

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent's ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority. *Alberta Education Ministerial Order #002/2020*



Leadership Quality Standard

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Alberta Education Ministerial Order #002/2020



Alberta System Education Leadership

Leading us Forward Conversation Starters: Adaptive Leadership

CASS believes that system education leaders are critical to ensure quality of leadership, teaching, and learning across Alberta schools. As individuals and in teams, you are called upon to address a vast range of issues. You are likely highly skilled in collaboration, communication, and your ability to do analysis and to problem solve. All of these skills are competencies that you refine over time but what happens when you encounter situations where you don't know what to do? Situations that you have never faced, that you have never seen, and your normal structures and strategies don't apply. This is the time for adaptive leadership.

In *Leadership on the Line* (2002), Heifetz and Linsky describe the leadership necessary for a complex and volatile world and were early leaders in defining adaptive leadership. To understand adaptive leadership, it is important to identify the difference between technical problems and adaptive problems.

Technical problems are where you have the skills, structures, and networks to address the issues at hand. This does not mean that technical challenges are straight forward. Very often these challenges require substantial tenacity, resilience, planning and perseverance. Adaptive challenges are where the knowledge, structures and currently established ways of working do not yet exist. These challenges require the establishment of new ways, new networks, new knowledge, and the ability to be vulnerable, flexible, and yet steadfast in the resolve to find a way together.

Heifetz and Linsky offer several key considerations for adaptive leadership. At its core, they believe that "the single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify...is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems."

There is little doubt in our minds that the past few years have provided a series of adaptive challenges. The research on adaptive leadership helps system leaders face such challenges in a series of ways and provides a framework for how to begin to address issues:

1. Learn to recognize the difference between adaptive and technical challenges. If the challenge is technical, existing strategies, structures and processes will apply. If the nature of the issue is adaptive, new methods, new structures, and new networks will have to be created along with new knowledge to be learned.
2. Accept the responsibility that comes with leadership and your part of the mess. Heifetz and Linsky say "leadership is a dangerous business." Leaders must understand their role and the responsibility to act.

3. Get on the balcony and the dance floor at the same time. Understanding and adjusting to adaptive challenges must include reflection in amongst the action.
4. Listen to the song beneath the words. When working with individuals, with groups, pay careful attention to not only the content of what is being said, but the meaning and, more importantly, the underlying values behind the words being used.
5. Place the work where it belongs. Placing the work where it belongs engages those who are doing the work directly in the solution to the issues. The “leader” is not the source of the solution, the solution comes from within and through collaboration.
6. Leadership comes from action not from authority. In adaptive leadership, resolution to adaptive problems is a construct of engagement, collaboration, analysis, and knowledge creation. Leadership is also not the sole domain of one charismatic, heroic individual.

Adaptive leadership begins with recognizing that one does not always have the skills, knowledge, and ability to quickly seek resolution to tasks at hand. Over the past two years, all system education leaders have had to face new challenges, new obstacles, and have had to create new knowledge and structures as we moved ahead in support of learning for all children.

The world does not appear to be getting less complex. The Adaptive Leadership framework, with its recognition of the difference between adaptive and technical challenges, provides one lens through which to view the complexity of today and to help us prepare for our ongoing uncertain future where new and unforeseen challenges will emerge.

Questions to Consider:

1. When you consider all the changes/challenges that Alberta has faced over the past three years, what new knowledge were you required to learn and what new structures did you create to address the challenges and changes?
2. What supports do you need (from CASS or others) to help prepare you for adaptive challenges?

Further Resources:

College of Alberta School Superintendents. (n.d.) *CASS resource library*.
<https://cass.ab.ca/resources/>

Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Harvard Business School Press.

Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2002, June). A survival guide for leaders. *Harvard Business Review*.
<https://hbr.org/2002/06/a-survival-guide-for-leaders>

Metcalf, M. (Host). (2016). *Ron Heifetz on Adaptive Leadership and His Journey* [Audio podcast]. International Leadership Association. <https://ilglobalnetwork.org/podcasts/ron-heifetz-on-adaptive-leadership-and-his-journey/>

Meier, J.D. (n.d) Leadership on the line book summary. *Sources of Insight*.
<https://sourcesofinsight.com/leadership-on-the-line/>

Minneapolis Foundation. Conversations with Chanda. *Leadership in a Crisis: A Conversation with Ron Heifetz*. [Audio Podcast] <https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/podcasts/conversations-with-chanda/leadership-in-a-crisis/>