



# MOYA CHRONICLES

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## BLESSED ARE THE ADAPTABLE

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Just as change is a constant in life, challenges are also inevitable. To this end, a leadership expert named Ronald Heifetz imagined life's difficulties in two forms. According to him, the nature of problems could either be *technical*, *adaptive*, or a blend of the two. Some other proponents of Adaptive Leadership style have affirmed this categorisation. *Technical problems* represent those challenges which are easily diagnosed and addressed from the existing arsenal of skills, knowledge, or resources. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are problems requiring new learnings and are not easily defined. Perhaps one recent and familiar example of adaptive challenge is the complicated problem of COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic has continued to forcefully ensure that we all habitually reinvent ways of doing things be it governments, organizations (including churches), groups, families, or individuals.

A biblical example of an adaptive challenge is David's situation along with his men as recorded in 1 Samuel 30:1-16. They had just returned from King Achish of the Philistines to rejoin their families in Ziklag. However, the men's arrival was greeted with the news of the surprising kidnapping of their wives and children in an Amalekite raid. Of course, the devastation and confusion that followed — such that the men even contemplated stoning their leader, David, to death — suggests how difficult and unfamiliar the development was. It was a case of an adaptive challenge indeed. Yet David and his men addressed the challenge in a manner that could be resourceful for believers in the body of Christ today who are facing complex situations. This interesting approach is the crux of the discussion considered here following a quick look at the Adaptive Leadership structure which will be the lens for interpreting the text under consideration.

### Adaptive Leadership Framework in Brief

Adaptive Leadership has been described to be “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.” In doing this, a leader and his team will have to engage in certain behaviours and practices as they take on these hard situations. These activities are often uneasy for both categories as they involve adjustments connected with traditions, values, habits, and beliefs. Yet, it is this uncomfortable process of unlearning, learning, and relearning that births the much-needed solutions (adaptive changes) to unfamiliar and complex challenges. As spelt out by Heifetz and his colleagues, the leader particularly motivates his people for problem-solving through the following actions:

- 1. Identifying the problem:** This involves distinguishing technical problems from adaptive challenges.
- 2. Regulating the distress** occasioned by the changes happening in the organization.
- 3. Maintaining disciplined action:** This is against the backdrop that change is often not easily embraced while variations in beliefs and experiences also exist across the organization.
- 4. Giving the work back to the people:** Leaders must endeavour not to assume all responsibility even when people naturally lean towards them for direction and orientation in the face of stress.
- 5. Protecting leadership voices from below:** In the face of adaptive challenges, there will predictably be some people with dissenting views who will challenge the initiatives being used to tackle the challenge. Adaptive leaders must ensure that they do not shut out these voices which are critical to exposing contradictions within the organization.



## The Adaptive Leadership Mix in David's Problem-Solving Strategy in 1 Samuel 30:1-16

**1. Identifying the problem and giving the work back to the people (verses 1- 6a).** Having realized that the issue at hand was not a technical problem (since it had not been encountered before) and ways of solving it were immediately elusive, David's men decided to put the blame on their leader while also deferring responsibility of solution to him. Of course, this is a natural tendency for followers. Yet, David would not yield to the temptation of solely inventing a solution. He ensured that everyone was engaged in the process of recovering their possessions and families — right from the priest who consulted God on behalf of all, to others who joined in the battle against the Amalekites. This behaviour finds resemblance with the activity of “giving work back to the people” in Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership structure. The implication is that as pastors guide their people through the process of identifying the nature of their challenges, they must not be too “pastoral” to consistently assume the role of solely proffering the solutions. Otherwise, ministerial burnout may be imminent.

### **2. Managing personal distress (Verse 6b).**

Verse 6b speaks of David strengthening or encouraging himself in the Lord. This practice is identical to one of the activities of regulating distress in the Adaptive Leadership framework — managing personal distress. Indeed, adaptive leaders do not just balance stress levels for others in the organization but also ensure that they regulate the disequilibrium, emotional tensions, and other forms of distortions facing them as well due to the changes happening within the organization. In this regard, Christians can avail themselves of the encouragement, comfort, and courage of and from the Holy Spirit in navigating strange circumstances. Church leaders should also not be ashamed to seek help and find ways of constantly retreating from “the crowd” as well as the busyness of their assignments to maintain their mental health and general wellbeing.

### **3. Auditing existing resources (Verse 9-11).**

As with the natural process of adaptation in living organisms where only the genes required for present and future survival is retained by an organism, Adaptive Leadership allows for the evaluation of already acquired knowledge, skills, relationships, and strategies. This is to create a focus on practices and relationships helpful for problem-solving now and in the future while disengaging from outdated ideas. The implementation of this principle is also seen in how David and his men ended up with four hundred men for the recovery battle out of a total of six hundred persons. David did not attempt to hold on to the two hundred who were “too exhausted to cross the Wadi

Besor.” In the same vein, believers in Christ must not attempt to cling unto relationships, skills, ideas, or traditions that are proving obsolete in face of new challenges. Of course, the only resource that remains eternally relevant is God. That is the one resource that must never be discarded.

### **4. Anticipating Change (Verse 11-16).**

One of the results of Adaptive Leadership is building an organization that is always alert to future changes as well as unexpected events. David's men, in their journey towards adaptive change, were now poised to spot such unforeseen occurrences as an unlikely Egyptian in “the open country.” Their move to embrace the change rather than resist or ignore it was helpful. The men, indeed, fed the Egyptian by themselves before gravitating towards David, their leader, for support, as reflected in their action to bring the man to David. The joint work towards resolution certainly paid off as the Egyptian became a critical resource that added to their new knowledge and influenced their strategy in ultimately tackling their challenge. Similarly, as believers, when engaging the ultimate resource (God) with other strategies in tackling life's challenges, we must be sensitive to new opportunities and ideas arising around us as they could be the unsuspecting keys to the answers we seek.

Preparing a church that is poised for change and, therefore, able to handle unexpected challenges, is a much-required task of a Christian leader today. By approaching unfamiliar challenges through the lens and practice of Adaptive Leadership as with David, ministers, and other believers alike can find themselves thriving as they take on complex problems in the church and society. It is, indeed, no wonder that David is one of the most celebrated kings — if not the greatest — in Jewish tradition. He was usually quick to embrace unconventional approaches in dealing with strange problems. May the Lord help us as we also engage more effectively with life's challenges that we may become adaptable and blessed — unbroken believers in the face of difficulties.



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