

Causes and Consequences of Adaptive Leadership: A Model of Leaders' Rapid Responses to Unexpected Events

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This conceptual article seeks to understand individual and organizational factors that influence leaders' ability to act quickly in response to unexpected events—crises or opportunities. It offers a model for analyzing leaders' overly forceful or overly constrained responses and their outcomes. These factors are influenced by the strength of the unexpected stimulus moderated by characteristics that reflect leaders' expectation of positive outcomes and organizational factors that empower leaders or impose barriers to change. Leaders' capabilities and their organization's capacity increase the likelihood that adaptive actions will produce positive outcomes. Also, adaptive experiences and outcomes affect leaders' self-identity and reputation, which in turn influences the likelihood that leaders will be adaptive in the future. The discussion offers implications of the model for research and practice, particularly in learning and coaching for adaptive leadership.

Keywords: adaptive leaders, quick decision-making, feedback, transformational change, leader self-identity

Adaptive performance is important to organizational effectiveness given the pace of economic, technological, organizational, and global change (Chen et al., 2005; Kozlowski et al., 1999; Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Employees

This article was published Online First October 31, 2022.

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demonstrate adaptive performance when they are able to solve problems quickly, deal with uncertainty, learn new work methods, and handle stress, especially in response to unexpected events such as crises and opportunities (Pulakos et al., 2000). This approach is in contrast to that of those leaders who are likely to be more conservative, seek certainty relying on methods that worked in the past, and who avoid stress by delaying responses. Adaptive leadership is defined here as *leaders' rapid decisions and actions in response to an unexpected situation*. These behaviors may be in response to an immediate crisis or opportunity but also may occur in an unexpected nonimmediate situation that leaders deem warrants rapid action. Adaptive leaders analyze situations quickly to comprehend events, recognize or construct alternatives, and act decisively (Kaiser, 2020a). The goal of this article is to consider how leaders' personal characteristics and organizational factors impact leaders' rapid responses to unexpected events and to consider how the outcomes of those responses influence the leaders' future adaptive responses.

When unforeseen events occur (e.g., sudden crises or opportunities), leaders may feel the need to respond fast with the intention of producing transformational change or steadying the course. The direction and speed of their adaptive performance depends on their motivation to succeed, their versatility (having a wide range of capabilities) and agility (ability to apply their different skills quickly and easily), and their resilience to withstand volatility and uncertainty while they act quickly to produce change or regain goal momentum (Kaiser, 2020a; König, 2019; Yukl & Mashud, 2010).

Leaders process their actions and decisions in response to sudden external events and what they learn about themselves from the experience. For instance, a sudden change in geopolitical conditions may cause a chief executive officer (CEO) to abort an international investment and focus instead on the domestic market or opportunities in another part of the world. A new technology may spark an initiative to develop a new line of business. Or, the loss of an important team member may cause leaders to discontinue or refocus a team's efforts. How leaders respond to these events is likely to be career-altering, catapulting successful leaders to further advancement or prematurely curtailing their career (Hogan et al., 2011; Joungh et al., 2006; McCall, 1998).

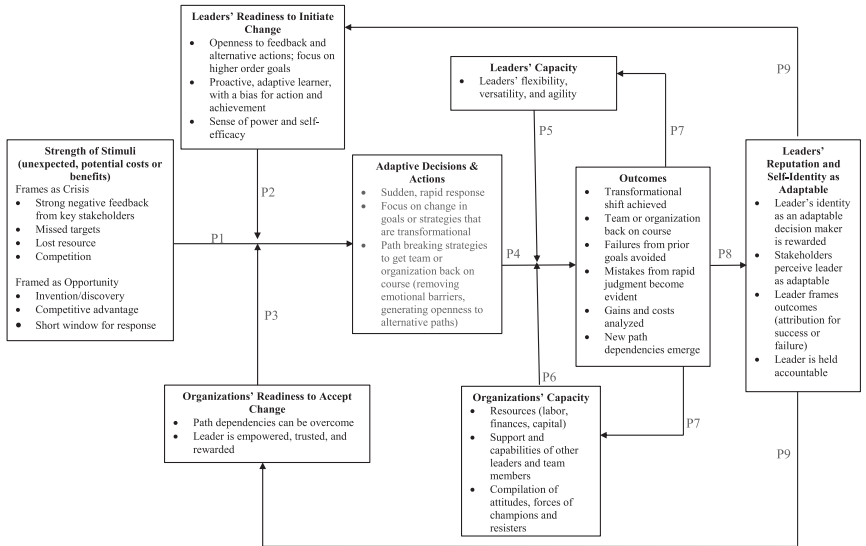
Knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, and the desire to learn are individual characteristics that contribute to growth in adaptive performance (Park & Park, 2019). This is especially true for individuals whose careers center on being leaders (e.g., managers, executives, government officials, military officers). Leaders are likely to face multiple challenges to adapt and overcome throughout their careers. Their ability to respond rapidly to unexpected events affects the direction and accomplishments of their teams and organizations as well as their career trajectory. The stimulus may be an unexpected immediate crisis or opportunity. Adaptive leadership experiences can be developmental as leaders increase their interpersonal skills and self-knowledge to help them

respond to and implement change. The model of adaptive leadership presented here provides a framework for how leaders learn and grow their ability to be adaptive throughout their careers. Recognizing the need for theory-based executive coaching practices (Kilburg, 2016), this article suggests ways that coaches can guide leaders toward an understanding and development of adaptive leadership.

A Model of Adaptive Leadership

Figure 1 presents a model of adaptive leadership. Antecedents are the strength of the stimulus, leaders’ readiness to initiate change, and organizations’ readiness to accept change. Support factors are leaders’ and organizations’ capacity to manage change. Outcomes are the effects of the change on organizations, leaders’ reputation, and leaders’ self-identity as action-oriented and adaptable. Characteristics of adaptive actions and decisions are examined and contrasted with leadership for continuous adaptive change that does not require rapid action. Organizational and leader characteristics moderate the relationship between external events and rapid adaptive responses. The outcomes of adaptive leadership affect leaders’ self-perceptions and reputation, possibly reinforcing or constraining leaders’ future adaptive actions as their

Figure 1
Causes and Consequences of Adaptive Leadership



careers unfold. Overall, the model suggests theory-driven research and practice to help leaders diagnose their past actions (or inaction) and facilitate their ability and willingness to adapt quickly in the future.

The following sections address each component of the model and their interrelationships, starting with characterizing adaptive actions. Their antecedents are then considered—the strength of the stimulus, leaders' readiness to initiate change, and organizations' readiness to accept change. This is followed by considering possible outcomes of adaptive actions, how the outcomes are influenced by leaders' and organizations' capability to be adaptive, and the effects of adaptive actions on leaders' reputation and self-identity. Finally, the feedback effects of outcomes (results and rewards) on future readiness and the effects of reputation and identity on future capacity to be adaptive are considered. The discussion addresses implications for research and practice.

Characterizing Rapid Adaptive Actions

Some leaders train for adaptive decisions and actions (e.g., military officers and enlisted personnel, first responders and medical personnel, and trial attorneys, to name a few). They deal with emergencies or unexpected events and information that require in-the-moment decisions and actions to achieve a mission. Adaptive leadership is endemic to these roles. Characteristics of adaptive actions and decisions in the model can be contrasted with leadership for continuous adaptive change that does not require rapid action. Organizational leaders are usually not confronted with fast-moving emergencies. Their jobs entail directing and monitoring operations, setting vision and goals, and implementing strategy to accomplish goals. Nevertheless, organizational leaders are likely to face the need to respond rapidly to unexpected events and uncertain situations, possibly multiple times throughout their careers.

Adaptive responses vary from incremental to framebreaking (Yukl & Mashud, 2010). Incremental changes are likely to be transactional. They may alter the path to a goal over time but maintain the same goal. The need for change stems from feedback (data, observations, communicated information, or opinions) that indicates a process is not working as expected. Incremental change is likely to require some, but not undue, demand on resources, investments, and commitment from stakeholders as processes move toward goal achievement. These decisions are likely to be made by leaders alone or in quick consultation with a few experts or stakeholders, especially if the changes are in response to new regulations or policies or instructions from more senior leaders and an awareness of organizational support. Other personnel may implement the change, but leaders receive credit for the adjustment, especially if it is successful. Or leaders may credit others for making or suggesting the

adjustment. Such changes are not unusual and are likely to be understood and even expected by employees and others involved in or observing the shift.

Transformative decisions and actions redirect vision, goals, and strategies or make major shifts to sustain goal direction in the wake of an unexpected event (Bass, 1990). They change a superordinate goal and establish new, unanticipated paths for goal attainment. The need stems from an unforeseen and major event that serves as feedback indicating that a key vision, mission-driven strategy, or goal cannot be achieved or is not likely to be achieved, or that a new opportunity is possible and could be more fruitful than the current direction.

Quickly made transformative decisions are infrequent and may require substantial resources, investment, risk, and commitment from others as the goal is changed and/or new processes are established. They may require rapid actions to take advantage of resources or market opportunities. Leaders may not have time to consult with experts or stakeholders. The change may be an unanticipated idea, not a direction that was under consideration by leaders as an alternative and previously assessed in consultation with others. Or it may be an alternative that leaders and or others had thought about if not considered deeply or seriously. When the change is made, it is sudden and may fly in the face of what had been ongoing initiatives and goals. Leaders are accountable and will bear the risks, possibly along with other stakeholders including teams or organizations. The results take time to emerge. When the outcomes are successful, stakeholders praise leaders for being adaptive and the leaders may receive extra compensation for the pivot.

Generally, changes in goals and processes are likely to be iterative, with combinations of both transformative and incremental changes. Incremental adjustments may set the stage for more dramatic changes. Rapid changes have more at stake, there is more uncertainty, and they come as unexpected shifts in direction of goal or strategy. Leaders may need to balance continuing processes that work well—are reliable, efficient, and meet objectives—with the need for innovation in the face of emerging threats and opportunities (Kaiser, 2020b; Yukl & Mashud, 2010). Adaptive leaders are open to new goals and strategies and ways of accomplishing them and may need to overcome barriers to change such as others' habits and risk aversion.

The outcome of an unexpected stimulus and leader's response is not necessarily transformation or failure. There is an in-between. Leaders' adaptive response in a crisis may be a change in strategy that sets organizations back on course, restabilizes the situation, avoids further negative outcomes, and creates a predictable next step.

The goal here is to understand the dimensions and their relationships that influence leaders' rapid decisions and actions and leaders' career development. Adaptive behaviors encompass, and may be applications of, different leadership styles in times of crisis—for instance, creating and focusing attention on a

new vision or strategy (transformational leadership), attending to logistics and tactics for accomplishing change (transactional/agentive leadership), empathizing and resolving team members' anxiety and need for guidance (communal/servant leadership), and/or recognizing and responding to changing conditions (situational and behavioral leadership; James et al., 2011; Kulich et al., 2018; Lanaj et al., 2016; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Indeed, a response could be to do nothing and rely on others to carry the ball in the name of team autonomy and participative management (*laissez-faire* leadership; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Skogstad et al., 2014).

Stimuli for Adaptive Leadership

Stimuli that prompt rapid adaptive actions are unexpected and have potentially high costs and benefits, and, as a result, demand a response. The stimulus may be a crisis or opportunity. Whether it is one or the other or both may depend on how it is framed by leaders and whether how it is framed makes a difference in the likelihood of a rapid response. Opportunity may come from a crisis or vice versa. Opportunity and crisis may co-occur and enable each other. A stressor is neutral until it is framed as positive or negative, or simultaneously both positive and negative (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Perhaps negative unexpected events are given more importance and attention by leaders than positive events and thereby increase the perceived need for a rapid response (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979/1988). In any case, an unexpected event is episodic, discontinuous, and intermittent, and if leaders are sufficiently adaptive, the outcome can be transformational. This is in contrast to continuous, evolving, and incremental change (Munduate & Gravenhorst, 2003).

Leaders may make a shift in a goal or strategy when there are signs of impending failure. Such signs include severely negative feedback from customers or other stakeholders (e.g., a faulty product), a major miss in key targets, suddenly diminished resources, or a dramatic advancement in technology by the competition. A possible reaction to such signs may be to hunker down and persist in current courses of action, and even commit more resources to goal accomplishment.

In the case of an opportunity, leaders may perceive a path to being first to market with a new advancement that would be in great demand (e.g., a vaccine) or hear of a new invention or discovery, possibly created by a coworker or leader. Adaptive leaders see a short window of opportunity to take action or lose the advantage. The action may be risky in that it is aimed at major changes that require considerable resources and are not easily reversible. Leaders judge that the rapid response is appropriate—that is, justified and not unduly risky. Leaders who are not adaptive in the face of crisis or opportunity delay action

until a direction with less risk is evident. However, they may realize too late that inaction is risky in that it may increase the negative impact of the crisis or miss an opportunity.

Proposition 1: The stronger the stimulus (the more unexpected and the higher the potential costs or benefits from a crisis or opportunity), the more leaders are likely to respond rapidly.

Leaders' Readiness to Change

Characteristics of leaders may increase the relationship between the strength of the stimulus and adaptive response. These are traits that can be strengthened or weakened over time depending on learned experiences and coaching. Consider three that are likely to affect leaders' expectancy that effort can produce a positive outcome: attention to feedback, bias for action, and sense of power and self-efficacy.

Attention to Goal-Related Feedback

Attention to a goal may be driven by regulatory goal orientation (Higgins, 1998). The goal may be what leaders are expected to accomplish at a particular time by making progress toward a higher order goal. To achieve the lower order goal, leaders may need to change actions or possibly shift the goal in order to achieve the higher order goal. Regular monitoring and feedback with changes when needed lead to faster and better outputs (Barrows & Neely, 2012).

Adaptive action can involve advanced thinking. Likely, adaptive leaders are motivated to learn and examine alternatives while processing feedback about current conditions (Kahneman, 2011). They are open to experience and feedback and have been consistently monitoring progress, examining the environment, and exploring alternatives (Ashford et al., 2016; De Stobbeleir et al., 2020). They recognize and even expect ambiguity and learn from analyzing it (Furnham & Marks, 2013). Leaders may engage in a thought process or actual tests of possible scenarios in consultation with others, trying new courses of action ready to be fully implemented if the situation changes or the time is right for a new direction. A situation may change suddenly and unexpectedly, requiring an immediate response, and adaptive leaders are ready to make decisions and take action quickly. However, a situation calling for adaptive actions may not have been anticipated, and alternatives will not be at the ready, even at a conceptual stage. The crisis or opportunity may stimulate ideas that would not

have occurred to leaders otherwise, yet adaptive leaders recognize the need to enact change quickly.

Proactive Personality

Adaptive leaders have the ability to anticipate problems in advance and act quickly when they occur (Yukl & Mashud, 2010). As such, a personality characteristic that is likely to predict adaptive behavior is a proactive personality or bias for action—a disposition to take initiative and actions toward positive performance, rather than a preference for normality or “wait and see” (Bakker et al., 2012; Baron & Ritov, 2004; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Thompson, 2005). Individuals with a proactive personality seek feedback and undertake challenging tasks (Bakker et al., 2012). Proactive personality induces political skills such as networking and social astuteness (Shi et al., 2011). Characteristics that are likely to be associated with (i.e., supportive of) proactive personality, in addition to attention to feedback, include motivation to learn by going beyond current conditions (DeShon et al., 2004; Major et al., 2006), readiness to experiment to create change (Boyatzis, 1982, 2011; Passarelli & Kolb, 2011), and a performance prove orientation (the desire to prove one’s competence and earn others’ esteem; DeGeest & Brown, 2011; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Proactive leaders are expansive, adaptive learners who explore outside their comfort zone (Dweck, 1999). They engage in self-reflection as they mindfully process feedback and coaching (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021). High in learning goal orientation, they are likely to reframe failures as learning opportunities while keeping a focus on achievement (Senko et al., 2011).

Sense of Power and Self-Efficacy

Adaptive leaders are likely to feel in control. Feeling empowered is a psychological resource. Leaders attain power through achievement as well as dominance (Glasser, 1998; Maner & Case, 2016). Adaptive leaders who feel in control are likely to take risks and tolerate uncertainty (Huangfu, 2014). Also, adaptive leaders have a sense of self-efficacy and internal control—the confidence about being able to accomplish goals (Bandura, 1997). When there is time and leaders and stakeholders are patient, risks and uncertain conditions may be mitigated by a trial pivot before making a commitment that cannot be changed. However, clear feedback and a bias for action, together with a sense of power and self-efficacy, are likely to stimulate leaders to act. Adaptive

leaders are likely to believe in their ability to bring about positive outcomes (Judge et al., 2009). They command the situation, are inquisitive, and see details without losing sight of the higher order goal. Power and risk-seeking become part of leaders' self-identity (Ibarra et al., 2014; Maurer & London, 2018).

Self-justification is an element of power and agentic behavior (Tost, 2015). Adaptive leaders are likely to be mindful of escalating commitment to a particular course of action, especially when an action is failing. Proactive personality may be a boundary condition to escalating commitment. Proactive leaders who sense failure may be likely to seek alternative courses of action and produce them quickly, thereby maintaining their self-concept as in control and successful. Less proactive leaders may see changing course as losing face so they escalate commitment to the failing strategy in hopes of turning it around.

In summary, individual differences that affect leaders' expectancy of a positive outcome increase leaders' tendency to respond rapidly to sudden crises or opportunities. Such characteristics include openness to feedback, a proactive personality, a realization of power, and a sense of self-efficacy.

Proposition 2: The more leaders are open to feedback, have a proactive personality, and have a sense of power and self-efficacy, the higher the relationship between the stimulus (crisis and/or opportunity that is unexpected) and leaders' rapid response.

Organizational Factors That Constrain or Support Adaptive Responses

Path dependencies in organizations—"the way things are done around here"—determine what leaders need to do to initiate a quick response to crises and opportunities. The degree to which leaders are empowered and trusted by their boards, team members, and other stakeholders, internal and external to organizations, is likely to influence how quickly they act.

Path Dependencies

Organizational path dependence theory provides an understanding of how organizations become dependent on goals and modes of behavior that can become impediments to change. Sydow et al. (2009, 2020) conceptualized the development of path dependence and breakouts from these paths. A path is "a rigidified, potentially inefficient action pattern built up by the unintended

consequences of former decisions and positive feedback processes” (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 696). Dependencies happen when an initial set of decisions and actions get rewarded, and habitual paths of behavior form as self-reinforcing processes that gather momentum and become locked into what is essentially a closed feedback loop if there are no external shocks or drastic interruptions. Leaders observe the positive results of their and others’ actions, and they repeat the pattern with one action building on the next. This occurs despite an assumption that organizations operate in fast-moving environments that require flexibility for incremental or even framebreaking change. Sydow et al. (2009) emphasized that path dependence is more than timeworn routines, cognitive rigidities, or structural inertia. Despite possible inefficiencies, the paths are enabled by sustainable competitive advantages and resources that include leadership capabilities. Sydow et al. (2009) described ways to break path dependencies such as restoring choice and recognizing other alternatives, at least one of which is better than the current path, and involving stakeholders in emergency discussions to observe what is happening and brainstorming alternative actions. Adaptive leaders are likely to recognize these dependencies as constraints on rapid actions and work hard to overcome them, especially when leaders feel strongly that change is necessary. However, adaptive leaders might fail if the resources are not present. Leaders who possess adaptive characteristics might not be able to be adaptive in an environment that is strongly against change. If they do not succeed in disrupting organizations’ culture, they may seek a position that is more receptive to their leadership, thereby removing themselves from these dependencies.

Proposition 3a: Path dependencies constrain adaptive action. The stronger (more rigid) the path dependencies and the stronger the stimulus for change, the more adaptive leaders will exert personal energy (e.g., spend time and make forceful arguments with stakeholders) and organizational resources (e.g., change executives, invest in new ventures or operations) to break these dependencies in order to effect rapid change. When leaders fail to break dependencies, they are likely to withdraw from their position.

Empowerment and Trust

Empowerment and trust are integral to the role of leader. The source of empowerment may be the board of directors, the CEO or other executives or managers who delegate authority to leaders. Position power provides support for responsible action (Williams et al., 2022). This includes voice to explain and justify (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Coleman, 2009). Leaders are

also likely to have earned idiosyncrasy credits based on past accomplishments (i.e., legitimate and referent power; [Hollander, 2013](#)). Stakeholders give them the benefit of the doubt, giving the leaders more leeway to act quickly.

Trust is the basis for empowerment, the “willingness ... to be vulnerable to the actions of others based on the expectation that they will perform a particular important action, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control performance” ([Mayer et al., 1995](#), p. 712). Leaders who are trusted are likely to expect fewer negative consequences or reprisals for adaptive decisions and actions, which in turn allows more room for innovation ([Frazier et al., 2017](#)). Leaders’ trustworthiness could be a powerful persuasive tool to make it easier for them to convince others to shift.

Leaders might create a rapid shift without external provocation. This could be a product of leaders’ forward thinking and self-confidence in their insights and willingness to take risks. Some risks and crises are predictable given particular antecedents that others might miss. Leaders who do not feel empowered and sense they are losing their control may be too cautious and unwilling to generate potentially valuable change ([Kaiser et al., 2015](#)). Essentially, leaders who feel empowered, trusted, and influential are likely to take action, possibly unilaterally, using organizations’ resources to best advantage, at least until which time the leaders are held accountable and called to explain decisions and outcomes.

Proposition 3b: The more leaders are empowered, trusted, and influential, the more they are likely to respond quickly to unexpected events.

Outcomes of Adaptive Leadership

The outcome of a rapid, major shift in goals or strategies can have a transformative effect on organizations or can restabilize it. However, the adaptive action or decision may fail, or at least not live up to leaders’ promises or organizations’ expectations. Depending on the degree of empowerment, support, and time span of discretion leaders enjoy, stakeholders (e.g., executives who are at higher levels in organizations) may give leaders time to test the new direction before more distal outcomes are realized. However, if the shift does not produce positive outcomes, credit for past accomplishments only goes so far, and leaders are likely to suffer the consequences. The stakeholders may second-guess leaders’ decisions, perhaps attributing mistakes to rapid, misguided, and/or self-centered judgment. In any case, the gains and losses from the shift are likely to be analyzed. Costs may be wasted resources or opportunities lost. There may also be the cost of implementation; for instance,

retooling, hiring new talent, or laying off people who lack the needed knowledge or skills.

Proposition 4: Adaptive actions will be related to accomplishing positive outcomes, avoidance of failure and mistakes, new path dependencies, and analysis of gains and losses.

Leaders' and Organizations' Capacity

Leaders' Capacity

Leaders' intelligence, training, and experience are likely to affect leaders' ability to be successful in implementing rapid change. Heifetz et al. (2009) described adaptive leadership as the ability to diagnose, design, and implement organizational systems to meet challenges and create change through formal and informal means.

Yukl and Mashud (2010) described leaders' skills and behaviors for flexibility and adaptation that are essential to change behavior in ways that are appropriate to the situation. How leaders make appropriate changes in strategies and tactics to handle an immediate crisis is an indication of leaders' flexibility. Behaviors and skills indicating flexibility include

the ability to anticipate problems in advance, the ability to quickly but accurately identify the reasons for a problem, decisiveness in responding to immediate problems (rather than denying them or delaying in the hope they will go away), being proactive in planning how to avoid problems, making contingency plans to minimize effects of unavoidable problems, and confidently leading others in a collective response to a crisis. (Yukl & Mashud, 2010, p. 86)

Yukl and Mashud (2010) called for increased attention to leader characteristics and processes that determine the extent to which leaders are strategic thinkers who are able to identify and accomplish changes and act quickly in line with current or new strategic direction in line with shifting conditions.

Adaptive leaders need to be versatile to respond quickly to unforeseen events. Versatile leaders have a wide repertoire of complementary perspectives, skills, and behaviors (Kaiser, 2020b). This enables them to be at once forceful, enabling, strategic, and operational. Kaiser (2020b) found that versatile leaders oversaw teams that were more adaptive, productive, and effective. A similar characteristic is agility—the ability to handle a wide range of fast-moving, volatile, and uncertain environments (Iacocca & Witney, 2007; König, 2019) and the ability to apply a full range of leadership behaviors (cf. Antonakis & House, 2013; Dartey-Baah, 2015).

Proposition 5: The more capable the leader (e.g., versatile, ability to manage uncertainty and complexity), the higher the relationship between the adaptive actions and their implementation to achieve positive outcomes.

Organizational Capacity

Leaders' decision to adapt, and judgment about why the change will be successful, is likely based on the available resources and collaborators. This perception is embedded in leaders' feeling of power and support that increase the relationships between the stimulus and the adaptive action. Ultimately, the success of the action will require that resources (labor, finances, capital) be available and that stakeholders are willing to support the decision and work toward its success.

The capabilities and support of other leaders and team members in organizations (e.g., top management teams) will influence leaders' decision to respond rapidly. Attitudes of key participants and stakeholders about an organizational change, especially a change that is rapid, transformational, and leader-driven, is likely to affect the degree of support in organizations or work groups. Work groups' attitudes become a compilation of members' perspectives, some of whom may be aligned with their leader (the "in group" of those who have a close leader-member relationship) and others in disagreement (the "out group"; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Members essentially negotiate the shared understanding of the initiative—the nature of the problem, the solution, and underlying motivations. Ultimately, the resulting attitudes among group members could facilitate the change or hamper it.

Proposition 6: The more group and organization members' attitudes form a shared understanding of, and support for, the leader's response to a major unexpected event, the higher the relationship between the adaptive actions and positive outcomes.

How Outcomes Influence Capacity and Leaders' Reputation and Self-Identity

Positive outcomes are likely to increase leaders' and organizations' capacity for rapid action. Leaders will have had experience in analyzing and responding to situations quickly. Although situations will vary, leaders will have acquired analytic and interpersonal skills that apply in difficult

situations or opportunities that call for rapid action. The challenge for leaders will be to understand situational differences and not develop a tendency for rash action without foundation. Leaders may be adaptive, but whether they are successful adaptive leader or not depends on the outcomes and what they learn from them. Likely, adaptive leaders, even those who are truly successful, will not be able to avoid failure or mistakes entirely. They may be prone to reframe those losses in more positive terms for others and in their own minds. The more they are open to feedback and learning, the more they will learn new strategies for avoiding loss.

Organizations, too, will have learned how to respond rapidly in adapting systems and structures that can be applied in the future.

Proposition 7: There will be a positive relationship between outcomes of rapid action and leaders' and organizations' capacity to adapt in the future.

Outcomes will also influence leaders' self-identity. A successful shift in goals or strategies is likely to reinforce leaders' ego and sense of self as adaptive—able to make rapid decisions, effect major change, take advantage of a significant opportunity, and/or avoid a major loss. Explained in terms of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), if leaders had some self-doubt before, their success likely moves their actual self closer to an ideal self (what they want to be) or ought self (the way they believe they ought to behave in the future).

Outcomes will also influence leaders' reputation. Stakeholders look back at the decision and outcomes to attribute the adjective “adaptive” perhaps believing they would have predicted this all along (hindsight bias; Roese & Vohs, 2012). Stakeholders may ascribe other superlatives, labeling leaders as “brilliant,” “quick minded,” and “risk takers.”

Leaders and stakeholders will reflect on the lessons learned. However, lessons may not easily apply to future career situations. Major opportunities and the shifts they require are likely to be infrequent. Yet the label of “adaptive” may give leaders confidence for fast action. This may also help leaders be adaptive in refining tactics. Leaders who were not successful may be given credit for trying or may experience slower career advancement than they expected.

Leaders have the advantage of being able to frame the outcome of a change and attribute causes, for instance, explaining the rationale, expressing what organizations (and leaders) learned, and accepting consequences. Leaders and supportive stakeholders can reinforce the label “adaptive,” reinforcing the leaders' influence on stakeholders given inevitable future uncertainties that give rise to crises and opportunities. These experiences and effects are likely to influence leaders' readiness to implement rapid change and organizations' readiness to accept it in the future.

Consider what may happen when there are several unexpected events one after another. Leaders may build a tolerance for risk and ambiguity over time after repeated exposures to unexpected events (Kahneman & Tversky, 1988). These may become evolving changes that are perceived as incremental (Munduate & Gravenhorst, 2003). Leaders may be more willing to shift lower order goals, adjust higher order goals, and see themselves as agents of change with the power to overcome barriers and be proactive. They may conceptualize sudden crises or unexpected opportunities differently, acting rapidly with less stress and a greater sense of control. Organizations may become inured to rapid change and be ready to accept it. A question would be whether leaders have the time to develop the capacity to implement rapid change and whether organizations' systems develop the flexibility to adapt (become "learning organizations," Senge, 1990).

Proposition 8: There will be a positive relationship between outcomes of rapid adaptive actions and leaders' reputation and self-identity as adaptive.

Proposition 8a: The more mistakes are evident and losses are incurred from unexpected, rapid, self-initiated shifts in goals or strategies, the more leaders will be held accountable for damages and will not be inclined to engage in adaptive actions in the future when crises and opportunities emerge suddenly.

Proposition 9: There will be a positive relationship between leader's reputation and self-identity as adaptive and leaders' readiness to implement rapid change and organizations' readiness to accept it in the future.

Discussion

The incremental value of the model of adaptive leadership is to integrate theory-based dimensions and processes that predict conditions for leaders' adapting in response to crises and opportunities. The model predicts that leaders will initiate change when they are mindful of feedback, focused on higher level goals, have a bias for action, and feel empowered, and when they are not hampered by existing path dependencies. Outcomes are more likely to be successful when organizations' resources and collaborators are willing and supportive and leaders have the ability to be versatile and exert influence. Successful outcomes are transformational shifts in goals and strategies, regaining momentum, and avoiding negative events that might have occurred if leaders have not acted quickly. Successful adaptive action reinforces

leaders' self-image and reputation as adaptive and breeds future adaptive action. Mistakes from rapid judgments may become clear and be avoided in the future.

More than one study will be needed to test the propositions, and qualitative exploration can shape quantitative measurement. A place to start would be to examine adaptive actions and collect information about opportunities or crises that led up to them along with characteristics of the leaders and degree of support within and outside organizations. Longitudinal quantitative research can test the propositions by measuring characteristics of leaders and situational conditions correlating them with later measures of leaders' willingness to institute rapid actions in response to crises and opportunities.

Research can investigate whether there are differences in how positive and negative unexpected events are framed by leaders and responses perceived in organizations. Leaders may be more inclined to create rapid responses to opportunities than crises, perhaps unless the response requires a huge transformational shift in higher order goals. In other words, leaders may be more inclined to make rapid decisions in response to opportunities than crises, but not if the response means a major transition in the mission of organizations.

Examples of adaptive decisions and behaviors can be collected and coded with information about leaders' characteristics, situational conditions, and outcomes. Leaders and situations can be studied as events unfold (e.g., a market meltdown, a pandemic, a discovery, or new technology) to understand paths to positive outcomes from rapid adaptive leadership. This may lead to rich areas for research that are less well understood. In particular, research can focus on the extent to which leaders are willing to change lower order goals and what sorts of stimuli it takes for them to alter higher order goals.

The nature of organizational factors that support or constrain rapid action can be studied along with how leaders address them, recognize and break path dependencies, and draw on power and trust dynamics to initiate and reinforce new dependencies.

Longitudinal research can test the feedback loop from the effects of outcomes to the development of leaders' and organizations' readiness, capacity, and reputation to adapt in the future.

Examples of multiple sudden crises and/or opportunities in quick succession could be studied to determine whether the number and strength of stimuli become boundary conditions for leaders' rapid actions. Leaders who in the past acted quickly and succeeded may reach a limit for developing a stronger sense of power and willingness to change higher order goals. Organizations may reach a limit for accepting rapid change. In other words, when does too rapid and too drastic change produce dysfunction and leader derailment?

In addition to implications for research, the concepts and processes suggest directions for practice, particularly ideas for career coaches and counselors for

after-action reviews with leaders. A question for coaching and leader development is whether leaders are capable of diagnosing the environment and anticipating needs correctly based on feedback. Could a sudden decision or action be counterproductive if something else would be more effective? As the model suggests, leaders who are more ready to initiate change are likely to be more coachable, and successful experiences in accomplishing change are likely to increase leaders' readiness to change in the future.

Leaders can learn to recognize early warning signs of an impending crisis and avoid a tendency to ignore or discount such warning signs (Kaiser, 2020a). When they take adaptive action, they act confidently and decisively but keep people informed and remain receptive to information and ideas they may have overlooked. They can assess whether their rapid response to a crisis is consistent with organizations' core values. They can formulate contingency plans for possible crises. They can hold after-action reviews to identify what they did well, what mistakes were made, and what lessons they learned.

A practical step for research and practice would be to develop assessment devices to do the following:

1. Characterize the stimuli: The nature of the crisis or opportunity, its suddenness and leaders' perceptions of potential costs and benefits at the time it occurred.
2. Analyze leaders' actions: How quickly leaders responded, the outcome leaders intended, leaders' recognition of path dependencies.
3. Assess leaders' readiness to initiate change: Leaders' openness to feedback, proactive bias, need for achievement, feeling empowered, and sense of self-efficacy. Consider that possible disparities in power due to gender, minority status, or age may have constrained leaders from taking more forceful action to initiate change or avoiding change altogether.
4. Examine organizations' readiness to accept and reward the change: Path dependencies that made leaders reticent to take action or that shaped leaders' actions to unlock them, policies and role structures that gave leaders power, and internal and external stakeholders' voice of trust in leaders.
5. Examine organizations' capacity: Their ability to absorb the change and leaders' capabilities to communicate, motivate, and direct the change. Consider the compilation of attitudes toward the change and the extent to which a shared attitude emerged or failed to emerge. Identify champions who collaborated with leaders. Identify active resisters and/or passive resisters and how they affected the transformation's success or lack thereof.

6. Assess favorability of outcomes: Timely and successful transformation, momentum regained, problems avoided because the transformation was initiated, mistakes made because of rapidity of action, costs and benefits, ethics of the decision (e.g., changes do not hinder or take advantage of others' good will), and possible emergence of new path dependencies that might have facilitated outcomes of the response but may hinder future rapid shifts in goals and strategies.
7. Determine leaders' current self-perceptions: The extent to which they feel able to be adaptive and the extent to which they feel that stakeholders recognize and appreciate their adaptive action. Examine how leaders handled accountability for lack of success and leaders' ability to frame results and attribute positive or negative outcomes to themselves or others.

The model has implications for leader assessment, selection, and development in relation to organizational needs. It addresses the conditions under which organizations want adaptive leaders, for instance, in the event of a product failure or other crisis. An organization may prefer leaders who are stable, who stick to the vision and tried-and-true methods for organizational stability. Overall, organizations may appreciate and support leaders who seek clear feedback, have a proactive personality, are ready to take rapid action without being stymied by uncertainty anxiety, and recognize the breadth of their decision-making power. They want to guard against leaders who are too ready to take risks, as well as create compensation policies that reward short-term fixes without considering their long-term impact.

Once being "adaptive" is incorporated into organizations' desired leader profile, a range of assessments of adaptive leadership potential are possible in order to evaluate prospective leaders' career potential (Collins & Hartog, 2011). Records of past behavior would be a good indicator—situations that allowed leaders to demonstrate adaptive decisions and behaviors. Personality measures can be used to predict adaptive leadership. Such measures may include feedback-seeking behavior, mindfulness, proactive personality, self-efficacy, and internal control. Simulations can be used to assess candidates under different scenarios that call for adaptive leadership, for instance, responses to scenarios regarding current mission and reactions to possible failure or gain. Leaders can be evaluated and rewarded on the speed, initiative, self-direction, and reliance on organizations' strengths in response to changing conditions.

Leaders who have an exaggerated sense of power can be prompted by career counselors and coaches to develop self-regulatory strategies to avoid unnecessary and rash actions that are induced by these characteristics. Kaiser et al. (2015) pointed out ways to accomplish this. Managers and coaches of these leaders can provide feedback, discuss with leaders their implicit mental models

of interpersonal interactions and performance expectations, highlight faulty assumptions and emotional hot-buttons, and point out self-defeating behaviors that have not worked well in the past, or that might have but would no longer be adaptive. Leaders can practice considering if-then contingencies to generate more constructive alternatives. In addition, they can learn to be cognizant of and avoid self-protective behaviors that were acquired under stress and reinforced through habitual uses.

In conclusion, managers and scholars of management often use the term “adaptive” glibly as a desirable characteristic of leaders, especially when tough situations arise and leaders take rapid action toward transformational change. Situations can be evaluated to determine the value of adaptive responses. Research testing the propositions from the model can guide the assessment and development of prospective and current leaders for future adaptive leadership and their learning to improve their ability to adapt.

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