

## Adaptive v. Technical

Wagner, A. Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R.W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D. Howell, A., & Rasmussen, H.T. (2006). *Change Leadership: A practical guide for transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 10-11.

In his work on public leadership, Heifetz makes a fundamental distinction between technical versus adaptive challenges. A technical challenge is one for which a solution is already known—the knowledge and capacity exist to solve the problem. Meeting such challenges is not necessarily simple. Nor should the results be presumed to be trivial. Learning to remove a person’s appendix is a remarkable feat. It may be hard to do, but by now an established and proven procedure exists to gradually teach someone how to do it. An “adaptive” challenge, on the other hand, is one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist. It requires creating the knowledge and the tools to solve the problem *in the act of working on it*.

Meeting technical challenges often involves changes within an existing paradigm, whereas meeting adaptive challenges often involves reconception of the very paradigm in which one is working. IBM’s Selectric typewriter in the 1960s was a dramatic technical improvement over the existing manual keystroke typewriter. But merely improving upon the Selectric typewriter would never have created the IBM personal computer (PC). The PC is much more than a “reformed typewriter”. It is a reinvention of what composing in print is all about.

Breakthroughs require the creation of new technologies, which in turn necessitates the creation of new knowledge, all in response to a new context or societal need. Heifetz maintains that this creation requires organizations to look and act very differently. He points out that when individuals and organizations meet adaptive challenges they themselves become something different. It is not merely some new skill or capacity that has been “inputted” into the person or organization. The person or organization grows into a different form: it adapts. Transforming organizations to meet adaptive challenges and become knowledge-generating versus knowledge-using organizations—what Peter Senge calls learning organizations—requires very different kinds of leaders—ones who recognize that they, as individuals, may have to change in order to lead the necessary organizational changes.

We believe the national education goal of “leaving no child behind” is a vital one for our country, for both economic and moral reasons. We also believe it is an adaptive challenge of great proportions, not yet well understood. Like Heifetz, we believe the adaptive challenge of reinventing American public schools versus merely trying to reform them has profound implications for those who lead them. This challenge requires all adults to develop new skills—beginning with leaders at all levels—and to work in very different ways. *And there is no school for leaders that will teach them exactly how to make their district into one that will leave no child behind.* Unlike a student pilot learning to land in a stiff crosswind, those who want to transform their schools and districts to meet this new aspiration are launched on an adventure with no flight instructor in the right-hand seat.