

# What Is the Adaptive Leadership Style and Why Is It Important?

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7 min read



In the modern era, the business landscape undergoes rapid changes seemingly almost every day. From the pivots required by the pandemic lockdowns to the dawning of new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and the growing fears of an economic recession, businesses today have been and will continue to be challenged to undergo and survive change. Big challenges, such as these, require that a business change and adapt in order to survive.

## Key Takeaways

- **Adaptive leadership:** What sets the adaptive leadership framework apart from other leadership styles is the emphasis on rethinking the status quo when challenging times make...
- **The Adaptive Leadership Model:** These actions should be taken while maintaining (or improving) the organization's values and core beliefs. The adaptive leadership model is comprised of three key determinates...
- **Adaptive Leadership Theory:** With unprecedented employee turnover rates of the Great Resignation, hiring challenges, and a probable, impending economic recession looming, adopting a resilient leadership style that leverages every advantage is...

In their books *Leadership Without Easy Answers* [1] and *Leadership on the Line* [2], ideas posited by the authors, Harvard professors, and leadership experts, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, assert that regular top-down leadership simply doesn't cut it when challenging times call for adaptive change. In these times, it is necessary for business leaders, instead, to adopt a new [leadership style](#), and that's adaptive leadership.

## What Is Adaptive Leadership?

Adaptive leadership is a leadership style designed to provide a framework that promotes both organizational and individual adaptation and success in challenging times and environments.

What sets the adaptive leadership framework apart from other leadership styles is the emphasis on rethinking the status quo when challenging times make "business as usual" obsolete.

Additionally, adaptive leadership focuses on distributing leadership opportunities throughout an organization. While the CEO ultimately makes the big decisions, a CEO with an adaptive leadership style keeps their core values strong while remaining open to new ideas that can come from anywhere inside or outside of the organization [3].

# The Adaptive Leadership Model

The adaptive leadership model requires [business leaders](#) to recognize and diagnose problems, interrupt and challenge the status quo, and innovate for positive change. These actions should be taken while maintaining (or improving) the organization's values and core beliefs. The adaptive leadership model is comprised of three key determinates [4]:

## 1. Precious vs. Expendable

Like a phoenix, irrelevant ideas in a business must burn before they can be rebirthed from the ashes. So, the first step in the adaptive leadership framework is to determine what aspects of your business need to change. In other words, what processes, procedures, tools, relationships, or values are worth keeping and which aren't? If a current aspect of your business is hindering your success or no longer serving your organization, then it's time to eliminate it while welcoming new opportunities, ideas, and systems.

## 2. Experimentation and Smart Risks

During this phase of adaptive leadership, a business leader should focus on encouraging creativity and directing innovation in the organization. Throughout this phase of experimenting with new ideas and systems, it's important not to lose sight of the company's values and goals.

This phase includes much experimentation, and that comes with inevitable failures. Operating with an adaptive leadership style, however, means that the leaders and [people](#) in the organization learn from the [mistakes](#) and challenges faced during this stage, recognizing them as parts of a necessary path to success.

## 3. Disciplined Assessment

Once the smartest risks (i.e. new approaches, processes, procedures, tools, technology, or people) have been identified, they should be implemented and integrated into the business and its operations. This, however, should not happen until processes have been put in place for measuring the success of the modifications and the new aspects of the business. Measuring success is important so that further changes, adjustments, and adaptations can be made to continuously improve the system.

## Being a Leader vs. Being a Manager

[Sarah Sentes](#), managing partner at [Manager Tools](#), shares strategies for, not just successful management, but successful leadership.

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# 4 Principles of Adaptive Leadership

## 1. Emotional Intelligence

Any kind of successful leadership cannot be based on logic alone; it also relies on emotion. Adaptive leadership requires a high level of emotional intelligence. This emotional intelligence enables a leader to hold onto their values while remaining open to feedback and new ideas. It helps them manage a team comprised entirely of potential leaders while coaching them to work together toward innovative solutions. Emotional intelligence helps to keep the team closely bound while establishing relationships based on trust and respect.

## 2. Organizational Justice

In a business that's being led with an adaptive leadership style, every individual has a voice and a spot in the conversation. As a result, clear communication that ensures everyone feels heard and is heard is essential. Additionally, leaders must be prepared to take ultimate responsibility for the impacts of the changes that are implemented – no matter whose idea the change was initially.

## 3. Research and Development

Adaptive leadership is based on adaptation, and that means change. For this leadership style to succeed, changes must only come after developing ideas and researching properly. It's important to make decisions based on data, facts, and science.

Additionally, leaders using this framework also need to continue improving and developing their own leadership skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, and business acumen.

To cultivate an adaptive workplace culture, business leaders must be able to welcome learning and embrace innovation throughout the company and at every level of the org chart.

**Read More:** [6 Leadership Styles- Which One Is Best For Your Business?](#)

## 4. Integrity

Strength of character is vital for an adaptive leader. Your [employees](#) need to trust and respect that you're leading them with the best intentions for the business and everyone in it. Your actions, choices, and behaviors need to match the values you claim in order to build and maintain this trust.

# Adaptive Leadership Theory: Why This Leadership Style Matters

With unprecedented employee turnover rates of the Great Resignation, hiring challenges, and a probable, impending economic recession looming, adopting a resilient leadership style that leverages every advantage is imperative to the survival of a business operating in today's climate. Through its principles of welcoming feedback and ideas, learning from mistakes, and innovating intelligently and intentionally, the adaptive leadership style poises a business to nimbly take advantage of all its resources and potential leaders – no matter where they might be listed on the org chart.

## When to Use Adaptive Leadership in Your SMB: Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Problems

Knowing when to implement an adaptive leadership style in your business is key to making the most of this leadership style. In order to do this, a business leader needs to understand the difference between technical and adaptive problems because the adaptive leadership style is, as you might guess, most conducive to solving adaptive challenges.

### Technical Problems

Technical problems arise regularly. They're the day-to-day issues we're most accustomed to facing and solving. Although a technical problem might not be an easy fix every time, they are problems that you can recognize, understand, and already have the people and tools necessary for solving them. Technical problems are often compared to fires that need to be put out. The problem is obvious, as is its solution.

**Read More:** [Upgrade Your Management: 5 Steps to Establishing Effective Leadership Teams](#)

### Adaptive Problems

Conversely, adaptive problems are unlike fires, resembling complicated knots that to be untangled. Adaptive problems tend not to be obvious or easily definable. They also do not usually have simple solutions. In fact, adaptive problems might only reveal themselves when you've repeatedly failed to solve what you thought was a technical problem.

## Practicing Adaptive Leadership for Business Growth

As you apply the adaptive leadership framework to your business and use it to implement new [strategies](#), solutions, processes, tools, ideas, innovations, and procedures, you'll want to ensure your back office is set up and ready to run so that you'll be able to collect the necessary data and track the proper metrics to measure the success of the fruits of your new leadership style.

By outsourcing the back office, an SMB can afford to access an experienced team while also taking advantage of the latest tools and technology. This can help you automate back-office processes, readily generate reliable financial reports, and learn to lead adaptively with data-driven decisions.

[1] <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674518582>

[2]

<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/leadership-on-the-line-staying-alive-through-the-dangers-of-leading>

[3] <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/what-adaptive-leadership2101.html#close>

[4] <https://cambridge-leadership.com/adaptive-leadership/>