



Lesson 2

Adaptive Leadership

Learning Objectives

At the end of the lesson, participants will be able to:

- Identify three characteristics of adaptive leadership
- Identify the difference between a win/lose versus a win/win approach to conflict

This lesson provides civilian, military, and police leaders with an understanding of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership is a specific type of leadership useful for working in complex environments. Complex environments are difficult to predict. Diverse stakeholders do not fall within a “chain of command” in a complex environment. No one stakeholder is in control. This lesson describes why using adaptive leadership, taking smart risks, and listening to diverse stakeholders makes sense in a complex environment.

1. What is Leadership?

Leadership is a process of guiding or facilitating a group of people toward some goal. Basic leadership requires an array of skills, including the following:

- A vision and an ability to develop a strategy
- Courage and an ability to make difficult and even risky decisions
- Communication skills to deliver clear messages to mobilise followers

This type of leadership is sufficient to handle most technical problems. But most leadership models are not adequate for managing complex environments with many different stakeholders. It is not possible to “command and control” all the stakeholders operating in a complex environment.

2. Complex environments demand adaptive leadership.

Adaptive leadership helps leaders to adapt to constantly changing dynamics with diverse groups of other stakeholders.⁴ Military and police training academies as well as government, business executives, and civil society are turning to adaptive leadership, recognising that it is more effective in complex

environments. Adaptive leaders accept chaos and ambiguity in complex environments. Despite new and chaotic information, adaptive leaders find a way to understand the motivations and patterns of behaviour in other stakeholders. Adaptive leaders can accept ambiguity; a situation which is unclear.⁵

3. Adaptive leaders listen and share information.

No single person or group can understand a complex environment alone. Adaptive leaders do not try to force a simple “good versus evil” analysis onto a context where there are a lot of people in the middle of a conflict where all sides have legitimate grievances. Adaptive leaders listen to many different points of view to understand how different stakeholders might react or respond and to learn to know their interests and needs. Information is a form of power. While not all information can or should be shared, an adaptive leader recognises that other stakeholders in a complex environment will be better poised to contribute to peace and security if they have information necessary for their work and decision-making. When new challenges appear, adaptive leaders accept the chaos and unpredictability of complex environments. Adaptive leaders continue to listen, learn and share information, in an attempt to learn more about new challenges or threats. Adaptive leaders continue improvising and innovating new approaches instead of repeating the mistakes of the past, hoping for a different outcome.

4. Adaptive leaders communicate, coordinate, and build relationships with all stakeholders, even across the lines of conflict.

No one stakeholder can create peace and security in a complex environment alone. Adaptive leaders foster participation in decision-making. Peace and security require the work of many different stakeholders, usually government, security sector, civil society, and the business sector. Adaptive leaders recognise that these diverse stakeholders need forums for communicating and coordinating their efforts; first to reduce any conflicts or duplication between them, but also to find areas for cooperation.

5. Adaptive leaders foster innovation, creativity, and improvisation.

Since a complex environment is difficult to predict, normal decision-making processes often fail to provide effective solutions. An adaptive leader recognises the need for on-going improvisation, trial and error. Adaptive leaders see the need for continuous learning and evaluation. Listening and learning from others helps develop a common vision. Adaptive leaders think outside the box. They create opportunities for others to criticise an idea and to develop innovative solutions to problems. Adaptive leaders recognise that mistakes are opportunities for learning.⁶

6. Adaptive leaders respond according to their assessment of the context, not according to their individual personality preferences.

Since complex environments are always shifting, leaders cannot use a fixed plan and hope that it works in the changing environment. Daily analysis of stakeholder interests and relationships may be necessary. Individuals and groups have preferred styles for how they will interact with other individuals in a system's process. These preferred patterns help set the way change happens in a complex environment. Broadly defined, there are five different styles of dealing with conflict: avoidance, accommodation, compromise, collaboration, and competition. These patterned responses to conflict are preferred ways of relating in systems. For example, social cohesion requires using compromise and collaboration patterns to build relationship across the lines of division between people and groups. Although every leader may have a personal preference for one of these styles, adaptive leaders in complex environments learn how and when to use each of these different styles to the benefit of the whole. Their approach adapts to the context.

7. Adaptive leaders take “smart” risks.

Since complex environments are unpredictable, any action carries a risk of unintended consequences. Adaptive leaders do not take all risks. Anticipating potential unintended impacts and weighing costs to benefits help leaders make decisions about which risks are worth taking. Listening and sharing information help determine which risks are smart risks and which are not.

8. Adaptive leaders set an example.

Adaptive leaders illustrate and model how they would like others to act. This means adaptive leaders have to stick to their principles, and only make compromises when it does not violate their integrity.

Adaptive Leadership in the Philippines

Filipino Brigadier General Raymundo Ferrer used adaptive leadership skills to address violence. Reaching out to peacebuilding NGOs and the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, together the Filipino security sector and civil society are training together, analysing conflict together, implementing peacebuilding projects together and evaluating the effectiveness of security strategies together.

The Philippine case study is an illustration of innovative and adaptive leadership. Ferrer recognised that civil society peacebuilding experts had valid ideas for transforming the conflict. Both civil society and military leaders improvised a way for joint learning to happen, something that had not happened previously.

Both military and civil society leaders took “smart” risks as they decided the benefit of having military leaders train with civil society leaders in the same classroom outweighed the risks of continuing patterns of avoidance.

Ferrer is a leader who led by example. His willingness to show humility and listen carefully to civil society leaders earned him trust with community leaders. His ability to solve difficult conflicts and deescalate tensions in areas under his command earned him respect and career advancement.

*Read more about the innovation and collaboration between civil society, military and police in The Philippines in *Local Ownership in Security*, the companion report to this *Handbook*.

9. Adaptive leaders seek win-win solutions.

Adaptive leaders recognise that the best solution to a problem is not that one group wins while another group loses. Winning refers to meeting the group’s interests. The best solution to any problem is a solution that will last. When there are winners and losers, the losers may simply take time to regroup and begin fighting again. Adaptive leaders look for “win-win” solutions where stakeholders develop a solution that satisfies or addresses their main interests.

The chart below illustrates a simplified outcome of a conflict between two individuals or groups. There are four possible outcomes. Group A can win and Group B can win or both Group A and B can lose. Many violent conflicts result in an outcome where neither group wins or achieves their interests. The number of violent conflicts that result in one side winning and another side losing are very small.

	Group A	
Group B	Win/Win	Win/Lose
	Lose/Win	Lose/Lose

10. Women and Men in Leadership

Complex environments require leadership from both men and women. In many places, women’s leadership is restricted to raising children, providing education for children, running the household, and possibly engaging in selling and shopping for household goods. Males, on the other hand, are given leadership responsibilities for politics, security, and other public issues. When women show leadership or aspire to be leaders in their workplaces, communities, or nations, they often meet resistance from other women and men who think they are either ‘too feminine’ or ‘too masculine’ to be a good leader. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and 2242 both affirm the positive contributions women make to peace and security and mandate the inclusion of women in these areas.⁷

There is a growing awareness that when women and men share leadership, especially when there is a “critical mass” of 30-35%, there is more attention to human rights, indigenous and national self-determination for minority groups, greater economic justice and environmental protection, broader ideas of security, and more attention to reproductive issues and population-planning policies. In other words, when women join men in leading their communities, regions, and countries, everyone benefits and real changes take place that support a just peace. Lesson 27 expands on the necessity of “Gender Mainstreaming in Security.”

REVIEW

This lesson identified the characteristics of adaptive leadership. In complex environments, a leader cannot possibly command and control other stakeholders. Adaptive leadership takes a distinct approach. Listening and learning from other stakeholders allows an adaptive leader to respond to new situations, take smart risks, and develop innovative solutions to challenges.

Citations

⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organisation and the World*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School's Cambridge Leadership Associates, 2009).

⁵ Wheatley, Margaret J. 2006. *Leadership and the New Science* (3rd Edition), (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006).

⁶ Robert E. Quinn in *Building the Bridge as you Walk on It: A Guide for Leading Change*, (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

⁷ *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. Adopted by the Security Council on 30 October 2000. *United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242*. Adopted by the Security Council on 13 October 2015.

Lesson 2

Learning Exercises

Anchor

10 minutes

To begin the lesson, anchor the content with a series of questions. Think of a time when you were in a leadership role in a complex environment.

- What were your most significant challenges?
- How did you respond to these challenges?
- Did your responses work?

Add

20 minutes

Present the PowerPoint slides or ask participants to discuss the lesson readings in a small group.

Apply

25 minutes

The goal of this exercise is to compare and contrast leadership styles and their impact on others. Each scenario stakeholder team will identify two options for leadership and test how these approaches would interact with other stakeholders' perceptions and actions. Stakeholder teams have twenty minutes to design two specific ideas for exercising leadership in your scenarios. First, what specific step you would you take using a "command and control" approach to leadership in this situation? Second, what would it look like for you to take an "adaptive leadership" approach in this situation? After twenty minutes of discussion, each stakeholder teams first announces to the group their first action, using a "command and control" style of leadership. After each group shares their plan of action, the group can step out of role and respond with how their stakeholder team would perceive the actions taken by other teams. What types of responses does a "command and control" style of leadership inspire in others? Next, each stakeholder team shares their "adaptive leadership" approach to the situation. Then debrief this round in the same way. How would other teams likely perceive and respond to the team's adaptive leadership?

See the "Scenario-based Learning" section in the [Handbook on Human Security: A Civil-Military-Police Curriculum](#) for explanation of the scenarios and teams.

Away

5 minutes

In a large group, participants can discuss this question:

- If I could go back in time, what would I do differently in a past work experience if I could use adaptive leadership skills?
- What will I do differently given what we have learned in this lesson?

This Lesson is part of the *Handbook on Human Security* found at www.humansecuritycoordination.org

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