

From the Academy Director

Change Management and Adaptive Challenges

BY ED HOFFMAN



What do we mean when we talk about change management?

Change is an inevitable part of the life of an organization. Regardless of why it happens, it is always difficult and painful for many people.

One metaphor that's helpful for understanding change in an organizational context comes from evolutionary biology. In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow recall that humans have been practicing adaptation for millennia:

Our early ancestors' process of adaptation to new possibilities and challenges has continued over the course of written history with the growth and variation in scope, structure, governance, strategy, and coordination of political and commercial enterprise. So has the evolution in understanding the practice of managing those processes, including in our lifetimes what we call adaptive leadership.

They go on to define adaptive leadership as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive," noting that they use the term "thrive" as an evolutionary biologist would when describing the three characteristics of a successful adaptation:

1. It preserves the DNA essential for the species' continued survival;
2. It discards (re-regulates or rearranges) the DNA that no longer serves the species' current needs; and
3. It creates new DNA arrangements that give species the ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenging environments.

This concept of *thriving* is the essence of change management in organizations. Core values and practices remain intact, while the organization modifies or closes out activities that no longer match current needs and develops new ones to meet current and anticipated future needs.

Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow suggest that organizations typically encounter one of two types of issues: technical problems and adaptive challenges. When a technical problem arises, the problem definition is clear, the solution arrived at is clear, and the process of solving the problem takes place through established lines of authority. Adaptive challenges are altogether different. Both the problem definition and the solution require learning, and the primary decision-making needed to meet the challenge takes place at the stakeholder level.

NASA currently faces an adaptive challenge. It has faced them before, and it has thrived. Doing so again will require learning across the enterprise.

Like the transition from Apollo to shuttle, the current adaptive challenge is the result of changes in the political, social, economic, and technological context in which the agency operates. As a government organization, the agency's mission has always been shaped by stakeholders in the White House and Congress in response to the world around us. This is as true now as it was in the age of the "space race" between the Soviet Union and the United States. As the new national space policy notes, the space age began as a race between two superpowers for security and prestige. Today, the benefits of space activities are ubiquitous in everyday life, and the space community includes increasing numbers of nations and organizations around the globe.

A new challenge is here. It's time to thrive. ●