



Dealing with Adaptive, not technical, challenges

In life we sometimes have to deal with technical challenges. There is a problem that needs to be solved, a puzzle that needs to be cracked. If we apply current know-how, principles and techniques, we will be able to sort it. The work of technical change in human services is often carried out by statutory authorities.

Sometimes, however, when trying to change human services, we are dealing with problems to which there are not already devised, not yet applied, technical solutions. Trying to apply more of the same, faster, doesn't crack the problem we are trying to solve.

We are then dealing with problems which pose "adaptive challenges", as described by Ronald A Heifetz and Marty Linsky in their book *Leadership on the Line* (published Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

1

Heifetz and Linsky explain that adaptive challenges require experiments, new discoveries, and changes in attitudes, values and behaviours. They require people to be creative, imaginative, thoughtful, reflective, courageous, honest and bold in the face of uncertainty.

We would suggest the job of effectively and meaningfully including people who are currently devalued and potentially marginalised in our society is our greatest adaptive challenge. Creating support systems and services that both meet basic human needs and increase the likelihood of individuals playing an active part in their communities is not something that we already know how to do well. It is something that we have to learn how to do well.

Heifetz and Linsky state that leading people through a process of adaptive process requires distinct leadership qualities.

“If leading were about giving people good news, it would be easy. Unfortunately many leaders avoid the hard work. How many leaders have you heard say something like this?

‘We can’t keep going on this way, but the new direction is yet undetermined, and how effective any plan will be in enabling us to thrive – or even survive – in the new environment is also unknown.

We’re going to have to go through disagreements and conflicts as we sort through what’s precious and what’s expendable; loss as we abandon comfortable pieces of the past, old routines and even close relationships with people; feelings of incompetence as we strive to innovate and learn new ways; and doubt and uncertainty as we make inevitable wrong turns on the way.’ Clearly this is a very difficult message to deliver, however honest.”

As Heifetz and Linsky stress, people generally resist change. When they are faced with an adaptive challenge, they can’t see that the new solution will be any better than the current condition. All they see at the start of the process is potential for loss.

2

Part of the work of changing human services involves all of us in thinking carefully about what we are trying to do and why we understand it to be difficult. It requires us to gather our knowledge about what other people have tried and to think together creatively about what a good next step might be. It involves us each reassessing who we think we are in the process and the part we can each play. It also requires us to think about what we are willing to give up as well as what we hope to gain.