


Leadership in Complex Environments

An Adaptive Leadership Course

Presented by Beatrice C. Benne, Ph.D.



"The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure."

~ Joseph Campbell ~

- Do you belong to a mission-driven organization, making conscious efforts to develop more sustainable business practices, products and services?
- Are you trying to address challenges across functional systems while involving diverse stakeholders in the process?
- Does your organization need to develop more resilient business practices and achieve higher-level performance?

If you answered 'yes' to any of the above questions, you are called, with no doubt, to exercise adaptive leadership.

What is Adaptive Leadership?

Adaptive leadership is required when leading a change process in multi-stakeholder environments. In the words of Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz:

"[Adaptive] leadership is what individuals do in mobilizing other people, in organizations or communities, to do what I call "adaptive work." Adaptive work can mean clarifying a conflict in values, or bridging the gap between the values that we stand for and the current conditions under which we operate. When you have a problem or a challenge for which there is no technical remedy, a problem for which it won't help to look to an authority for answers - the answers aren't there - that problem calls for adaptive work."

Adaptive leadership is built on authenticity and transparent communication. It is grounded in the belief that excellence is within each individual and that ways to address our most complex challenges do exist—our collaborative task is to find them. Consequently, adaptive leadership begins with choosing to challenge the status quo in order to move the system away from its comfort zone; courageously asking the questions no one else is willing to ask; and committing to finding the 'truth' about what is really going on in the system.

The Capacities of an Adaptive Leader

The journey to becoming an adaptive leader can be a frustrating one, with potentially disappointing results. While no one can fully guarantee the successful resolution of value-based and politically-charged challenges, developing your adaptive leadership skills will give you a unique advantage as a change agent and will empower you to make positive lasting changes on your entire organizational ecosystem.

As an adaptive leader you will:

- Know how to diagnose an organizational system and uncover the structural dynamics that constrain it.
- Understand your role and your contribution to the system within which you operate.
- Know how to expand your informal authority.
- Possess the tools required to influence your system structure and design processes that effectively support your adaptive journey.
- Have the required skills to lead your system toward perceiving reality with new 'eyes,' thereby reframing your challenge in a way that generates a 'field for emergent possibilities'.
- Stand strong amidst ambiguity and uncertainty.
- Apply your creativity and work from a deeper source of knowledge and insight.

Adaptive Work Focus Areas

Adaptive Strategies

Organizational Culture and Identity

Change Initiatives

Innovation

Community Stakeholder Engagement

Socio-Ecological Work





"Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be."

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

About the Course

This course builds on the seminal work of Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues and complements it with additional materials from diverse sources, including my own work and research on leading transformative work in complex environments.

One cannot read one's way to leadership; leadership is learned by doing and practicing one's skills. Consequently, the course is designed to be very 'hands-on' and balances theories presentations with individual and group activities that are built to support the work of the participants on their adaptive challenges.

The course has two main objectives. The first objective is for participants to become familiar with a set of tools and frameworks that will help them lead positive and generative change. Specifically, participants will learn to:

- Analyze and diagnose their projects
- Design effective interventions and collaborative processes
- Address behavior issues
- Know how to operate and lead in a political environment

The second objective is to develop the participants' personal capabilities for leading adaptive work in the context of complex environmental projects, and to teach them self-reflective practices, which will assist them on their on-going learning journey beyond this course.

Course Structure

The course includes four sessions of 4 hours each. A prerequisite for the course is for participants to have an adaptive challenge on which to practice the diverse tools and frameworks learned throughout the course.

Session 1: The Work of Adaptive Leadership

In this introductory session, participants will explore the differences between technical problems and adaptive challenges and will contrast the adaptive leadership skills from the ones used in traditional styles of leadership based on authority. Using the Action Learning Methodology, participants will learn how to reframe a complex issue of their choice by practicing active listening and effective inquiry and advocacy.

Session 2: Intervention Design: Creating the Space for Adaptive Work

Adaptive work is about facilitating a journey of change; this requires careful process design. In this session, participants will use diverse tools and frameworks to diagnose their project; create a collaborative space that will unleash the collective intelligence present in the project team; and generate a field for emergent possibilities.

Session 3: Addressing Resistances, Conflicts, Fears, and Losses

Adaptive challenges present a broad range of behavioral issues that must be effectively addressed to bring the process to fruition. At any given time, adaptive leaders must be very aware of the overall team dynamic so that to anticipate issues and respond sensibly. The objective of this session is to raise the participants' awareness of the complex dynamics operating in social systems. They will explore the origins of different types of problematic behaviors and will practice ways to manage 'difficult conversations' effectively.

Session 4: The Political Leader

One of the main assets of adaptive leaders is their capacity to understand the whole political landscape and think and act politically. In this session, participants will broaden the focus beyond the immediate project stakeholders to explore the political influence of other constituents (e.g. policy makers; regulatory agencies; private businesses; NGOs; etc.) and will use Heifetz's list of recommendations to find ways to mitigate risks and expand their informal authority.

The course will conclude with a group reflection on the learning throughout the course and an exploration of the different ways by which participants can create a supporting environment in their organization to continue to develop their adaptive leadership capacity.

What Participants Have Said About the Course

“The course of adaptive leadership was transformative for my professional and personal life. In our constant changing environment as conservationists we are frequently confronted with numerous challenges that require more than “technical fixes”. In the course offered by Beatrice Benne we learned how to address these challenges from a new perspective and how to become effective leaders not only in jobs but also in our personal lives. I highly recommend this course for those who are brave enough to identify adaptive challenges and who are willing to outgrow them through transformative changes.”

Cecilia Simon, Independent Consultant
Mexico

“The adaptive leadership course has revolutionized the way I approach difficult conversations, challenges at work, conflict and even day-to-day management. Beatrice is a great trainer, and the regular exercises interspersed between the lectures were perfect to help practice and reinforce the new approaches. The course was also a lot of fun, and really helped all the participants bond as a group.”

Jennifer Chapman, Country Coordinator (Belize)
Blue Ventures, London, England

“I highly recommend Beatrice Benne to any conservation organization that is working on building its organizational capacity or capacity within a stakeholder group. Her passion for this work is genuine and inspiring. Also, her unique approach combines teaching, coaching and practice-based exercises that grounded the 'Adaptive Leadership' theory in a way that I was able to reframe my approach to stakeholder facilitation and engagement. Finally, her attentive and insightful manner created a customized experience during my 1:1 coaching session with her.”

Kelli McCune, Senior Project Manager
Sustainable Conservation, San Francisco, USA

“I work in the community forest management field in Ecuador and found the Adaptive Leadership course by Beatrice Benne extremely relevant to my work. Sustainable community forest management in the tropics typically involves numerous diverse stakeholders attempting to implement projects under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. I had already identified an adaptive approach as highly important, but Beatrice’s course provided me with the tools and frameworks necessary to actually lead these processes. Inspired by this, this year, I am implementing a new program in my organization that has the objective to identify and train local adaptive leaders within the communities that we are working with. My expectation is that these talented young leaders will be able to apply a much-needed style of leadership that helps their communities navigate the changes they face when coming into contact with economic markets.”

Wain Collen, Founder & Executive Director
PlanJunto, Quito, Ecuador





About the Instructor

Beatrice Benne, Ph.D., founded Soma Integral Consulting in 2010 with a mission to facilitate the resolution of adaptive challenges by designing purposeful organizations, while focusing on the wellbeing of social and environmental ecosystems. Ms. Benne brings to her clients a broad range of skills and expertise including a whole systems approach to organizational management and change; generative strategy facilitation; transformative leadership capacity development; and a creative learning approach to addressing complex situations. In collaboration with practitioners in the Design Built Environment, she also delivers regenerative design and development services to communities, cities, and local governments that seek to become more sustainable and resilient.

Over the past 15 years working in diverse organizational settings—from large corporations such as Bechtel to startups—Ms. Benne has gained experience in facilitating change, leading process improvement projects, and creatively combining ideas from different fields for the design of strategic business solutions. With her unique ability to combine rational analysis and perceptive intuition, Ms. Benne is able to successfully navigate the intricacy of highly complex organizational environments, while maintaining a sharp focus on the expected outcomes and performance of the projects and initiatives she leads.

Ms. Benne has been an adjunct faculty with Bainbridge Graduate Institute (BGI) for five years where she team-taught a Strategy and Implementation course and a Systems Thinking course for the sustainability-centered MBA and for the Certificate program in sustainable business. She currently teaches a Strategic Management course for the MBA in Design Strategy at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

Ms. Benne holds a M.Sc. and a Ph.D. from the Department of Architecture at the University of Berkeley, California, and a Diploma of Architect from the University of Geneva, Switzerland.

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