

## DM 999 – “Diagnostic Problem-Solving: Root Cause Analysis (RCA)”

**The Practice of Adaptive Leadership***Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky***Introduction**

Churches and schools face herculean challenges when partnering in ministry. This paper is intended to assist church-school leaders pinpoint the adaptive challenges when they face changes, like calling a new pastor or principal.

When losing a key staff member, senior pastor or principal, many churches press forward too quickly to fill the vacancy without considering the changes in the landscape (i.e. social, political, economic, etc.). The intentional interim pastor assists church-school leaders in diagnosing transitional challenges below the surface that may impact the replacement of key leaders and possibly even the mission and vision.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky offer an explanation for why organizations often push forward without adapting to the changes around them. They assert, “Organizational systems take on a life of its own, selecting, rewarding, and absorbing members into it who then perpetuate the system.”<sup>1</sup> The goal for many church-school systems is to keep the machine and momentum going, avoid any delay. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky warn such self-reinforcing behavior can “become tenacious quickly.”<sup>2</sup> That is, the organizational system discourages behavior that disrupts the established way of thinking and talking, even during times of significant change.

Properly diagnosing the organization’s behavior helps the organization respond appropriately to new adaptive challenges. This paper is divided into two parts: (I) challenges to the diagnostic process, and (II) diagnostic components to consider first.

**I. Challenges to the Diagnostic Process**

There are several problems, or “challenges,” organizations encounter by way of self-infliction before ever facing the adaptive challenge:

**Challenge #1 - *Organizations are like living organisms and have an innate desire to survive.*** Coincidentally, this need may become one of its greatest threats.<sup>3</sup> The authors note, “In organizational and political life, people often jump to treatment without stepping back to clarify the nature of the problem itself.”<sup>4</sup>

The authors describe how in the 1990s during the technology boom AT&T’s managers had difficulty seeing the warning signs. “They were so immersed in their organization’s system they

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Mary Linsky, “The Practice of Adaptive Leadership”, (Harvard Business Press, Boston Massachusetts, 2009.) 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47.

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couldn't see the adaptive challenge facing them.”<sup>5</sup> They thought the technology boom was just a fad. The authors observe this “quick-fix” behavior within an organization “can prevent it from adapting, from learning to thrive in the new context.”<sup>6</sup> With this example the authors summarize, “Many organizations get trapped by their current ways of doing things, simply because these ways worked in the past.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, church-school ministries will often use the same problem-solving thinking and methods from the past. For example, if attendance is low, traditional wisdom will change the worship service times, add a midweek service, or preach on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment. If young families are not active, traditional wisdom suggests introducing a new style of worship, hiring a “youth” worker, or preaching and teaching a series on life-style priorities.

**Challenge #2 – Reinforcing loops add to the challenge of root cause diagnostics.** The authors caution, “Over time, the structures, culture, and defaults that make up an organizational system become deeply ingrained, self-reinforcing, and very difficult to reshape.” Every organization, like a church-school ministry, has developed reinforcing behavior. This was the adaptive behavior which allowed the church-school ministry to survive during a once challenging time. A church-school ministry may be considered a “closed system” when stuck in a reinforcing loop, unable to recognize the need for new ways of thinking and behaving to address current challenges. When it comes to problem diagnosis the authors warn “Yesterday’s adaptations are today’s routines. Yesterday’s adaptive challenges are today’s technical problems.”<sup>8</sup>

A helpful distinguishing feature is the adaptive challenges are new and the technical problems are old. A helpful diagnostic tool to locate the resistance to change is to look for the feedback patterns. Identifying feedback patterns is useful in pinpointing where the church-school ministry is getting stuck. Congregations have comfort levels and use feed-back loops to keep the life of the church steady at that level. Congregations get comfortable at their size, with their type of people, with an outlook, and with levels and types of ministry programs. “Whenever the organization begins to deviate from the desired comfort level, signals are sent to bring the system back into desired states.”<sup>9</sup> The authors suggests you know you are facing an adaptive challenge when the same problem recurs over and over again after a series of “technical fixes.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Chapter 4

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 70.

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**II. Diagnostic Components to Consider First**

Chapter 4 describes the three powerful organizational components that make an organizational system fall into a reinforcing loop: structures, culture, and defaults. The following sections provide a brief description of these components. They refer to these components as the subsystems which “shape how people respond to and try to deal with adaptive pressures.”<sup>11</sup>

**Diagnostic Component #1 - Discover structural implications.** Described as, “Structures create the playing field and rules for all activities” of the organization. For example, structures may reward staff for certain behaviors or attitudes, for completing an outreach program or earning a training certificate or advanced degree. Church-school reports, communication protocols, Calling and hiring practices are all examples of such structures.

A few questions to assess structural issues:

1. What behaviors do your church-school compensation and recognition systems encourage? Discourage? How well do the encouraged behaviors support the organization’s strategic goals?
2. What does your church-school organization chart say about which functions and roles are valued most? Valued least? Looking at who has direct access to whom, what might this imply about who is designed to work together and who in isolation?
3. How are ministry departments or teams organized in your church-school? Who reports to whom? What does this suggest about who has input into decision making?
4. Recall the last senior staff or faculty hired by your church-school. How did the process work? Who did this person formally meet inside the church-school? What does all this imply about how the new person is supposed to interact with the system?
5. What do the size, criteria for membership, election system, and acknowledgement of the board of directors tell you about how decisions are made and what and how the church-school recognizes value.

The authors recommend a quick activity:

With your ministry team, write the church-school’s mission on a whiteboard or flip chart. Draw two columns underneath. In the left column, list all the organizational structures that support the mission. In the right column, list the structures that impede the mission. Here’s an example:

**Our mission: Unify church-school ministries to reach souls with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Structures supporting the mission	Structures impeding the mission
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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 54.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring practices emphasizing recruiting church and school staff with a background in ministry teams, success at bridging between ministries, and an ability to do so in Christian love.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees who find ways to bridge church-school ministries receive little recognition.</li> <li>• Employees are not give discretion (real power and influence) to take risks and make strategic decisions.</li> </ul>
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**Diagnostic Component #2 – Identify surface cultural norms and forces.** The authors recommend identifying cultural norms and forces. Be aware of the stories, group norms, rituals, and meeting protocols that exist.

The authors observe, “Unlike structures the culture of an organization is not usually written down or formally documented, so it may be hard to describe in precise terms.”<sup>12</sup> The authors note that culture is just as influential as structure on acceptable and unacceptable attitudes and behavior. The authors note, “Too often, people taking on tough issues in organizational life do not devote enough time to this diagnosis.”<sup>13</sup>

An intentional interim pastor must be aware that the culture wants to normalize him. To discover a problem’s root cause he must resist being absorbed by the “tenacity” of the cultural environment. The church-school ministry’s culture is where many of the adaptive challenges may be uncovered. The authors suggest, “Adaptive challenges are typically grounded in the complexity of values, beliefs, and loyalties rather than technical complexity and stir up intense emotions rather than dispassionate analysis.”<sup>14</sup>

**Diagnostic Component #3 – Recognize problem-solving defaults.** Defaults are described as, “ways of looking at situations that lead people to behave in ways that are comfortable and that have generated desirable results in the past.”<sup>15</sup> Interpretative and behavior defaults are often accompanied by blind spots. The authors note, “[Defaults] can blind people to a wider array of solutions and ideas that might generate even more value.”<sup>16</sup> Defaults are constraining.

The authors recommend identifying default interpretations that your organization regularly makes (i.e. interpreting the source of the problem as the congregation’s failure to practice tithing, tuition collection procedures, etc.). What predictable behavior does it generate? What created the default? In what situations has the default worked well? In what situations has it proved less effective? What’s different about those two situations?

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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**Summary and Theological Reflection**

Church-school ministries encounter many obstacles on the way to diagnosing and solving for adaptive challenges. The more awareness ministries have of the organizational components, the less likely they will continue to pile-on additional problems, and the more likely they will successfully address their challenges.

It is difficult to balance the theological reality of God’s providential hand behind every problem with man’s duty to be wise and faithful in the use of God-given resources, reason, and strength. Church-school ministries are called to be a blessing in both the community of believers and the greater society. A helpful passage in sorting out the Christian responsibility and value of diagnostic problem solving methods is I Timothy 4:4. Regarding marriage and the eating of certain foods Paul says, “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” The wisdom that God has endowed secular institutions (insight into how organizational systems behave) is intended to bless the people of God, too, in their efforts to promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ.