An autistic child must go to a residential treatment facility because his school cannot manage him—his mother, who is the only one who has the soothing touch her child responds to, is forced to give up custody. Thinking creatively, human service practitioners work with the school district to hire his mother, so she can be the one to give him the in-classroom support he needs. The boy stays in residential care for less than a month and the family moves forward together. This is the art of the possible in human services—and adaptive leaders are making it happen.

With budget cuts driving fewer resources and the economic downturn creating increased demand, human service leaders must continue to develop creative approaches to deliver programs with the resources they have. This pressure—and the media attention that covets headlines about tragedies over stories of triumph—can be overwhelming.

Yet there is optimism among human service leaders despite these challenges. Today’s environment is cultivating a new breed of adaptive leaders who favor possibility over pessimism, fearlessly go against the grain, and feel energized where others are paralyzed. As adaptive leaders break through traditional barriers to build capacity via outcome-oriented business models and family-centered approaches, they are driving profound changes.
The Adaptive Challenge Landscape

Adaptive leadership stands in stark contrast to the leadership style prevalent in human services of a decade ago that managed inputs and outputs in an institutional and bureaucratic environment where preserving the status quo was paramount. This transactional leadership model has become ineffective today. Clearly, as organizations traverse the Human Services Value Curve, there exists a need for transformational change—and transformational leadership.¹

Ron Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, has pioneered the concept of adaptive leadership.² According to Heifetz, moving an organization or system through multi-dimensional change requires numerous facets of the organization to change simultaneously. People and stakeholders must internalize the changes, shedding old practices, accepting new ones, and developing new capacities. Adaptive leaders “exercise leadership” by guiding and pacing people through both the discomfort and opportunities of transformational change.

This concept can be applied to the human services where “adaptive challenges” arise from driving change across two dimensions. The first is “technical innovation,” which involves typical changes that organizations and people experience when making incremental changes within existing structures. The second is “organizational innovation,” which is atypical change that requires new roles, capabilities, and competencies within a new paradigm. In human service organizations, those exercising adaptive leadership help staff, stakeholders, and partners learn new practice models and new competencies—and pace the innovation at a rate that an organization and its people can sustain.

Picturing the Adaptive Leader

Adaptive leaders are making inroads in all sectors, but this leadership style especially aligns well with the social sector. Human service leaders often cannot be as autonomous and authoritarian in their leadership styles as executives in the private sector and other state agencies. Many must also manage through more complex stakeholder and partner dynamics and organizational structures.

Adaptive leadership is ideally suited to drive creative approaches in such a complex environment. Adaptive leaders are well-positioned to create cultural norms, tangible plans, and expectations in which continuous improvement and transformative change will occur. Adaptive leaders set up and use systematic mechanisms for monitoring progress, impacts, and lessons learned, creating a “learning environment.”

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organization" to drive outcomes. Adaptive leaders adhere to several fundamentals:

- **Know the organization.** Traditional human service leaders view the organization as a singular entity, a monolith rich in sameness, common thinking, and common doing. Adaptive leaders know their organizations as ecosystems bound together by a common purpose, but steeped in difference. They understand that their agencies include stakeholder groups that overlap, but that each group has its own unique characteristics. As such, moving people toward a common center means understanding existing competencies and attitudes.

- **Forecast the future.** Adaptive leaders get ahead of change before it happens because they take the long view of all impacts. This approach includes a willingness to consider longer term strategies for change, despite the short political cycle, and an evolutionary rather than a short-term results orientation. In this, short-term but unsustainable and potentially traumatic strategies of recent times are replaced by adaptive leaders’ measured understanding of “what it will take.”

- **Break down barriers.** Adaptive leaders are not turf oriented. They focus less on championing an organization’s place in the larger enterprise than on championing across the enterprise. This is important because human services is broadening to a community of interest that looks beyond contractual relationships, and is more about developing a collective of non-traditional public- and private-sector partners focused on sustaining whole community well-being.

- **Be disruptive.** Adaptive leaders privilege outcomes-focused goals and principles above all else, even if they require major changes to organizational norms and sacred cows. This mindset is evident in approaches that were rare even five years ago, such as shared services, cross-jurisdiction collaboration, and social media outreach. Disruption is also as much about building new competencies as it is about effectively letting go of old ones.

- **Be agile to get to the end game.** Adaptive leaders adjust mid-course if new information is revealed or if economic, technological, or social changes occur that require a different approach. This spirit is couched in a realization that leaders must carefully calibrate an organization’s readiness for change and set the right pace accordingly.

- **Empower the organization.** Adaptive leaders focus on empowering and flattening the organization to de-emphasize hierarchy and silos. They engage staff at all organizational levels in collaborative, cross-functional diagnoses of problems and solution identification. These leaders also foster other voices of leadership from all levels of the organization because they can seed change and motivate others.

- **Sense and respond.** Adaptive leaders hold true to their understanding of other people and of themselves. They consider deeper impacts of gains and losses, and perform self-checks, realizing they may have their own barriers to work through to reach desired outcomes.

To make a lasting impact in human services, adaptive leadership must move beyond the top of the organization chart.
Never a “One Size Fits All” Approach

There are variations within the adaptive leadership style in human services. While leaders may lean more toward one, there is overlap and fluidity among them as leaders adapt to changing circumstances.

Silo Smashers

Silo smashers take the big picture view of the entire human service community of interest rather than having a myopic view of their own agency. They are open to new ideas because they are not mired in narrow context or subject matter expertise. This relational mindset is vulnerable—in a good way—to the influence and interests of others.

Moreover, silo smashers are adept at driving outcomes that require cross-program and cross-system practices and services. These leaders can demonstrate a lack of pragmatism or systematic planning and execution if they are not well rounded or if they fail to surround themselves with necessary and complementary capabilities.

Lynn Johnson, executive director of the Jefferson County, Colorado, Department of Human Services, is a model silo smasher. With a commitment to “do something different” to improve the agency’s program effectiveness and reputation, she has embarked on a transformation initiative to bring together historically siloed programs. To drive this change, Johnson is working across stakeholders—including 600 staff and 65 nonprofit and 350 faith-based groups—to drive a cultural shift.

Her approach is rooted in the philosophy that magic happens when there is no single leader and teams are allowed to focus on what they do best, making cross-program connections and taking risks along the way. It’s an outcomes-based focus made possible by cross-community engagement and whole-person, whole family solutions. As Johnson explains, “We started looking at the passion circles. We started saying, what are you passionate about? You know I have a huge agency, 13 different departments—50 different programs. We all did our passion circles, and then we linked them because we didn’t want to be doing different things. We wanted to be driving in the same direction.”

First Movers

First movers know that sustainability requires a pioneering spirit that spurs renewal and embraces risks. They understand that trust requires being one’s own worst critic, which is counterintuitive for many leaders. These leaders are data and logically driven, and confident that moving the needle is strengths-based, instead of deficits-based.

These leaders make their own blueprints and know how to adjust midstream if outcomes are not forthcoming. They are likely to analyze root causes and underlying drivers of an effective practice as part of planning and execution.

The Washington Department of Social and Health Services moved from transactional management to transformational leadership because of former Secretary Susan Dreyfus’s passionate first mover approach. Dreyfus recognized that driving outcomes in difficult times demanded “a different and dynamic organization.” She asked everyone to join her in leadership, and flattened the organization. She also set a unique precedent, finding unexpected value in ambiguity as only adaptive leaders can,

“... in bureaucracy as soon as something becomes ambiguous we want to shut it down. We want a technical solution. We want to get it under control because it’s in that space of ambiguity that bad stuff can happen from the political standpoint, and yet it’s that one space—if we allow it to happen—where creativity occurs.”
Future Drivers

Future drivers look to the horizon. They want to understand why things are the way they are and address problems at the root. These leaders are effective in driving outcomes requiring community capacity building and working from a low baseline current state. Weaknesses can arise if future drivers overanalyze and do not move quickly into execution mode.

With an eye to the future, the Hampton Virginia Department of Human Services—initiated by Walt Credle and now led by Director Wanda Rogers and Deputy Director Denise Gallop—used a legislative driver as a springboard to dramatic and lasting change. The department spearheaded the coordination and alignment of more than 30 programs over a 15-year period.

Creative and integrated service strategies ultimately led to positive outcomes. Hampton has not had one child placed in a residential treatment facility since 2007. The community has not placed a child in a group home since 2008. There has also been a greater than 85 percent reduction in foster care numbers. Part of this success comes from the future-driving leadership vision to involve family perspectives in developing solutions. Rogers explains this “common sense” approach,

“We always, always, always start with a good assessment of what this family brings to the table and what this family wants, partnerships, public and private providers, recognizing that families are the experts about their families. When we begin to do that, we were able to really lock into moving from knowing to doing…”

Making the Legacy Last

While the results that these adaptive leaders have achieved are impressive, adaptive changes are only starting to take shape in human services, and most exist in pockets.

To make a lasting impact in human services, adaptive leadership must move beyond the top of the organization chart. Sustaining its value means “giving back the work” to everyone—embedding this spirit across the organization and addressing resistance by confronting its non-constructive forms with conviction. The adaptive model involves co-creating solutions and making it possible for stakeholders and partners to process change, add competencies, and give up old ones in a protected environment.

Just as human service practitioners used a one-child-at-a-time approach to help an autistic boy stay in school, so must adaptive leadership be a one-leader-at-a-time approach where the art of the possible ultimately becomes a part of an organization’s DNA.  

1. For more information on the Human Services Value Curve, please visit www.accenture.com/PursuitOfOutcomes