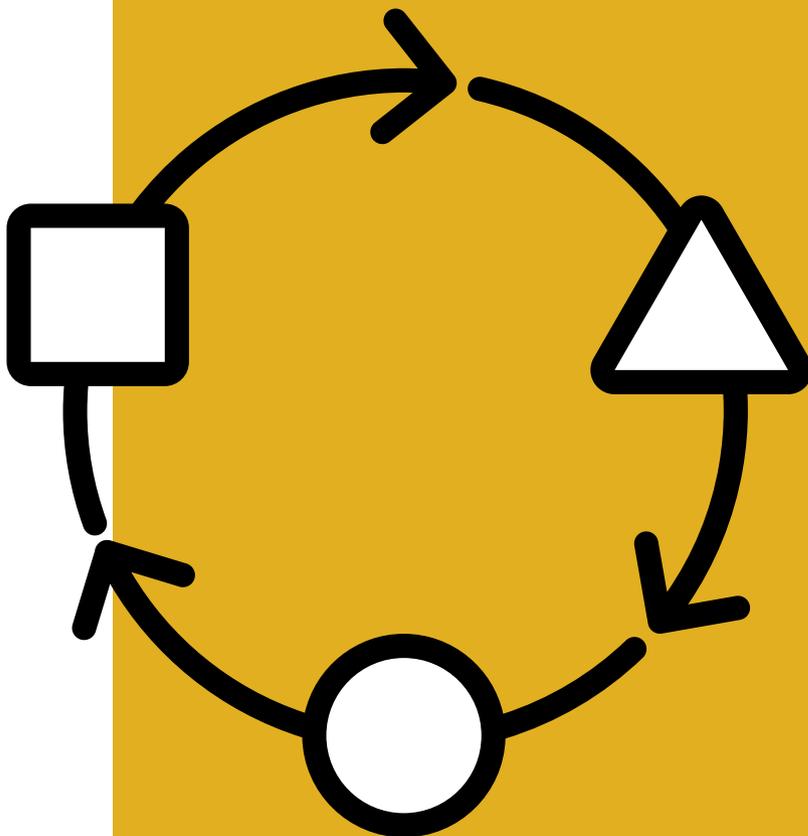




“A” Is for Adaptive

Ready for anything, the assistant principal is continuously learning and managing change

By Ian P. Murphy



Technical and adaptive leadership skills both have a strong influence on student achievement, research says. But while technical leadership skills focus on straightforward problem-solving within existing structures, adaptive leadership is more open-ended. It concentrates on change management, demanding flexibility, reactive capabilities, and a willingness to learn.

A term originally coined by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, adaptive challenges are interpersonal and don't have a defined quick fix. Instead, they require people and systems to embrace solutions that take into account any number of variables students, parents, teachers, and leaders bring to the table. Solving such challenges usually requires stakeholders to adjust their values, beliefs, habits, ways of working, and/or ways of life.

“Leaders go through different kinds of changes,” says Jacquelyn Wilson, director of the Delaware Academy for School Leadership at the University of Delaware. “Technical change means I already have the knowledge; I don't have to go out and gain a new skill set. Adaptive change is more of a paradigm shift in that [leaders] have to adapt to a new situation, and that requires them to learn new skills. The assistant principal is constantly

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living in the world of adaptive change, because they are learning how to lead and handle new responsibilities.”

New Responsibilities

Adaptive challenges may be sudden, like last year’s transition to virtual and hybrid learning, or they might involve a planned effort to alter existing norms, such as pursuing an equity initiative or installing a new curriculum. Whereas a technical challenge might have an obvious answer, an adaptive challenge must be met head-on with new strategies and structures. APs usually take a hands-on role in such situations, even though they may be unfamiliar.

Adaptive challenges are often issues that preparation programs can’t predict or address. “We get the theory, but we don’t get the practice until we’re at a site and faced with a challenge,” says Alicia Flores, associate principal at Vista Square Elementary School in Chula Vista, California, part of a district that participated in The Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI). “The things you learn in a preparatory program really can’t prepare you for real-life situations.”

Effective principal pipelines concentrate on growth and instructional leadership, she notes, helping address any shortfalls in prior leadership training in order to develop new talent within a district. “We want to make sure that APs really see themselves as instructional

leaders and not just managers,” Flores says. “With the pipeline, I know I’m not going to be an AP until I retire; the goal is that I will become a principal. We’re being set up for success.”

Special Skills

According to “How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research,” a report released in February by The Wallace Foundation, leaders who have a positive impact on student outcomes have three categories of skills in common:

- **Skills and expertise to support instruction.** Effective leaders possess skills “that enable them to provide effective, structured feedback to teachers with the goal of motivating them to refine their practices,” and they orchestrate high-quality professional development (PD) opportunities.
- **Skills and expertise in managing and developing people.** Effective leaders develop caring relationships, communication, and trust with teachers, staff, parents, and the community. Trust is especially important: One study found that trust must precede any collaborative effort at reform.
- **Skills and expertise in organizational management.** Though organizational management often involves plenty of technical challenges, research says that adaptive skills such as goal-setting and strategic thinking are also helpful.

These attributes align with PSEL standards, Wilson says, and “APs have to demonstrate these actions to be effective. Adaptive change is hiring the right people, providing a supportive work environment, and building a culture around teaching and learning. Managing people and talent is an important skill set they have to learn.”

Willing to Grow

A “growth mindset” is important to the development of adaptive leadership skills—APs have to be prepared to soak up new information to address situations appropriately. “Be ready for anything. You don’t know how your day is going to go,” Flores says. “You will have challenges. Be ready with tools and resources that will help you get good at this. At the end of the day, people are looking to you to know what direction to take in a matter of seconds.”

To smooth transitions, adaptive APs must strategize, learn, and grow collaboratively alongside their principals and staff. Last fall, Flores learned about the new virtual learning apps that would enable distance learning alongside her teachers. “It really made an impact with them,” she says. “I feel we are in a trusting relationship.”

Amanda Michael, assistant principal at Lewis Elementary School in Forney, Texas, says to anticipate, articulate, and communicate issues to prevent adaptive “casualties”—students, staff, or parents who feel shut out by a sweeping change. “You have to be able to work with anyone,” she says. “It’s OK if you don’t know; you just have to be able to figure out who to ask for help. I’ve seen people not ask for help, and things go terribly wrong.”

APs RISING

Flores found that out in advancing an initiative to improve equity. While everyone in the district was on board, introducing themes such as white privilege to teachers and union representatives required an adaptive velvet glove. “We had to start slow to go fast,” Flores says. “We started with an important concept—self-identity. It was part of the equity work we had done at the leadership level, and it aligned with our district model: Each child is an individual.”

Most adaptive challenges will be new to the AP. “To solve some of these problems, they are going to have to take on new knowledge,” Wilson notes. “Let’s say you ask me to lead a data inquiry on seventh-grade math teachers. I am going to have to learn how to do that, so I will work with someone—the principal takes time to show me or I sit with a specialist in the school who’s a good data cruncher. I get some books on it. I attend a training.”

Reacting Fast

When schools transitioned to distance and hybrid learning last year, learning and communicating new information became an essential part of leaders’ response. “Our principals had to make huge changes,” Wilson says. “They learned new skills they didn’t have before. They had never led in a 100 percent virtual environment. Now we’re asking them to go into a Zoom classroom and provide teacher feedback when these teachers have never even taught this way.”

Another example is special education: Few new APs have experience establishing IEPs, but many are asked to take on the task anyway. “Give them the opportunity to sit in as a participant first,” Wilson says. “The job of a principal should always be to grow your assistant. One day, they will be principal, and they will need to know how to do these things.”

“I don’t care what school you’re in, you are going to be solving problems and leading change,” she adds. “Some APs are very good at it—they are eager to learn. Others are a little more reticent; they are fearful of failure or worried about the repercussions. Principals have to create a climate where it is OK to fail forward.”

“When I stepped in, I was a little shy,” Flores admits. “Had it not been for my principal pushing me to take on leadership roles, I might not have come out of my shell. [In Chula Vista], you have an opportunity to step into the role as the facilitator of the group or school. Take that step, so you can begin to take on leadership roles. APs are such an important asset to any school; they allow principals to focus on change.” ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Principal magazine.



Extra! Extra!

Last month’s *APs Rising* e-newsletter featured exclusive content on self-assessment as it relates to collaboration, 10 tips for meaningful self-care in pandemic times, and questions APs should consider when thinking about moving up to the principal role. For more, watch for the next *APs Rising*, hitting your inbox in June!

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