

Chapter 48

Leading and Learning in the Digital Age: Framing and Understanding School Leader Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how Heifetz's (1994) model, applied to the work of school leaders, has led to key insights. The framework helps practitioners and education leadership faculty who teach aspiring and practicing school leaders better understand the nature of adaptive and technical challenges that leaders encounter day-to-day and their approach to making sense of them, managing them, and helping other adults to do the same. The authors employ the adaptive-technical analytic framework to examine a case that is representative of real world problems that leaders have been wrestling with, based on their prior research. Through Heifetz's lens, the authors deconstruct the case to illustrate how framing the problem as adaptive and/or technical directly informs the leader's work. Embedded reflective questions create opportunities for readers to pause and apply this model to Principal Georgina's case. The authors encourage leaders to apply a framework and questions like this in their unique milieus.

INTRODUCTION

With the explosion of technology in the digital age, access has eased work—in many ways—in that educational leaders everywhere can instantly connect to their stakeholders, tap resources from around the globe with the click of a key board

and create learning communities without the constraints of brick and mortar. This is what we call the “light” side of technology. We want to acknowledge that advances in technology have enriched the work of leading and learning.

And yet, as much as life has changed in our post-modern society, there are enduring issues,

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imminent challenges, and struggles that school leaders around the world find difficult to manage even “on-line” and with the aid of technology. What we mean is that even with the astonishing help of technology, we’ve learned that leadership challenges are becoming increasingly complex. For example, school leaders must meet urgent challenges associated with changing demographics and high levels of poverty that are difficult to address despite the advances of technology today (Jacobson et al., 2005; Mulford et al., 2008). In addition, leaders are confronted with challenges like establishing strategic partnerships, implementing new performance reviews and new accountability standards, as well as recruiting and retaining good teachers (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Wagner, 2007). Thus, such challenges demand more of leaders and stakeholders—in spite of the aid of technology that bridges and enhances communication—and makes so much more possible.

The challenges leaders encounter today are often unpredictable—maybe even more than in the past. In addition, we’ve learned that these challenges are ones for which—as leaders in our longitudinal research (2008-present) have shared—there are no formal leadership preparation formulas, and few effective professional development opportunities for leaders-in-practice that would help them to a) understand their unique challenges, b) effectively manage them, and c) work through them in ways that would simultaneously help them to cope and use them as an opportunity to support growth and learning—their own and other adults as well (Barber, 2006; Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2007; Donaldson, 2008; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2013; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011). Compounding the challenges, leaders are often under pressure from external mandates and accountability policies, though likely different kinds of mandates and account-

ability issues depending upon their local contexts (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Hoffman, 2011; 2012; Leithwood & Beatty, 2007).

To face up to problems and meet challenges, leaders must support their own and others’ learning in different ways. Heifetz (1994) created a framework that distinguishes between what he calls *technical* (e.g., fixing the master schedule) and *adaptive* (e.g., meeting new accountability standards). This framework helps us—practitioners and education leadership faculty, who teach aspiring and practicing school leaders—better understand the nature of challenges that leaders encounter day-to-day and their approach to making sense of them, managing them, and helping other adults in their care to do the same. School leaders with whom we’ve had the gift of learning with and from have repeatedly shared that understanding the distinctions in Heifetz’s framework between the different types of challenges is “incredibly meaningful” and helps them and other adults in their communities to better understand and tackle issues. Our hope is that this is useful to you and those in your care as well.

Practitioners need support to help them develop the internal capacities to manage these complex challenges. In other words, we need to offer support to them in practice and in preparation programs so that they are equipped to be better able to manage the problems they encounter every day. This includes opportunities to develop their own internal capacities, i.e., social-emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and affective. We must carefully consider the kinds of professional learning opportunities available both within university preparation programs and in the workplace to ensure leaders of all levels of school (Pre-K—20) are able to lead learning for their leadership teams and staff.

How do principals, directors, head masters, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and others identify and understand the challenges that they confront in their day-to-day practice? Our chapter

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