Adaptive Leadership

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"All change is not systems change . . . sometimes [even] positive change upholds the status quo. We are not here to feel good but to do good."

—Adrienne Brown

"All important things are hard."

—Toni Morrison

There is no school or system leader on the planet whose daily work doesn't constantly involve balancing urgent priorities with less urgent but nonetheless important ones. At the same time, leaders are often faced with challenges that, on the surface, seem to have simple technical solutions but may be undergirded by far more complex challenges that are not easily resolved. Our awareness of this dance plays a pivotal role in our ability to engage in ways that are effective, transformative, and sustainable.

Ruby's doctoral studies included deep research into qualities and practices of effective leaders and how effective leadership is sustained through particularly challenging times. McGuire and Rhodes (2009) identified four competencies in their analysis of the most important skills and capabilities that organizations need for future success: leading people, strategic planning, inspiring commitment, and managing change. Incidentally,

they also noted that these four areas were found to be most lacking in leaders' skill sets. They stressed that organizations must position themselves to develop ongoing capacities to reframe, reinterpret, and reform operations systematically. This process requires a shift to focusing on leadership as a collective and intentional activity rather than the singular efforts of a heroic individual. The authors posited that organizations need to move from technical approaches to a more adaptive focus on flexibility, collaboration, boundary-crossing, and collective leadership. Such a move entails not only new methodologies but new paradigms as well (Fernandez, 2014).

What stands true then, and is even more pronounced now, is the need for leaders to have the technical, emotional, situational, strategic, and instructional knowledge of managing schools and districts while simultaneously moving the organization and its people toward the urgent cause of student success. Effective leaders are prepared through ongoing engagement in authentic experiences that challenge mindsets, perspectives, and mental models, while enhancing awareness of self and others' beliefs and cultures in order to move toward action steps that increase conditions for student learning.

We have felt these challenges and the shifts that come with them throughout our entire lives: in our personal lives, roles as school and district leaders, and our work with noneducation organizations. With that said, we also both established an early foundation for effective leadership through on-the-job experience managing complex change and problem-solving in our work in various schools and systems and, in some cases, learning from our mistakes.

For instance, after several years leading her public high school, Courtney recognized that students were being kicked out of class at an alarming rate for low-level student misbehavior, most centering around insubordination. She engaged her leadership team, who also saw the issue, and devised a response to drive down student removals. They created a new student removal form with questions about the student, the infraction, and the proposed solution. The team felt this form would serve as a deterrent for teachers and thereby drive down the removals overall. Within a few weeks, it was clear that this single approach to solving their issue would not be enough. Not only did student removals persist, but

the forms themselves often served to escalate issues between students and teachers.

Addressing only the technical aspect, like the form, as a response to what required both a technical and wider view of the problem only exacerbated the existing challenge. When Courtney and the team, humbled by their perceived failure, began to reexamine and recast the challenge as nonlinear, what they found was alarming and far more complex than the initial problem diagnosed, especially as the team explored patterns in the data (both in terms of who was removing students and which students were repeatedly removed). The ultimate response was not a quick fix. It first required Courtney to lead her team through an inquiry process to consider what they may have missed. They worked with a data specialist to analyze removal data through different subgroup classifications (race, gender, and special education status) and found that there was an alarming pattern under the surface. Black males were nearly five times as likely to be removed from the classroom than their counterparts. The number was nearly seven times when Black males with IEPs were isolated in the data. The team had to adapt to the new data surfacing, understand what additional knowledge needed to be built, and maintain curiosity to probe for better outcomes.

As leaders, our ability to create intentional space for personal reflection and pause can help us make sense of storms and chaos, and it can then further guide responses that shape a culture flexible and adaptive enough to solve issues in our organizations. Courtney took part in and facilitated extensive new learning on the part of an almost entirely White leadership team, unpacking their own schema around issues of punitive discipline, implicit bias, and the social-emotional role of a teacher in the classroom. The learning then had to be expanded to include the entire community, leading to a multiyear investment in restorative practices and a complete reexamination of the approach to student discipline.

Another example of our tendency to reach for a quick, technical fix involved a first-year assistant superintendent of instruction, Matthew, who joined a midsize suburban district that has grappled with many of the same academic and social challenges as its neighboring large urban district, especially as enrollment ballooned in recent years. The average staff experience across schools was ten years, with 73 percent of teachers

having been there for longer than five years. Although the makeup of the district was racially diverse, the teaching staff was 83 percent White, and seven of ten teachers resided in neighboring, much more White, segregated communities.

Most faculty preferred to work siloed, or in small grade-level groups, and demonstrated historical resistance toward new initiatives or programs. While there were a few official teacher leaders, their leadership skills were generally not considered strong. After observing classrooms for a few months, Matthew felt that introducing Socratic seminar discussions would serve to increase rigor and student engagement across the classes, and he invested a significant amount of professional learning time in the first semester to introduce and build teacher and administrators' capacity around planning and executing this strategy. Despite these efforts, each time he visited classrooms to observe discussion, students remained in rows and teachers still dominated or controlled the discussion. When he met to debrief the lesson with the school leader, the administrators shared similar feedback. "The teachers don't really understand the structure," or "They don't feel confident enough yet to roll this out." He felt frustrated and also concerned that, early in his tenure at the district, one of his most visible expectations was floundering. He was also concerned about the expectations of his boss, the superintendent, which included increasing reading scores by the end of the year.

Matthew struggled with how to best solve this "knowing–doing" gap. His solution: developing and distributing a twenty-page, step-by-step guide to implementing Socratic seminar, with a teacher "script" for facilitating discussion. His rationale was straightforward: Making the strategy "teacher-proof" would bridge the gap and provide teachers with no alternative but to change their instructional practice to accommodate Socratic seminar discussions. Still, weeks later, little changed, and he was dumbfounded as to why the initiative wasn't more successful.

To make matters worse, Matthew reacted to this failure with defensiveness, blaming the teachers and building leaders for using insubordination to try and undermine his authority as a new leader. In his response, Matthew reacted only to what was plainly in front of him and assumed that teachers simply needed additional clarity in order to carry out the expectation. His response lacked perspective and curiosity, avoiding

the exploration of what might be functioning beneath the surface to cause the block.

Courtney and Matthew's stories aren't unique. As building and district leaders, the pace and expectations for our work often find us moving a mile a minute while providing solutions just as fast. Even more, we are often praised, rewarded, and celebrated for the ways we provide solutions or quick wins, so it should come as no surprise that our wiring often leads us down this path of short and unsustainable outcomes. They both wanted success for their communities and students, and their moves were intended to ensure continuity of services while their stakeholders remained confident in and trusting of their leadership. But without peering deeper into root causes, any leader is unlikely to see a structure that is far wider and more massive than ever imagined. Most challenges we encounter may appear seemingly straightforward and "above the surface," when in reality, they are far more complex and full of tentacles that extend well below the surface. More often than not, when the problem seems easy and clear it produces the seductive illusion that the response will be equally simple and clear. Most leaders fall into the trap of diagnosing complex issues with technical responses to problems that are both technical and inherently adaptive, leading to a perpetual state of recurring problems.

Technical Versus Adaptive

Understanding the difference between technical and adaptive work is foundational to choosing the appropriate pathway to engaging as a leader, as one of the most common pitfalls as a leader is treating adaptive problems with technical solutions. Heifetz et al. (2009) lay out three types of challenges along the technical to adaptive continuum: technical, technical with adaptive elements, and fully adaptive.

TABLE 2.1

CHALLENGE	CLARITY	RESPONSE
Technical	Clear	Requires no new learning
Technical with adaptive elements	Clear and unknown	Requires additional learning
Adaptive	Unclear and unknown	Complexity requires additional learning and paradigmatic shifts

Technical Challenges

As Table 2.1 illustrates, the underlying problems embedded in technical challenges are clear, easy to understand, diagnose, and, most importantly, solve. These are problems that reveal themselves quickly, require little to no additional inquiry, and call for clear and direct solutions and resolutions. For example, at the beginning of a new semester, we found that two classes had been programmed for the same room at the same time. While not necessarily easy, the solution was clear. We returned to the master program, found a vacant room, and updated the schedule and communicated the change to students and teachers. A more recent example is one that many districts and organizations can likely relate to. As we began to shift to an in-person or hybrid work and school reality, our reliance on technology escalated. Even in an in-person setting, the use of laptops, online document sharing, and learning management systems have become commonplace. But what happens when a district's current technological capacities do not meet the demand of our new way of working? The problem is all too common in underresourced schools and systems around the country. But it is also clear, easy to diagnose, and understand. The solution is to devote sufficient financial resources to ensure that every student (and teacher) has access to the requisite equipment and technology infrastructure. In response, districts across the country have increased their broadband access and invested in additional laptops and hot spots for students.

Challenges That Are Technical With Adaptive Elements

As we've emphasized, not all problems have such clear-cut solutions. Often, challenges that are both technical and adaptive in nature present the illusion of quick and easy solutions. Even when the problem appears unambiguous, a long-term solution may not be that simple. Challenges that present as both technical and adaptive may trigger our tendency to look for a quick fix, but all too often, such shallow responses fail to acknowledge the root cause of the challenge. Instead, we must commit to studying the challenge's complexity, function, and evolution over time. A deeper-level response may call upon us to reconsider our approach, beyond the part that may seem to be easily resolved.

In her personal life, Ruby prides herself in maintaining a healthy balance of work and wellness—so much so that at one point in life she kept a schedule

that included 4:00 a.m. to 5:15 a.m. as her "me time." She described this as the time where the world would be most quiet, requiring nothing from her. Ruby devoted time to hobbies like training for marathons or other workouts, preparing food for the day, indulging in everything she wanted. She kept this rigorous schedule for many, many years as a mom of two young boys, leader, and graduate student. She said yes to every opportunity in both professional and personal spheres, ever pressing and reducing her "me time." She took on these commitments in a manner that eventually became unsustainable and crossed healthy boundaries daily. At one of her routine doctor's visits, analysis of her test results and vitals indicated an increase in her blood pressure that concerned the doctor. There were no previous issues with her blood pressure during earlier visits. The doctor suggested Ruby consider low-dosage medication in hopes of helping the issue subside—on the surface, a quick and easy fix. Since her natural disposition is to avoid medication, she rejected the suggestions and immediately asked for options. The doctor's response initially didn't land well. It called for nothing less than a substantial change in behavior, including learning to say no to requests from others, declining invitations to participate in multiple work-related tasks, limiting overextension of herself personally, pursuing wellness activities such as yoga or meditation, and adhering to a schedule that allowed her to engage in restful and consistent sleep. In other words, short of medication (the technical fix), only a radical lifestyle shift would prevent a future diagnosis of hypertension. To enact such a shift as a Black woman took relearning how to bring about more adaptive changes over time in mindset, disposition, and actions.

Adaptive Challenges

On the other end of the spectrum, adaptive challenges are unclear and unknown in both diagnosis and implementation of solutions, requiring an inquiry stance to explore root causes of the problem as well as its damaging effects. Adaptive challenges are often those that we never could have envisioned the day before they surfaced. Such complex challenges can't be solved by reassigning a room or taking a pill. They typically aren't rooted in simple cause-and-effect relationships and consequently demand nonlinear responses. Adaptive leadership is the activation of complex problem-solving in service of transformative change (Heifetz, 1994). The complexity and ambiguous nature of adaptive challenges create high levels of disequilibrium. They challenge

our identities by posing hard questions that are inherently tied to deep-seated values, attitudes, or ways of being. This disequilibrium induces stress, defensiveness in reasoning, conflict, and resistance for individual leaders and organizations as part of helping us solve hard problems in ways that allow us to succeed beyond the moment (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009).

One of the most profound adaptive challenges we have faced in modern education (some would argue in modern society at large) has been the shift and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Even as headlines warned of a looming potential crisis in the winter of 2020, nothing could have prepared educators for the challenge we would face with schooling as we had always come to know it ceased to exist in a matter of days that March. Over the course of a few days, students and faculty stopped reporting to school and shifted to online learning. And while remote schooling certainly wasn't brand new, it had never been attempted on the scale that was required by the pandemic shutdown.

The tentacles of this challenge were unclear and unknown to us, as the ripple effects of remote learning, both positive and harm-inducing, would take weeks and months to surface; in fact, we are still learning about those ripple effects. Approaching the challenge required humility and inquiry as we explored the myriad of choices, and further challenges, before us. There was no technical manual to reference, no preexisting plan. We had to engage questions not previously asked—questions concerning technology availability and access; engaging students through online platforms; balancing the social-emotional needs of our students, families, and staff with the responsibility to provide rigorous and engaging instruction; and life and death physical safety during a once-in-a-multigeneration global pandemic. The complexities of this challenge required not only new learning but a complete shift in our orientation to everything we previously understood about our roles as leaders in education. For many of us, responding to this challenge produced discomfort, fatigue, and, in some cases, despair. In this moment, leaders had extended themselves to those in their care in ways that ultimately come at the cost of their own well-being.

The resilience and muscle required to engage in this sustained space of discomfort is not often acknowledged in the practice, in the work, and

in society. These feelings are often powerful enough to limit us to technical responses. For many leaders, giving into the unknown conjures feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. For others, it leads to the kind of overexpenditure that renders a leader ineffective. The more complex and jarring the problem is, the more we look to authority for solutions that save us from the sustained discomfort and new learning needed for us to respond. Yet our true power lies in the ability to induce learning by resisting the urge to provide quick answers and instead reframe expectations and ask critical questions, thereby holding ourselves and those we lead to a place of curiosity, learning, and more impactful outcomes.

Adaptive challenges call for leadership that is unapologetically focused on leveraging this disequilibrium to induce and facilitate learning. Without such learning, we will be unable to collectively understand the nature of the problem and design the most effective solutions. The discomfort we often feel must serve as a signal and reminder to stay engaged in a space of inquiry and resist the urge for a quick solution. Engaging and responding to this disequilibrium requires a fine balance and a keen sense of suspended wonder to better understand what is not immediately present. Ironically, what earns us credibility as leaders—what lends itself to the accumulation of degrees, credentials, and awards—may be the very things that become barriers to our own adaptive growth; we are not exempt from the hard work of adaptation, and this ultimately binds us to sustaining our evolution as individuals and humanity. This kind of change disrupts comfort, and if we are truly honest, there are very few of us that don't bristle at this kind of discord. However, it taps into change that has the potential to push individuals and organizations to thrive and advance in ways that were previously not thought possible.

A few years back, we were invited to work with an executive team of a nonprofit organization. The organization's CEO felt strongly that her team could benefit from exploring how their personal leadership struggles show up at work and framed the executive coaching opportunity as a resource for the leadership team to grow and advance their goals. Our engagement started with a series of key questions to get to know these leaders, understand their roles, and learn about their past executive coaching experiences. Although we worked with the entire leadership throughout the course of our time, Will, a VP in charge of recruitment,

stood out immediately. As we continued our line of questioning, Will stopped us short. "Listen," he said. "I understand intellectually why we are doing this, but personally, I really don't see the value." By all performance measures, Will was a star. He had substantially exceeded all performance goals for the previous three years and was responsible for recruiting top talent to the organization year after year. His high performance served as feedback that he didn't need to engage in coaching that explored the connection between the personal and professional. In short, to Will, what he'd been doing was working exceptionally well.

He went on to explain why this separation was so important to him. Growing up in the Jesuit schools and then beginning his early teaching career in a Catholic high school, Will fiercely hid all aspects of his personal life that would reveal his sexual orientation. He believed success depended on that level of separation. And while he certainly wasn't able to do the same with his race, Will worked hard to be exceptional in the White-dominant spaces he had occupied throughout his career.

Before we began our coaching engagement, Will had received some anonymous feedback from a few direct reports citing that he was a "detached leader" and seemed both distant and cold. Over our sessions, we asked questions that helped Will begin to make connections between this feedback and the separation code he had been operating under for the past twenty years. "Does it really matter? If I let my guard down and let them see the real me, how will that lead to better outcomes?" As a young, Black, and gay man growing up in the Deep South, Will learned quickly to compartmentalize any part of himself that could be seen, in his eyes, as a liability or give anyone reason to doubt him.

We decided to probe for a better understanding of what Will meant by "the real me."

"Well," he said. "I have never ever felt like I was good enough, like I belonged. I don't always feel I deserve the life that I am living, so I do just about anything to prove I should be here. Sometimes I worry that people think less of me because of my race, and it is up to me to work hard to prove that I am different. I'm a hard worker and smart. I don't want to lead a team that feels I'm detached, that's not the culture I want to create. I'm not sure what to do." There was weight in what Will described and shared. The struggle in what he has carried for the better part of his life,

the fear and exhaustion of all he's had to do and be to avoid being "found out" was incredibly heavy. As a child and adult, he'd navigated White spaces to advance in stature and position, all the while internalizing messages that, because of his race and background, he was somehow inferior to his peers and colleagues. As a result, Will learned to shape-shift, hide additional aspects of his identity he perceived would serve as a deficit, and compensate through a pursuit of perfection. When we aren't curious or critical about the stories we internalize, about the world around us, and even about ourselves, we inevitably find ourselves contorting to maintain the illusion of stasis. In Will's case, he'd spent his professional life beautifully weaving a success story that justified his own invisibility.

Adaptive and complex leadership requires leaders, like Assistant Superintendent Matthew, to maintain an inquiry stance about the problem presented and requires us to question what we know, especially as we approach a potential solution. It demands that leaders, like Will, apply that same critical inquiry lens using a mirror to understand how our socialization can make each of us adapt in ways that compensate for—and avoid—our own personal adaptive challenges. Each of these scenarios bears cost to outcomes we pursue personally and professionally. A shift toward advancement in both areas demands critical examination of the underlying causes, most notably the driving assumptions and beliefs that may be present in the problem we seek to solve. When we fail to acknowledge the role this plays, we create solutions that don't have the intended impact, often falling flat or stagnating on progress. After several coaching sessions, many of which devolved into venting, Matthew was willing to reexamine his own socialization as a White man along with his approach to the problem and gather additional information to better understand why the discussion strategy was not taking hold in classrooms. He recognized that he needed to gather additional information to better understand the team's resistance, so Matthew and his coach came up with a plan to leverage the relationship capital of assistant principals and team leaders in the buildings to engage each teacher in a conversation about the work. After meeting with each member of the team, the leads shared trends across each conversation and across the buildings. We learned that, while teachers understand the structure and some had even practiced it in prior schools, few of them understood the *why*. Most teachers were skeptical that Socratic

seminars were a useful way to build students' knowledge and skills and felt as if it were another ask, another fad, another initiative. Most concerning was the fact that most of these White teachers communicated beliefs that students were not capable of driving meaningful conversations about literature without heavy teacher control.

When leaders fail to acknowledge the underlying causes—the deeply rooted assumptions and beliefs that drive behaviors—they stand no chance at driving successful change. It is akin to stretching out a long rubber band, which will hold its shape as long as we keep our hands on it. The minute we let go, it will snap back into its original state. When we respond to adaptive challenges through our formal authority, we often inadvertently produce a mismatch, which accounts for failing strategies. Although humbling, these discoveries rooted in these places of inquiry allowed Matthew and Courtney to reimagine and recast their approaches to supporting teachers, not only in specific endeavors like introducing a specific discussion strategy or reducing student removals but overall in how they engaged in deep and sustained learning and capacity building as White leaders. They slowed down, took time to understand teachers' perspectives, and initially engaged with a smaller subset of teachers willing to try new strategies. The work of adaptive leadership requires us to suspend our need for the instant gratification of quick success and instead engage in a sustained process to better and more deeply understand what may be driving the challenge. When we consider the trajectory of some of humanity's most complex challenges, in particular the crisis of long-standing inequities in schools and systems, we must acknowledge that our very existence as humans may depend on our ability to be incredibly adaptive in our response for the moment.

Peering Inward

We say all of this knowing how hard change can be. Some leaders are openly fearful of change, and some embrace it. Many leaders openly commit to change but then get stuck in the cyclical dysfunction of the status quo or stagnation because our best intentions are still undermined by something that's hard-wired in our actions. When this happens, leaders are often left deflated, wondering *what happened?* Most leaders exert outward effort toward growth and improvement, investing time and money in training and professional development to address

issues they want to change. Perhaps some initial shifts and progress are made, but eventually—and consistently—we find ourselves returning to our old habits and ways of doing things. This often becomes our greatest impediment to engaging in adaptive change because our barrier lies within our own blind spots and biases. The work of Kegan and Lahey (2009) illustrates the depth and persistent nature of these personal and organizational barriers by explaining just how complex change is for us as humans. In studies where doctors tell heart patients that they will die if they don't change their habits (eating, exercise, etc.), their studies highlight that only one in seven patients, even when their lives were on the line, ever successfully followed through on the long-term changes (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). This means that in fact when our very mortality is at risk, change is still difficult. We are just as highly committed to the change we say we want as we are to conflicting behaviors that actually impede progress, although unconsciously. If change is fleeting for people even when we are faced with matters of life and death, Kegan and Lahey's research establishes that good intentions and willpower certainly can't be enough to challenge and change the status quo. The level of change required to advance, to transform each of us at the individual and organizational level is metaphorically akin to cleaning out our bone marrow: deep rooted and expansive. Consider the case of James.

Throughout his career, James was a doer, volunteering for all manner of new initiatives and projects. His colleagues entrusted him to follow through on every new task and complete it in record time. He consistently delivered and was rewarded with a promotion into the principalship. His superpower—taking on every task and banging it out on his own—won him accolades as a teacher, assistant principal, and ultimately as the principal. However, as James's role and responsibility expanded, this habit of rapid-fire response to every new demand left him feeling buried and perpetually behind in his workload. James recognized that this status quo was unsustainable and, with the help of his leadership coach, began to understand the need for systems and structures for delegating work to members of his team. They created a list of ongoing tasks, categorized them using the urgent/important matrix, and began grouping and assigning tasks based on skill set and role.

When the leadership coach returned a month later, she noticed that James still seemed overwhelmed, frantic, and defeated. She revisited the delegation

plan they'd created and quickly found that he was still holding onto the majority of tasks they'd assigned to be delegated. After some probing, James finally confessed, "I know I am overwhelmed, but honestly, it is just easier if I do most of these things myself." While he was clearly struggling and outwardly communicating a commitment to shift his actions to address the problem (in this case, his commitment was to better delegation), his day-to-day actions were actually competing with this stated commitment. As a new leader, his insecurity drove a need to want to prove himself to his staff; when they approached him with a problem, James hesitated to hand it off to someone else. This gave him the gratification of having a direct impact on the success of his teachers and made him feel legitimized. With the help of good coaching, once he was able to understand *why* he was getting in his own way, he started to make progress with delegating.

When we examine how our habits, blind spots, and biases work directly against the stated goal, we begin to better understand how our behavioral patterns can be a barrier to our own growth. It is like trying to drive a car with one foot on the gas and one foot squarely on the brake. The good news is that leaders can be taught to unpack and understand the reasoning they use to inform any action. This unlocks a powerful tool for leaders in that they can begin to recognize, in real time, the conflicting nature of their stated versus actual behaviors and beliefs.

Still, rather than framing these contradictory behaviors as problems, Kegan and Lahey (2009) suggest that they are indicative of "symptoms of something else" that can "lead us to a picture of the real challenge" (p. 35). Kegan and Lahey use the medical metaphor of immunity to contextualize this phenomenon: "The immune system is, most of the time, a beautiful thing, an extraordinarily intelligent force that elegantly acts to protect us" (2009, p. 36). However, at times, our immune systems actually threaten our well-being. The challenge James faced wasn't technical in that he certainly knew how to delegate and also had faith in his team's ability to execute work. However, his *immunity to change* stemmed from a deeply rooted fear that he would be exposed as incompetent, untested, and unready to hold his new role. Minus a deep understanding of the way these blind spot behaviors function, James didn't stand a chance of disrupting the attitudes, values, and assumptions that drove his contradictory behaviors. And without this shift, James would never manifest the kind of adaptive change that is sustainable and transformational.

Even with an understanding of the disequilibrium and often distress that comes with tackling adaptive challenges, the discomfort that comes from unpacking the hidden impact of *race* on our thoughts and actions can be enough for us to run and hide. Peering inward to gain a deeper understanding of how race plays out in our own lives and leadership is a first step to leading for equity. It's the distance between transformation and stagnation. It requires us to not only understand what lies beneath the surface of the problem we seek to solve but also to understand how our own contradictory behaviors impact our leadership moves. Stagnation results when leaders habitually avoid examining and confronting race, typically out of fear of the resistance, the pushback, and the grief that may come from disrupting the comfort we all crave. However, an unexamined leader carries around an ever-growing knapsack of false truths—beliefs we have accumulated and carry in an effort to mask the aspects of our leadership we don't want exposed. Again, cultivating a sharper understanding of our long-standing patterns is the key to growth and transformation.

Core Considerations

Complex and adaptive leadership is not only able to sustain this kind of challenge; it is able to diagnose, decode its DNA, and move accordingly. And most importantly, a truly transformational leader would never ask a team to engage in this kind of sustained adaptive reflection without being equally willing to engage in the same sustained study because it is only when we understand our own hidden maps that we gain the power to begin navigating it in ways that were previously unimaginable. The power to shift radically, however, lies in the ability to examine and unpack the ways of being through a complex lens. Uncovering your own immunity to change—the elusive stuff that lives in our unconscious, the unexamined, the 10x mirror we work hard to avoid—is the work we must build comfort revisiting and examining through ways we have been socialized and how that socialization functions in our beliefs and behaviors as leaders. That is the bone marrow–level work necessary at the individual levels that builds momentum for what teams and organizations have power to achieve together that we get to leave as a legacy for future generations to continue.

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EXTENDED LEARNING

Independent Practice

We invite you to make continuous learning an ongoing part of your leadership work as you explore and deepen your understanding of the impact of personal and organizational adaptive leadership and encourage you to make a commitment to these actions:

- Advance your learning through deeper exploration of research on the concepts of personal barriers to change and adaptive challenges and leadership.
- Use learning to self-assess and racial insights gleaned to guide needed personal and organizational shifts to ensure thriving leaders and teams.
- Elicit ongoing feedback from multiple perspectives, experiences, and voices around you.
- Complete your own "Immunity to Change Map" (found in Keagan & Lahey, 2009) to reflect on your own competing commitments. Reflect on how these commitments were shaped by your racial socialization (see Chapter 1).
- Journal on what happens in your brain and body when you are faced with challenges that are adaptive in nature. Reflect on how you respond to these feelings and their impact on your practice and those around you in the organization.

Collaborative Practice

Building Muscle to Connect the Personal and Professional Power

A Case Study: *Dr. Stallingsworth*

In 2018, Dr. Stallingsworth took over as the first Black female superintendent of schools for a midsize suburban district. As any new leader, she sought

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to better understand the district's priorities and the people driving the work. Throughout her long career, Dr. Stallingsworth prided herself on being a tinkerer by nature and approached any new challenge with a need to get under the hood and understand the landscape of the work and the people. She spent weeks diving into the history of the district's data, setting goals with a particular eye on unpacking the major equity initiatives, from increasing AP access to a commitment to cultural competency training. She unpacked historical data, which reflected long-standing deep disparities between the district's Black and Brown students and their White counterparts. She spoke with teachers, families, and school leaders about their experiences with the district and reviewed artifacts to better understand the aim of the work. She also met with her team, the leaders leading and driving this work on the senior leadership team, to better understand who they were in the work and the *why* that drives them. After spending years successfully leading schools in two other districts, Dr. Stallingsworth felt primed to engage this team, along with herself, in capacity building that would lead to personal adaptive growth on behalf of the nearly seven thousand students she now served.

As many leaders do, she inherited teams with a lot of talent and teams with a lot of dysfunction (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive). As she learned more, Dr. Stallingsworth found that many of the workstreams, both important and potentially impactful, felt largely technical and driven by an overflow of resource output. But surrounding all of this were pockets of personal dysfunction and interpersonal conflict spread across most of the teams, including her own leadership team. She engaged this challenge head-on the only way she knew how: with sustained and focused data/knowledge gathering and capacity building. Putting out individual fires would only yield temporary relief from the larger issue embedded in the culture of the district. She needed the leaders to understand who *they* were in the work and how *who they are* expected to show up in everything they do and lead.

Using one-on-ones, check-ins, team, and all-staff meetings, Dr. Stallingsworth gathered information from the staff to help shape her district plan in an effort to better serve the schools. She decided to interrogate the goal-setting structure to address the persistent culture issues plaguing the teams. For years, district staff and building leaders were required to draft individual goals that were output driven and aligned to the district goals. They were little more than action items or tasks. For example, if my workstream as a district leader was

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to support AP expansion in the local high school, my personal goal might be "By June, I will visit all AP classrooms a minimum of two times each." If you aren't inspired by that example, don't worry; neither was Dr. Stallingsworth. With a few exceptions, these goals could be completed without much thought or reflection, like most checklists. And they certainly weren't doing anything to challenge or build anyone's capacity to create long-term transformational change. This leadership had become beneficiaries of a comfortable system requiring no more than maintenance of status quo.

As she learned more about the district's work, Dr. Shallingsworth became curious about what was standing in the way of advancing her new team's success. While the district was meeting most general benchmarks for state student achievement, there was little progress made in advancing many of the specific subgoals the team identified to accelerate outcomes and close disparity gaps. In her next round of individual team check-ins, Dr. Stallingsworth began to shift her questions to include inquiries into *how* each individual leader approached the work and into their perceptions around what might be standing in the way. After several weeks, she noticed some striking patterns. Many key members of the team were hesitant to collaborate across workstreams for fear that their colleagues would negatively impact the outcome of the work. Some even went so far as to identify trust issues among the team. Another pattern surfaced in that many team members felt resentful about the amount of work on their plates in comparison to colleagues. Despite their capabilities and talents, her team's personal baggage was clearly impacting performance and hampering their ability to meet the numerical outcome goals they set. Although she knew this would produce discomfort, these concerning patterns seeded in Dr. Stallingsworth an urgent need to engage her new team, and district, in an exploration between the personal and professional.

While she recognized the need for individual workstream goals, a few months after assuming the role of superintendent Dr. Stallingsworth formally introduced the adaptive personal goal to all district staff and building leaders (principals and assistant principals). She began by presenting a high-level overview of her data gathering through a review of artifacts (including the team goals) as well as patterns from her individual check-ins. From that data, Dr. Stallingsworth presented a needs assessment, which included the strengthening of individual

workstream goals by adding a new component: the adaptive personal goal. The process started with a simple question: *What personal challenge do you anticipate standing in the way of you fully achieving one of your workstream annual goals?* Her intention was to guide the team to simply dip a toe in the water to explore what it felt like to engage in an exploration of the relationship between our personal adaptive challenges and their impact on our professional aspirations. She leveraged the district's long-time investment in rigorous work goals—most of her team of leaders knew how to write some of the strongest technical outcome goals she had ever seen—and gently pushed them to think about how some aspect of their own personal behavior might need to be addressed in order for that goal to come to full fruition. She provided copious models, even using her own stories, her own personal challenges, as models to support their understanding.

For some team members, the floodgates opened, and they relished the opportunity to think about the relationship between a personal challenge and a professional goal. Others were confused. Many people spend most of their careers leaving their personal selves at the door when they leave for work each day, unzipping and stepping out of their personal suits and donning the professional version of themselves as they head off to work—or at least they think they do. Asking them to consider how the personal icky "stuff" showed up in the work felt like a violation of an unspoken rule.

Dr. Stallingsworth invested in intensive development and capacity building around the personal adaptive goals, including a targeted professional learning series as well as a year of executive coaching for all of the district's staff and building leaders (about twelve in total) who made up the formal cabinet. The team was asked to engage in a comprehensive 360-feedback process (designed to solicit feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors and produce a comprehensive report about their leadership) and used that intensive feedback to ultimately set their personal adaptive goal. The goals were constructed using a backward-planning reflection template (see the following table) to help team members reflect on a challenge, describe a method/action for addressing that challenge, and describe criteria for success. The template she used and some of the team members' goals are listed in the table that follows.

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PERSONAL ADAPTIVE GOALS		
Goal *What personal challenge do you anticipate is standing in the way of you fully achieving one of your annual workstream goals?*	**Method/Action** *What will you do to achieve your goal?*	**Criteria** *How will you know you have achieved your goal?*
In my interactions with teachers, school leaders, and colleagues, I tend to feel most successful with those I identify as "effective," or "highly effective." I can also feel efficacious with those I consider "developing." I struggle with those I deem "struggling" or "ineffective." I search for explanations that allow me to exit from partnerships that I feel will be unproductive. I say to myself, "This is not my work; this task belongs to someone else." My biases go into overdrive when I tell myself that a person or team is "in the red."	I will pause when I identify a person or team as being "in the red." What evidence is there for this assessment; am I just "seeing red" because a bias has been triggered? I will consult with colleagues and engage in consultancies to get other perspectives on the situation. I will try to bring an asset-based mindset that promotes my engagement and doesn't alienate the partners I am meant to serve. I will lean into the difficulty of supporting all learners, wherever they are in their arc of learning, for they are very much "my work."	I will have more than the standard number of visits to classrooms that I deem to be "in the red." I will have a journal of support in which I keep track of my own thinking about the person I'm supporting; I will strive to make direct connections with students, so I can keep alive the ultimate purpose of my work as a school support. I will shift my thinking to identify assets in all partners and interrogate my own biases that are veiled in dismissive assessments.
I struggle to distinguish between top priorities and less important activities to prioritize time and meet deadlines. I say yes to too many things and get involved in things that are not necessarily the best use of my time because I always want to help or "fix things."	I am going to stop myself before committing to new projects/tasks and reflect before I do. I am going to keep an accurate task list and calendar specific time to work, so I can accurately plan. I am going to check in with a partner to help keep me accountable	I am completing tasks on time. I have enough time to complete all I set out to do.

PERSONAL ADAPTIVE GOALS		
I am finding myself conflicted during interracial conversations where we don't agree on something. I struggle with balancing my own privilege and desire to approach with an equity lens and how much to push if I disagree or have a concern.	I am going to attend a session on leading while White. I will engage with coaches and the affiliate program to deepen my work around this. I will deliberately enter conversations that I am concerned about and get feedback when possible.	• Conversations with peers of all races • Feedback from my coaches • Personal reflection

A few staff members were confused but also very openly resistant and hostile toward the process. One in particular, Jim, was a Black veteran principal in the district, overseeing one of the two middle schools and a team of approximately forty-five staff. In Jim's case, the discomfort produced by the mere suggestion of exploring the relationship between personal and professional was enough to send him into a tailspin. He became oppositional and defiant in the learning sessions and worked to undermine efforts to engage the broader team. While nearly all team members found a scaffolded way to engage in the reflection, Jim fought against and declined every opportunity to engage, citing it as unprofessional and unnecessary. Ultimately, Jim decided to leave at the end of the year and remained resistant and defiant until the end.

Meanwhile, colleagues on the team began to develop trust like never before, sharing aspects of their own personal/behavioral immune systems and developing plans to disrupt their own hidden commitments in public and collaborative ways.

One enthusiastic team member, Brian, a White male who had been a leader on the curriculum and instruction team for five years, began to share connections he made going back to adolescence, when he was tasked with taking care of his ailing mother as she battled a chronic and debilitating illness. The requirement to step up and assume increased responsibility at such a young age had morphed into a middle-aged man who took on work (often work that should have been completed by others) and said yes any time a request was made to help out on the team. It left him feeling tapped and resentful. And while he had committed repeatedly (especially to his spouse) to stop taking on so much, he discovered that the validation he received from being the

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team's "go-to guy" was stronger than the frustration he felt from being overburdened with work. When Brian discovered his hidden commitment and the ways in which he had a foot on both the gas and brake in his own life, he shared this with several trusted colleagues and asked for their support in calling it out and nudging him when they saw him falling back into the pitfall of being the team's "yes man."

This work was embedded with a parallel track of implicit bias awareness training, helping the team develop a shared and common language around the function and role of racial socialization and bias in the work. It was not surprising that, for some of the teammates, their personal adaptive reflections included the need to unpack deeply rooted assumptions about themselves racially as well as their teammates. For a district team committed to addressing issues of disproportionality in several aspects of their data, including disparities rooted in suspensions, IEP referrals, and even enrollment, they had almost never been asked to consider how their own personal journeys might have been connected to the very conditions that led to the disparities. In short, most of the team, and especially the White members of the team, saw themselves as completely outside of the system that caused the harm. So as Dr. Stallingsworth worked to build their collective capacity, she built each individual team member's muscle to tolerate and push through the discomfort that comes with understanding how personal adaptive challenges create the hidden commitments standing in our own way of success.

At the end of her first year, Dr. Stallingsworth sought feedback from all participants through open and anonymous surveys as well as through one-on-one interviews. While several leaders shared the discomfort they had experienced, nearly everyone reported that, over time, the discomfort subsided and the work around exploring personal challenges in a professional environment began to feel natural. More than that, as Dr. Stallingsworth compared the leaders' professional workstream goals from the prior school year to the following year, she noticed leaders across the board creating more rigorous, robust, and adaptive work goals that were more closely linked with the complex challenges they sought to address. Finally, Dr. Stallingsworth noticed a striking change in the way her team worked together, leveraging the vulnerability embedded in the personal adaptive challenge work to build trust, take more risks, and shift the way in which these leaders worked with their own teams at the district or back in schools. This investment in capacity building set the stage for Dr. Stallingsworth to drill down even more deeply to attack the issues of disparities plaguing the district and underrepresented students in its care for generations.

Case Study Discussion

1. What are your initial noticings about challenges facing both the leader and the district?
2. What fundamental values, actions, assumptions, and behaviors are driving this leader and her organization in this case study?
3. What factors do you believe influenced the choices of Dr. Stallingsworth? What were the technical and adaptive implications of these choices?
4. What changes can better advance her vision and ideas for innovation? What is the new learning that might be required?
5. Are there actions or messages that may be producing results exactly the opposite of what Dr. Stallingworth might have planned?
6. As you reflect on your own leadership, in what areas might you be interested in making progress in your leadership practice or organization? What shifts are necessary to create the outcome described? What new learning is required to make progress in bringing about this change? How would that foster new ideas, solutions, and innovation?
7. How will you reinforce commitment as resistance, defensiveness, and frustration increases as the need for adaptive change?
8. How will value for this new way of being be communicated, celebrated, and memorialized?