Perspectives

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Adaptive Leadership: Strategies for Challenging Times

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With the turmoil experienced in many states and communities, leadership of America's community colleges may be at its most challenging juncture. Leaders are confronted with declining enrollments, state disinvestments, public scrutiny, changing demographics, and complex problems, among other issues. Public perceptions of higher education appear to be at an all-time low, with Gallup having reported in 2017 that 56% of all Americans report having only some or very little confidence in higher education. The rationale for Democrats (36%) for holding this view is that it is too expensive. The second highest reason is that there is poor leadership or colleges are poorly run (14%). In contrast, Republicans cite the belief that higher education is too liberal or too political (32%) while their second reason is that students are not properly educated or education is not relevant. Republicans' criticisms include poor leadership in third spot (Jaschik, Inside Higher Education). Leading in this environment will not be easy, yet it is more important than ever.

What community colleges, and higher education more generally, are experiencing may reflect the views of authors Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky in *Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis* as they describe the "permanent crisis of serious and unfamiliar challenges." Another description that has become popular in the business literature (stemming from the military) is the concept of VUCA, that is short for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) to describe our plight. Bennett and Lemoine contend that each VUCA factor requires a different type of leadership response, and that a VUCA environment can be addressed with strategy. So what are the implications for leadership in a VUCA – or at minimum – a challenging environment? Many would agree that new leadership skills are required, while proven strategies are also still valuable. This author espouses the view that leadership can be learned, but the Academy has historically done too little to cultivate it within their organizations. There does seem to be some urgency to the need to develop more and better community college leaders.

Multiple leadership perspectives and theories exist to inform our work. Among the many popular approaches to leadership today are servant leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and strengths-based leadership. Each of these has dimensions that are valuable in conceptualizing and actualizing leadership roles. Each has proponents and most focus on the people and their roles in bringing about change as well as the mindset of the leaders. Increasingly, the literature is examining the importance of followership and teamwork. Some definitions even suggest that leadership and change are nearly interchangeable terms. Most college leaders we know embrace components of multiple philosophies and fulfill their roles with individual styles best suited to them and their environments.

One approach to leadership that may be less well known but potentially valuable in today's environment is that of Adaptive Leadership, that has been popularized through the work of Ron Heifitz of the Harvard Business School, beginning with his book called *Leadership with No Easy Answers* (1998) and followed by *Leadership on the Line*, first published in 2002 and updated in 2017. In *Leadership on the Line* Heifitz and Linsky write:

We believe our times call for deep and widespread change that transforms people's capacity to meet today's challenges and thrive in new ways. We also believe that sustainable, transformative change is more evolutionary than revolutionary, conserving far more cultural DNA than it tosses out.

This observation would suggest a need for approaches aligned with Appreciative Inquiry, where what is good in an organization is valued.

At its heart, AI is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them. AI is not so much a shift in the methods and models of organizational change, but AI is a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process to 'see' the wholeness of the human system and to 'inquire' into that system's strengths, possibilities, and successes (Stavros, et al 2015).

While the Adaptive Leadership approach elaborates extensively on the complexity of the challenges (the problems) we face, the authors also acknowledge the importance of building on strengths that exist. To what extent does your organization employ appreciative inquiry in its change management strategies?

Heifitz and Linsky continue:

For transformative change to be sustainable, it not only has to take root in its own culture, but also has to successfully engage its changing environment. It must be adaptive to both internal and external realities. Therefore, leadership needs to start with listening and learning, finding out where people are, valuing what is best in what they already know, value, and do, and build from there. It's dangerous to lead with only a change idea in mind. You need both a healthy respect for the values, competence, and history of people, as well as the changing environment, to build the capacity to respond to new challenges and take advantage of new openings.

Throughout their works, Heifitz and Linsky emphasize the importance of rethinking how we see the problems, distinguishing between what they describe as technical problems and adaptive challenges. Further, they posit that the methods of the past are ill suited to the needs of today. The Adaptive Leadership framework relies heavily upon diagnosis of the current environment, including the type of challenge (technical vs. adaptive) and the political environment.

EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

The current literature suggests that the future health of community colleges depends on adaptive leadership. Given the swift speed of change and myriad complex challenges now impacting our institutions at a rapidly accelerating rate, it is vital that colleges begin building the institutional leadership capacity to meet these threats, especially since the skill sets and traditional strategies of the past may no longer be sufficient to meet current and future challenges. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders begin to drive adaptive change in their organizations?

Shai A. James Boyd, CFRE, MPA

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Post-secondary institutions across the nation face persistent, recurring issues that drive leaders to seriously consider their perceptions of the industry's threats and challenges, the steps they have already taken to position their institutions for tomorrow, and the plans they are developing for the future.

Without question, deteriorating financial resources, completion rates, non-academic barriers, and demands on workforce development initiatives are complex issues; however, the expectations of eliminating these barriers are bombarding our institutions at an alarming rate. As a result, college and university leaders face a growing sense of urgency to prepare for the future and transform from within the institution. Community colleges have reached a crossroad, and ever-changing environments depend upon the leadership of the institution and the ability to adapt and readily respond to complex challenges. No longer can the administration afford to operate in silos that stonewall innovative thinking and minimize proactive opportunities that weaken the overall of the institution.

According to research conducted by the American Council on Education (2019), "By rooting transformation in tangible changes to the management approaches, processes, and structures that have long defined their institutions, leaders will prepare their teams to educate and meaningfully impact as many students and communities as possible — regardless of what the future holds"(p.5). Adaptive leadership provides a big-picture view at all levels of the institution and allows institutions to identify the challenges within each department and the institution as a whole. Furthermore, adaptive leadership embraces the philosophy of soliciting solutions to complex problems from members across the institution regardless of their leadership rank, allowing diverse perspectives and robust solutions for individuals directly impacted by the issues.

Change is complicated, and shifting the culture of individual values, beliefs, and perceptions is difficult. As such, this leadership model requires experimentation and openness to innovation with sufficient time to test and adjust practices. To that end, perhaps the most significant challenge within this model is the unwillingness of leaders to listen, process, and empathize with other people's opinions — as adaptive leadership focuses on the team and not the power of one's leadership position. Ultimately, how community colleges face ambiguity, urgency, and stress will eventually determine the sustainability of the institution.

Post-secondary institutions that fail to embrace change face possible extinction. The future health of our community colleges depends on adaptive leadership and the mindset of leadership to lead proactively from a balcony viewpoint. Today, adaptive leadership is everyone's responsibility.

Reference:
Huron Consulting Group. (2019). *The transformation ready higher education institution: How leaders can prepare and promote change.* Retrieved from https://www.acenet.edu

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Leading adaptively is multi-faceted. Research shows there are common factors associated with being able to adaptively change an environment. One factor encourages college leaders to search out those who are open to opportunities. Encouraging employees to see the value in growth makes the process of adaptively changing that much easier. Community college leaders who wish to lead adaptively should seek to partner with employees who not only can envision the possibilities that come with a new way of doing things, but with those who can act on implementing policies and processes (Bowles & Hattie, 2013).

An additional component in driving adaptive change calls on key stakeholders to actively help others see the value of new opportunities. Understanding the reasons behind the change and the positive opportunities that might come from adjustments enables individuals to better understand the reasons for change. This in turn may motivate them to actively participate in the change process (Bowles & Hattie, 2013).

Including employees in the planning of the changes can be equally effective in helping to drive adaptive change. Cultivating an environment where leaders actively work to build a partnership with their employees fosters a sense of ownership in the initiative. Employees begin to feel they are part of the process which strengthens their investment in working toward a successful conclusion.

An example of how impactful this can be happened at the college where I work. During a meeting recently between the college President and our Student Affairs division, the president spoke about working to find new ways of doing things. He pointed to declining enrollment and shared if enrollment kept trending downward, layoffs could occur. He encouraged everyone to try to find ways they could maximize their efforts toward enrolling students. What this did was invite the Student Affairs division to partner in the process of finding new, innovative ways to enroll students. Likewise, he explained the reason for the change and how it might affect the college. He empowered the employees to share in working to change how things were done.

The results were that several new ways of doing things were implemented. Marketing focused on programs previously not targeted. Financial Aid added a fourth de-registration to its calendar to free up seats for students who were serious about attending in the fall. A Strategic Enrollment Management Task Force was developed to help streamline processes and procedures. The list goes on. In the end, our college saw an increase in its fall enrollment for the first time in ten years.

Consequently, it is clear that leading adaptively can be done, and further, it can have positive effects on all who participate in its process.

Reference:
Bowles, T., & Hattie, J. (2013). Towards positive adaptive change: *Australian Psychologist, 48*(6), 437-444. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12024

Shai James Boyd, *Assistant Director of Development for the Henry Ford College Foundation, oversees all aspects of fund development and alumni relations. Shai is a passionate and successful fundraiser in a region that is now making a comeback through corporate and nonprofit engagement. She earned her MPA from University of Michigan-Dearborn, is a Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE), a Leadership Detroit XXXVII graduate, and currently is enrolled in the DCCL program.*

Elizabeth Preston, MA *is a Financial Aid Specialist at Henry Ford College where she and her team have developed an Ally Training Program, established resources for individuals in need, and helped support students struggling with homelessness and food insecurity. She created HFC's LGBTQ+ employee group, SAFE@HFC, helping HFC be recognized nationally as a LGBTQ+ friendly institution. Elizabeth earned her MA at Eastern Michigan University and is enrolled in the FSU DCCL program.*

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

The current literature suggests that the future health of community colleges depends on adaptive leadership. Given the swift speed of change and myriad complex challenges now impacting our institutions at a rapidly accelerating rate, it is vital that colleges begin building the institutional leadership capacity to meet these threats, especially since the skill sets and traditional strategies of the past may no longer be sufficient to meet current and future challenges. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Coaching a Leadership Team

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QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders begin to drive adaptive change in their organizations?

Acting alone, college leaders simply cannot administer a college and plan for its future. Even the strongest college presidents cannot have lasting influences on their colleges unless they can change the values and the vision of the institution's people, and the difference between success and failure depends upon the effectiveness of leadership teams throughout the institution. Developing, coaching, and nurturing successful teams may be the most important task of any leader. What should a leader know about teams and their members?

Expectations can be powerful motivators for a team, and a lack of clearly communicated expectations often leads to serious problems. The team leader as coach should communicate expectations clearly and often. Leaders should talk about their expectations for honesty, ethical behavior, fairness, legality, respect, courtesy, civility, cooperation, visibility, courage, balance, and scholarship.

> *Developing, coaching, and nurturing successful teams may be the most important task of any leader.*

If team members are not honest in their dealings with people or if their behavior is considered to be unethical, the college leadership will not enjoy the level of trust needed to be effective. College leaders need to be honest and data-informed in order to keep a college from being politically divided. Lack of attention to fairness and legality can lead to unnecessary legal challenges and costs for the college. However, threat of a lawsuit should never keep college leaders from doing what is right.

Leadership team members do not have to be best friends, but they should respect each other and treat each other civilly. Some college leaders encourage a competitive climate among team members, with the belief that competition will bring out greater effort. However, most leaders want their people to be on the same team and to realize how interdependent they are. Team members should cooperate with each other and be institutional advocates, not just narrow constituency advocates.

> *College leaders need to be honest and data-informed in order to keep a college from being politically divided.*

It is all too easy today for college administrators to become trapped by their inboxes and never leave their offices. However, it is important for team members to be visible—on campus, in the community, and statewide and nationally. Leaders need to schedule time to get out of the office and talk to faculty, staff, and students so they are familiar with current issues and so they can accurately portray leadership plans and decisions. Attendance at community events is important for the college to maintain community support. Involvement at the state and national levels helps to keep leaders informed about emerging issues and provides visibility for the college. Expectations for level of involvement in campus, community, state, and national organizations should be clearly communicated.

Not all leadership decisions will be popular, but leaders need the courage to do what is right. Confronting faculty and staff with data that shows the need for improvement may not be comfortable, but leaders need the courage to do it and the common sense to ask the faculty and staff to help develop the plans to do a better job. Leaders who disparage the college and then have all of the answers will not get the buy-in to accomplish anything. Communicating negative information to a board of trustees takes courage, but boards need to know the truth to address issues before they get out of hand. The team leader should ask the team members to be courageous enough to do what is right for the college and its students—and then, the leader needs the courage to support the team member.

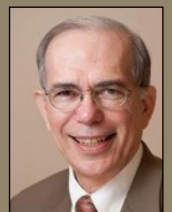> *Not all leadership decisions will be popular, but leaders need the courage to do what is right.*

College leaders need to protect their own health and the health and well-being of their team members. College leadership jobs are stressful and can be almost all-consuming. Team leaders should communicate their expectation that team members protect their health and fitness and strive for balance in their lives. Leaders and team members need to get ahead of their calendars and block out time for fitness activities, family, spiritual renewal, scholarship, and recreation. Unless time for these activities is scheduled, professional activities and commitments will fill the calendar.

There is a great deal to learn about team leadership: team diversity, gender differences on a team, teams in urban colleges, teams in multi-college districts, assessing an inherited team, developing a mid-level team, board-CEO teams, developing a leadership team during a crisis, focusing a team on student learning, and leading a team during institutional transformation. For those who wish to learn more, our edited book, *Team Leadership in Community Colleges,* is the first book to address these topics and to assist leaders to work with teams to manage and transform today's community colleges (Boggs & McPhail, in press).

Reference:
Boggs, G. R. & McPhail, C. J. (in press) *Team Leadership in Community Colleges.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, L. L. C. (https://styluspub.presswarehouse.com/browse/book/9781620368879/Team-Leadership-in-Community-Colleges)

George R. Boggs is President and CEO Emeritus of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and Superintendent/President Emeritus of Palomar College in San Marcos, California. He also serves as Chair of the Phi Theta Kappa International Student Honor Society Board, and continues to be an active consultant, teacher, author, and speaker. He is the author of more than 100 articles, books, and chapters on various aspects of higher education. He currently teaches classes in emerging higher education issues in the doctoral program at San Diego State University and is a guest lecturer in programs at several other universities. Over his career, Dr. Boggs has served on many boards, commissions, and committees. He has been recognized by the American Association of Community Colleges with its 2016 Leadership Award and by the Public Broadcasting System with its Terry O'Banion Prize for Teaching and Learning for "triggering the most significant educational movement of the past decade." He is a Distinguished Graduate of The University of Texas, where he earned his PhD in educational administration.

Adaptive Leadership: Strategies for Challenging Times (continued from page 1)

In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership,* Heifitz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) describe these as the qualities of adaptive organizations:

▲ **Name the elephants in the room.** The authors observe that in a highly adaptive organization there is "no issue too sensitive to be raised at the official meeting, and no questions are off limits" (p. 102).

▲ **Share responsibility for the organization's future.** Shared responsibility means that people share responsibility for the success of the entire organization and not only their units; in these units, they note, cross-functional problem solving is routine.

▲ **Value independent judgment.** Leaders cannot and usually do not have all of the answers. Wise leaders who seek input of others acting in service of the mission find "there is a palpable norm of pushing decision making and idea generation down deep into the organization."

▲ **Build leadership capacity.** Adaptive leaders as CEOs recognize that they are the chief development officers, and they take leadership development seriously. Further, they note that line managers have responsibility for developing leaders on a daily basis.

▲ **Institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.** Being open to learning is a critical capacity for anyone seeking to enable their organizations to adapt . . . "People throughout the organization must open themselves to experimentation, giving up some old truths that have become irrelevant with changes in the business, social, or political landscape."

For community colleges to thrive, leaders will need to model courage, learning, and reflection.

While the preceding descriptors speak to the attributes of the organization, suggestions are also offered for the leaders. Mobilizing the system is Part 4 and Deploying Yourself is featured in Part 5. Part 5 resonates well with the guidance of famed authors Kouzes and Posner in their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, a required reading in many leadership programs. Based upon their extensive research, Kouzes and Posner identify the five practices of effective leadership, including: Model the Way; Inspire a Shared Vision; Challenge the Process; Enable Others to Act; and Encourage the Heart.

In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Heifitz, Grashow, and Linsky offer the following list: Stay Connected to Your Purposes; Engage Courageously; Inspire People; Run Experiments; and Thrive.

Given these perspectives on what the authors believe to be the qualities of an adaptive organization or best practices in leadership, how well does your organization stack up? Here are some possible conversation starters for those wishing to build more adaptive organizations.

▲ How safe are your President's Cabinet, Academic Leadership, and/or board meetings for difficult questions to be raised?

▲ How will challenging the process – questioning the ways in which things have always been done – be received?

▲ What examples exist of cross-disciplinary, cross-functional, creative problem solving?

▲ What voices are invited to participate in difficult conversations about topics that matter to the college?

▲ What is the infrastructure for leadership development across the organization?

▲ How are you continuously learning and reflecting?

▲ What does being courageous mean in your environment?

▲ What purposes does your leadership team share?

▲ What needs to be different if the college is to realize its mission and vision?

One may wonder how becoming an adaptive leader, utilizing appreciative inquiry, or embracing the best practices espoused in the *Leadership Challenge* relate to the AACC Competencies broadly embraced as representative of the skills needed for today's community college leaders? Fortunately, there is considerable alignment. In the advice for aspiring CEOs, there are several that resonate:

Information and Analytics. An effective community college leader understands how to use data in ways that give a holistic representation of the institution's performance, and is open to the fact that data might reveal unexpected or previously unknown trends or issues.

Advocacy and Mobilizing/Motivating Others. An effective community college leader understands and embraces the importance of championing community college ideals, understands how to mobilize stakeholders to take action on behalf of the college, and understands how to use all of the communications resources available to connect with the college community.

Collaboration. An effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promote the success of the college community, and sustain the community college mission. (AACC 2018)

In the section labeled Personal Traits and Abilities, these two are best aligned: Emotional intelligence and courage. What may be less prominent in the AACC competencies is the acknowledgement of the dramatically different context within which leaders must now perform.

Regardless of which leadership philosophy resonates with you, skillful leadership is vital, and a combination of approaches may be best suited to most environments. Leaders must recognize how different the challenges are, to be ready to think beyond traditional responses, and to mobilize others to greater futures. For community colleges to thrive, leaders will need to model courage, learning, and reflection.

Dr. Roberta "Robbie" Teahen is Director of the Doctorate in Community College Leadership at Ferris State University that will celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2020. She has served as a high school business teacher, a community college faculty member and administrator, and as an administrator and faculty member at Ferris State University. She earned her doctorate in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Learning at Michigan State University. In 2002, she became the Dean of the University Center for Extended Learning at Ferris where she was responsible for off-campus programming. From 2007-2019 she served as Associate Provost, with responsibilities for accreditation, assessment, online learning, faculty development, charter schools, and graduate education. In 2010, she assumed leadership for the Doctorate in Community College Leadership, a role she continues to fulfill. Professional endeavors include more than 30 years of service to the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) as a peer reviewer and team chair and as a member of the Institutional Actions Council. In 2014, Robbie was awarded the Athena Grand Traverse Award and in 2015 was honored as a Distinguished Woman in Higher Education by the Michigan chapter of the American Council on Education (ACE).