

Adjusting Your Sails to Survive the Storm  
*Adaptive Leadership for Stage Managers*

By

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## INTRODUCTION

Adaptive leadership teaches individuals and organizations to deal with changing conditions through specific processes. This approach focuses, not on traits or other characteristics of a leader, but on actions of leading. Stage managers work with individuals with different personality types and can encounter unexpected problems within a production that they must be in charge of resolving. Developing the skills to adapt to these situations by changing their leadership style can make them a more adaptive leader.

It is first important to know what being an adaptive leader is. How is it different from any other leadership principles one has encountered? Adaptive leaders work out adaptive challenges rather than technical challenges. They also resolve conflict and make tough decisions in a way that works for the good of the company. They are able to remain inspiring to others even when a company is going through change. Examining these principles will allow a leader become an adaptive leader.

The world is changing swiftly around us all the time. As leaders, we must be able to embrace this change and lead our company towards the end goal. Being adaptable is one of the most crucial skills that any leader should have in their arsenal. Saying that you are adaptable shows that you are confident in what you do and you can handle stressful environments very well. Nothing lasts forever and if you want to be someone who rises to the top, you will need to know how to adapt and overcome the inevitable change that will occur in your life and your workplace.

## PART ONE: WHAT IS ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP?

### Section One – Adaptive versus Technical Challenges

When facing a civic challenge, it's important to distinguish the aspects of that challenge: which are adaptive and technical. A technical challenge can be exemplified as you breaking a bone in your body. The solution and the problem are fairly clear, there are experts who know how to fix the problem and they can expedite the solution quickly. When you break a bone, you know quickly what the problem is and your solution is to go to the emergency room to get it fixed. When you go to the emergency room, there are doctors who know how to address the problem and can do it quickly so the problem does not worsen.

An example of an adaptive challenge is someone who has experienced a heart attack. When they had the heart attack, they have already had the technical fixes to their heart and now they need to adapt to a new lifestyle. In order for this person to find a solution to this problem, they have to learn what the problem really was and discover what a solution might look like. This sense of learning will help them get an idea about this new style of living. If the person who has had a heart attack was a member of a family, they may have to bring all of the members to change their lifestyle by implementing an exercise routine and watching what they eat as a family in order to help the victim. In other words, there is not one expert to help find a solution, but rather a group of people who implement recommendations. This process will lead to experimentation to try new routines and recipes that may not fix the problem, but make progress to a healthier lifestyle. To summarize, adaptive challenges are about learning, engaging stakeholders because there is no single expert, and making progress in experimentation rather than having a fast and immediate fix.

Adaptive challenges have a different resolution timeframe than technical challenges. Technical problems cause a high level of disturbance, but then the disturbance itself triggers an organizational response. With these technical problems, an organization already knows how to treat the issue because it already has the design, cultural assumptions, and expertise to resolve the issue. Fairly quickly, the organization steps into action to resolve the problem and provide a real solution. Technical challenges can cause distress that is relieved fairly quickly because the company knows how to address the issue based off of past experience.

Adaptive challenges don't get resolved as quickly as technical challenges. These challenges require ongoing experimentation, efforts, and attitudinal change. Leadership requires keeping people together over time through a sustained time of uncertainty. With compassion for the disturbance you're causing people, you are able to operate within their capacity to learn and think creatively.

The reality of distinguishing the two is that most civic challenges are both. Working on a theatrical production can bring both technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges could include creating an extravagant production, but looking at the budget when making decisions, having to choose the right technology to use and hire the right amount of people you need to run the show nightly. All of these components need to get done in a timely manner in order for the show to successfully open. While working on a production has many technical challenges there are also adaptive challenges that can arise.

A new production goes through constant change including rewrites of the script and, in a musical, the score and lyrics. Everyone as a company needs to be open to these changes and has to be able to adapt to these changes. Script changes are not the only thing discussed collaboratively. If a show relies on many technical and automated effects, the design and creative

team need to come together to find effective ways to achieve this goal. Once you have established which work problems are technical and which are adaptive, you are able to attend to the demands of each.

## **Section Two – Orchestrating Conflict**

When working in any organization, conflict will eventually come up and a manager or someone higher up will have to handle the issue. One key component to being an adaptive leader is being able to orchestrate conflict in a way that clears the situation while still keeping the relationship between your employees strong. It requires seeing the process as a necessary step in the journey toward a better future, tolerating the moments your people are not working well together and believing that working through some rough patches will help to solidify their collective effort and commitment (Heifetz 149).

Dealing with conflict is never an easy job nor do people want to be a part of it, but it must be addressed or it could lead to something much worse. In order to first tackle conflict, you must know the proper ways to approach it. Most organizations respond to conflict in a simple, but ineffective way. For example, they either do nothing, react by fight or flight, or look to authority (Heifetz 150). Some organizations do nothing with conflict because they do not want to upset equilibrium and do not want to bring conflict out into the open. Doing nothing, however, can leave the conflict unresolved and the organization will remain unchanged (Heifetz 150). Reacting by fight or flight can lead to employees either blaming other workers or avoiding the situation as a whole. Other organizations prefer to rely on those with formal authority to resolve the conflict. Authorities are often expected to do what they can to preserve the calm atmosphere within the organization (Heifetz 150). If you want to generate progress on adaptive issues, you

have to seek out, surface, nurture, and then carefully manage the conflict toward resolution, rather than see it as something to be eliminated or neutralized (Heifetz 151).

Ronald Heifetz developed “Seven Steps to Orchestrate Conflict” to describe how to start the process of surfacing and working through conflict:

- 1. Prepare.** Before bringing your organization's factions together and surfacing the conflict, do your homework. Where does each faction stand on the key elements of the conflict? Talking to them in advance helps you acquire the informal authority you will need to retain their trust when the rough moments come.
- 2. Establish ground rules.** Propose rules making it safe to discuss the conflict, such as committing to confidentiality, staying in the room with the PDAs and computers off, depersonalizing the conflicts, and brainstorming. Tell them it is up to everyone to keep the work issues at the center of attention at all times.
- 3. Get each view on the table.** Invite each faction to articulate the values, the loyalties, and the competencies that inform each of their perspectives on the adaptive challenge and its various related work issues.
- 4. Orchestrate the conflict.** Starkly, but evenhandedly, articulate the competing claims and positions you are hearing. Look for signs that people are seeking to avoid the conflict, such as trying to minimize the differences or change the subject. As orchestrator, keep reminding people of the purpose, why it is that they are going through this hard patch.
- 5. Encourage accepting and managing losses.** Give each person or faction an opportunity to reflect more fully on the nature of the losses they would be asking

each of their factions to accept. Tell them that some losses will be necessary, but give everyone time to sit with these losses.

**6. Generate and commit to experiments.** Generate a consensus to go with several experiments for tackling the adaptive challenge, in sequence and/or at the same time, as it makes sense, with a shared commitment to get back together to evaluate the results of both kinds of experiments when enough data has been generated for lessons and insights.

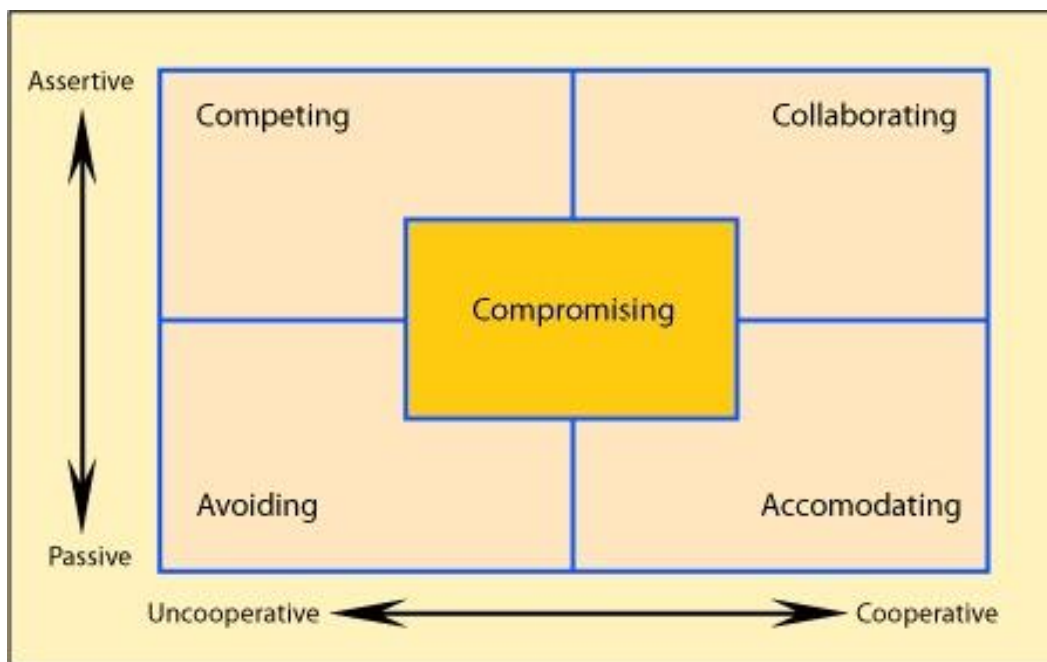
**7. Institute peer leadership consulting.** To maximize the chances of success, move the members of the group into peer consulting, where they begin systematically to consult one another on the leadership headache they have just given one another. (Heifetz 152-153).

Being able to orchestrate conflict takes a lot of courage. Being able to take the above steps to help deal with issues within an organization while also being able to push the boundaries of your own tolerance for conflict can help. Another adaptive component that leaders need to include when orchestrating conflict is being able to adapt your communication style. Changing your communication style can help adversarial factions work through their issues (Heifetz 154).

Dealing with conflict is a complicated and sensitive issue that many leaders have to be a part of and take their own approach to solving the situation. This, however, is the biggest area for the use of adaptive leadership skills. Conflict happens everywhere and it is completely natural. It's the result of miscommunication, differences in opinion or perspective, and having limited resources. If we can't completely avoid conflict in our lives, how do we make the best out of these inevitable situations?



First, it is important to know that everyone is different. We all have different values and beliefs and we all approach conflict in our own way. There is usually a pattern to how people handle conflict. Every conflict/resolution style has a different level of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann developed a chart, pictured below, that analyzes the different levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness and the different styles that people implement with these varying degrees.



The avoiding style is low on both cooperativeness and assertiveness. Usually, the original problem is not directly addressed or resolved. There is a sense of ignoring the issue and hopes of it resolving itself. It can be useful when a problem is trivial and may dissipate on its own. Avoidance can cause significant problems in the long term as a long-running issue is likely to build up resistance and potential resentment over time. The competing style examines a participant seeking to reach his or her own preferred outcomes at the expense of other individuals. This approach is best when a quick, decisive action is required, such as emergencies. The style, however, can cause bitterness and anger if used continuously. A person using the

accommodating style will put aside his or her own goals in favor of the other person's. When taken to the extreme, this style could be a win-lose situation. The compromising style has equal amounts of assertiveness and cooperativeness at a moderate level. This can be used when you need to find a timely solution and both parties have similar goals. This style, however, can mask stronger and underlying issues and should not be used long-term. The final style, collaborative, is high on both assertiveness and cooperativeness and is similar to a win-win scenario. Both sides creatively work towards a solution that meets the objectives and goals of all persons involved. While this can create ideal outcomes, it can be a time-consuming process.

None of these styles are better than the next; therefore you don't have to stick with one particular style. Most people have one or two styles that they use most of the time. Being aware of how you react to conflict can help you with how to manage conflict. Some of these styles are better used in certain situations. If your natural conflict style is collaborating, but in a work situation where you are working on a project that meets tight deadlines, like working on a production, your style might change to accommodating in order to finish the project on time. If you know what the other conflict management styles are and know which ones work best for certain situations, you can wisely choose to adapt your own style to best fit the situation.

### **Section Three – Making Tough Decisions**

Working around conflict is one of the many tough decisions leaders have to make within an organization. There are leaders in every organization who either enjoy making tough decisions or who try to avoid them. Heifetz created some helpful tips that can help leaders strengthen their capacity to embrace the tough decisions that come with leading adaptive change:

*Accept that you are going to have to make some tough decisions your whole life.*

Tough decisions require you to put your heart into them, nourish the possibilities, and then make a commitment to a course of action. *Nothing is forever.* If you are struggling with a decision, then all the options likely have some merit. The odds of making the right decision are close to the odds of making the wrong one.

*Making no decision is a decision in itself.* Most decisions are iterative: you make a move, take the risk. If things seem to be going well, you continue. If not, you take corrective action. *Tough does not necessarily mean important.* Decisions that seem incredibly fraught at the time will often result in changes only at the margins of your life. Roger Rosenblatt says, “Whatever you think matters-doesn’t. Follow this rule and it will add decades to your life”. (Heifetz 256-257)

When making decisions people often want to succeed and make the right decision. They don’t, however, want to make the wrong decision and fail. They want to avoid failure entirely. Sometimes people hold back from leading adaptive change because they cannot tolerate knowing that they might fail (Heifetz 158). When analyzing a situation and forming a decision around it, people often keep a high standard and make a decision that might not be the best, but your employees might think is best. Heifetz has discovered that actually lowering your standards can avoid the risk of failing.

Lowering your standards, however, will not help you lead adaptive change, because leading adaptive change requires an experimental mindset, involves risk, and brings the real possibility of failure (Heifetz 158-159). In other words, you need to give yourself permission to fail. Heifetz has developed some practices that can help give you permission to fail:

*Broaden your definition of success on a particular adaptive change intervention.*

Thinking experimentally, consider the lessons you gleaned from efforts that did not generate all the outcomes you wanted. Think about the ways you might apply those lessons to your next move. *Prepare your constituents.* Manage the expectations of those around you to prepare the ground for possible failure of your effort. The language you use is critical to managing your constituents' expectations. *Conduct small experiments.* Conducting relatively low-cost experiments can help you test your idea, fail, and not be destroyed in the process. (Heifetz 259).

Failure is something that we all deal with. We are human and make mistakes. Knowing that no one is perfect and embracing failure will help leaders and even other employees within an organization overcome future challenges and make the right decision. Working on a production brings many challenges and can require stage managers to make some tough decisions. For example, during dry tech, the Production Stage Manager (PSM) is there to observe how each scenic piece will come on and offstage. This may require the PSM to make some executive decisions on the order of what piece comes when since they know the show very well at that point, even if the director may have a different idea. If they don't know the answer, they should feel confident in saying "I don't know" and they will search for the right answer.

#### **Section Four – Inspiring Others**

Inspiring people is another component to effectively leading adaptive change. Inspiration is the capacity to move people by reaching in and filling their hearts from deeper sources of meaning (Heifetz 263). When approaching how to become an inspirational leader, you must first

be able to find your voice as a leader. Your voice needs to be uniquely you and be shaped by the purposes that move you and expresses your own style of communication.

How do you know when to be inspirational? As a leader within an organization, properly analyzing your team and employees is crucial. Have people forgotten their purpose? Is the community beginning to lose hope? These are crucial moments that leaders need to examine in order to properly know when to inspire others. Heifetz mentions that you need to strengthen two skills to master the ability to inspire: listening from the heart and speaking from the heart (Heifetz 264). You will not be able to inspire others if you are not listening empathetically, the highest form of listening, and then reacting in an empathetic way. Take in the information beyond what is being said, using as sources of information your own feelings and the nonverbal signals people are giving you (Heifetz 264). Heifetz set some guidelines for strengthening one's ability to listen from the heart:

Listen from your heart with curiosity, and compassion, beyond judgment, to understand the sources of people's distress over a proposed initiative. Try to "walk in their shoes" to feel something akin to what they are feeling, and then tell them what you have to come to understand. At the very least, you have to be able to say with credibility, "I see." (Heifetz 266).

Listening wholeheartedly is the first step to begin to inspire people. Once you have listened empathetically and actively you can then begin to form a statement that comes from your heart.

Speaking from the heart communicates the values at stake, the reasons that make it worthwhile for people to suffer and stay in the game (Heifetz 269). If you care deeply about a certain subject, find a way to tell them. When you speak from your heart you are incorporating your own viewpoints, principles, and emotions into the conversation. In the work environment,

however, people tend to use their brain, because it shows their most rational self, rather than their heart.

When speaking with your heart, it is important to know how to properly communicate your thoughts in a positive and inspiring way. Heifetz calls it being able to “speak musically”: using proper voice pitch, volume, and tone (Heifetz 271). People who are in positions of authority speak in a calmer, more dispassionate way whereas those in non-authoritative positions speak with more urgency and are often louder as they may worry that no one will listen to them. Although, people without any authoritative power can still lead change; it just a different challenge. They need to assume that people are listening to them and that they are paying attention. Once you begin to speak confidently, people will start to listen to you. People listen to those who are confident (Heifetz 273).

Inspiring others through adaptive change is important for leaders to foster. Adaptive challenges come with a great sense of uncertainty and fear of failure. If leaders communicate with confidence then they will be able to begin to lead their employees to change within their organization. Stage managers are the members of the production who inspire everyone to do their best work and keep them inspired during a long-run.

## PART TWO: ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IN NON-THEATRICAL BUSINESSES

### Section One – Company Culture, Values, and Leadership

Why is culture so important to have within an organization? A successful culture is like a greenhouse where people and ideas can flourish. Everybody in the organization, regardless of rank or role, feels encouraged to speak frankly and openly. They are also rewarded for sharing ideas about new products, a more efficient process, and a better way to serve their customers. Without having a sense of shared values and some basic rules for working together, people can easily forget they are part of a team and start protecting and pursuing their own parochial interests (Bryant 11).

Within the world of theatre, everyone involved on a production contributes to help the production grow and become the spectacle that it is on opening night. Without this collaborative effort, people would not communicate with one another, understand what is going on and not know their responsibilities and the responsibilities of others. For most people, they want to make a good impression, fit in with their teams, and make important contributions. Leaders need to create a culture that preserves this energy and to remove the forces that make people shut down (Bryant 13). One way to do this is to make every member of your team feel important and are vital within the company. Laurel J. Richie, the former president of WNBA, mentions that she wants people coming in every day thinking this is a place where they can bring their very best, and believes that if they feel that way, they will actually do it. Giving employees a sense of worthiness by proving they are not just a name on a piece of paper, will give them the confidence they need to come in every day and do the best work that they can.

When developing a culture within an organization, an important element is to devise a simple plan. David Barger, former CEO of JetBlue, says that one of the most important roles of a

leader is to boil down an organization's many priorities and strategies into a simple plan, so that employees can remember, internalize, and act on it. There is no proper way to do this, as every company and every leader is unique and can have a different way of interpreting it and forming a simple plan. As stage managers, we look at the big picture of a production. We are given just about every piece of information involving the set, lighting, costumes, etc. We then have a set list of priorities to get done for the production as a whole as well as the day-to-day activities. Keeping this list simple, clear, and concise can help the stage manager and their team get to a certain objective.

People generally want to belong to something of greater purpose that is larger than they are. When employees are given guidelines for behavior, a "rules of the road", they can focus more on the work at hand, rather than on navigating the stressful politics that naturally occur when all sorts of bad behaviors are tolerated (Bryant 32). Lars Björk, CEO of Qlik, explained his company's five values and how the company rewards people who best model the behavior. The first value is challenge. Always challenge the conventional, because if you follow other, you can at best be number two. The second value is move fast because it is a fast-moving company. If you make mistakes along the way, it is okay. Learn from them and never make them again. The third is be open and straightforward. This refers to people speaking the truth and being open if they think something is wrong. The fourth value is teamwork for results. Results don't come from one individual, but rather a team effort. The last value, and probably most important, is take responsibility (Bryant 36-37).

Working in the theatre, these values can all be incorporated into just about every production. Every production comes with a new set of challenges, and as stage managers, we need to find a way to adapt to these new situations and still lead the company to their goal. Being



able to move fast, be open and straightforward, and taking responsibility can allow a co-worker to become a model member of positive behavior. If they don't, they could get "left behind" and have a poorly viewed work ethic. Being a part of a team and communicating amongst your team members can allow just about anyone to become a leader. Communication is leadership (Bryant 40).

Leaders need to create a culture where employees understand that treating one another with respect is a core value. You need to trust everyone you work with because what creates jealousy and fear is not trusting or understanding something. If you can communicate what your fears and challenges are and trusting the people you work with, a positive environment can create itself (Bryant 55). One of the many components that make a great stage manager is being trustworthy. Remaining open can allow members of your team or company to come to speak about their problems and can trust you to keep it confidential. More often than not, the most reliable and trustworthy stage managers are also the most respectful.

Another way to incorporate respect within an organization is to eliminate yelling. Chef Mario Batali incorporated a no-yelling rule in his kitchen. He says that if anyone is not close enough to touch one another, they cannot speak to that person. Yelling can lead to problems understanding the nature of your message. Stage managers typically yell to gather people's attention during a rehearsal, but rarely to communicate with the company. Even during tech, stage managers might feel the urge to yell hold or to talk to designers across the theatre, but using a God mic and speaking over headset can minimize yelling during an already stressful time.

Great leaders are those who have built up a reservoir of loyalty, so when the time comes to tell people that they have to change direction, they are willing to make an extraordinary effort

toward that change. Respect is a powerful and necessary tool for a leader who hopes to get the best work out of people. If there is leadership, it means there are followers and you're only as good as the followers. The quality of the followers directly correlates to the respect you hold them in (Bryant 65).

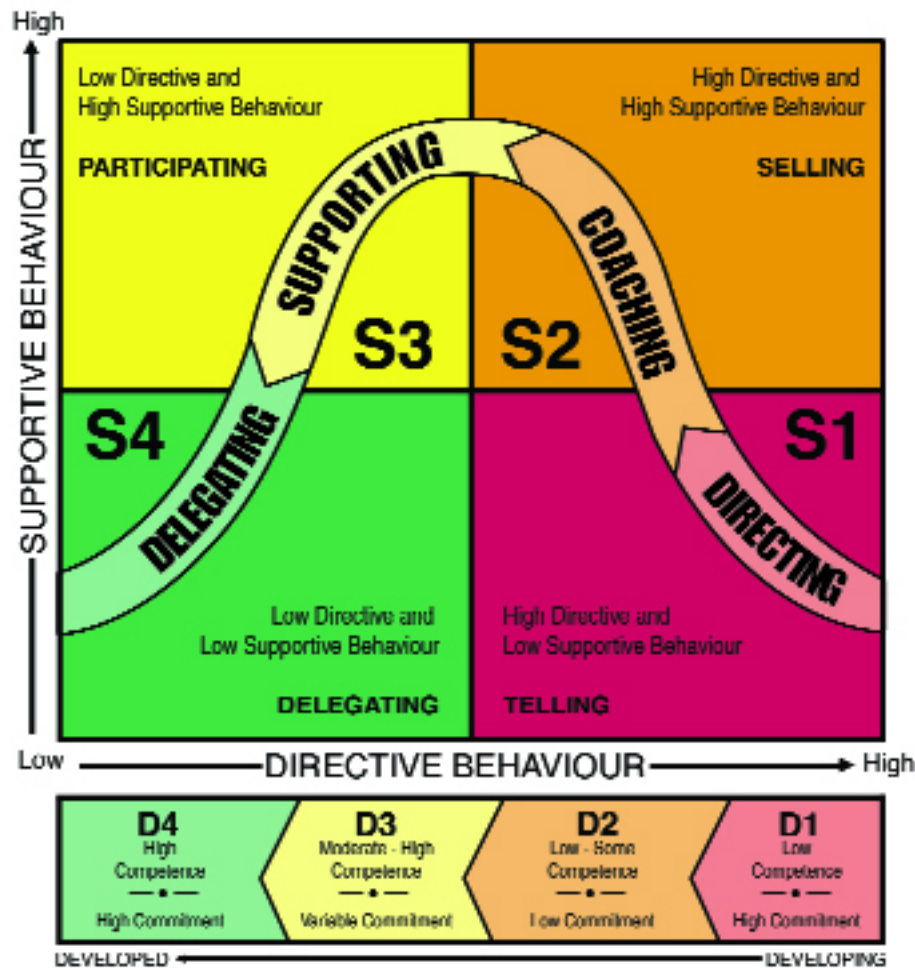
Lastly, remembering that working as a team is another part of the equation to creating a positive culture. When companies can find the right balance of treating each other with respect, while also setting clear expectations that everyone must play his or her role, the group becomes greater than the sum of its parts (Bryant 67). Teamwork is key in the theatre. It comprises of one giant team subdivided into smaller teams within each department. Paul Maritz, the former CEO of VMware, discusses the four personalities found in any great leadership team, but not all found in a single person. There is someone who is the strategist or visionary, the person who sets the goals for where the organization needs to go. There is also the classic manager, the person who makes sure that everybody knows what they need to do and make sure that is gets done. Thirdly, there is a person who is a champion for the customer or someone who understands how customers will see the product. Lastly, there is an enforcer or someone who is going to make the decisions and can deal with whatever conflict comes their way. I personally think that stage managers are enforcers instead of the classic manager, which I feel fits with a production manager. Stage managers lead companies out of tough situations and are the ones who make executive decisions once the show is running.

With all of these components, leaders are able to incorporate some kind of culture with an organization and have a set of values to implement. Having culture and value within a company can lead to the best results as long as the employees treat one another with respect and leaders

play to everyone’s strengths. You only get the best out of other people when you do things in a positive way.

**Section Two – Situational Leadership**

Within non-theatrical businesses, adaptive leadership is called situational leadership. It is defined as when the leader or manager of an organization must adjust their style to fit the development level of the followers he is trying to influence. (Hersey 35). There is no best leadership style for all situations. The leadership style that is best for a particular situation depends on the employee’s skill set and attitude. Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard proposed a model for situational leadership, pictured below.



The way this model is broken up is divided into four sections and shows varying levels of behavior the leader must exemplify with their employees. On the X-axis is directive behavior, which is the degree of one-way communication between the leader and the employee. On the Y-axis is supportive behavior, which is the degree of two-way communication between the leader and employee. The bar on the bottom signifies the development of the employee. Moving from right to left, the employee is becoming more competent and confident at their job. Each color also coordinates with the squares above it. Identifying employee readiness is crucial for any leader. It helps them identify the best leadership style when dealing with each individual employee.

This model also shows the different leadership styles and breaks down to identify when each one is best to use. In the S1 square, the leadership style highlighted is directing. New employees need a high directive behavior and low supportive behavior. In other words, they need a leader that tells them specifically what to do. The next leadership style is coaching. Employees at this stage ask a lot of questions. There is a great deal of both one-way and two-way communication between the supervisor and employee. When employees no longer need to be told what to do, they move to the next phase. At this next phase, leaders still need to be involved and exhibit a supporting leadership style. There is still some developing to be done. At the final phase, the employee has become fully developed and need little to no direction. Leaders and supervisors can simply delegate and let them do their job.

As employees evolve over time, supervisors must change their leadership style. As a leader, in order to properly adapt to the people you work with, you must first identify the employee's readiness and then match your leadership style to the employee based on their

competence and confidence. Lastly, it's important to remember that no two employees or situations are alike, so be ready to adapt at a moment's notice.

Situational leadership is more relevant today because companies are focusing more on results and are concerned about staying in business. In today's world where we're facing a dramatic need to change and be competitive, companies need to have a clear vision and be open to the possibility of their vision changing in the future. The whole concept of situational leadership doesn't start with the employees, but rather with the individuals at the top of the organizational chart and getting their commitment and understanding thus giving them a clear direction to how they are going to make change happen in a positive way.

A situational leader is anyone who recognizes that influencing behavior is not an event, but a process. The process entails assessing follower performance in relation to what the leader wants to accomplish and providing the proper amount of guidance and support. The situational leader is concerned about people, the results, and behaves in a manner where everybody wins.

## PART THREE: ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR STAGE MANAGERS

### Section One – Becoming a Leader

How can all of this relate to stage management? One of the many skills stage managers need is adaptability. Although, there is a difference between being adaptable and being an adaptive leader. If someone is adaptable, they are able to modify to new conditions. This means that they change in the interest of one's self. Being an adaptive leader is someone who changes themselves for the benefit of others. As stage managers, we have to lead the members of the company that we work with on a nightly basis once the show starts running.

With every new production comes a new set of cast members, designers, stage managers, etc. The way you lead the company might be different for every show you work on, but it's important to present yourself as a leader from day one. A good way to start this is by having a strong and confident voice when you speak. People often relate someone who is able to speak confidently with someone in a position of power. This does not mean being assertive in what you say, but rather speaking clearly and being vocally strong. A stage manager can implement this when they meet the cast for the first time and when they start a rehearsal.

Another way to sound like a leader is adjusting the way we converse with others. There are many studies out there that examine the science of inflections in our voice and the impact they have on how others perceive us. If we're haphazard with our tone, we can have the exact opposite effect. We can distract the listener's attention from what's most important and make it harder for them to process what we're saying. One of the most common and annoying examples that is ubiquitous in society nowadays, is a phenomenon called "up-speak," otherwise known as up-talk. This speech pattern is where people are talking and they keep adding question-like tones at the ends of all of their phrases and sentences. The problem with talking like this is that what

ends up becoming emphasized is just whatever randomly falls at the end of the phrase. It doesn't help anyone to process what you're saying and the repetitious upswing inflection can be rather hypnotic. After a while, we don't really know if the audience is listening to anything we are saying, much less what we are saying. There are times where stage managers will have to run a meeting or a rehearsal and being able to speak in a strong and confident way will demand everyone listen to you while speaking in the right tone will help.

Being a strong leader does not only mean being a good speaker, but also being a good listener. Within the world of leadership there are five levels of listening: ignoring, pretending, selective, active, and empathetic listening. The lowest level of listening is called ignoring – not listening at all. If you are distracted by anything while talking to a user, they can get the impression that you are ignoring them. For example, while someone is speaking, you start a new conversation or interject with an unrelated comment. This shows that you don't care about what the other person is saying. Pretend listening is most easily explained in a face-to-face conversation. When you're talking to someone and they have a distracted look in their eyes, you can tell they are pretending to listen. On the phone it happens when you say things like "I see", "right", and "okay" numerous times while working on another activity. People can tell that you are distracted. During selective listening, we pay attention to the speaker as long as they are talking about things we like or agree with. If they move on to something else we slip down to pretend listening or ignore them altogether. Active listening occurs when we carefully listen to the other person, but while they are speaking we are deciding whether we agree or disagree. Instead of paying close attention to the other person, we're formulating our response to what he or she is saying. At this level it should be evident that we are listening to our own perspective, and in most cases with the intent to respond from our experience. The final level of listening is

empathic listening. To be a successful leader, you must teach yourself to treat every conversation as though it is the first time you've heard it, even though you may have heard it many times before. Discipline yourself to see it through the eyes of the person you're speaking to. For example, if an actor is speaking to you about a problem in their dressing room, you must listen and connect on an emotional level and offer help in a positive and courteous behavior.

People often view people in a leadership role as someone who has authority and power. Everyone interprets leadership in a different way and takes a different approach to leading. Is there a "right way" to lead? How should a stage manager lead? Samantha Watson, the PSM of the Broadway production of *Significant Other*, gives an outside perspective on this issue:

Being a good leader isn't about showing off your power and authority. Any stage manager that is after power and authority is in it for the wrong reasons. As a leader, the best thing I can do is create a positive work environment and support my team. I demonstrate through my actions that I believe in their ability to handle their jobs/tasks with skill. I also think it is important to not hoard information. If a team member is kept informed and up-to-date with information, they can make better-educated decisions for themselves, which will in turn, help the entire team. There is no right way to lead, everyone has a different style, a different approach. What is important is to remember who you are leading and what is the goal that the team is working towards. If you make decisions that advance the team towards its goal and are creating positive relationships with and amongst your team members, you are probably leading well.

I have observed young stage managers who think that being the stage manager means that you get to boss people around. Instead, they should think that they get to lead people towards an



end goal, such as opening or closing night, rather than bossing people around. People don't like to be told what to do especially in an aggressive or passive-aggressive way. Stage managers should be those who lead by example. Peter Lawrence, a PSM/Production Supervisor/Associate Director of several Broadway shows including *Spamalot* and more recently the 2017 revival of *Sunday in the Park with George*, offers his thoughts on leadership and authority:

I think anyone who has to constantly assert their authority doesn't really have any. Leadership is about making all situations about the show itself and not about you. A stage manager is there to do a job, mostly to be sure the show happens night to night, but also to tend to the safety, welfare and collegiality of everyone in the theatre building. "Everyone serves the play" must always be the guiding principle and anything that gets in the way of the clear presentation of the material must be corrected. The theatre must be a safe place – not only physically but also psychologically. This requires finesse from a stage manager and not assertion of authority. It's about the play, not about the stage manager. Also, leadership is best by example. I always consider myself to be a part of the cast and crew and not a part of management. I want to do the right thing for those in the building.

I am not concerned about how much things cost – there are plenty of general and company managers for that. I want people to be glad to come to work and to be happy to see each person in the building. I want the actors to welcome my notes and for the crew to be appreciative of technical notes. I want the cast and especially the deputies to understand the measures taken on behalf of the cast.

I believe in saying "thank you". If someone needs to be reprimanded or punished, it should be done in person and not by email or phone call. The stage manager

should take responsibility for the reporting of problems to management or to Actors' Equity Association. Once the show has opened, it is the stage manager's show to lead and not to arbitrarily try to control.

It is imperative to remember that everyone on the production "serves the play" and no one is more important than the play. If you view everyone as an equal member and not as someone below you or higher than you, then you will become a more respectful leader.

Whatever your past experience, whatever your relative success or failure as a stage manager and leader, you can become a self-assured, highly-effective leader. It doesn't require that you become someone else or "play a role" because there is no perfect leadership style. There is, however, a leadership style that matches you: your strengths and weaknesses, values and beliefs, personality and tendencies. A big part of your personal leadership development process is determining this style and then developing in that direction. Once you understand yourself enough to determine your style, then you can begin building your skills and implementing them.

Leaders should also be open about their strengths and weaknesses. When a leader is honest about his or her capabilities, both good and bad, it encourages team members to adopt the same attitude. Your biggest strength is knowing your own weaknesses because it allows you to partner effectively with people whose expertise is a good complement to your own. This is also important to know when forming teams. When forming a stage management team, you are choosing people who can balance your skill set. For example, if you dislike and are terrible at paperwork, bringing in someone who does clear and organized paperwork will help you as a leader and as a team.

## **Section Two – Managing Conflict**

Being able to handle conflict is one of the most frequent adaptive challenges that stage managers must address. Every time conflict arises, it involves a new set of individuals with their own say on the matter and each person thinks they are right. How should stage managers approach these delicate situations and ensure that both parties walk away satisfied and more importantly feel that the situation got resolved? First, it is important for the stage manager to remain calm and logical. When someone comes to complain about an issue with another actor, for example, it is important to remain calm and try to not escalate the situation. Second, actually listen to the individual. If you are empathically listening to the individual you can begin to feel the emotions that they are feeling toward the issue and can take a course of action to resolve the issue. Third, take time to think of a resolution, but don't take a lot of time. Allowing a problem to remain unresolved may worsen the issue. Being able to address a conflict with an educated and well thought out manner can allow you fix the problem in a way that both parties can leave happy. Peter Lawrence tackles conflict with a slightly different approach:

I believe in tackling conflict head on. I grew up in the theatre with producers and directors who liked to get in a room, to hear everyone's point of view and then to have the person in charge (director, producer or author) make a decision, but everyone got to forcefully express their opinion. Anytime I face a problem with a person or group, I believe we should get into a room and discuss it. People need to be heard, not just ordered around. Often, I need to make an unpopular decision; I like to assemble those and explain my reasoning and acknowledging that the decision is unpopular. I also like to confront rumors.

If I hear a rumor (firing, closing, new actor, etc.) I'll call the person likely to know the answer and tell them that I have the rumor. Once I have a real answer, I'll go to those affected and either confirm or deny the rumor. I don't like to let things fester. I also like to be source of accurate information. I want the company, crew and management to know that I can be trusted to be truthful, and also to keep personal information confidential.

With conflict, the stage manager must be able to adapt their leadership style to each new incident that arises. The important thing to remember when handling conflict is to make sure that everyone's voice is heard. If there is negative tension developing between two actors, it is important to bring them together and talk it out, face-to-face. Working out a solution in this manner will have a different outcome if you try to resolve it over the phone and with each actor individually. If you are uncomfortable with tackling conflict face-to-face, you will have to learn to adapt to this change, as it is typically the most effective way to find a resolution.

It is also important to know when to bring in "backup". Some conflict may require you bring in another member of your team to be a witness. If an actor doesn't like your solution, it may come back to haunt you. Having someone on your side proving what was said and the intention of the talk might be beneficial and protect you from an even bigger issue.

### **Section Three – Staying Inspired**

If you are fortunate enough to work on a long-running show, a constant challenge is staying inspired. As the leader of the production, it is important to keep the company inspired because performing the same show eight times a week can get tiring. The stage manager must also find something that inspires them to stay with the production. Many stage managers are able to keep the cast and crew inspired, but rarely focus on themselves. If you're able to find that

healthy balance the production will be able to look and feel the same from opening night and not feel like tedious work.

Marybeth Abel, the PSM of the popular long-running production of *Wicked*, has been on the show for eight years and has been able to find a way to keep herself and the company inspired throughout these past years:

Especially on a long run, I have found that positive reinforcement is profound. I try to look at everything we do with the adage of “the glass is half full”. I try to avoid use of negative words when noting (i.e. don’t, no, not, never, wrong, etc.). In terms of inspiring for performance, principals usually are self-sufficient in this area. A termed contract provides incentive to also be at your top performance. Ensemble in a long run provides a challenge. Basically, hand-in-glove with the dance captains, we try to stay on top of each person’s performance. I stay inspired with what new people bring to the show. The greatest challenge is putting an actor into a show and making them feel that they are bringing their talent and themselves into the roles, not just filling a “slot”. I am inspired when they embrace this and we accomplish the storytelling as it is intended.

Being able to properly inspire others doesn’t have to be solely on a long-running show. It can be implemented on any production you work on. When working on a limited run, treat it as though it is an open run. It’s important to first find something about the production that inspires you to join the team in the first place. Do you love working on new work and seeing everyone working collaboratively to bring the show to life? Do you connect with a particular style of music that ignites your soul? Whatever it is, finding your niche will help you become an inspirational figure.

When the show begins previews and performances, start to focus on something new within the production itself each night. Whether it's a particular scene or a technical element, looking at different aspects of the show allows the stage manager to remain fresh and allows them to better catch any errors or deviations in the show. This is what Samantha Watson does when she tackles a new production.

Inspiration is something that can help stage managers become adaptive leaders. Stage managers have to know when is the proper time to be inspirational. If actors are all of a sudden becoming lost and not performing the same way each night, the stage manager might have to step in and say some words of inspiration and encouragement to bring them back on track.

#### **Section Four – Adapting to New Situations and Environments**

Most of us walk into any new situation with a set of prejudices about what we think is possible. These prejudices can come from past personal experiences, other people's experiences, or simply mistaken beliefs. We then form rules about what will happen based on these beliefs and those rules typically affect the choices or actions that we take. Whether it's changing your diet, starting a relationship with someone, or taking a new job, all of us go into every situation with a set of expectations, requirements, and desires. The power to adapt to any situation in life lies in getting clear on what these expectations, requirements, and desires actually are. It's about closing the gap between the risks that we see in the changes that are happening and all of the opportunities we would like to seize from those risks.

Starting on a new show brings a whole new environment. It brings a new cast, design team, director, etc. How do we handle this change? Samantha Watson offers some words of wisdom on how she adapts to new environments:

I think adapting to new environments and/or situations is just part of the job of being a stage manager. Every show is different, even if the players are people you have worked with before. As I approach a new show, I look at what the show will require of me and how I can best serve it. I decide how I can best work, along with my team, to support the director, the company and the production. And even the best plans need to change, when that happens, I quickly re-assess and make a new plan. We must constantly adapt to best work in our surroundings.

Learn as much as you can about your new environment in advance. If you get hired to be on a new production, research the people involved. What have they worked on previously? Talk to someone who may have worked with this particular director or creative team. Gather as much information as you can about them as you can so you can start to build a positive relationship with them.

Decide what three qualities you want to be known for. For instance, you might want to be known for being upbeat, hardworking and a go-getter or you might prefer to be known for being calm, considerate, and detail-oriented. This is a basic rule of “personal branding.” Being certain of your three top qualities will allow you to establish a strong platform early on. It will also come into play when you leave a production. What kind of fingerprint did you leave? Was it positive or negative?

Staying in your comfort zone can hold you back from learning and developing how to adapt to new situations. Your comfort zone is a psychological place where you feel safe and in control. You experience low-anxiety and you’re using a limited set of behaviors. This means you’re not growing or developing any new skills. Essentially, you’re stuck on autopilot. You’re just going through the motions. Clearly this is not the place from which to lead. It’s in our

comfort zone that we feel safe and secure. It's the zone of routine, the place where we do those things we find safe, comfortable, easy and familiar. It is a place where nothing particularly challenging happens. You know you're in this zone when you feel no anxiety, pressure or stress. You're in control and doing things that you know how to do. They don't take much physical or emotional energy. It's dangerous to stay in your comfort zone for long periods of time as it leads to mediocrity, inactivity and a lack of growth. Leaders who spend too much time in their comfort zone end up bored and unchallenged. You are able to become your true self and exemplify your true qualities when you step out of your comfort zone.

The comfort zone places a lid on your potential and limits the achievement of your goals and dreams. When you're trapped in a comfort zone you fail to take the risks necessary to make your dreams a reality. You will never discover your full potential unless you step outside your comfort zone. To grow you must put yourself in a place where more is demanded of you. Once you are able to step outside your comfort zone, leadership grows, success is built and goals are attained.

With these new people you begin to work with, being polite to everyone is an important rule of thumb. The person you walk past may turn out to be the person who will be your future boss. It is also a simple form of respect. Treat everyone how you want to be treated. Working in theatre is already stressful enough, if people start to be rude to one another, it will make a job that you may love to do, less enjoyable. Courtesy will pay you back with rich rewards.

If you are given the opportunity to work on a touring production, you will have to adapt to new environments all the time. Traveling to a new city every few weeks is a new environment. The stage management and company management team must examine their new surroundings and adjust the show in order to fit into the new theatre and the company will have to be in a



different dressing room and find new things to do when not performing. Granted, touring can be a fun experience, so as long as everyone remains optimistic and stays inspired, then the whole company will remain in a positive environment.

Every day is a new environment and situation, both in your personal and professional life. When you are in performances, no show is ever the same. You can have a different cast just about every day. Peter Lawrence offers his thoughts on adapting to new environments and situations:

Every day can be different. No two audiences are alike. Actors come in with new problems or exciting news. Actors change because of personal days, vacations or illness and stagehands sub out. Scenery breaks, lighting goes out of focus, business rises and falls. I think we must embrace all this change. It's not to be feared or resented. Change is what we're all about in the theatre and if you do anything except embrace it, you'll be unhappy in your work and ultimately will do a bad job. Doing summer stock or going on tour is very good for helping stage managers to trust their instincts and to be able to react quickly to change. Change actually teaches us about each other, about ourselves and about the show.

Once stage managers embrace change, they can become adaptive leaders. Change can happen at a moment's notice and people look to stage managers for guidance. They must be there to help get everyone through, what can be, a scary and challenging time. If stage managers encounter change regularly and practice within an environment where their solution doesn't negatively impact others, they can be ready to make tough decisions and lead their team and company to a new environment.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership has nothing to do with position. You can exercise leadership from any position within an organization or company. Leading adaptive change is difficult because it is about the distribution of loss. When you ask people to adapt to a new reality, you are asking them to give up something that is important to them, what has worked for them, and that is a part of who they are and what they find comfortable in life. We are all living in a time of constant change and tremendous uncertainty, which requires us to make decisions based on inadequate information. This is why we all need to exercise our adaptive leadership skills.

Stage managing is like captaining a ship during a storm. The captain of a ship is responsible for every aspect of the voyage. They set the course and speed, direct crew members, and ensure that proper procedures are followed. They also need to remain alert and respond to unexpected situations at all times. During a massive storm, everyone scrambles to try to stay afloat and look to the captain for guidance. Giving clear and concise instruction in a calm manner will give everyone the confidence boost they need to work in these extreme conditions. There will, however, come a time when you will need to adjust the sails in order to survive the storm. When you adjust the sails, it may cause the wind to push you in the right direction toward your end goal, but you have to alter it in just the right way in order for it to be most successful. You might even need to make the decision to bring them down completely if the storm is too intense. This will allow you to wait for the storm to pass and you can reflect on what happened and what to do next.

Adaptability is an important skill for any stage manager to have as working in the theatre is an ever-changing environment and how they can adjust their leadership style to these new environments and situations can make them become an even better leader overall.

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