TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

1. Easy to identify

2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions

3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert

4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries

5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions

6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)

2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work

3. People with the problem do the work of solving it

4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries

5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.

6. "Solutions" require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

EXAMPLES

- Take medication to lower blood pressure

- Implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions

- Increase penalty for drunk driving

- Change lifestyle to eat healthy, get more exercise and lower stress

- Encourage nurses and pharmacists to question and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physicians

- Raise public awareness of the dangers and effects of drunk driving, targeting teenagers in particular

GROUPSMITH

Technical & Adaptive Challenges

Adapted from the work of R. Heifetz and M. Linsky

	Technical Challenges i.e. Payroll issues	Adaptive Challenges i.e. Culture Change
Distinctions	• Solved by experts • Logic & Intellect • Often quick & easy solutions • Easy to identify	• Cannot be solved by experts • Changes in values, beliefs, behavior, roles, relationships, & approaches to work • Difficult to identify & easy to deny
Nature of Solutions	• Requires change in one or few places, often within organizational boundaries • Solutions can be implemented quickly — often by edict. • People generally receptive to technical solutions • Locus of Work: **AUTHORITY**	• Changes in many places, often across organizational boundaries • "Solutions" often required experiments & new discoveries • Implementation often takes time & cannot be done by edict • People often resist adaptive solutions • Locus of Work: **STAKEHOLDERS**
Role of Leader/ Authority	• PROBLEM SOLVER: solve or delegate to experts to solve • Implement solutions by edict, resource assignments, etc. • Focus on **SOLUTION**	• CONVENER: bring the people together with the problem to do the work of solving it • Allow for long-term outcomes • Communicator: transparency • Focus on **PROCESS**
Strategy	FIX IT!	• Convene conversations necessary for group thinking (i.e. Relationship-building, Mutual Understanding, Possibilities, Action — see below) • Allow for experiments that explore opportunities or test assumptions • Prototype & scale up what works; share learning from what doesn't
Learning Required	• **INFORMATIVE Learning** • Bringing into mind new ideas, skills & content • Basic Perception of self & world remains the same	• **TRANSFORMATIVE Learning** • Changing whole mind – perspective, perception, orientation • Feels unfamiliar, outside of comfort zone, risky • Requires courage & growth