



Intentionally Building Agility and Adaptability in School Leadership Post Conference Activities

Dr Venesser Fernandes
Monash University

National Education Summit 2022

What is Adaptability?

Part One

Adaptability defined...

The Cambridge dictionary defines adaptability as the **ability or willingness to change** in order to **suit different conditions, [factors or environments]**.

Adaptability at work involves skills in “**responding quickly to changing ideas, responsibilities, expectations, trends, strategies and other processes**. Possessing soft skills like **interpersonal skills, communication, creative thinking and problem-solving** are appreciated. Being adaptable can be important when working on **projects, developing strategies and implementing different approaches to meeting goals**”.

Activity: Schools today are concentrating on developing these skillsets in their people. Consider how this can be done at your school. Discuss it together in the leadership team as well as in curriculum teams.

What is Adaptive Leadership?

- Schools having been facing for some time **volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous circumstances**.
- Recently coming out of multiple lockdowns, has made school stakeholders **adapt and pivot themselves to dealing with change more willingly**.
- Adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) allows people to recognize that problems that require change may be of two types: **technical problems and adaptive problems**.
- Different types of approaches are required for the two.
- Technical problems can be complex but **they do have solutions that can be undertaken, policies to scaffold them, and, processes to work towards solutions that are known**. People have experienced them in the past and can work on them in a known space of change. They are less ambiguous.
- Adaptive problems are unknown problems that need **new thinking, new skillsets, new approaches** to address them. They take time and effort and are worked upon in a **productive zone of disequilibrium**. The solutions are unlikely linear, and introduce times where members need to confront their ideas, beliefs, and behaviours.

Activity: As a team work out what are the biggest hurdles and constraints that you are facing at school this year. Which of these are technical problems? Which of these are adaptive problems? Which ones are to be picked up this year (Short term plan), next year or the year after (Long term plans)

Using an Adaptive Leadership Approach?

Activity: Consider whether you are working on a technical or an adaptive problem. If it is a technical problem you already know what needs to be done because you've addressed this problem before. However, if it is an adaptive problem then there are certain characteristics that are required in times of productive stress caused due to change while addressing this problem.

Consider the following as a team as you build up an adaptive team to address the adaptive problem that you are wanting to work on.

1. Being **open to change and to taking risks**. What risks are going to be undertaken in your long short-term planning as you work on this adaptive problem?
2. Being **willing to try out new and novel ways of thinking and doing** and likewise giving up on old ways that aren't working like they once did. Identify what practices need to be removed and what practices need to be introduced?
3. Being **resilient and acceptable that mistakes can be made**. Using a growth mindset what new skills need to be acquired by the staff? What resources are available in terms of time, physical resources and human resources?
4. Being **reflective in individual as well as collective spheres**. How will you develop spaces for intentional reflective thinking amongst members of the team? Where can these reflective processes be recognized and given voice and agency for e.g. developing meeting times for the team to work together and to work individually within assigned working hours?
5. Being able to make **informed decisions and practice distributed leadership** at all levels. How will you develop distributed leadership roles and have role clarity ensured? How will it be inclusive to ensure that there is a wide representation and not a nominal representation of stakeholders who are impacted by the decisions being made?

What is Agility?

Part Two

Agility defined...

The Cambridge dictionary defines being agile as the **ability to move quickly and easily; and, to think and understand quickly and clearly.**

Agility involves people in “**ways of planning and doing work in which it is understood that making changes as they are needed is an important part of the job**”.

Activity: Have a discussion together and discuss where you feel your school is agile, needs to be agile and does not need to be agile. Explain to each other why this is the case. People often think agility needs to be exercised in everything at the same time. That is not the case! That will overwhelm the people in the roles that they are undertaking. Agility needs to be intentionally designed and mapped out in some spaces not everywhere.

Organisational Agility is ...

Organisational agility, is “the ability of an organisation to environmental change and respond efficiently change” Plumber and McCoy (2006, p.1).

sense or create
and effectively to that

Desouza (2006) offers four essential qualities for determining if an organisation is agile:
“Being agile will result in the ability to:

1. sense signals in the environment,
2. process them adequately,
3. mobilise resources and processes to take advantage of future opportunities, and
4. continuously learn and improve the operations of the organisation (p. xiii).”

Activity: Organisational agility works in opposition to organisational bureaucracy since power is distributed across the organisation to self-managing teams. What practices at your school can disable the productive agile and adaptive work that you are doing? How will you mitigate this so it doesn't undo the work being envisioned?

Agile Leadership is thought to be...

- Agile leadership maintains that **leaders require certain characteristics and competencies to thrive in complex environments** (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).
- According to Akkaya and Yazici (2020), there are six agile characteristics needed in workplaces today: **collaboration, self-awareness, proficiency, flexibility, an ability to change, and quickness.**
- **Agile schools have agile leaders who are self-reflective, open-minded, optimistic, resilient, empathetic, collaborative and creative.**

Activity: How will you allow agile leaders to work at your school? Is the agility to be something that is permanently exercised or is it functionally exercised and based on the adaptive problem that is being addressed? Agility is always something that is seen after an adaptive system is put in place.

Agile Leadership is thought to be...

The essence of agile leadership is creating the right environment for self-managing teams.

Koning (2019), defines four areas of action for agile leadership to take place:

1. **Co-create the goals** – Consider how your teams can work with the leader at co-creating goals together? How do these goals then become translated upwards to form a part of the main goals for the school in a given year?
2. **Facilitate Ownership** – Consider how you can as a leader create an educational environment in which your self-managing teams can grow in agile ways? What kinds of agile processes can these teams take ownership of while addressing their part of the adaptive problem that they are working on?
3. **Learn faster** – While working on an adaptive problem, there are some skills that the teams will need to learn quickly while others will take time. What are these skills? Who will be responsible for ensuring that the skills are improved and put into practice? The leader in such situations promotes learning from experiments and failures, and gives timely feedback on team actions and on their decisions, allowing the teams to continue to grow.
4. **Design the culture** – Consider how the agile leader will need to envision, design and improve the culture of the organisation while involving the self-managing teams in their contributions towards addressing the adaptive problem?

What is the link between Agility and Adaptability?

Part Three

Relational Leadership is thought to be...

1. Komives et al. (1998) suggest that **leadership is a relational and ethical process of [bringing] people together [while] attempting to accomplish positive change**. It considers that relationships are created within institutions that supersede the hierarchical structures within them and focuses instead on the context within which these relationships get shaped in the organisation.
2. Five individual attributes of relational leadership presented by Komives et al. (1998) include being: **inclusiveness, empowering, ethical, purposefulness and process-oriented**. Regan and Brooks (1995) also indicate five attributes of relational leadership which include: **collaborative, caring, courageous, intuitive, and visionary**. Carifio (2010) outlines the attributes of relational leaders as: **inclusiveness, empowering, ethical, caring, and visionary/intuitive**.

Activity: What characteristics of relational leadership will your teams be focusing upon?

What does Relational Leadership in Schools look like?

Activity: Spend some time as a team identifying where there are organizational processes where these aspects of relational leadership are found at your educational institution?



**Clear, Succinct
and Open
Communication**



**Building Systems
of Empathy and
Wellbeing**



**Collaboration
across self-
managed teams
as well as in
spontaneous
teams
originating for a
specific purpose**



**Emotional
Constructive
and Critical
Reflection**



**Trust & Respect
is developed
across all
processes**

How can we Intentionally build Agility and Adaptability in School Leadership?

Part Four

Agile & Adaptive Leadership in Schools during the Pandemic

– Consider how these factors can be considered at your institution?

- 1. Improving mental health & wellbeing support using a holistic approach** that emphasises compassion through relational leadership exercised throughout the school. This care involves caring for students, teachers and school leaders as well. Making this the central focus is essential.
- 2. Recognising different learning needs of learners and personalising their learning** by building up innovative curriculum approaches that is directed by the learners needs and learning styles. Areas like assessments, homework, enquiry projects can be re-designed to involve more learner agency, both individually and collectively.

Agile & Adaptive Leadership in Schools during the Pandemic

– Consider how these factors can be considered at your institution?

3. **Embracing new ways of teaching and learning** by incorporating hybrid teaching and learning models as well as on-site learning. Revisiting what the current whole-school teaching and learning model is and using diverse learning and teaching approaches that can be utilised to suit the learner and the educator. Giving the student and the teacher agency in crafting the learning together. A good balance between in-class, online and on-paper needs to be reconsidered. The blended model requires time given for more experimentation, risk assessment and monitoring as teachers understand its potential and harness its strengths.
4. **Empowering staff and emphasising teamwork** by building in time allowance for staff to work together, to be able to voice their concerns and to know that they are part of an organic change process. Communication that is clear, succinct and straightforward is required. Distributing leadership across the school and visibly empowering the teams to be able to self-manage themselves is critical but the leader needs to be visibly present in this process and emotionally intelligent and vigilant for this to be agile. Staff empowerment is led through the leader's authentic involvement in the process.

Agile & Adaptive Leadership in Schools during the Pandemic

– Consider how these factors can be considered at your institution?

5. **Strengthening school communities through collaboration** by communicating and partnering with parents as co-partners in their children's learning. Building up valid and personalised two-way communication at multiple levels within the school community. This communication is built on respect and trust.
6. **Being the change and increasing flexibility and responsiveness** in the approach taken to changes occurring within the school. Agile school leaders cultivate school culture that embraces failure and learns from mistakes. By encouraging staff to become more expansive and step outside of their comfort zones, staff in agile schools are more likely to remain calm and to seek alternative ways to attain common goals.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have further questions about the concepts discussed in this slide deck!

My Contact details are:

Dr Venesser Fernandes

Lecturer – Educational Leadership Studies

Monash University, Faculty of Education

venesser.fernandes@monash.edu