and Linsky call **“getting up on the balcony.”** This perspective is far more helpful than that of the “dance floor.”

- The perspective on the balcony allows the leader to **spot trends and patterns rather than focusing on the minutiae** of the day-to-day.
- Observing is a highly subjective activity, but **in exercising adaptive leadership the goal is to make observing as objective as possible.**
- In the **observation** stage, the group must **intentionally withhold interpretations or interventions** in order to gather as much data as possible.

**Differentiation** is the ability to have a sense of self that is distinct from one's role, one's relationships, and the family or organizational system we are part of without having to disconnect relationally. Differentiation enables the leader to stay *with* the group in the most difficult moments even when the group is blaming the leader for the difficulties.



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# RESPECT

re- (again, back) + specere (to look at) . . . To “respect” is to “LOOK AGAIN/ANEW!”

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in **seeing with new eyes.**” (*Marcel Proust*)

“Discovery and exploration do not so much answer all our questions as they **help us to raise and consider new questions.**” (*Tod Bolsinger*)

“Reframing or ‘**an ability to think about things in more than one way**’ is perhaps the most critical skill for adaptive leadership.” (*Ronald Heifetz & Marty Linsky*)

Adaptive leadership helps people become aware of the **GAP between our aspired values and our actions, between our values and the reality we face.**

Is uncertainty such a bad thing?

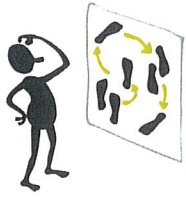
- It means one does not have to have the answers.
- It means the leader should not be working alone.
- It means **any progress** is a success.
- It is a time to **learn**, not to solve.
- It is marked by an **urgency** that motivates us to work.

“When we engage our awakened awareness, we make use of the different parts of our brain, and we literally *see more*, integrating information from multiple sources of perception . . . and (we) ask, *What is life showing me now?* This awakened awareness allows us to perceive more choices and opportunities available to us. We feel more connected with others, understand the relationships between events in our lives, can be more open to creative leaps and insights, and feel more in tune with our life’s purposes and meaning.”

(Lisa Miller, *The Awakened Brain*, 2022)

“In a Christendom world, vision was about seeing possibilities ahead and communicating excitement. **In uncharted territory - where no one knows what’s ahead - vision is about accurately seeing ourselves and defining reality.**”

(Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 2018)



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# REORIENT

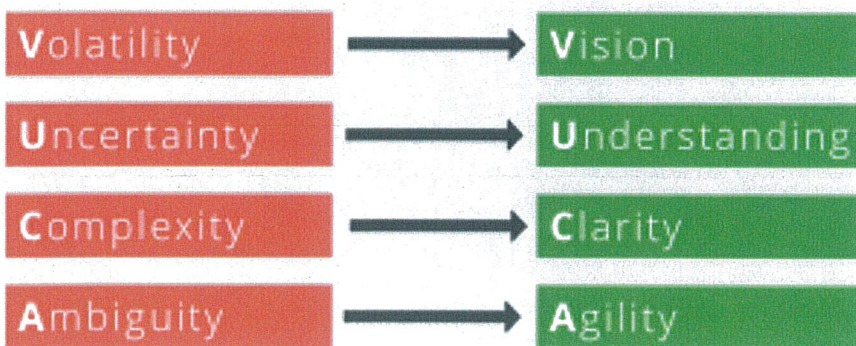
Doing more of the same or operating out of organizational equilibrium is very unlikely to help with adaptive challenges. A key role of the effective adaptive leader is to **move and then keep the organization in a state of “productive disequilibrium,”** which is to say, just enough off its usual ways of doing things that it **begins to be able to hear, see, and imagine accomplishing the core values of the organization but in very different ways.** *(Ronald Heifetz)*

“The drawing near of the Kingdom of God was and remains a terribly disequilibrating reality for the ways this world knows how to function!” *(UMC Discipleship)*

“Perhaps we should face this uncharted territory with resolve, trusting that **God is already ahead of us.** How might God want to shape us in this new place? Does God want to expand our imagination for who we are called to be?” *(Tod Bolsinger, A Leadership Study Guide for Canoeing the Mountains)*

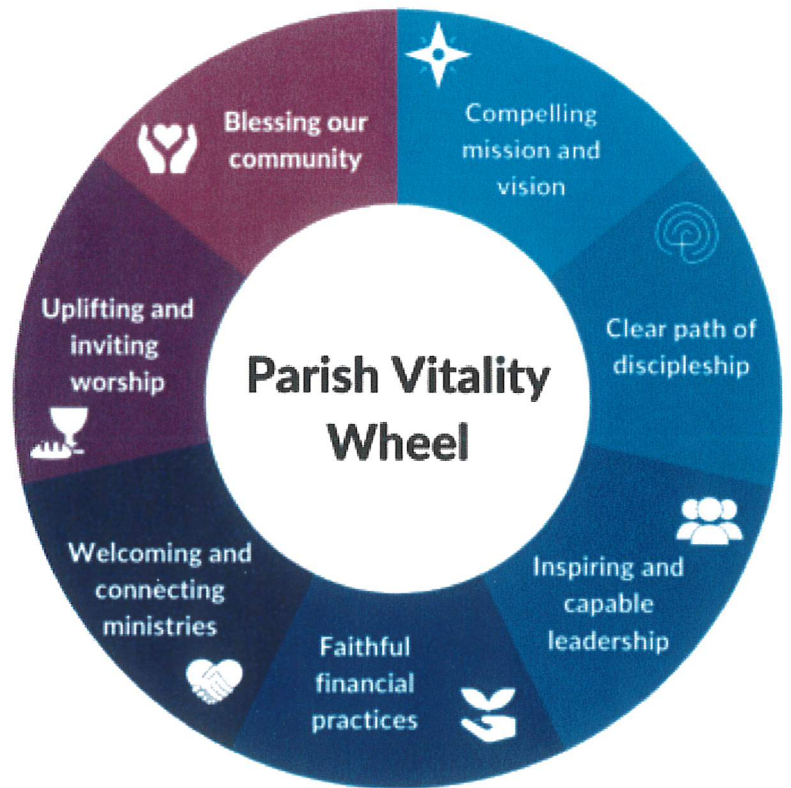
The system may elect an expert to do their work. This creates the illusion that something is being done! Leaders can “escape the expert expectation” by becoming an **EXPERT EXPERIMENTER** or an **EXPERT QUESTION-ASKER** (instead of answer-giver!)

## VUCA



Every reality in a world filled with **vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity** can be responded to with a **BEST PRACTICE**, such as **vision, understanding, clarity, and agility.**

The Episcopal Diocese of Washington has many resources on **Vital Signs for Parish Health** available on their website: <https://edow.org/congregational-resources/congregational-vitality/parish-vital-signs-how-are-we-doing/>



**Was Jesus an Adaptive Leader?** “If an adaptive leader is one who gets it that the way things work now is unsustainable, and the techniques we use to manage our lives now won’t do us much good in light of new realities, then, **YES OF COURSE!**” (*UMC Discipleship*)