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## Adaptive Leadership: Leadership Theory or Theoretical Derivative?

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# Academic Leadership Journal

Today's public and private business leaders and leaders of our Armed Forces are faced with challenges that require leadership that is capable of tackling and solving complex problems and issues, with collective, collaborative, timely effective, and innovative solutions. This set of challenges requires leadership that spans the spectrum of leadership theories, traits, and stylistic approaches that is very adaptive, yet direct in nature. This type of leadership is defined as 'adaptive leadership' and is a style of leadership that is developing into a new theory of its own, evolving from situational, transformational, contingency, and complexity theories, as described by Nastanski, (2002), being further refined by leadership theorists such as Heifetz (2004), Yukl,(2002) and Lepsinger (2006), and Bennis (2003), who are pioneering adaptive leadership approaches into the practicality of today's workplace. A recent study conducted, entitled: "Adaptive Leadership: Leadership Theory or Theoretical Derivative" analyzed, synthesized, and evaluated the legitimacy of adaptive leadership as a leadership theory, and provided conclusive results determining whether or not adaptive leadership is a leadership theory or simply a theoretical derivative from other leadership theories such as situational, transactional, transformational, contingency, or complexity theories.

Adaptive leadership is emerging as a contemporary leadership concept, evolving from situational, transformational, and complexity theories, as described by Nastanski (2002), being further refined by leadership theorists such as Heifetz (1994), Yukl (2002), and Bennis (2003), who are pioneering adaptive leadership approaches into the practicality of today's modern day workplace. In concert with this emergence and exciting advents underway, the United States Military, is also paving its own way of transforming and revolutionizing its doctrinal approach to leadership doctrine and leader development through a multitude of studies, lessons learned and doctrinal revision. These studies incorporate leader experiences in the complex contemporary environment our military leaders are faced with, leading in highly complex and adverse environments, against asymmetrical and adaptive enemies, who are adapting themselves in the evolution of tactics, techniques and procedures.

The determination of the legitimacy of adaptive leadership approaches as a leadership theory are being derived from concepts, approaches, and adaptive work, by those involved in leading such determinants. Bass's (2003) description and calling for a more adaptive and flexible leadership supports the theoretical notion that adaptive leaderships is a phenomenon that exists in today's environment that leaders can utilize for effectiveness. Bass's (2003) suppositions support the notions that that adaptive leadership is a natural derivative of transformational leadership and that it are not only a derivative of another leadership theory, but are also grounded in nature. It also possesses rigor and employs a variety of standards of measurement as exemplified by PDRI's Job Adaptability Inventory measurement systems and TABA's decision-making modeling methods of measurement being developed by (Hogan, 2004). The wide acceptance and utilization of these tools, models, and approaches, support Bass's criteria of acceptance by those who recognize the value of the integration of the competencies and traits of adaptivity being applied to leadership.

Hawkins's (2004) description and model of leadership theoretical development provide a descriptive and inductive template for leadership theory development, which is used for synthesis of the concepts

of adaptive leadership. The phenomenon of adaptive leadership has been identified, defined, articulated, and practiced, with a collection and codification of results assembled for theoretical consideration and confirmation. As a result, sets of principles, theories, and expectations have been developed that provide a set of standards and criteria for what is required of adaptive leaders and how to become an adaptive leader.

Hawkins (2004) postulates that theory should be comprehensive and coherent, and at the same time it should also be simple. Theory must explain practice, and ideally must provide cause and effect relationships. Theory must also explain practice in terms of outcomes; interwoven processes can be investigated once a general set of principles has been established. The theoretical, academic, and practical definitions of adaptive leadership are comprehensive, coherent, and in most cases simple. They explain practice in terms of outcome that are generated by a general set of principles that have been established by a core set of principles developed by Heifetz (1994), which have been further refined and developed for over fifteen years. They explain practical application of adaptive leadership and explain the practice of being and adaptive leader providing a cause and effect relationship. The research results collected from this study indicate that a solid historical record is being established, practiced, and recorded on a daily basis. Knowledge is being derived and contributed from experts within the fields of leadership and organizational management that identify adaptive leadership as an effective contemporary leadership approach that possesses potential for becoming a leadership theory.

Detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of adaptive leadership are supported by Hawkins's (2004) criteria of observation, that focus on identification and measurements units for adaptive leadership; derivatives and steps, patterns or groups of adaptive leadership; hypotheses statements and principles on adaptive leadership; testing and refining logical consequences of the principles and experimentation to check the predictions from theory. Hawking's (1988) definition of theory in his book "A Brief History of Time", as "A theory is a good theory if it satisfies two requirements: 1) It must accurately describe a large class of observations on the basis of a model which contains only a few arbitrary elements, and 2) It must make definite predictions about the results of future observations (Hawking, 1988)." The observations obtained from this study provide such an arbitrary class of observations that are based on a basis of a model and variations of models focusing on adaptive leadership. These models make definitive and definite predictions about the phenomenon of adaptive leadership and adaptability. Such models are exemplified in leadership models described by Bass (1990), are also portrayed in PDRI's Adaptability from a Multi-level Perspective Model, Eight Dimensions of Adaptive Performance Model, Hypothesized Trainability Continuum Model (Dorsey, Mueller-Hanson, Pulakos, 2006), TABA's Adaptive Leadership Maturity Model (Hogan, 2004), and Vandergriff's (2004) Adaptive Course Model (ACM).

According to Hawking's (1988), theories are constructed in order to explain, predict and master phenomena (e.g. inanimate things, events, or the behavior of animals). In many instances we are constructing "models of reality". A theory makes generalizations about observations and consists of an interrelated, coherent set of ideas and models. In this case study of adaptive leadership, the theories and ideals proposed about the leadership phenomenon construct "models of reality" that are based on generalizations about the past and contemporary observations that are being exercised on adaptivity and its relationship to leadership. These models, their ability to measure the phenomenon and the ability to conduct predictive behavior amongst leaders, serve as a sound basis to support Hawking's

(1988) definition of theory.

Schrivier (2005) defines theory as a set of propositions intended to explain phenomena or predict the occurrence of a phenomenon. While theories are not intended to provide specific answers to specific questions, they do act as road maps toward understanding what is observed and assist in formulating informed decisions about those observations. Theory also helps create working models based on knowledge, which is acquired over time, and observation of the phenomenon. From this observation, models can emerge that are tailored to the real needs of the clients (Schrivier, 2005). The concepts, models, principles, and theories provided by experts throughout this study support Schrivier's (2005) premise and definition of theory, by virtue of the explanation of the phenomenon of adaptive leadership, with predicted methods of outcome, that provide informed decisions about the observations of leaders leading in adaptive situations.

The recent study "Adaptive Leadership: Leadership Theory or Theoretical Derivative" conducted extensive research on the subject of adaptive leadership focusing on three categories of study. The three categories were: Category 1 (Academic, Theoretician, Experts on Leadership), Category 2 (Business/Consultant Leadership Experts), and Category 3 (Military Service Components and Leadership Experts). A summary of the research gathered from Category 1 respondents indicated that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach, with an 83% respondent rate. One of the six total respondents (16%) assessed adaptive leadership as a contemporary leadership theory and a contemporary leadership approach. All six (100%) of the Category 1 respondents assessed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach that has merit of becoming a leadership theory in the future. Two respondents (33 %) identified adaptive leadership as not being a derivative of other types of leadership theories, while four assessed the subject as being a natural derivation of other types of leadership theories. Two respondents (33%) assessed adaptive leadership as not being a "grounded theory".

Additional research by Dr.'s Glover, Jones, and Friedman (2002), in their work "Adaptive Leadership: When Change is not enough", presented a framework that they call an "Adaptive Leadership Theory". This framework provides a description of leader relationships with the contextual environments they operate within as well as a succinct definition of adaptive leadership theory that describes what adaptive leaders are. This framework supports definitions of leadership theory and theory as defined by Bass (1990), Hawkins (2004), and Schrivier (2005).

Results from this study revealed that this category of respondents assessed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach that has merit of becoming a leadership theory in the future. This indicates that from the sampling conducted in this category, there still remains a large degree of study and research to be conducted for this category to fully embrace the phenomenon of adaptive leadership as a leadership theory and as a grounded theory.

A summary of the research gathered from Category 2 (Business/Consultant Leadership Experts) respondents, indicated two of the three respondents (66%) believed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach, with one respondent (33%) not believing that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach. One of the three Category 2 respondents (33%) believed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership theory; while two of the three respondents (66%), believed that adaptive leadership is not a contemporary leadership theory. Two of the three (66%) Category 2 respondents believed that adaptive leadership is something other than a theory or

approach; one being an extension of complex leadership theory, and the other being a leadership framework, two of the three respondents (66%) assessed adaptive leadership to be a grounded theory or possessing components critical for warranting consideration as a grounded theory. One Category 2 respondent (33%) did not assess adaptive leadership to be a grounded theory.

All six (100%) of the Category 2 respondents assessed that adaptive leadership is a derivative of other leadership theories. Two of the three respondents (33 %) identified adaptive leadership as not being a derivative of other types of leadership theories, while four respondents assessed the subject as being a natural derivation of other leadership theories, such as situational, transformational or complex theories. Two respondents (66%) did not assess that adaptive leadership warrants consideration at the present time to be considered a legitimate leadership theory, while one respondent (33%) strongly believed that adaptive leadership is a leadership theory and a constructive framework. Results from this study revealed that this category of respondents assessed that adaptive leadership is primarily an effective leadership approach. These results indicated that there is still a vast array of agreement and understanding as to what exactly adaptive leadership is and how to embrace it in its application to leadership development and practice.

A summary of the research gathered from Category 3 (Military Service Components and Leadership Experts) respondents indicated that all three respondents (100%) believed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership approach. One respondent (33%) out of the three believed that adaptive leadership is a leadership theory, leaving two Category 3 respondents (66%) that did not believe that adaptive leadership is a leadership theory. One respondent (33%) believed that adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership theory, with two respondents (66%) believing that adaptive leadership is not a contemporary leadership theory. Two Category 3 respondents (66%) assessed adaptive leadership to be something other than a theory, such as a leadership trait and methodology, while one respondent (33%) assessed adaptive leadership to be a grounded theory or possessing components critical for warranting consideration as a grounded theory, while the other two respondents (66%) did not assess adaptive leadership to be a grounded theory. All three respondents (100%) assessed adaptive leadership to be a derivative of other leadership theories, and also believe that adaptive leadership can and will derive into a leadership theory of its own in the future. The results of the five military service components (JFCOM, Army, Navy, Air Force, and USMC) indicated that one service component (Army) considers adaptive leadership as a "Methodology" and four service components (Navy, Air Force, USMC, JFCOM) consider adaptive leadership as a leader competency.

A summary of the research gathered from Category 3 respondents resulted in the following statistical responses. Five respondents (27%) considered adaptive leadership a contemporary leadership theory. Fourteen respondents (73%) considered adaptive leadership to be something other than a leadership theory. The responses included (7 x Approach, 2 x Framework, 1 x Methodology, and 4 x Competency). Results from this study revealed that this category of respondents assessed that adaptive leadership is primarily an effective leadership approach. The military services and leadership experts largely do not assess adaptive leadership to be a grounded theory, but do wholly agree that it is a derivative of other leadership theories, and could develop into a leadership theory in its own right in the future. Only the Army out of the five service components considers adaptive leadership to be a methodology rather than a leader competency, however, much more research is being conducted and practiced within the Army on the value of adaptive leadership as leadership doctrine.

## Study Conclusion

Adaptive leadership is currently an accepted leadership approach that is considered by some as a developing leadership theory. Results also indicate that adaptive leadership is widely accepted by some as a derivative of other leadership theories such as situational, transformational and complexity leadership theories that is a necessary trait or competency for today's leaders.

## Implications

The following set of implications was derived from this study:

1. The sets of challenges that are presented to today's leaders require leadership that spans the spectrum of leadership theories, traits, and stylistic approaches that is very adaptive, yet direct in nature. The adaptive leadership approach is presently meeting these challenges, which is the primary reason that the success of the approach is being taught in today's universities, corporate professional leadership training curriculums, seminars, and workshops, and U.S. military schools and training seminars on leadership. The results of the adaptive approach being utilized to develop adaptive leaders, are predicating the adaptive leadership approach to be considered as a leadership theory in its own right.
2. Adaptive leadership is currently being used and applied in today's modern workplace, academic institutions and universities, and our military, as a leadership theoretical basis for corporations, businesses, human resource leader development training programs, consultant firms, and the United States Military applications alike, as a doctrinal theory. Whether or not it is completely considered as a theory, doctrine and the application and use of doctrine, is based on what works in the environment. This altered use of the adaptive leadership approach effectively applies doctrinal theory for effective practical application value and use to achieve results amongst leaders.

## Recommendations

This study revealed the following set of recommendations provided for future study and research in the field of adaptive leadership.

1. Effectiveness of leadership theories in today's environment. Mobbs (2004) assesses that current management theory is proving willfully inadequate for addressing this task. In response to these inadequacies, an alternative school of thought has come to the forefront, derived from "science of complexity". This school of thought views all living things as examples of complex adaptive systems, whereby independent participants interact to continually reform and shape their future. DeGenring (2005) addresses the challenge to lead in today's contemporary environment by stating that "today's organizations need the capacity to adapt their approaches, their economic models, their thinking and their leadership in order to survive in the environment they operate within. Adaptive leadership embraces the ideal more readily than older leadership approaches, which today are insufficient to solve the complex problems of today's business environment." These statements serve as a premise for a recommendation for continued research on why past leadership theories are becoming "inadequate" for leaders to succeed in today's environment and why adaptive approaches are working for today's leaders.

2. Leadership theory legitimization. Much research was conducted during the course of this study to find suitable, feasible, and acceptable criteria that served as a legitimization set of criterion for leadership theory determination. Further research and codification of a collective set of principles that succinctly articulate what legitimizes a concept, approach, framework, or set of competencies into a leadership theory that is relevant and supports today's conceptual and practical needs is essentially required.

3. Effective learning strategies, approaches, and methods. Much study and research is being conducted on effective learning strategies, approaches, and methods, with some involving the integration of adaptive learning and behavioral approaches to train adaptive leaders. These methods of learning are producing empirical results on the effectiveness of their methods to produce leaders who think and act adaptively. Compilation and dissemination of such qualitative and quantitative data is essential to the further study and research of adaptive leadership and will contribute to the viability of the phenomenon becoming a leadership theory.

4. Available Field Data. The primary limitation assessed for this study was identified as the amount of measurable data available that measures the effectiveness of the practical application of adaptive leadership in a corporate, business, and military workplace environment or military operational area. This study recommended that such data collected be shared amongst all spectrums and across "categories" to contribute to the development and growth of this developing leadership theory.

5. Measuring Adaptivity and Adaptive Leadership. Adaptive leadership achieves positive change through provoking debate, encouraging rethinking, and applying processes of social learning. One of the most provoking challenges in being able to assess if positive change is being achieved through provoking debate, rethinking methods, or processes of social learning, is being able to measure such methods of employment. Further research and study are essential to facilitate methods of measuring adaptivity and adaptive leadership to facilitate leadership and grounded theoretical development and determination.

6. Glover, Jones, and Friedman's (2002) Adaptive Leadership Theory. Glover, Jones, and Friedman's (2002) Adaptive Leadership Theory prescribes that leaders make decisions and act with a conscious understanding of how their behaviors are broadly relevant to time and space, not just for one organizational setting within a singular moment of time. Glover et al., (2002) provide a model that concludes to understand adaption that explains the dynamics of biology, culture and environment on leadership that supports their first principle of Cultural Competency. Expanded research and development of this model that measures the effects of the environment on leadership is required to fully expound upon the effectiveness of the Glover et al., (2002) Adaptive Leader Model.

7. PDRI Research Measures. The specific measures used and developed to support the PDRI research on Adaptive Predictor Measures included factors of Criteria, New Adaptability Predictor Measures and Cognitive Ability and Personality Measures. Results from PDRI's research were shown to predict adaptive performance. Their findings indicate that possessing these individual traits are not enough, and suggested that a leader's role in encouraging adaptability suggests at least two broad performance dimensions of leader adaptability are required: 1) Developing the adaptive capabilities of others and 2) Creating a climate that fosters adaptability. Further research and study is recommended to determine the best and most effective 'how' to develop adaptive capabilities is attained to develop effective adaptive leaders, and "how" to create a climate that fosters adaptability.

8. TABA Adaptive Leadership Maturity Model. The TABA Adaptive Leadership Maturity Model developed by Hogan (2004) provides a methodology for assessing adaptive leadership maturity (by survey of organizational leadership with decision-making responsibility) and then gives direction to leadership development efforts by prioritizing development to address the identified constraining skills. Hogan's (2004) models that support the assessment of measuring adaptive leadership maturity serve as a sound starting point for further research and development that will contribute to the development of adaptive leadership as a leadership theory.

9. ACM Evaluation Criteria. Vandergriff's (2004) Adaptive Course Model provides a set of evaluation criteria to provide students or leaders feedback on their progress in becoming an adaptive leader. Results from this evaluation criteria being shared with other military service components, as well as publicly and privately shared in best practiced leadership training seminars, will additionally contribute to the development of adaptive leadership as an effective approach and potentially as a theory.

10. Training Adaptive Leaders. Ross (2000) provided a comprehensive review of adaptive leadership analysis in her article "Training Adaptive Leaders". Ross's (2000) analysis revealed that adaptive leadership is essential for today's leaders in order to effectively adapt to changing operations and technology that are growing at an incomprehensible rate. This requires adaptive military leaders (and leaders in other walks of life) who can think at the speed of new technology, which in turn requires a new innovative training methodology that develops adaptive thinking to prepare and train adaptive leaders. Ross's (2000) premise on rationalizing the need for adaptive thinking is based on the increased cognitive demands for situation assessment, decision-making and monitoring outcomes in unusual situations are projected for "information rich," complex, fast-paced and ambiguous mission settings of the 21st century. Ross's premise and recommendations are rich criteria to support further research and study on the types of increased cognitive demands for situational assessment and decision-making that will greatly contribute to adaptive leadership training and development.

11. Adaptive leadership becoming a leadership theory. Heifetz (2008) believes that Adaptive leadership can and potentially will become a recognized leadership theory in time, when proponents of such theory begin to appreciate the implications of the effectiveness of the approach. Heifetz calls this the "Politics of Recognition". This recognition process is at work today and he believes that the impact of the Adaptive work itself will create difference of it being recognized from a leadership approach to a leadership theory. Heifetz (2008) also believes that the process will be greatly facilitated by the work completed by doctoral students who publish their research on Adaptive leadership and the adaptive framework. This research and dissemination of such research requires an active public relations, information sharing and marketing plan and process that can achieve this recommendation.

Glover (2008) also strongly believes that the concept of adaption can be and will become a theory and a grounded theory, through the operationalizing of its concepts. This notion also supports Heifetz' recommendation of conducting continued research on this subject matter. Dr. Page Smith (2008) also assesses that that it will take the "family of established venires of empirical research" to validate the concept of adaptive leadership into theory, and that such a span of visibility will facilitate that development and increase the depth of content of the current approach phenomenon through a evolutionary validation of research. Smith's recommendation is founded by a validation standard. Academics critique observations that validate or refute theory. Results of research must get into the



right hands for appropriate analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Re-tooling what has been to fit what is and the process of reconditioning are acts of progression that add to development of theoretical notions and concepts, according to Smith (2008).

Lawrence (2008) believes that adaptive leadership requires commercial exploitation and marketing in order to “legitimize” it as a widely recognized theory. He believes that there is a “public relations problem” with the marketing aspect of the theory and states that the “message is practical and compelling”. Mobilizing researchers and people to narrow this gap between theoretical aspirations and current experiences will help its recognition as a legitimate leadership theory. (Lawrence, 2008)

Vandergriff (2008) assesses that there is resistance to change, however Senior Leaders of the Army are endorsing the Adaptive Leader Methodology and Course for integration for curriculum revision, despite bureaucratic obstacles impeding rapid implementation. The practical application of Adaptive Leadership Methodology through the ALC will generate positive results by producing confident and competent leaders who will grow to support and endorse the approach to produce effective adaptive leaders our military is yearning to grow.

These recommendations provided by this study’s contributors serve as starting blocks for adaptive leadership to develop from an effective leadership approach to a widely and accepted leadership theory.

## Conclusions

Adaptive leadership is currently an accepted leadership approach that is considered by some as a developing leadership theory. Adaptive leadership is widely accepted by some as a derivative of other leadership theories such as situational, transformational and complexity leadership theories that is a necessary trait or competency for today’s leaders. Adaptive leadership is emerging as a leadership concept, evolving from situational, transformational, and complexity theories, as described by Nastanski (2002), that is being further refined by leadership theorists such as Heifetz (1994), Yukl (2002), and Bennis (2003), who are pioneering adaptive leadership approaches into the practicality of today’s modern day workplace. In concert with this emergence and exciting advents underway, the United States Military, is also paving its own way of transforming and revolutionizing its doctrinal approach to leadership doctrine and leader development through a multitude of studies, lessons learned and doctrinal revisions. These studies incorporate leader experiences in difficult environments our military leaders are faced with, leading in highly complex and adverse environments, against asymmetrical and adaptive enemies. Today’s public and private business leaders and leaders of our Armed Forces are faced with challenges that require leadership that is capable of tackling and solving complex contemporary problems and issues, with collective, collaborative, timely effective, and innovative solutions. Adaptive leadership serves as a means to help leaders effectively meet the challenging demands placed upon them to succeed in endeavors that require effective leadership by highly effective leaders.

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