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Adaptive Leadership in Academic Libraries

Structured Abstract

Purpose

This article outlines the core ideas of Adaptive Leadership and relates them to challenges confronting academic libraries.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper provides an overview of Adaptive Leadership model and highlights the key concepts. Recent initiatives at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library are used as cases to illustrate how the model may guide our focus to finding leverage points.

Findings

Using the model, the key role of positional leaders shift from the traditional sense of giving direction and protection to followers, to one that orchestrates the change process with the team through difficulties and uncertainties, and to build culture and structure that facilitate adaptive changes.

Practical implications

Academic librarians can use the concepts and framework of Adaptive Leadership to design change strategies and manage change processes.

Originality/value

This is the first article introducing Adaptive Leadership model to academic libraries.

Introduction

The traditional metaphor of seeing a library as "the heart of a university" is losing ground. A modern academic library may be more like a *Crossroads Community*, in which users are provoked and enabled to challenge their current knowledge (Fowler, 2016). How can librarians lead academic libraries to adapt to changing environments, and evolve from a traditional collection-centric organization to an engaging, dynamic "crossroads community"?

The model of Adaptive Leadership, developed by Professor Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University since 1994, emphasizes leading changes when organizations have to adapt to a radically altered environment (Heifetz, 1994). Challenges that confront academic libraries nowadays rarely come with clear boundaries; nor do they present themselves with any pre-defined paths to solutions. Libraries must explore the ways to tackle them, not only to evolve to new roles, but also thrive in these new roles. Adaptive Leadership is therefore a practice with good potential to guide academic libraries through complex challenges and changes.

This article outlines the core ideas of Adaptive Leadership and relates them to library challenges. Recent initiatives at the *Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library* (HKUST) are used as cases to illustrate how the model may guide our focus to finding leverage points.

Key Elements in Adaptive Leadership Model

Adaptive Leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009). It embraces complexity and ambiguity in situations, and actively pursues innovative solutions via organizational learning, creative problem solving, experiments, and collaboration (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). The roles of adaptive leaders are different from those of the traditional view, which focuses on providing vision, solutions, and directions to relatively passive followers under the leaders' protection. Instead, adaptive leaders work together with the team to bring out tough issues, challenge established practices, and involve people at all levels to learn their ways to solutions. Followers are actively engaged in the change process to experiment and to learn. Therefore, in the Adaptive model *leadership* is a practice rather than a position or a job.

The breadth of Adaptive Leadership model and practice is beyond the scope of a journal article. Yet, a brief outline of the core concepts should benefit academic librarians as an introduction to this approach. The key ideas of Adaptive Leadership include the importance of diagnosing complex systemic challenges, engaging stakeholders to inspect organizational practices and values, and navigating the change process collectively through inevitable resistance, potential losses and trade-offs. The following sections capture three important elements of Adaptive Leadership based on Heifetz's writings (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009, 2004; Heifetz and Laurie, 1997):

1. the concept of adaptive challenges
2. the nature of adaptive changes
3. practices to implement changes

1. Identifying Adaptive Challenges

When libraries face a new situation, do we afford ample time and effort to diagnose the problem, or do we tend to respond with a quick fix using existing tools that we have? One core element of Adaptive Leadership is to make an explicit effort to analyse the situation and distinguish the types of problems.

The model introduces the terms *adaptive challenges* versus *technical challenges*. Technical problems have clear definitions and known solutions that can be implemented by current knowledge, through application of existing professional expertise, or using the organization's current structures or procedures. On the other hand, adaptive challenges are ones for which the experts or organizational leaders have not yet developed an adequate response. They do not have clearly defined problems; further learning is needed to identify problems and find solutions. The two types of situation also differ in terms of who can implement the solutions. Technical problems can usually be tackled sufficiently by someone who has the authority or technical expertise; however, tackling adaptive challenges requires everyone to work in new ways. Authority leaders must share responsibilities with others for fuller understanding of problems, and experiment with members to find solutions. It usually involves deeper changes in people's priorities, beliefs, and habits; and it takes time for the change to be implemented. As it naturally takes greater effort and attention to perform the diagnosis, mistaking an adaptive problem as a technical problem is a common phenomenon.

Adaptive and technical problems differ in the nature of the problems; technical problems are not necessarily easier to solve. Some technical problems may not be solvable due to lack of resources or other reasons. Technical solutions usually bring incremental changes; adaptive solutions often incur transformational changes, which relates to shifts in mind-sets, beliefs, and long-established habits.

In academic libraries, we face both types of challenges in many areas. For example, building a collection for a new course can be a technical move, while supporting new pedagogy or program structure in the university is adaptive. The former can be tackled with existing expertise and procedures in the library; although the availability of funding may make it a difficult challenge. The latter situation is very different, it may call for a review of library programs, facilities, and service priorities. Another example could be digitizing a special collection using an existing infrastructure and workflow, which is a technical solution; as compare to creating a digital scholarship project from scratch, which requires adaptive leadership.

2. The Nature of Adaptive Changes

Tackling adaptive challenges is a process of change that takes time, hard work and persistence.

The idea of "being adaptive and thriving in the new environment" comes from the analogy to biological evolution. Evolutionary change is an adaptation, which builds on preserving what is important in the existing system and changing what is expandable or dated. Therefore, successful adaptation is both conservative and progressive, in the sense that it is not about simply giving up the old ways, but to distinguish what are essential in an organization's tradition from what can be or should be renewed or removed.

What does thriving means for libraries? In biology, thriving means propagation. For organizations such as academic libraries, signs of thriving may include quality user services, increases in transactional library use, high staff morale, and positive impact in the support of teaching, learning and research in the parent institutions. In this sense, adaptive success in an academic library may start with effort that engages library staff and stakeholders to prioritize organizational values and define thriving.

In the process of adaptive changes, an experimental mind-set plays a key role. Using the analogy of natural evolution, variation and diversity is essential for a system to generate innovations for adaptation in new environments. The same applies in the process of designing and implementing adaptive changes in organizations. Experimentation produces variations, some may succeed and some will fail. An experimental mind-set allows adaptive leaders to expect failure, and learn to improvise as they go. At the same time, adaptive leaders build a culture that values diverse views, a culture that relies less on central planning and the expertise of the few at the top.

In an adaptation process, some organizational heritage is conserved, but there are also losses in certain legacy practices, traditional values, professional identities and others. The process in essence requires tough choices and trade-offs to be made. Adaptive leadership requires the awareness of those losses, and the expectation of potential resistance at individual and systemic levels.

Adaptation changes takes time to consolidate into new sets of norms and processes; therefore, adaptive leadership calls for persistence and the tolerance of uncertainties.

3. Practices for Effective Actions

Adaptive leaders diagnose the situations, design change processes, and navigate with their teams through the processes. The Adaptive Leadership model highlights different actions that help leaders to focus their attention on important issues in handling adaptive changes. Four adaptive practices are presented below.

Get on the Balcony

This is an analogy to illustrate how leaders have to be able to view patterns as if they were on a balcony rather than in the field of action. Only from a distant point of view can a leader observe the context of actions and see the connection between different forces in the complex systems. To build a systemic view, a leader attempts to view problems as caused by system weakness rather than individuals' failure. Multiple perspectives are usually generated to broaden a problem diagnosis. For example, if a study area in a library has a noise issue, we may interpret it as a "user behaviour" problem; if we try to take a systemic approach, perhaps it is not primarily the users but the furniture type or the surroundings that is one of the causes. The interpretation that shifts the "blame" from the users to the environment leads the library to a very different approach to tackle the issue.

Give the Work Back to People

Adaptive changes are systemic in nature; the new state is a result of new ways of thinking and practices, implying evolved elements such as new rules, mind-set, values and workflows. To achieve meaningful changes, authority leaders must involve all members in the change process. Letting people take the initiative in defining and solving problems means that managers need to learn to support rather than control. At the same time, team members need to learn to take responsibility. Adaptive leaders

should know how to create wide-spread engagement, instill confidence among team members, and back them up if they make mistake.

Regulate Distress using a "Holding Environment"
Adaptive changes are tough for the people involved. Adaptive leaders strike a delicate balance between having people feel the pressure to change and not having them feel overwhelmed by change. A state of disequilibrium can motivate team members to make productive change; but too much discomfort leads to burnout or work avoidance. In Adaptive Leadership, the idea of a "holding environment" is a physical or virtual structure where team members can find support and protection. It is a safe "place" where frustration can be expressed, failures are understood, and ideas are exchanged. A typical practice in regulating pressure may be making opportunities for diverse groups to share practice and discuss issues and progress; it helps to create mutual support, clarify assumptions and relieve competing perspectives.

Maintain Disciplined Attention
Adaptive work is difficult and disturbing; it usually implies certain loss. It is normal that team members may respond with avoidance and resistance. Adaptive leaders learn to counteract distractions and guide people to regain focus. They help team members to handle tough trade-offs in values, procedures, operating styles and power. Conflicts arise in adaptive changes; adaptive leaders have the role to bring out conflicts among team members and resolve conflicts *with* them, rather than *for* them. For a team to navigate through adaptive change, the persistence to success comes from having a disciplined mind to stay focus at tackling the challenge despite of avoidance, resistance and conflicts.

Adaptive Leadership in Library Literature

Cases in Education Leadership
Among higher education, and academic librarianship in particular, reported cases or discussion of the practice of Adaptive Leadership are few. One extraordinary example of the power of Adaptive Leadership on effecting social change is the story of how three charitable foundations successfully led to improvement in the public school system in Pittsburgh (Heifetz et al., 2004). On management of higher education, Randall and Coakley contrast two cases in academia with the lens of Adaptive Leadership (Randall and Coakley, 2007): a four-year college failed in a crisis management as the president applied an unsuccessful technical solution to an adaptive situation; it did not obtain stakeholders' attention on the challenges, and failed to engage stakeholders and did not create a sense of responsibility to the problem. In the second case, a graduate program at a university was successfully rebuilt by taking strategies that align with the Adaptive approach.

Papers in LIS fields
It appears that many libraries have initiated and are managing adaptive changes without the awareness of the Adaptive Leadership approach. So far there is very little discussion in the library literature about the concepts of Adaptive Leadership. In the context of proposing a transformational change to a sustainable, responsive information literacy culture in academic libraries, Wilkinson & Bruch (Wilkinson and Bruch, 2014)

made reference to an adaptive method of holding open dialogue that aimed to resolving competing priorities and beliefs. For LIS education, the concept of adaptive change was used to frame the demand for training librarians towards higher levels of mental complexity (Yukawa, 2015). In the field of health information management, leaders of information governance found that the adaptive framework suited them the most in facing the complex environment of health information governance (Sheridan and Watzlaf, 2016).

Challenges for Academic Libraries

What kinds of challenges are academic libraries facing in the changing information and scholarly environment? For academic libraries, traditional roles such as collection gatekeepers and information mediation have been challenged by communication technology; traditional functions are becoming obsolete, or are being performed by other units in campus or services on the Internet.

Librarians have been proactively responding to challenges. While defending the core jurisdiction of information access, academic librarians advance new areas such as information literacy teaching and research outputs management (Cox and Corrall, 2013). Many libraries redesign and expand their operations and service scope. A study in 2008 projected a set of four new core responsibilities of academic librarians: consulting services; information lifecycle management; collaborative print and electronic collection building; and information mediation and interpretation (Goetsch, 2008). To experiment new roles and to operate versatile services, many academic libraries undergo organizational restructuring (Franklin, 2012); new job descriptions and educational roles of librarian positions have been emerging (Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). Libraries are challenged to develop new initiatives and skills to fulfil the new purpose. Innovation and creativity in their services, systems and facilities become essential to face new challenges (Walton and Webb, 2016). At the same time, libraries are expected to demonstrate their value in accountable ways (Oakleaf and Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010).

The majority of these challenges are adaptive rather than technical. They call for libraries to examine their traditional services and values, rethink their priorities, revamp existing practices, and reinvent their expertise. These cannot be addressed by incremental, technical solutions, but adaptive, systemic changes.

Initiatives in the HKUST Library

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) is a vibrant university with teaching and research programs in the disciplines of science, engineering, business and management, social sciences and humanities. It is recognized as a leading university internationally as reflected on the high rankings by different agencies[1]. The HKUST Library provides active support to the university's teaching and research. Change is a constant in our Library.

This section examines selected initiatives at HKUST Library using the lens of Adaptive Leadership. These projects are at different stages of the change process; for instance, the library learning space was successfully transformed to a well-received commons model

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[1] http://www.ust.hk/about-hkust/rankings/

after the Learning Commons opened in 2012; while digital scholarship is still in an exploration phase at the time of writing. These cases aim to highlight features of adaptive changes in the development processes.

Learning Space: from traditional to the commons model

The transition of learning space at HKUST Library was catalysed by the opportunity to extend the building in 2010. As a consequence of the extended floor space, the Library repurposed space use and created a new learning commons (the LC). The change was not only in physical space, but also in how we support learning to happen in the space. It involved a new service mind-set, and required operations which was not readily reproducible from existing library workflows. Library staff had to go through learning at different levels to evolve with the new environment. It was an adaptive change.

Adaptive processes invoke new practices that may clash with existing values and beliefs. Shortly before the LC opened, we conducted a promotion program that engaged campus units, many of which subsequently collaborate with the Library to offer a variety of learning activities in the LC (Chan and Spodick, 2014). Traditionally, the Library staff had been proud of a well-maintained study space in a more controlled mode. Once we opened our space to a wider range of learning activities, we started to see how the more proactive model of learning support brought up conflicts with the long-held rules and values. For instance, how much control of the space and facilities did we let go when a learning event was hosted by a campus partner? Was there any potential resistance or negative emotion that frontline staff might have when they saw student activities that were not allowed in the Library before? The Adaptive Leadership model helps us to expect such difficulties in the change process, and reminds us to resolve conflicts and resistance rather than to avoid them.

Research Data Management: experimenting in a holding environment

Research data management (RDM) has become a strategic priority of many academic research libraries. What roles libraries may have in terms of RDM throughout the research life-cycle is still being explored and experimented. Studies of academic libraries in the UK and North America found that libraries had been developing technology support, such as repository for data storage or curation; and informational support, such as advisory and training for researchers (Cox and Pinfield, 2014; Tenopir et al., 2014). Developing RDM service is an adaptive challenge, which calls for changes in librarians' skill gaps, resources and service culture.

As highlighted in the Adaptive Leadership model, tackling an adaptive challenge requires the whole team to take on learning in order to understand the problem. At HKUST Library, RDM was first explored in June 2013 when we formed the internal group called Scholarly Communications Committee (SCC); the membership included the University Librarian and more than 10 professional librarians from different functional units. Members contribute to the exploration using their own expertise, which range from metadata management, digital infrastructure, user education, to service design. SCC is the platform where we plan for systematic self-learning about RDM through online tutorials, seminars, and data training. We complement each other's learning, share experiences, toy around with new ideas, and develop new services at SCC. The nature of research data is complex, many stakeholders are involved, and there are many possible models of RDM service. One can expect that the process of learning and service development as nonlinear and continuous. Throughout the process, SCC has become a

"holding environment" where we can find support, feedback, and experimentation. Our model of RDM support evolves gradually. At the time of writing, the main components of RDM services at HKUST Library include a portal showcasing the components of RDM, the RDM Service Kit, the data repository DataSpace@HKUST (https://dataspace.ust.hk/) and RDM seminars for researchers. Our learning and experimentation continue.

Digital Scholarship: in search of an adaptive path

While RDM could be viewed as an extension of existing library services such as information advisory and institutional repositories, digital scholarship is a new ground for most academic libraries. HKUST Library is in an early phase in the development of digital scholarship service model. Using the Adaptive Leadership vocabulary, we are taking a "balcony" angle to generate a good view of the "playing field".

The Library has substantial experience in creating digital projects, which are primarily driven by library collections and activities. For example, the Special Collections were digitized and made available via the *Rare & Special eZone* (http://lbezone.ust.hk/rse/), and library exhibitions are usually captured with digital images, videos, and platform for users' comments (http://library.ust.hk/exhibitions/). These digital initiatives align with library's strategic priorities, but do not relate to specific research needs or interests of scholars in the institution. How do we transit from a system that enables such library-driven digital projects, to a new model supporting digital scholarship? What does that new model look like? Vinopal and McCormick proposed a 4-tier framework (Vinopal and McCormick, 2013) that can provide a structure when we explore what services we can support with the consideration of scalability and sustainability.

Yet, at the time being, we are first taking our time to understand our digital scholarship context. Adaptive Leadership model emphasises the importance of spending time to diagnose the situation rather than jumping to quick solutions. In our diagnostic process, we survey the diverse modes of digital scholarship services at pioneering libraries, including those from Hong Kong as well as overseas. We scan the research interests of faculty at HKUST, identify researchers and research topics that may be of interest for digital projects. We continue to talk with potential collaborators to explore if and how they may take advantage of digital scholarship. Internally, we take stock of the Library's existing strengths and weaknesses, in terms of digital tools, services, and staffing.

While staying mostly on the balcony, we also get down to the field of action. In the Spring term of 2017, two undergraduate courses in the School of Humanities collaborated with the Library through our exhibitions. Students' coursework included guiding library gallery tours as well as writing essays about the exhibits. The Library took this opportunity, proposed to the professors to create a web project connecting students' intellectual work with the exhibition items. This experimentation will give us a different learning experience from what we culminated from developing library-driven, collection-based digital projects. Such projects help us prepare for more research-based digital scholarship projects in the future.

Information Literacy Course Enhancement: collaborating under uncertainties and diversity

Under a government-sponsored project on information literacy, each university in Hong Kong was given a few course enhancement funds (CEF) for teaching staff to develop information literacy elements in their courses. This fund supports teaching staff to co-design teaching and learning elements with librarians in order to enhance students'

information literacy. In 2016-17 academic year instructional librarians at HKUST initiated and engaged in four collaborations using the first round of CEF.

This was a brand new challenge for us, in terms of the level of outreach to course instructors and the depth of engagement in the course delivery. When compared with the ways many librarians organize traditional one-shot classes, to initiate and carry out a CEF collaboration with course instructors requires a very different mind-set. Again, this is an adaptive situation rather than a technical one. To face the challenge, instructional librarians drew on previous experiences in deep collaboration, and went through training program covering marketing and collaboration skills. In the exploration with instructors of different courses, librarians encountered different ideas and demands from them, some were creative while some were very tough to meet. Our librarians had to keep an open, flexible mind to handle the diverse situations; and to determine how much ambiguity, uncertainty and risks we could withstand.

As a consequence of such experimental effort, the instructional librarians successfully engaged the four courses with a wide variety of learning activities. Information literacy was instilled through different channels and media, including LibGuides, learning objects, videos, coaching sessions, database searching, referencing workshops, intellectual property workshops, poster design workshops, mini-conference poster presentation, learn-by-doing exercises, and group project consultations. These various deliverables were impressive to all stakeholders: students, librarians, course instructors and library administrators. Collaboration happened not only in teaching, but also in assessment and rubric design. Such multi-dimensional interactions between teaching staff and librarians was a good exposure for us to embed information literacy teaching in the course context.

Throughout the challenging and ambiguous process, our instructional librarians brought back problems to the team's meetings which served as a holding environment to share frustration, brainstorm creative solutions, and find mutual support.

Shared ILS Workflow Reengineering: wide-spread engagement

The eight government-funded academic libraries in Hong Kong embarked on a Shared Integrated Library System project in 2016. This was a significant transformation from eight ILS to a single instance, cloud-based, next generation system. The migration of 18 million bibliographic records to a new shared system was an enormous challenge not only of technical nature, but also of adaptive change. The project was led by an Implementation Team and seven Functional Working Groups with delegates from eight libraries. They had frequent meetings to guide the changes in areas such as acquisitions, metadata, fulfilment, user experience, etc.

It was a deep collaboration between sister institutions; across institutions the focus was standardizing and simplifying inconsistent issues and policies. At the local level, however, we emphasized on embracing the change with a positive attitude. A central task force was formed at HKUST Library to oversee the implementation progress: it took the "balcony view" at issues using multiple perspectives, discussed issues at the macro level and built a systemic view to solve problems.

A key part in the transformation was workflow changes. For this, a change manager was hired by the consortium to guide the eight libraries through the process. At HKUST Library, he conducted sessions on business process re-engineering to all library staff. The sessions applied brain-storming exercises to guide participants to rethink given

workflows, and to come up with innovative ways to redesign practices to achieve set targets. At the time of writing, the change manager was planning more workshops that would focus on mapping out "as is" and "should be" workflows in various library functional areas. The workflow change was adaptive: staff at all levels need to make trade-offs in values, procedures and operating styles; conflicts have to be resolved among themselves. Team leaders need to maintain a disciplined mind to focus on tackling the challenge, resistance and conflicts; and help their team members to do the same.

Building an Adaptive Culture

Once we have learnt how to differentiate adaptive situations from technical situations, academic librarians may notice that most challenges they face are in fact adaptive. It becomes important that libraries develop a facilitative organizational culture that can handle adaptive changes.

Heifetz et al. (Heifetz et al., 2009) suggested that authoritative leaders can cultivate an adaptive culture by:

- Making "naming the elephants" the norm – key issues that need attention should not be avoided even if they are uncomfortable to be discussed openly; "troublemakers" should be protected
- Nurturing shared responsibility for the organization – people feel a shared sense of responsibility when rewards are based mostly on the performance of the entire organization and not on an individual only; other indicators are whether they feel comfortable to share resources, ideas, insights and lessons across boundaries in the organization
- Encouraging independent judgment - distribute leadership in which everyone seizes opportunity to take initiative in mobilizing adaptive work in their own roles; prepare team members to develop a tolerance for ambiguity, and recognize the fact that authority does not have all the answers
- Developing leadership capacity among members – through on-the-job experience with appropriate challenge, feedback and support
- Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning – develop the group norms to ask difficult reflective questions, honour risk taking and experimentation, and foster a taste for action.

Although Adaptive Leadership emphasizes the engagement of the whole team in the change process, the role of positional leaders is still a major determinant of success. They are important not in the traditional sense of giving direction and protection to followers, but in their roles to orchestrate the change process with the team through difficulties and uncertainties, and to build culture and structure that facilitate adaptive changes. Academic libraries are operating in a continuously altering environment. Adaptive Leadership model equips librarians with a framework, a set of vocabulary, and a systemic perspective; it does not give us easy solutions, but can guide us to confront tough challenges with strategies and courage.

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