Decolonizing Dialog for Leaders

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR DESCRIBING THE ADPATIVE CAPACITY OF LEADERSHIP TEAMS

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Objective

- Emerging from a pandemic in an unsteady state world, leadership teams and organizations must adapt (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).
- We must mitigate social pathologies like racism and organizational pathologies like inertia.
- Education leaders and ecosystems are faced with these "chronically obstinate" (Howard, 2023, p. 1) problems every day, defying linear either/or solutions (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2022) requiring leadership to go beyond convenient metaphors (Kowch, 2013) and practicing linear complexity.
- Addressing these wicked problems (Midgley, 2015) by decolonizing education system problematics and dialog is a good way for leading decolonized education systems to focus less on top-down power, and more on relationality and collectives or community (Wane et al., 2023), where adaptable leadership teams in complex education ecosystems can **understand their very potential to adapt, i.e., their adaptive capacity**, where they are better prepared to work in complex organizations (Kowch, 2021).

Describing the Adaptive Capacity of Leadership Teams?

- Mining data offering a new model to describe and to lead the adapting team (Fossey, 2022), we find the *proactivity feature* among the lowest adaptability features found in cases of low adaptability teams.
- **Adaptability and proactivity are considered important leadership skills** (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) **and by taking an ecosystem approach to linking these two traditionally different team features, we develop a convincing indicator of adaptive capacity.**
- By plotting adaptability against proactivity on a comparative 2D matrix, we can describe a leadership team's adaptive capacity, or ability to emerge, from a low to high continuum in four quadrants representing their adaptive capacity (see Figure 1).
- **Plotting adaptive capacity leads to understanding the very potential of a team to adapt or to change.** We found adaptive capacity is a strong indicator of a leadership teams' ability to emerge as a high-capacity leadership team.

The Leadership Team Adaptive Capacity Matrix

- We propose a framework and taxonomy for plotting and understanding the very potential of a team to adapt, i.e., it's adaptive capacity.
- The **"*Leadership Team Adaptive Capacity*"** matrix describes teams with high and low potentials to adapt (see Figure 1).
- In line with Wane et al. (2023), this matrix uses relational organization models and complexity approaches and provides a decolonizing dialog for leaders using post-structural relational organization models and systems thinking to describe a team's potential to become high-capacity leadership networks (Kowch, 2013) and **conceptualize a new way to understand a leadership team's (network) adaptive capacity.**

Theoretical Framework

- Using post structural complexity leadership-informed organization analysis techniques (Kowch, 2013; Kowch & Boonlue, 2021), we found a leadership team's adaptability, can be characterized as a mixture of features: (1) tension, (2) diversity/redundancy, (3) paradox thinking, (4) trust, (5) relational network communication, (6) *proactivity*, (7) issue attractors, and (8) innovation (Fossey & Kowch, 2023).
- We focus here on proactivity.

Proactivity

- Proactivity here is characterized from two theoretical frameworks.

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- o (1) the *competence* and *motivation* of a leader to engage in actions necessary for change (Hall & Chandler, 2005) and because proactivity is not composed of an explicit set of behaviors, but instead reflects a process of anticipating, planning, and striving to have an impact (Harri & Kirkman, 2016),
- o (2), the seven behaviors of *proactive personalities*; (1) scan for opportunities, (2) set effective goals, (3) anticipate/prevent problems, (4) do different things, or do things differently, (5) take action, (6) persevere, and (7) get results (Bateman & Crant, 1999; Bindl & Parker, 2017).
- Proactive individuals produce better performance (Crant et al., 2016) because the most effective people are those who are proactive rather than reactive (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2018).
- Proactivity is a continuum, not a dichotomy (Bindl & Parker, 2017).
  - o The proactive process involves finding new ways to add value, experiment, innovate, and "change things, in an intended direction, for the better" (Bateman & Crant, 1999, p. 2).
  - o Alternatively, the reactive process involves working to maintain, getting along, conforming, reducing experimentation, and being good custodians of the status quo.

Adaptive Capacity

- ***Adaptive capacity***, or the potential for any team to collect, is a function of the teams' **adaptability** and **proactivity** score.
- This means we can plot, on a matrix typology, low- and high-capacity team features (see Figure 1).
- **High-capacity teams are the ideal**.
- We offer a comparative matrix displaying adaptability on an abscissa vs. proactivity, in a 2D plot (see Figure 1), for two senior team member groups, indicating the adaptive capacity of the leadership team for emergence (Hazy & Ashley, 2011) – a comparative matrix to describe leadership team adaptive capacity from a low to high continuum in four quadrants.

Method

- Data for the doctoral dissertation were collected through a qualitative multiple case mixed method design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 2 executive-level senior leadership teams (Team Delta and Team Tango) working on participant-identified top priority attractors (issues) within a state-level healthcare organization serving over 1 million people, triangulated by documentation.

Data Source

- Using referential sampling, Team Delta self-identified 7 influential team participants with Team Tango identifying 5 participants in this qualitative descriptive multiple case mixed method exploratory constructivist study. In complex organizations, because issues are the attractors for people with working relationships, to understand how they viewed and created their issue networks, referential sampling was the preferred critically selected sampling method.
- Large volumes of adaptability data were gathered for all individuals on both teams via surveys, extensive document review, and semi-structured interviews.

Findings

- Both teams were found in non-reciprocated fractured relational networks. Both teams evidenced low adaptability with proactivity being among the lowest score feature found (Fossey, 2022). We found low scores for **both** adaptability and proactivity (see Table 1).

Results and Conclusions

- Because adaptive capacity is a function of the teams' proactivity and adaptability score, we can plot, on a matrix typology, low- and high-capacity team adaptive capacity (see Figure 1).

- **High-capacity (Hi-Flex/Hi-Pro) teams are the ideal**.
- We plot scores for both teams with adaptability scores on the X axis and proactivity scores on the Y axis (see Figure 1), creating the _Leadership Team Adaptive Capacity Matrix_.
  - o Adaptability scores, plotted on the x axis, show low to high scores going from low (1, left side) to high (5, right side).
  - o Proactivity scores are plotted on the y axis showing low (1) to high (5) scores going from bottom to top.
- **This allows us to link these two traditionally different team features for each participant and leadership team.**
  - o A team's adaptive capacity is shaped by individual-level factors providing some teams a higher capacity to adapt based on the characteristics of individual team members (Maynard et al., 2015).
- Both teams were shaped by their reactive approach and dedication to the status quo.
  - o **We found all the features of highly adaptable, high-capacity networks of executive level senior leaders, but their adaptive capacity (potential to adapt) was constrained.**

The Adaptive Capacity Matrix (see Figure 2)

Upper Right Quadrant

- **The upper right quadrant is the optimal zone for high-capacity teams that can change.**
- Using a metaphor of a high-performance Formula 1 racing team, a leadership team in this zone is a perfect mix of high-performance car and driving team. The car can go as fast as needed while the team adapts to the conditions of the race. This is a highly flexible/highly proactive team (we label this Hi-Flex/Hi-Pro).
- This team is a perfect complex adaptive team that is highly proactive capable of fully leveraging the features of adaptability in the way they organize to do work. This is a nimble, rock star team capable of learning their way forward with experimentation.

Upper Left Quadrant

- In the upper left quadrant, the leadership team in this zone has a high-performance car that can go as fast as needed but the driving team isn't able to manage it. The team does very little experimentation to energize emergence. This is a low flexible/highly proactive team (Low-Flex/Hi-Pro).
- This team is a jittery, brilliant team locked in a cage unable to leverage the features of adaptability. This is a frustrated team, unable to emerge through experimentation.

Lower Right Quadrant

- In the lower right quadrant, the leadership team in this zone know how to handle a high-performance car, but they don't have one. The crew tries to experiment but is unable to innovate and energize emergence. This is a highly flexible/low proactive team (Hi-Flex/Lo-Pro).
- This team is flexible as a unit, but they are reactive. The team tries to leverage experimentation, but their reactive approach constrains their leadership team adaptive capacity.

Lower Left Quadrant

- In the lower left quadrant, the leadership team in this zone is constrained by a low performance car and their inability to manage a high-performance car even if they had one. This leadership team is constrained by both their reactive approach and their dedication to the status quo. This is a low flexible/low proactive team (Lo-Flex/Lo-Pro).
- This is a reactive team locked in a cage of inability to leverage the features of both adaptability and proactivity. Innovation and change are only incremental, and the team is unable to energize

emergence to help the organization change with the environment. Experimentation is nonexistent.

Scholarly Significance

- The Complexity Leadership Framework of Leadership for Organizational Adaptability (see Figure 3) highlights the need for organizations to engage the generative tension between the need for teams to innovate and the need to produce (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).
- While Entrepreneurial Leadership and Operational Leadership create important outcomes for an organization, **Enabling Leadership is a crucial form of leadership for adaptive organizations** (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).
- Enabling Leadership requires (demands) adaptive capacity from its senior leadership teams. This means the question of knowing the potential, or **adaptive capacity** of a team becomes ever more important.
- **Understanding the very *potential* of a team to emerge (adapt) as a high-capacity leadership team gives us insight into how we can help organizations become more creative, innovative, and adaptable to meet the demands of today's increasingly complex world.**
- Taking an ecosystem approach to linking two traditionally different team features, i.e., adaptability and proactivity, can help us see and describe teams with great potential to emerge as high-capacity networks (teams). We offer a new way to see and describe adaptive capacity.
- We add to the enabling leadership literature by offering a tool for typifying collective potential.
- We go beyond convenient metaphors (Kowch, 2013) and practicing linear complexity.
- We take data from a unique doctoral study of senior executive leadership teams of a state healthcare organization serving over 1 million people during a once-in-a-hundred-year pandemic (Fossey, 2022).
- We calculate the adaptive capacity of executive level senior leadership teams to offer a means for describing leadership team adaptive capacity as a function of adaptability and proactivity.
- We offer both scholars and practitioners a way to characterize the potential of leadership teams toward emergence.
- Additionally, by using relational organization models and complexity approaches, we provide a decolonizing dialog for leaders. We use post-structural relational organization models and complexity thinking in line with Wane et al. (2023) and their decolonizing dialog suggestion for educational leaders in the coming century.

Tables and Images

Table 1
Team Delta and Team Tango Adaptability and Proactivity Scores (Likert, Low = 1, High = 5)

Team Delta	Adaptability	Proactivity
P1	1.88	3.14
P2	1.88	2.57
P3	2.13	2.71
P4	2.63	4.00
P5	1.88	2.29
P6	1.88	3.43
P7	1.88	3.86
Team Delta	**2.02**	**3.14**

Team Tango	Adaptability	Proactivity
P8	2.00	3.00
P9	2.00	2.89
P10	2.38	2.88
P11	2.63	3.25
P12	2.88	2.63
Team Tango	**2.38**	**2.93**

Cross Team	Adaptability	Proactivity
Team Delta	2.02	3.14
Team Tango	2.38	2.93

Figure 1
A Leadership and Team Adaptive Capacity Matrix

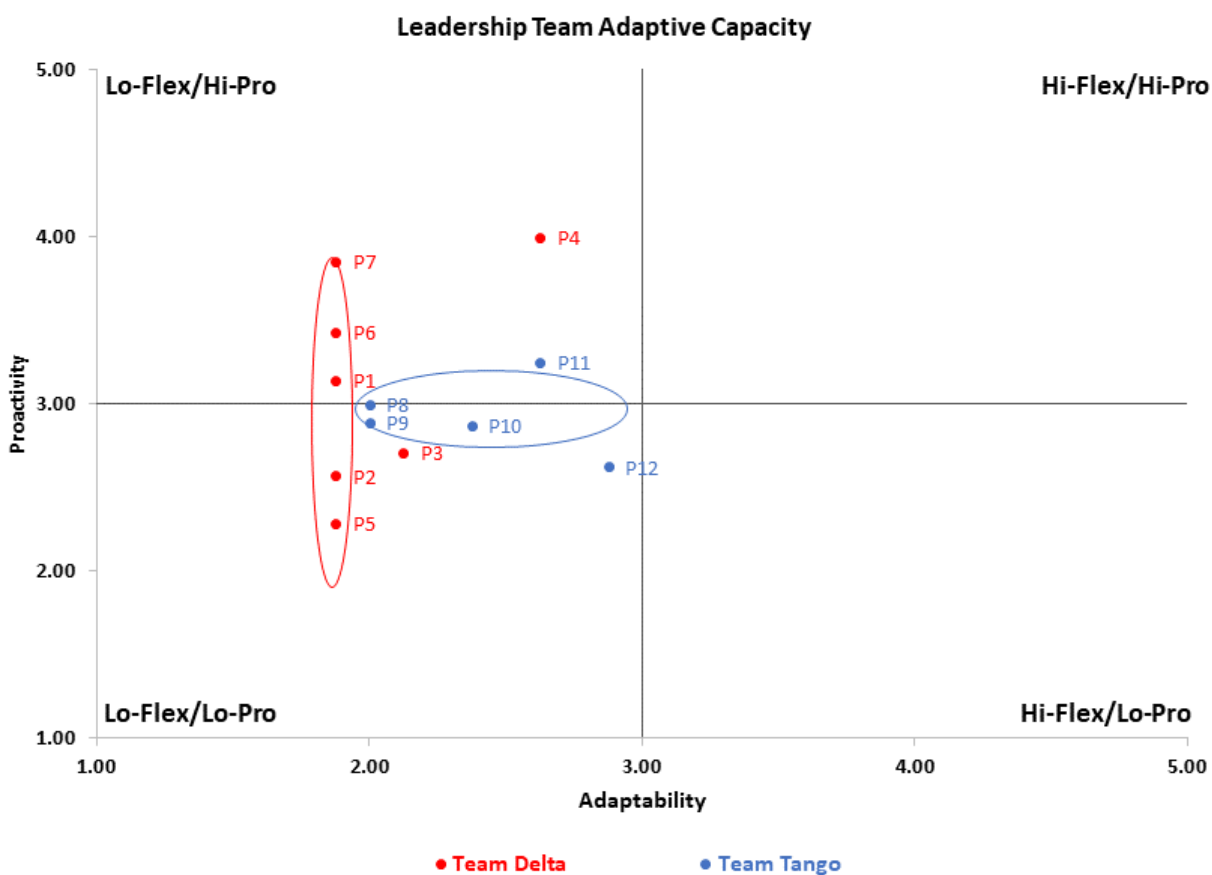Decolonizing Dialog for Leaders: Towards a Framework for Describing the Adaptive Capacity of Leadership Teams

Figure 2

The Adaptive Capacity Matrix

The Adaptive Capacity Matrix

High

Lo-Flex/Hi-Pro

- This is a low flexible/highly proactive team.
- Have a high-performance car but the team can't manage it.
- This team is a jittery, brilliant team locked in a cage unable to leverage the features of adaptability.
- This is a frustrated team, unable to emerge through experimentation.

Hi-Flex/Hi-Pro

- This is a highly flexible/highly proactive team.
- Perfect mix of high-performance car and driving team.
- This team is a perfect complex adaptive team that is highly proactive capable of fully leveraging the features of adaptability in the way they organize to do work.
- This is a nimble, rock star team capable of learning their way forward with experimentation.

Proactivity

Lo-Flex/Lo-Pro

- This is a low flexible/low proactive team
- Have a low performance car with no ability to manage a high-performance car even if they had one.
- This is a reactive team locked in a cage of inability to leverage the features of both adaptability and proactivity.
- Innovation and change are only incremental, and the team is unable to energize emergence to help the organization change with the environment.
- Experimentation is nonexistent.

Hi-Flex/Lo-Pro

- This is a highly flexible/low proactive team.
- Know how to handle a high-performance car, but they don't have one.
- The crew tries to experiment but is unable to innovate and energize emergence.
- This team is flexible as a unit, but they are reactive. The team tries to leverage experimentation, but their reactive approach constrains their leadership team adaptive capacity.

Low

Low · Adaptability · High

Figure 3

The Complexity Leadership Framework of Leadership for Organizational Adaptability.

Note. From "Leadership for organizational adaptability: A theoretical synthesis and integrative framework" by M. Uhl-Bien, and M. Arena, 2019, *The Leadership Quarterly, 29*(a), 89-104. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.12.009.

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