**WHAT IS ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP?**

**By Dr. Charles Albano**

I use the term not just in the sense of a trademark, but more importantly to draw attention to a way of leading. I selected a chameleon for my logo because most people readily recognize it as a symbol of adaptation. Adaptation is a dynamic process of mutual influence. All creatures act on their environments, and their environments, in turn, act on them. We are all engaged in co-creation in our offices and in our [families](http://www.selfgrowth.com/family.html) by virtue of the influences we exert on each other.

Adaptive leadership is given to impacting the environment. It addresses a very active form of leadership, not a passive effort taken merely to adjust to circumstances as found. Biology teaches that relationships between living entities are circular and interactive. Our organizations are also living systems, being composed not just of capital goods and technology, but of people.

Organizations are capable of intelligent, purposeful collective action, actions taken to influence their environments in desired directions. We know that, like all living organisms, our organizations can learn, adapt and grow. We know that they too have life cycles of birth, growth, maturity and eventual decline.

ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS COMPARED TO MECHANICAL SYSTEMS

It is quite a different matter to see organizations as being adaptive systems as opposed to the traditional (and ancient) way we have been conditioned to see them, namely, as Machines.

It matters a great deal whether leaders conceive of their organizations as being like machines or like living adaptive systems. It matters because it shapes the roles they and their people play. It matters because it bears directly on their ability to tap human potential. It matters because the times have changed and mechanically-based leadership and organizational practices are not adequate to the adaptive challenges being faced.

The old paradigm speaks to only the most mechanical aspects of how organizations operate, those activities that must be repeated in a standardized way. In the mechanical sphere of operations change and [creativity](http://www.selfgrowth.com/creativity.html) threaten efficiency.

When an organization is led as though it were a machine, people come to be treated as parts of machines- mindless extensions of impersonal processes. When that happens, what is desperately undeveloped is commitment, [creativity](http://www.selfgrowth.com/creativity.html) and a great deal of latent potential.

The Adaptive view of organizations and leadership presents sharp contrasts along a number of dimensions--

COMPARING MECHANICAL (M) AND ADAPTIVE (A) VIEWS

(M) Attention is focused on activities.

(A) Attention is focused on value-added outcomes.

(M) Job descriptions are long, detailed and constraining.

(A) Job descriptions are intentionally broad-based to allow for flexibility.

(M) Role expectations are narrow and rigid.

(A) Roles are fluid. Within limits, people are expected to substitute for one another.

(M) Contacts are confined and communication is channeled by higher management.

(A) Contacts are open and networks are encouraged to form.

(M) Policies are mostly oriented toward control, what people can't do.

(A) Policies encourage people to take a "can do" mindset to find solutions.

(M) The organizational structure is bureaucratic and fragmented into many departments.

(A) The structures are more fluid and of shorter duration. Changes in design are aimed at enhancing flexibility and responsiveness.

(M) Authority is based on rank, and it is expected that influence will equate with formal authority.

(A) Authority is accorded a place, but reliance on it is played down. Greater influence is accorded people who demonstrate ability to [add](http://www.selfgrowth.com/add.html) value.

(M) Efficiency and predictability are sought and reinforced.

(A) [Achievement](http://www.selfgrowth.com/achievement.html), innovation and change are sought and rewarded.

(M) Cooperation among departments is subject to a lot of formalization and clearances. Turf guardingprevails.

(A) Cooperation is a highly regarded value in the organization and is far more easily gained.

(M) Information is kept close hold.

(A) Information is widely available to facilitate work accomplishment and permit more opportunities for more people to [add](http://www.selfgrowth.com/add.html) value to operations.

(M) Traditional values are fostered such as unit loyalty and obedience to the effect that they stifle initiative and hamper teamwork across departments.

(A) Newer values such as cooperation, and responsiveness along with treating other units as internal "customers."

You can imagine how the working atmospheres differ. In the Mechanically managed and structured organization people in one department know little of the missions and contributions of the others. (And don't realize how important it is for them to know,) They look through "stovepipes" and see only their patch of blue, the view of the familiar world of their own work specialties. Since work is highly specialized and interdepartmental communication leaves much to be desired, things that need to be coordinated slip through the cracks. Problems as well as opportunities go unnoticed. Blame is placed on others. We-they conflicts develop. Teamwork is likely to be poor. Higher management sets up short-term cross-departmental committees and task forces to ameliorate matters. But since the leadership paradigm, the reward systems, and the organization's structure all proceed from the Mechanical mentality, little changes.

Things are stiff; the Mechanical organization is muscle-bound. Large organizations are highly susceptible to this. They get overrun by restrictive regulations, over-elaborated procedures and incredibly convoluted work processes. In short, they become bureaucratic. Mechanical organizations work (or worked) best in times when the operating environment was stable. Now chaos rules in many formerly predictable business environments-- mergers, acquisitions, new technology to absorb, changing demographics, de-regulation, global competition, competition from small, fluid, adaptive organizations. The days of the Mechanical organization and non-adaptive leadership are numbered.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADAPTIVE LEADERS

Adaptive leadership reflects the actions of leaders who:

-- Think and act to exert strategic influence on their environments. They act to assure that their organizations are well positioned competitively.

-- Are proactive, foresee opportunities and put the resources in place to go after them.

-- Employ a broad-based style of leadership that enables them to be personally more flexible and adaptive.

-- Entertain diverse and divergent views when possible before making major decisions.

-- Can admit when they are wrong and alter or abandon a non-productive course of action.

-- Are astute students of their environments.

-- Can generate creative options for action.

-- Build their organization's capacities to learn, transform structure, change culture, and adapt technology.

-- Stay knowledgeable of what their stakeholders want.

-- Are willing to experiment, take risks.

-- Strive to improve their personal openness to new ideas and stay abreast by being lifelong learners.

-- Love and encourage innovation from the ranks of their organizations.

In closing, I would like to point out that these qualities are not new in leadership. What is new is the extraordinary pressures leaders face to assist their organizations to adapt successfully at a time when the traditional (all too comfortable) models of leadership no longer work.

**Author's Bio:**

Charles Albano operates a consulting firm known as Adaptive Leadership. He conducts on-site leadership and management training. His website contains course descriptions and articles of value to managers.

Email: CharlesAlbano@webtv.net