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### Adaptive Leadership for the Twenty First Century: A Review

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#### Abstract

Operational changes brought about by the Covid-19 Pandemic necessitated leaders to adapt to changes in their external environment in order for them to maintain their workmanship. Adaptive leadership became an asset that was deemed necessary for every leader during their term in leadership. This study aimed to review the iteration and adaptation of the organization to conform to changes in its environment, look at the frameworks and theories of adaptive leadership, and study contextual information from secondary sources on the benefits of adaptive leadership in the twenty first century leader and the skills and competencies required. The research findings tailored the study towards; the implications of adaptive leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its effects, and any recommendations for leaders who choose to embrace this leadership style. From this research, we discover that the changing times brought about by the technological evolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have deemed it necessary for current leaders to be adaptive in their leadership style. Sustainable skills and competencies will come in handy for an adaptive leader to survive in an adaptive environment. The complexity of non-predictable problems that do not have definite solutions has troubled the operation of modern organizations. Constant changes in communication also seem to hinder adaptive leadership to be effective in organizations. The review has clearly outlined the impacts of adaptive leadership on an organization, its principles, pros and cons, past leaders who were considered adaptive, and how a person becomes an adaptive leader. The research findings lead to the following recommendations: A leader first needs to accept the inevitability of change in the organization, embrace the mistakes, and take into consideration the lessons learned. Be open to diversity and get a team that helps them to think outside the box. Change tactics and be open to criticism from their team.

**Key words:** Adaptive leadership, Technological evolution, Changing times, Twenty first century organizations and Skills and competencies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to an article written by the balance small business, leadership is an art that motivates people to strive towards achieving a common goal. The Western Governors University have gone ahead to explain adaptive leadership as an approach that guides leaders to be able to identify important aspects in their organization and doing away with the less important. Bruce *et al* has defined a leader as a person who has influence and can train their followers (who have numerous skills and abilities) to an organization's mission and vision and willingly, enthusiastically drive their energy and effort towards the given mission and vision. The definition of leadership is non-exhaustive as clearly depicted by the many scholarly articles that have tried to define leadership and how to be an effective leader. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) said that becoming a leader is agreeing to live dangerously. Leadership is mostly considered when you guide people through hard changes, which in turn results to people changing their way of life and letting go of things that they cherish the most.

Heifetz *et al* (2009) defined adaptive leadership as a practice that mobilizes people to tackle tough times and challenges and that in the end, results into them thriving. Khan *et al* (2016) stated on the importance of leaders adapting to emerging issues that are brought about by changes in their internal and external environment. Over the years we have seen a devolvement in the leadership theories, the focus has shifted from traits to eventualities. According to Emmanuel *et al* (2018), leadership is governed by over 66 theories. Some of those include; behavioural theory, trait theory and adaptive theory. In this review, we shall be having a closer look at the theories stated above. Leadership can be dated as far back as human existence. However, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a scholarly increase in matters pertaining to leadership.

### 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Over the years, various leadership styles have worked for various leaders. Adaptive leadership is yet to be embraced by most if not all leaders across the globe. The dawn of the twenty first century brought with it certain changes such as technological evolution, which saw the development of mobile phones and other gadgets. In turn, this has led to increase of terrorism and other criminal offences across the globe. It has affected countries at large and other sectors in various countries. The twenty first century saw the involvement and growth of the European

Union as it added to its member states. This and so many other changes and developments has brought about the need for current leaders to be adaptive in their leadership style. Scholars and researchers recently discovered adaptive leadership, little has been written about it and its involvement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **1.3 Justification of the Research**

The aim of this study was to understand and pass knowledge on the importance of adaptive leadership to leaders of the twenty first century, how they can embrace it and use it as an asset during their tenure in leadership. The findings may be used as a secondary source for other future studies on related topics conducted by other scholars.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Evolution of Leadership**

Trait theory was the most considered theory by previous researchers. They believed that, for a person to be considered a leader, they must possess certain characteristics. Such researchers of the mid twentieth century was Professor Tead from the University of Colombia. Tead (1935) outlined the traits to be such as having a vision, mastery of skills and competencies, intelligence, friendliness among many others. Empirical data that was obtained from empirical research challenged this fact, it brought out leadership to be constantly changing, and it varies from one situation to another. From the year 1946 to 1956, Ohio State University conducted a leadership research where they concluded that initiating structure and consideration was the fundamental dimensions of leadership in any organization. They went ahead to explain that initiating structure is the scope in which an individual puts systems in place for themselves and their juniors. This led them towards attaining their goals and created an environment in which a person develops interpersonal relationships that is characterized by respect for opinions from juniors, trust and having regards for their feelings.

Stodgill (1974) conducted research at Ohio State University and added more insight onto the situational type of leadership. Other researches that he conducted after that was of a contrary opinion to that off situational leadership. Stodgill's latest research findings came to a conclusion that personality plays a huge role in leadership but it is a modification of situational type of leadership other than the trait approach. Likert and Likert (1976) experimented leadership

principles used by high achieving managers into an organizations systems and they noted that it required the members to learn high advanced level of communication skills and leadership. It helped achieve organizational goals and objectives but it still could not confirm that participatory was the best form of leadership. (Participatory leadership is whereby juniors in an organization are given an upper hand in making major and crucial decisions and solving problems.) This in turn posed the question, “Could initiating structure and consideration both be equally of great importance?” This led to the rise of adaptive leadership.

## **2.2 Leadership Theories**

William *et al* (1994) argued that the leadership theories are a contributing factor to negotiation militarism. Kovac *et al* (2015) stated that the leadership theories did not contradict each other but instead they complement each other. Adero and Odiyo (2020) noted the significance that psychosocial support, interpersonal relationships, organizational rules and regulations and sharing of information has on the impact of applicability of the leadership theories.

According to the West Governors University, the leadership theories aim to explain why and the means people use to become leaders and how they employ and grow those traits. It is necessary for a 21<sup>st</sup> century leader to grasp the social and psychological outcomes of an effectual leadership.

### **2.2.1 Behavioural Theory**

Goff (2003) dated the behavioural theory far back to the 1950’s and 1960’s. Ozgur and Mustafa (2020) opined that the most considered research studies pertaining to the behavioural leadership theory are those of Ohio State University, Blake and Mouton’s management style and Michigan State University. Ohio State University’s research focused on the behavioural aspect of an individual once they take charge of a particular group that is part of the workforce in an organization. During their case studies, two specific types of behaviour seemed to stand out amongst the various types of behavioural research. Namely, initiating structure behaviour and consideration behaviour. The latter explains the type of leaders whose aim is to achieve a common trust with their following and they often put into consideration their followers’ ideas, beliefs and feelings.

Leaders who employ consideration behaviour are often active listeners and give guidance to the people they lead on how to solve various tasks and challenges. They more often than not reduce the need for employees to leave an organization and they are able to attain the highest level of work satisfaction. They initiate structure behaviour and often work with timelines and structured systems in place. They make their followers know what is expected of them from the start. They put systems in place that monitors and evaluates performance by ascertaining whether the work was completed on time and if it was done to perfection. Ohio State University through research found that leaders who have a combined trait for the consideration behaviour and initiating structure behaviour have a tendency of producing high business results.

### **2.2.2 Trait theory**

Goff and Donald (2003) assert that a leader need to possess certain traits and that such traits can be honed with time through practice and experience. Hockaday and Puyear (2000) narrowed down their research to traits that a college leader should possess. These included; the desire to lead, confidence, vision, integrity, persistence, good mastery of skills, and the technical knowledge. The traits should be part of a person's persona.

### **2.2.3 Adaptive Leadership Theory**

Northouse (2016) explains adaptive leadership to be a practice that involves gathering and mobilizing a team of followers to tackle rising organizational issues and overcoming them. Nastanski (2002) explains adaptive leadership from other present-day theories. Its evolution comes from complex, transformational and situational theories. Researchers such as Heifetz (1994), Yukl (2002) and Bennis (2003), were the trailblazers of the adaptive leadership research and its applicability in organizations. Hawoth *et al* (2018) looked at adaptive leadership from the point of view of day-to-day interactions between a leader and his followers.

According to Heifetz (1994), adaptive leadership requires leaders to embrace the realm of leadership so as to take up responsibility and have a sense of commitment to their work. Such kind of leadership requires an educative strategic approach that is more coherent. The approach should encourage leaders to contest and change certain ideologies and perspectives, modulate their beliefs and values, grasp and adapt new wonts. The adaptive leadership theory acknowledges the complexity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workspace and the need for the current

generation of leaders to master the complex procedures and problem solving skills. Teahan *et al* (2019) states that the future of the 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations is highly reliant on adaptive leadership. Present day organizations are affected by a myriad of problems and client demands that are constantly changing. This forces organizations to establish leadership capacities within their institutions that will enable them to adaptively cope with all complexities. However, they warn that adaptive leadership will only be effective if the leader is willing to actively listen, internalize and empathise with their followers' suggestions and opinions. The focus of adaptive leadership is of teamwork and not the leadership position that the leader holds. Dugan (2017) notes that versatile employees in the organization may end up becoming too dependent on the leader whereas the non-versatile employees may dissociate from the leader's direction.

### **2.3 Influences of Technological Evolution on Leadership**

Technology has changed organizational systems in a mighty way. Bartol and Liu (2002) assume that adaptive structure theory is the basis of their framework. According to their findings, there is a recursive relationship between technology and leadership. The interaction of technology and organizational systems have an effect on people and organizations. Technology has paved way for e-leadership. Works by other researchers conclude that leadership styles has an effect on virtual team performance and interaction. Hambley *et al* (2007) bring out the relationship between team interaction and the leadership style and level of performance. They say that it is not dependent on the technological medium of communication.

### **2.4 Impacts of Adaptive Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

According to the Corporate Finance Institute (2022), adaptive leadership follows four key principles. First, leaders should have an understanding of their followers' emotions. This enables them to be able to create meaningful relationships with their teams. This is commonly referred to as emotional intelligence. Secondly, transparency, inventiveness and character, allows an adaptive leader to be able to work well with their followers, embrace their ideas and admit mistakes made. Leaders should yearn to grow and be able to experiment on the various ways of conducting a specific task in case a preferred method fails. This gives room for the organization and the team to grow and widen on their various acceptable strategies in conducting organization activities. The most crucial principle is that adaptive leaders stimulate the culture of honesty and

being accommodative. They should consider their followers' emotions and points of view before enforcing any policies that they may need to abide with. Florence *et al* (2020) stated the competencies required for an adaptive leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These include; being able to lead a team, being able to cope and manage change, performance management, good communication skills and all types of intelligence. Heifetz *et al* (2009) stated that Adaptive leadership has the following impacts; it gives room for the inclusivity of stakeholders in the organization in coming up with solutions to various problems by creating a collaborative workspace.

#### **2.4.1 Pace Setters for Adaptive Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

According to an article written by Market 91 (2022), Abraham Lincoln (the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America) was considered the most adaptive leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He had integrated the most competent leaders to be part of his “unusual” cabinet. The leaders were not afraid to air out their opinions and come up with a conclusion to various issues. Examples of such leaders was Salmon Chase who was part of President Lincoln’s cabinet. He was the treasury secretary. In case there was a stalemate and no decision was made to a particular issue at the end, Lincoln made decisions on behalf of the cabinet team and involved them in the action process. For example, the case of abolishing slave trade, which was commonly referred to as ‘emancipation of the slave trade’. Before his assassination on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1865, Abraham Lincoln’s adaptive leadership style had earned him certain amount of success as President. He was able to balance interests of various electorates such as the ordinary American citizens, foreign nations, the army and his cabinet. He was also able to establish the 1862 Morrill act, which led to the establishment of most universities (such as the University of Illinois) across various States in the United States of America and abolishment of the slave trade amongst many more achievements.

Former United States army commander General George Patton led the seventh army as the commander in the twentieth century. He was known to be a good servant leader. He has been quoted in several occasions stating how leaders should lead from the front and show their team how things should be done. However, he showed character traits of an adaptive leader of the twentieth century by being able to obtain input from the people he was leading which contributed to his success as an adaptive leader.

Currently, former President of the United States of America, Barack Obama is considered an adaptive leader, which saw him achieve numerous success as a President of our time. The 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States is seen to have embraced former President Lincoln's leadership style where he absorbed the other Presidential aspirants such as Hillary Clinton in his cabinet during his first term as President. The stated examples of past and current leaders who were adaptive in their leadership style can act as a guide to leaders in organizations and other sectors on how adaptive leadership can assist them to tackle the various obstacles that they may encounter.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

Adaptive leadership will be more effective to leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century if it is combined with other leadership styles. Technological evolution and the regular changes being experienced worldwide, require leaders who are willing to take risks and be adaptive in their style of leadership. There is a higher chance of a leader being successful in leading his/her team when he/she embraces adaptive leadership as compared to when he/she does not adopt this style of leadership. Twenty first Century leaders can best learn from Barack Obama, who was the President of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He was faced with some of the challenges that leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century might experience.

### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that leaders in various organizations and sectors should embrace adaptive leadership in this century for optimization of results. The best way to learn is from history. This can only be achieved by reading widely. They can learn from the former 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and applying various tactics and techniques such as getting fellow leaders and people with a vision to be part of your team. Be open to criticism from your juniors, embrace their ideas, in the case where the entire team is not able to get into a consensus, take one for the team, and make decisions on their behalf. Leaders should make a conscious decision when it comes to acquiring of adaptive principles such as mutual respect for their subordinates, empathy, inventiveness, transparency and character. Leaders should not hesitate from applying other forms of leadership styles depending on the situation. Adaptive leadership style alone may not be of

great benefit to a leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Leaders should be guided by wisdom and knowledge as they lead their subordinates.

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