

Adaptive Leadership

by Performance Frontiers



“

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the one that is the most adaptable to change.

”

- Charles Darwin

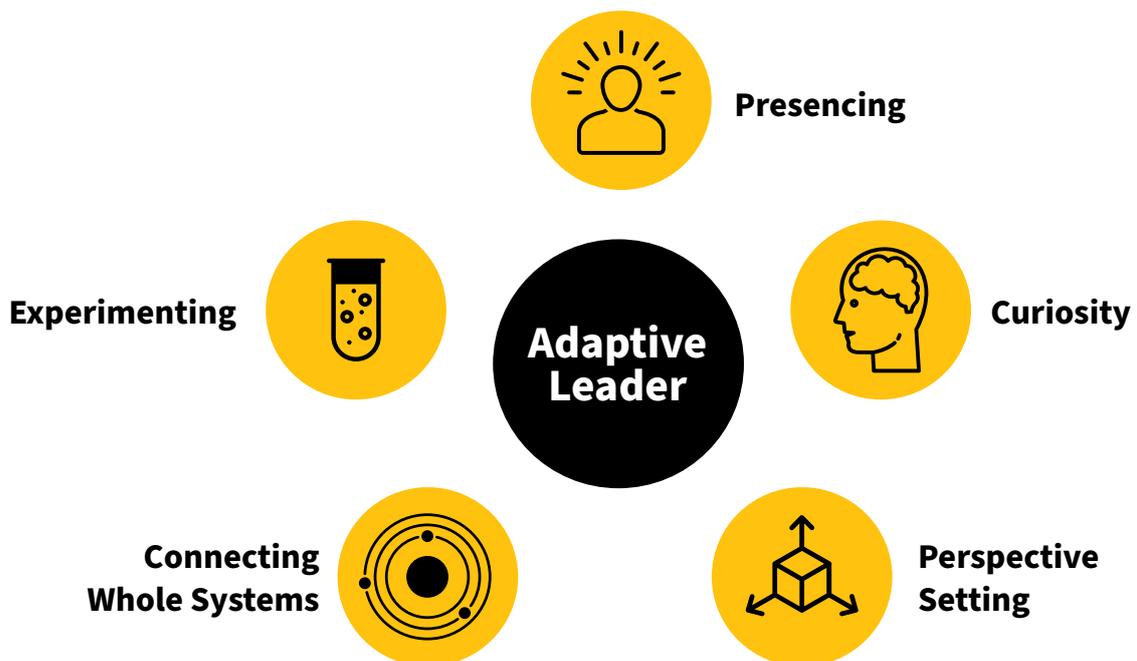
Our world is a complex, unpredictable ecosystem that sometimes feels unsteady and awash with ambiguity. Recently, it has been hard to stay afloat, or know in which direction to chart a course. Yet many of us have risen to the moment and are now finding ways to thrive. We're adapting. And without minimising the challenging realities we're facing, we can continue to open ourselves to learning and growth. Adaptability is an attribute that can be learned by leaders, organisations and communities alike. Here, we explore what adaptation means for leaders today, and the key skills we can develop to enhance our adaptive capacity.

The Adaptive Leader

While the notion of adaptive leadership is not a new one, the context or ‘playing field’ has vastly changed. We have had to reconfigure our ways of working and become more adept at inspiring our teams in asynchronous and online spaces. We’re learning how psychological safety figures differently in virtual conversations, and how listening and curiosity remain crucial to how we communicate. Knowing that we can’t always tap people on the shoulder anymore to ask a question, or bounce an idea, we’ve found new ways to spark spontaneity and synergy.

As adaptive leaders we navigate challenges more constructively. We see the world not as a problem to overcome, but as an ever-evolving reality filled to the brim with opportunity to grow, connect and create. We do this by embracing an abundant mindset and choosing to place continuous learning at the heart of everything we think, feel, do and say. We stay present, constantly curious, and aware of whole systems – so we can sense and attune to what is needed. We move from the ‘**lower ground**’ of thinking about what customers and team members want now, to operate on the ‘higher ground’ of thinking about what customers, team members and extended communities will think and do, and what is needed considering multiple scenarios.

While new adaptive leadership models emerge every day, with foundations found in the work of **Heifetz & Linsky**, our Performance Frontiers team have collated the following adaptive leadership model based on the work we’ve been doing for almost 20 years with all manner of adaptive organisations.



Presencing

Presencing is a slightly nebulous concept, but is foundational to adaptive leadership. **Otto Scharmer** defines it as a blend of **presence** and **sensing**. Being fully present and attuned enables you to connect to the best possible future in any given moment, and to understand what is required of you to bring it into reality.

In part, presencing is reliant on “knowing oneself”. To be truly present, you must understand your values and ensure your actions conform to them (words and deeds). Presencing is also about deep listening - to internal voices, to those of others, and to what the situation calls for you to change. At times, this can be uncomfortable: as you stretch into the unknown, or encounter the paradoxical. Presencing calls for you to sit with the discomfort, to learn and grow from it.

The balance of competency and humanity, of conviction and openness, equates to a stronger leadership presence.

Neuroscience tells us that we unconsciously build behavioural habits, which take over during times of stress, and may lead us away from highly present and attuned action. Adaptive leaders intentionally activate their executive brain to consciously audit what those habits are getting us to do and decide if we need to change them to bring about the best possible future.

Adaptive questions to ask:

- » How am I fully present in this moment, so I can respond intentionally and resourcefully?
- » How might I effectively communicate and act on my values and vision?
- » What could I achieve if I led from a place of presence?
- » How can I sit calmly with discomfort and paradox, and allow new insights to emerge?

Curiosity

The questions we ask ourselves and others often emerge from our typical patterns of thought or biases. Adaptive leaders break out of these patterns through intentional curiosity, asking different questions that open up dynamic possibilities.

A foundational curious question and one of the top three Innovative Questioning techniques identified by purposeful question expert, **Warren Berger**, is: ‘What if?’

‘What if?’ questions cause the brain to start ‘simulating’ – picturing multiple versions of the future and what could work. Our mind looks forward, instead of thinking about what happened in the past. ‘What if’ tests how we manipulate information, given a constraint, in order to achieve a specific goal (adaptive), rather than testing how we take in and retain information (static).

To adapt, we have to be willing and open to override what we ‘know’ or what we think we know with new information. This is linked to an **abundant** and **growth** mindset.

Adaptive questions to ask:

- » How am I engaging in a curious way in the world?
- » What are my go-to questions now?
- » What questions might fill me and my team with possibility?
- » Why?... How might we?... and, What if?...

Perspective Setting

Perspective setting relates to both presencing and curiosity. It is the process of synthesising information, within and around you, to set the lens through which you view the world and take decisive action.

Sometimes, we can be blinded by our own perspective, particularly if we never interrogate the way we see the world, or open ourselves to different perspectives. New perspectives can arise from unexpected sources. Otto Scharmer’s Theory U model suggests three elements that can help provide a framework:

- an **open mind**, so we see the world with fresh eyes and remain open to possibilities;
- an **open heart**, so we can try to see any situation through another person’s eyes; and
- an **open will**, so we can let go of identity and ego to sit with the discomfort of the unknown or the paradoxical

By remaining open and attuned, we learn to sit with uncomfortable realities, conflicting viewpoints and multiple future possibilities in order to let new insight or solutions emerge. This helps us grow and adapt.

Adaptive questions to ask:

- » What are my current perspectives, and why do I hold them?
- » How might I support an expansive view of my present conditions?
- » How am I suspending my judgements and taking on the perspective of others?

Connecting Whole Systems

In order to adapt to VUCA ecosystems, we need to see and act with a whole system lens. Elements in a system can be connected in ways that are not immediately apparent. Signal detection and experimentation require us to think beyond our own boundaries and to work more closely and ‘smartly’ with others.

In order to adapt, a leader must have their antennae attuned to signals of change from the external environment, decode them, and quickly act to refine, reinvent and even reshape the information landscape of their industry.

To do this well, leaders can seek to understand their network of interconnected relationships: who they connect to, and how every action ripples across the ecosystem. As the latest research in consciousness and social brain theory suggests, relationships are not just one aspect of leadership. They are not even the key aspect of leadership. They are **leadership**.

You can read more about connecting, influencing and enabling whole systems in our article on **Horizontal Leadership**.

Adaptive questions to ask:

- » How do I focus on the interconnections between things, instead of looking at the individual pieces?
- » Who am I connected to in the system, and how do we influence each other?
- » How can I look beyond the conventional system?
- » How can I hold opposing ideas without reconciling them?

Experimenting

Adaptive leaders approach work life with an **experimentation** focus. We can see the spirit of experimentation alive right now with a growing number of leaders and organisations embracing new approaches, technologies, and ways of working in virtual environments. However, adaptive leadership is not just about experimenting in responsiveness to the current moment; it’s consciously interpreting and preparing to adapt ahead of disruptive change. This means remaining vigilant of the forces of **contraction** that often make us retreat to safe and familiar ways of operating, and instead staying open to expansive possibilities.

Fear can be one of the greatest barriers to experimentation, particularly fear of making the wrong choice or the repercussions of going down the wrong path. We believe that somewhere out there is the “correct” choice, and that we just need to be intelligent or insightful enough to see it. If we can just measure, weigh and calculate accurately, we will find the ‘right’ choice. The danger we face with this mindset is that we can become paralysed by uncertainty. Default becomes the safest option, we become risk averse, and contract to familiar territory.

By embracing an experimentative state, we can lean into the unknown with focus and courage. It's in this space that learning and growth are possible - where we have the opportunity to become a wiser, more effective version of ourselves.

Adaptive leaders recognise that in a VUCA environment, weighing the merits of a particular choice to arrive at the 'correct' decision is not always possible. Many paths can be taken - each with merit. To navigate well, adaptive leaders make decisions guided by values, purpose and vision. They co-create solutions, applying design thinking principles to generate and test-drive new ideas, continuously learning and iterating to experiment their way forward. They embrace diversity, inclusion and the voice of dissent to "fan the flame" of different thinking. They put in place systems that empower teams and enable them to experiment and fail safely and quickly.

In essence, adaptive leaders experiment to inform their next adaptation.

Adaptive questions to ask:

- » How do I use my current context to experiment and learn?
- » How can I move toward living my life as an experiment I am constantly learning from?
- » How might I create a team environment where they can experiment, learn and even fail safely?

In life and business, as in the natural world, adaptation is a key ingredient to sustainable futures. What is special about the human condition is that we have the power to consciously adapt. To shape ourselves, with purpose and intention, and in doing so, shape better futures.

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STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] info@performancefrontiers.com

performancefrontiers.com



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