

Adaptive Leadership:

*Navigating Complexity Without
Losing Yourself, or Your Team*

Six Adaptive Leadership Capabilities

That Matter Most Right
Now

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Today's
ALTA Insights
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“What got
you here
might not get
you there.”



Chat Question: When the pressure is high, emotions are elevated, and the stakes feel significant, what is your default leadership response?

1. **I move quickly into problem-solving** to regain control.
2. **I become more analytical**, looking for more facts before acting.
3. **I become more directive**, taking charge to keep things moving.
4. **I become more defensive**, explaining or protecting my position.
5. **I avoid or delay the conversation**, hoping emotions settle first.
6. **I intentionally pause, regulate myself, and respond with curiosity.**



Inside-Out Leadership Development is...

- The practice of developing the **inner capacities** - *self-awareness, emotional regulation, mindset, values, and purpose*, that enable leaders to make better decisions, create healthier cultures, and stronger business results.



Inside-Out Leadership Development



Chat Question

- What is a complex leadership challenge you're navigating right now?
- Not a task or a project - a complex leadership challenge.
- Something that doesn't have an easy answer.

Two Kinds of Problems

- **Complicated problems** - have a knowable solution.
- **Complex** (adaptive) **problems** – have no single correct answer.



Complicated vs Complex Problems

- **Underperforming Team Member**
- **Complicated version:** A B-team member is consistently missing deadlines, even after being addressed by you. You document the pattern, set clear expectations, create a performance improvement plan, follow HR process. Complicated- but there's a known framework for it.
- **Complex version:** An A- team member with a history of high-quality work seems disengaged- missing deadlines because they're quietly overwhelmed by a reorganization that changed their role without changing their title, they're watching colleagues get laid off and wondering if they're next, and they used to be one of your best people.

Complicated vs Complex Problems

- **AI Integration**
- **Complicated version:** Implementing a new AI tool in a department. There are technical requirements, training needs, a rollout timeline, and a budget. Hard but knowable. You find the right vendor, train the team, measure adoption. Expertise solves it.
- **Complex version:**
Deciding how AI changes what your team's work means - which roles evolve, which disappear, how you retain people whose jobs are shifting, and how you lead through the identity crisis that comes when someone's expertise becomes partially automated. No playbook exists.

And here's what happens when leaders apply complicated-problem thinking to complex problems:

- *They make premature decisions because uncertainty is uncomfortable.*
- *They apply old fixes to new and novel problems*
- *They tighten control when they should be releasing it.*
- *They work harder at what isn't working - because that's what got them this far.*
- *And they wonder why nothing is significantly changing.*



Chat Question- When the complexity of a challenge gets high, and under pressure, which of these best describes your default response as a leader?

1. **I jump into problem-solving immediately** - I focus on finding the fastest solution.
2. **I gather more information** before making a decision or responding.
3. **I become more directive and take control** to keep things moving.
4. **I slow down, ask questions, and seek multiple perspectives** before acting.
5. **I avoid or delay difficult conversations** until I have more clarity.
6. **I intentionally pause to regulate myself first**, then engage others with curiosity and empathy.

Adaptive Leadership is...

- Leading people through complexity without pretending you have all the answers
- The capacity to ***read*** what a complex situation needs, ***regulate*** your own response to it, and ***create*** the conditions for your team to think, act, and own outcomes - without waiting for certainty that may never arrive.



6 Adaptive Leadership Capabilities

1. **Regulates emotional state in real time**
2. **Stays grounded in uncertainty**
3. **Distributes ownership**
4. **Builds psychological safety**
5. **Develops others thinking**
6. **Models the inner work publicly**



Chat Question

- Think of a time your default leadership response made a complex situation worse rather than better. What was your default behavior?
- Just name the behavior, you don't have to share the situation.

Emotional Regulation...In Real Time

- It's Tuesday afternoon. You're in back-to-back meetings, plus squeezing in a webinar. Your phone shows three missed calls from your most difficult team member who you might be putting on an action plan. Your boss just forwarded you an email from a client expressing concern about your team's poor customer service with a note that says 'can we talk today?' You have a team meeting in twenty minutes that you haven't prepared for. And your mother is calling and texting you from the Dr's office with update on your very ill father.
- **CHAT:** One Word

+
○ • *”Emotional regulation is
the biological
prerequisite for every
other leadership
capability”*



The Pattern Interrupt – 3 Questions

1. What am I feeling right now?...and...
2. Is it useful? If not...
3. What's the one shift I'll make right now?



Capability 1: Emotional Regulation, in real time

- **Inside** - They've developed the capacity to notice their emotional state in real time to catch the anxiety, the frustration, the defensiveness - before it speaks.
- **Outside** - Their teams experience them as steady. Not emotionless - steady.
- **Your Leadership Action** - The next time you feel yourself tightening in a leadership moment - a meeting that's going sideways, a team member pushing back, a situation that triggers your default pattern- Apply **The Pattern Interrupt**.

The Pattern Interrupt – 3 Questions

1. What am I feeling right now?...and...
2. Is it useful? If not...
3. What's the one shift I'll make right now?



Capability 2: Grounded in Uncertainty

- **Inside** - They've developed genuine tolerance for not knowing - the ability to stay functional and grounded when the path forward isn't clear.
- **Outside** - They communicate direction calmly and clearly even when the path forward is ambiguous and uncertain.
- **Your Leadership Action** - In your next team meeting about something uncertain, name three things explicitly:
 - **1) What you know for certain**
 - **2) What you're still figuring out**
 - **3) And what your team can count on from you regardless.**

Capability 3: Distributes ownership

- **Inside** – Leader has developed enough security in themselves that they can let their team be wrong, be slower, be imperfect, and stay out of the way long enough for capability to develop.
- **Outside** - They ***push decision-making authority*** as close to the work as possible. They ask before they answer.
- **Your Leadership Action** - This week, identify one decision currently sitting on your desk that belongs on someone else's. Delegate it completely, not with a check-in structure, with genuine release.

Chat Question: When you delegate something important, what most often happens?

1. **I delegate the task, then check in frequently** to make sure it's on track.
2. **I give clear direction and expectations**, then largely step back.
3. **I find myself taking the work back** when it isn't done the way I would have done it.
4. **I delegate the outcome** but don't always provide enough context or clarity.
5. **I worry about the quality of the result** and stay more involved than I'd like.
6. **I use delegation as a development opportunity** - clarifying the outcome, giving ownership, and coaching along the way.

Capability 4: Builds psychological safety as a leadership practice

- **Inside** - Adaptive leaders have developed ego flexibility - the ability to hold their own perspective loosely enough to genuinely consider another.
- **Outside** – They respond to bad news without shooting the messenger. They ask genuine questions and stay curious when challenged.
- **Your Leadership Action** - At the start of your next team meeting: ***ask one question*** you genuinely don't know the answer to and make it clear you're asking because you want to hear what your team thinks. Then listen for two full minutes without responding.

Capability 5: Develops (coaching) judgement in others

- **Inside** - They've made the identity shift from expert to developer. From the one who knows to the one who grows others.
- **Outside** – They ask questions that stretch rather than directing answers that limit.
- **Your Leadership Action** - In your next one-on-one with someone facing a complex challenge, resist giving your perspective for the first ten minutes.
- **Ask instead:** *'What's your read on what's actually happening here?' then 'What are your options?' then 'What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?'*

Capability 6: Models their inner work publicly

- **Inside** - The leader who cannot be seen struggling cannot model the inner work authentically.
- **Outside** – They name their own patterns under pressure. They acknowledge when a decision they made was driven by fear rather than wisdom. They share what they're working on in their own development.
- **Your Leadership Action** - In your next leadership team meeting - share one specific thing you're working on in your own development.

Chat Question

- *'The one Adaptive Leadership action I'll take this week is _____.'*

Q&A

Thank You!