

Leadership for the future: Adaptability

Podcast transcript

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Transcript

In Advance HE's 2023 leadership survey adaptability was rated along with collaboration as the most important skill a leader should have. 80% of leaders surveyed thought a good leader should be adaptable however only half believed that they possess that quality and only 10% believed that they were being led by people who possess that quality.

My name is Fiona Lennoxsmith, I'm Lead Consultant for Leadership OD and Research here at Advance HE and this provocation is about Adaptability.

Everyone has stories of change and adaptation. My own story of adaptability is that I spent the last 23 years at London Business School, before moving to Advance HE a matter of weeks ago. I've been passionate about the practice of leadership for a long time, having led cross-continental teams and partnerships and worked with senior leaders over a long time.

In my new role I'm leading a team of leadership experts, which has meant bringing a growth mindset to every conversation. As well as bringing myself, I have to bring an open mind and heart to every conversation and a willingness to get things wrong along with a beginners mindset where others help me to understand.

Adaptability is not only a vital trait for individuals but also for institutions,. In this screencast, we will explore the significance of adaptability as an individual quality and as an institutional quality.

What is it?

Adaptability is the art of being able to adjust to new conditions. This might be in a practical sense (putting up an umbrella when it starts to rain), cognitively (changing an argument in response to new information) or emotionally (responding to an unexpected negative event with empathy).

Adaptable individuals are resilient, open-minded, and willing to embrace change. They possess a growth mindset, viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and improvement.

At the heart of adaptability is learning, and there's a paradox here – in order to adapt, we need to learn – and in order to learn, we need to be willing to adapt.

Why is it important?

For leaders, adaptability, particularly in times of crisis, can be the difference between fostering innovation and stifling it – especially as pressured situations are most likely to

tempt one into old and comfortable habits just at the time when a new approach is called for.

For institutions, the ability to adapt can mean the difference between success and failure. The classic case here being Polaroid, when I was growing up in the 1970s and 80s a Polaroid instamatic was one of the most exciting things you could have rather than having to wait for photos to come back from the pharmacy, it came directly out of the camera and developed in front of your eyes. Although they'd foreseen digital cameras coming, the company didn't act fast enough, and that inability to adapt led to bankruptcy in 2001. Conversely, during the pandemic, companies such as Zoom, Amazon and Disney benefited from their ability to respond at speed to a locked down world, whilst luxury goods company LVMH converted perfume manufacturing units to hand sanitizer production and Red Roof Hotels rented its rooms by the day as workspaces.

Many of our universities are hundreds of years old and at times, even in newer institutions the cyclical nature of academia can make staff feel more like custodians than change agents and structures, systems and beliefs can reinforce this feeling. However, over a short period of time, starting in 1992 and speeding up over a number of years, the university landscape has increasingly become a VUCA world – volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous. We might talk to students about preparing for a marathon rather than a sprint when they start university, however, this tension between traditional systems and contemporary demands can leave university leaders feeling like they have the impossible task of sprinting a marathon. This situation is a threat to building sustainable institutions as well as to staff wellbeing.

How do we create the conditions in individuals, teams and institutions for adaptability to flourish?

So, what can we do to enable adaptability to flourish and flow through our institutions?

Firstly, we can work on ourselves. Leaders need to develop self-awareness. We can reflect on our strengths and weaknesses, know what challenges are likely to trigger us into a fight/flight response, identify areas for improvement, and embrace a growth mindset. We can seek out opportunities to learn and challenge ourselves and embrace continuous learning, both formally through professional development programs and informally through reading, networking, and engaging in meaningful conversations.

Those of us who work in universities might well have been drawn to a higher education environment from previous experiences. We may have been rewarded for our academic excellence at school, and in our undergraduate experiences. The rewards usually connect with getting the right answer, or delivering an excellently thought through piece of work. We might love solving problems or the opportunity to think deeply about a particular challenge by ourselves, we are probably good at focusing individually and maybe collectively too.

These attributes may not serve us as well when adaptation is called for. Reflecting on our own discomforts when faced with uncertainty, and asking ourselves “what will I do differently

to get a different result” can be an effective way to increase the ability to adapt, and to lead others to do the same.

Personal and institutional adaptability requires a willingness to experiment, and to accept that not all experiments will be successful, and to allow unsuccessful experiments to be learning opportunities that can fuel further exploration. Change agents have a tendency to describe their latest change initiatives as direct and linear series of steps, driven by influence and hard work and they tend to miss out false starts, and the messy, difficult pieces that are difficult to explain and might not cover anyone in glory. When change is presented, it is being understood backwards, after it has been shown to be successful. Change will require adaptation, not only as the outcome, but also in the process and this means, letting go of perfectionism and learning from mistakes.

Which comes onto the second point. Change and learning are inherently linked. We can feed our adaptability by continuous learning: Prioritizing ongoing professional development, whether through formal programs or informal means like reading, networking, and engaging in meaningful conversations. Experiencing learning from the perspective of a beginner rather than an expert can enable new thinking and permission to try, practice and learn from mistakes. It’s a great opportunity also to build diverse networks. Which brings us to the third point:

Thirdly, to increase the ability to adapt, we can foster a supportive environment around us. Take and create opportunities to collaborate with others, and to share ideas with peers and encourage our teams to do the same. When faced with critical challenges, it can be tempting to focus in to solve problems by ourselves, but often the best ideas and motivation to keep going can come from those around us.

Actively reaching out and building a network of people who bring different thoughts, skills and knowledge to a problem can bring new thinking to a situation. Ask also how you might empower your staff to innovate and experiment, offering them the support and resources they need.

Now, let’s shift our focus to adaptability as an institutional quality. Here are some practical approaches that might make a difference:

1. We can Cultivate a culture of open-mindedness across the institution: How can we activate inclusivity in a large scale? This means encouraging diverse perspectives, and enabling an environment where constructive dissent is valued. Where there may be academic or operational silos, we can consider opportunities to embrace interdisciplinary collaboration to foster innovative ideas.
2. We can Consider how data might be put to better use. Leveraging data analysis and monitoring systems to gather insights on student outcomes, emerging trends, and challenges. How can we better Use this information to make informed decisions and proactively respond to changing needs as well as fuelling conversations about what needs to adapt, and where experimentation might help.

3. What opportunities are there to develop External partnerships and Forge collaborations with industry leaders, government agencies, and community organizations. These partnerships can provide valuable insights, resources, and support, helping us anticipate future challenges and foster a culture of innovation.

Adaptability remains a vital quality for success in higher education. By implementing these practical strategies and approaches to develop individual adaptability and foster institutional adaptability, we will be better able to navigate the challenges of today's fast-changing landscape, embrace adaptability as an ongoing journey, and inspire everyone around us to do the same.



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