



Leaning Into Difference: The Key to Solving Tough Problems

By Craig Weber | 25 April 2014
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Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress

- Mahatma Gandhi

“Life is a series of problems,” observed M. Scott Peck. A more accurate statement was never made. But when it comes to solving them it’s important to realize that not all problems are created equal.

All our difficulties fall somewhere on a spectrum; at one end of this spectrum we find routine problems, and, at the other end, adaptive challenges. A routine problem isn’t considered routine because it happens regularly, but because we have a *routine* for dealing with it – a protocol, a process, or expert on which we can depend for a reliable fix. A routine problem may be irksome and expensive, but at least we’re in familiar territory and know what to do about it.

When we’re facing an adaptive challenge, on the other hand, we’re off the familiar trail in uncharted territory where there are no proven routines, protocols, solutions, or experts. To successfully negotiate an adaptive challenge we must work and learn with others to navigate the alien terrain. All the problems we face in life fall somewhere between these two distinct poles.

Adaptive Challenges in the Workplace

It’s easy to see these two types of problems in the workplace. If our corporate computer loses connectivity, for example, there’s a clear process for getting the problem fixed. It might be frustrating, but the problem is routine. If our corporate culture is trashing our strategy, however, we’re in highly adaptive territory,

because, unlike the computer problem, there is no simple solution, no established process, and no ready expert who can solve the problem for us.

Performing effectively in today's world is increasingly difficult because the number of adaptive challenges we face is snowballing. The culprits driving this trend are well known – rampant technological, social, economic, and political upheaval, and all the unpredictable change, surging complexity, and expanding globalization that comes with it.

Given this shift, it's more important than ever to recognize the distinction between routine and adaptive issues because they each require a profoundly different problem solving approach. For a routine problem a *bias for action* is appropriate. We have a routine, we know what to do, so as Nike suggests, we should “just do it.” But for an adaptive challenge – where there is no clear routine, no proven process, and no ready expert who can save the day – a *bias for learning* is essential. Why? To navigate our way over unfamiliar ground we must roll up our cognitive sleeves and work with others to figure out the best way forward. We must orchestrate, in other words, a process of *adaptive learning*.

The Key To Adaptive Learning

The key to adaptive learning is *leaning into difference* – the act of seeking out and exploring conflicting ideas and views. “If people don't engage across the divide of their differences there is no learning,” says Ron Heifetz. “People don't learn by looking in the mirror. They learn by talking with people who have different points of view. In a sense then, conflict is really the engine of adaptive work, the engine of learning.” And a critical competence that enables our ability to learn from difference is something I refer to as *conversational capacity* – the ability to orchestrate open, balanced, learning-focused dialogue about tough, heated, adaptive issues. High conversational capacity transforms how we react to people with different perspectives and information because our bias for learning leads us to see them as opportunities to expand our awareness and learn, not petty nuisances to be avoided or attacked. Rather than cave in or argue when someone shares a different point of view, we get curious: “What can *their* perspective teach me about how *I* am looking at this issue?”

This learning-focused orientation dramatically expands our ability to make informed choices, because, as Peter Elbow explains, “The surest way to get hold of what your present frame binds you to is to adopt the opposite frame. A person who can live with contradiction and exploit it – who can use conflicting models –

can simply see and think more.” And when working in unfamiliar territory nothing is more important than the ability to see and think more.

Abraham Lincoln understood this. Facing an adaptive challenge of historic proportions – a civil war and the utter failure of the American experiment – he did something unusual: he pulled into his cabinet people with political agendas that clashed not only with his own views but with each other’s. He didn’t create this hornets’ nest of conflicting perspectives because he yearned for comfortable cabinet meetings, nor did he do it because he wanted to get his way all the time. He did it because he knew a room full of contrasting points of view would help him make wiser, more informed decisions about the adaptive realities he was facing. The diversity of Lincoln’s cabinet helped him to see and think more.

It's no different in your organization. When you're up against big decisions, conflicts, changes, and challenges, the potential for profound learning isn't in the sameness around the table – it's in the *difference*. If your team can orchestrate balanced dialogue that fosters open-minded exposure to the varied and conflicting perspectives of its members, you gain a huge advantage that is unavailable to less capable teams – *the ability to think more expansively about your most pressing problems*. You have a greater field of vision and clearer set of choices in an adaptive situation because, as Margaret Heffernan puts it, you have “thinking partners who aren’t echo chambers.”

Adaptive Leadership

Cultivating a strong bias for learning is particularly important when you’re in charge of a team. Why? Because your primary job is to create a context where people can bring their smarts to the challenges at hand. The more adaptive the predicament you’re facing the harder you should work to pull their unique perspectives into the problem solving process.

In my book, *Conversational Capacity*, I shared the example of an executive who embodied this way of thinking. “In a hastily assembled meeting about a major problem facing the project he was leading, he explained to his team his current idea about how to address the problem, and then provided a quick overview of his thinking. He then tested his view; ‘I’d like to hear from others on this. But if you agree with me right now I don’t need to hear from you. I already know what I think. I’d like to spend the limited time we have hearing from those who don’t.’ That’s brilliant. Pressed for time, he recognizes he’s not going to expand his thinking by listening to people who agree with him, so he leans into difference by encouraging

people with different data or interpretations to share how they're looking at the issue. He's not doing this to reach agreement, per se, but to see what their differing views might teach him about the problem so he can make wiser choices about how to address it."

But mere exposure to difference isn't enough. Our differences only facilitate adaptive work if we have a bias for learning that is greater than our natural defensiveness to new and conflicting ideas. To truly learn from different perspectives we need the discipline – *the conversational capacity* – to balance candor and courage with curiosity and humility, to genuinely approach conversations with people who see the world differently as opportunities to trigger an "aha" moment – the exhilarating experience of having a blind spot in the mental map of our predicament unexpectedly illuminated.

Because it enables us to think smarter, faster, and together, the adaptive learning provoked by leaning into difference is invaluable in any organization facing tough challenges (and what organization isn't?). So let me leave you with a few questions to consider and discuss:

- What are the major issues facing your team and organization?
- What aspects of those issues are predominantly routine and which are more adaptive?
- When it comes to the adaptive challenges you're up against, does your team have the appropriate bias for learning needed to do the necessary adaptive work?
- If not, what can *you* do to build their conversational capacity so they can engage these challenges in a more balanced, healthy, learning-focused way?



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