

**EXPERTS' FORUM** | Open Forum

## Adaptive Leadership in a High Stakes World

One of my clients expressed personal frustration when his administrative authority was decreased by national leadership at a time when he feels he needs more latitude to effectively solve problems locally. He asks, "How do I help people when I no longer have the positional authority to solve problems?"

Similarly, a manager encountering increasing demands with diminishing resources, explains that he now sees his primary role as helping people adapt to new practices and skills required to achieve expected profit levels, while preserving the "best practices" of yesterday.

The nature and magnitude of change today is unlike anything we've experienced before. Financial metrics are shifting on every level, operational norms are being challenged and people are feeling uncertain about the future. Whether you are experiencing diminishing authority and resources, increasing demands and irrelevant best practices or some other ambiguous situation, adaptive leadership is the only successful way forward.

Adaptive leadership starts with a healthy personal attitude and the ability to be flexible, as well as versatile, in the face of ambiguity, change and adverse conditions. Adaptive leaders and managers will be guided by two critical factors as they navigate the through this high stakes world:

**Demonstrate Personal Adaptability.** Leaders and managers use to having authority and solving problems by exercising that authority, might feel powerless and less effective if they suffer from a low self-concept. But, those who are confident in who they are and their ability to influence others out of a healthy sense of personal power will be effective leaders. Resource constraints and limitations will be met with adaptive attitudes and capabilities.

As an adaptive leader, respond to problems as actual opportunities for breakthrough. Take personal initiative

and respond to situations in a realistic, productive and healthy manner. When challenges and surprises emerge, respond appropriately with resolve to turn those obstacles to your advantage.

For self-reflection on how adaptable you are, ask yourself this question: "Can I make decisions and solve problems based on facts rather than personal agendas, past history or emotional factors?"

**Encourage Adaptability in Others.** The most effective way to ensure your people succeed during adversity is to foster adaptability. This is the art of holding people's feet to the fire while empathizing with their needs. For example, in situations where your staff encounters resistance and want to throw their hands up and declare the task impossible, challenge them to adapt. Let them know you can appreciate the difficulty and its complexity, but you are confident in their ability to find a constructive way forward. You might ask, "If the way we've always performed this task is no longer possible or appropriate, what alternative approaches should we consider to get a similar or better outcome?"

In times like these, we all struggle with the issue of willingness to change how we do things. Being open to new and different approaches and ideas is the first step to cooperating with others and discovering innovative solutions. The willingness to embrace change can also be effected by the confidence we have in our ability to actually change our approach and learn new skills and competencies required of us.

As you foster adaptability in your team, you will want to pay close attention to both their willingness and capability to make the necessary adjustments. Some will be willing to change, but not capable. Others will be capable, but may not be willing to change their approach to achieve success in the future. Both are detrimental to effectively adapting to change in a high stakes world.



**LAMAR HAMILTON**  
President, CEO  
Core Vision, Inc.  
lamar@corevisioninc.com  
<http://www.lamarhamilton.com>