

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Implementation Guide



KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE: Engagement in public health activities that aim to prevent, protect against, quickly respond to, and recover from public health emergencies.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: Mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive amid change.

TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP: Refers to the ability to solve clearly defined problems using established expertise, procedures, and authority.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGE: A clearly defined problem with a known solution that can be addressed through existing expertise or authority.

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE: A complex issue that requires new learning, behavior change, or shifts in values.

GUARDRAILS: Boundaries, norms, or structures that help maintain productive tension and psychological safety while individuals and teams navigate complex, adaptive challenges.

WORKFORCE CAPACITY: The collective ability of an organization's people to effectively respond, adapt, and lead amid complexity and change. It goes beyond technical skills or staffing numbers — it encompasses the adaptive capacity of the workforce.

CONFLICT: The productive tension that surfaces when differing perspectives, values, or interests collide during efforts to adapt to change. It must be regulated—not suppressed—to enable learning and progress.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: A climate where people feel safe to speak up without fear of ridicule or punishment.

DISCIPLINED ATTENTION: The ability to stay focused on adaptive work even amid uncertainty or competing priorities.

ROUND-ROBIN / I-2-ALL Structured facilitation techniques that broaden participation and ensure inclusion.

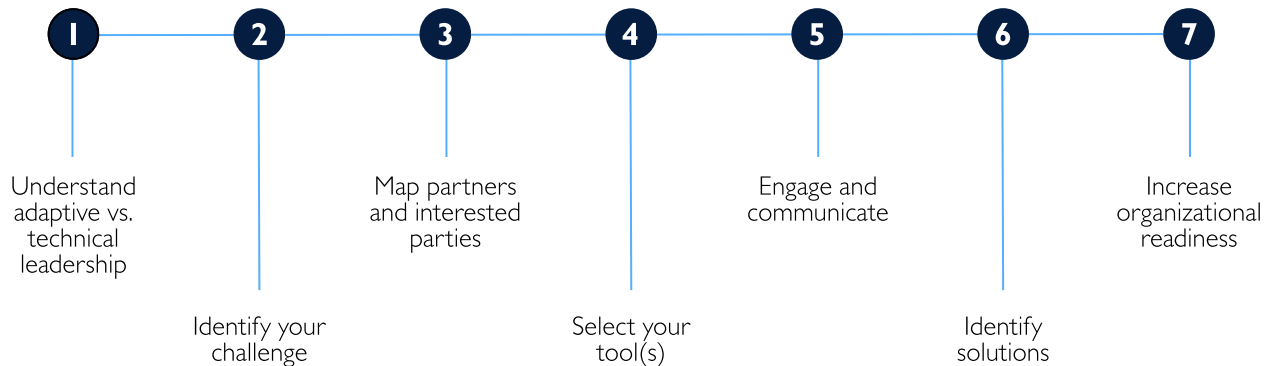


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TAKE STEPS TO ENHANCE ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP



1. UNDERSTAND ADAPTIVE VS. TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP

Understanding adaptive versus technical leadership involves discerning whether a challenge can be addressed through existing expertise or requires new learning and collaboration. Technical challenges have clear solutions that can be resolved through established procedures or formal authority, whereas adaptive challenges entail uncertainty, evolving values, and behavior changes that must be navigated collectively.

2. IDENTIFY YOUR CHALLENGE

For public health leaders, technical challenges involve well-defined problems with known solutions, such as updating protocols or repairing systems. In contrast, adaptive challenges are complex and rooted in people's values, behaviors, and relationships; for example, rebuilding trust, addressing burnout, or strengthening community resilience. These challenges require learning, collaboration, and shifts in how people think and work. Effective leaders recognize when a challenge is adaptive and engage others in addressing it, rather than relying solely on technical fixes. Other examples of technical and adaptive challenges include:



- Technical**
- ⚙️ Electronic record downtime
 - ⚙️ Data interoperability
 - ⚙️ Treating disease
 - ⚙️ Distributing supplies
 - ⚙️ Setting up a shelter

- Adaptive**
- ⚙️ Evolving attitudes of the public
 - ⚙️ Conflict in the workforce
 - ⚙️ Morale
 - ⚙️ Building trust in public health
 - ⚙️ Building cross-sector teams across agencies

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3. MAP PARTNERS AND INTERESTED PARTIES

Adaptive leadership helps public health leaders figure out who's most affected by a challenge and who needs to be part of the solution. By mapping and engaging partners to understand their values, interests, and influence, leaders can better navigate alignment and conflict. Tools such as partner analysis grids, influence-interest maps, and network diagrams help visualize relationships and determine who should be involved, informed, or supported. This structured approach fosters collaboration, builds trust, and ensures that diverse perspectives shape solutions that are sustainable, equitable, and effective.

4. SELECT YOUR TOOL(S)



Get on the Balcony: Step back from day-to-day activity to observe patterns, relationships, and dynamics before acting.



Regulate Distress: Maintain a productive level of tension by normalizing discomfort, pacing the work, and fostering psychological safety.



Give the Work Back: Empower others to take responsibility for generating solutions and implementing change.



Protect Voices from Below: Create space for diverse and marginalized perspectives to enhance learning and innovation.



Use Systems Thinking: Explore your challenge's broader context. An **Iceberg Analysis** can reveal underlying trends, systems, and beliefs beneath visible organizational problems. A **5 Whys** exercise can diagnose the root cause of a problem by repeatedly asking 'why' until the core issue emerges.



Be Reflective: Pause periodically to reflect on what's working, what's not, and why. Consider how team dynamics are evolving.



Facilitate for Enacting Change: Use structured discussion formats, such as round-robins or time-boxed debates, to sustain focus on adaptive work.

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5. ENGAGE AND COMMUNICATE

Adaptive leadership hinges on clear and flexible communication. To achieve this, it is essential to understand your team's skills, roles, and responsibilities, as well as shared values and priorities. Communication efforts should also extend beyond your immediate team to include organizational partners and interested parties. This broader engagement may introduce conflicting priorities, such as differing agency mandates, competition for limited resources, or varying risk communication strategies. These should be acknowledged, understood and maneuvered as they arise to reach compromises that sustain workflow and relationships, particularly as a crisis situation evolves. Tools like the Prevention Institute's **Collaboration Multiplier** can be useful in working with coalitions and teams to find multi-pronged, synergistic solutions.

6. IDENTIFY SOLUTIONS

Adaptive leadership tools help organizations develop practical, situation-specific solutions by engaging those most directly affected by a problem. Leaders can begin by distinguishing which aspects of an issue can be solved through existing procedures and which require new ways of thinking or working together. Techniques such as structured team discussions, testing small changes before wider implementation, and continuous feedback from staff and partners help reveal what works in the organization's environment. By using these approaches, leaders can guide their teams to create solutions that are realistic, supported by partners, and effective within their organizational setting.

7. INCREASE ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Adaptive leadership thrives in organizations that allow for it. Maximize individual skills and increase organizational capacity by:

- ✔ Creating a culture that values continued learning
- ✔ Encouraging increased self-efficacy among teams
- ✔ Ensuring flexible resource mobilization to allow adaptive leadership approaches
- ✔ Developing processes and structures that embrace adaptive principles

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- IV. 5 Whys: A team activity developed by Sakichi Toyoda as part of the Toyota Production System. It aims to identify root causes of a problem. <https://gamestorming.com/the-5-whys/>
- V. Collaboration Multiplier: Prevention Institute. <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/tools/collaboration-multiplier>



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