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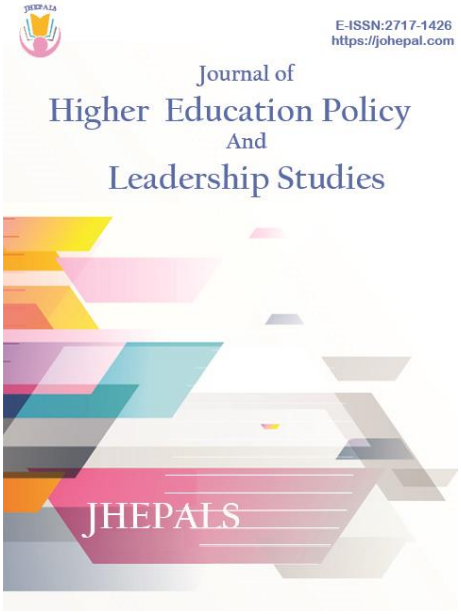


# Adaptive Leadership in Educator Preparation: A Statewide Case Study

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# Adaptive Leadership in Educator Preparation: A Statewide Case Study

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## Highlights

- Leaders are faced with adaptive challenges regularly, if not daily. Literature reports that adaptive leadership refers to a process of leading rather than an individual's capacity. This study focused on how adaptive and technical challenges in educator preparation are approached and solved throughout Louisiana's institutions of higher education.
- The problem investigated in this descriptive study is the adaptive and technical leadership approaches used to govern Louisiana's educator preparation programs.
- The descriptive study utilized Northouse's Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) to identify the leadership approaches used among educator preparation providers. One leader at each institution of higher education (IHE) offering educator preparation programs approved by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will comprise the sample.
- Frequency distributions of results for Northouse's six *a priori* constructs (Get on the Balcony, Identify the Adaptive Challenge, Regulate Distress, Maintain Disciplined Attention, Give the Work Back to the People, Protect Leadership Voices from Below) were analyzed to identify patterns in participants' adaptive leadership styles. Results can inform policy and practice recommendations, leader support needs, future research, and collaboration opportunities.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Leadership; Adaptive vs. Technical Leadership; Leadership Challenges; Leadership Development; Educator Preparation

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## Introduction

Today's leaders are required to handle myriad challenges in the workplace, both technical and adaptive in nature. Education preparation is one such setting, requiring focus on honing leadership skills and building capacity in today's unique culture and climate. As such, the concepts of adaptive and technical leadership encompass a fresh perspective that can be harnessed to navigate the educator preparation environment (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Recent events (i.e., pandemic, racial and political tensions) and contexts compound the need for leaders to synergistically use strategies within adaptive leadership to manage unprecedented change. These conditions propelled the authors to explore the skillfulness of their colleagues across educator preparation programs (EPPs) statewide.

Focused on adaptive versus technical leadership challenges in educator preparation, the authors sought to investigate the proficiency of Louisiana's public institutions of higher education (IHE) leaders in each of the attributes of adaptive leadership, investigating their approaches in addressing adaptive and technical challenges.

Through a descriptive study, an investigation was implemented to determine how the dimensions of adaptive leadership were exhibited by Louisiana EPP leaders. From the self-reflection of these leaders, via a questionnaire, leadership approaches were identified. Through this study, it is hoped that new understandings can be built that guide development and growth opportunities among EPP leaders.

## Literature Review

The concept of adaptive leadership involves engaging, challenging, and empowering employees to develop and adapt in dynamic situations (DeRue, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009). The idea is that of an interactive model of leadership, rather than a linear, hierarchical one (DeRue, 2011). In adaptive leadership, leaders move beyond technical challenges and into adaptive change. Moving beyond an institution's current understandings, policies, and procedures, adaptive leadership practice seeks to allow a measure of disequilibrium and tension. This leads to questioning and shifts to the priorities, habits, and the status quo and allows for input from multiple levels of the institution. Adaptive leadership can be seen as a means of not only managing change, but also enabling change to cause organizations to thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009). This does not mean that technical leadership is avoided, rather that both technical and adaptive strategies are allowed to work collaboratively. With this concept, the focus rests on existing strengths (rather than a deficit-thinking), overcoming change resistance with leaders adopting a flexible, vulnerable mindset (Goode et al., 2021).

The behaviors for adaptive leadership explain the progression in addressing challenges. First, the leader should *get on the balcony* to get a more global perspective on the challenge in order to gain an objective view of the context and concerns at hand. Viewing from the balcony allows time to pause, reflect, and gain perspective through the lens of core beliefs and purpose. Once time is given for this perspective, the adaptive challenge can be identified and well-defined (Khan, 2017). This second step, identifying the adaptive challenge, requires clearly recognizing and diagnosing in detail the challenge(s). This includes leaders listening to stakeholders within and without the organization, examining

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current conflicts as vital clues, and looking reflectively at one's own leadership practices (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001).

The subsequent leader behaviors are those of regulating distress and maintaining disciplined attention amongst stakeholders while addressing challenges. With the propensity of individuals to resist change, balancing the discomfort of challenged norms is a necessary component (Heifetz et al., 2009). Falling back on quick reactions that are rooted in the need to maintain appearances and be in control will not result in dynamic decision-making. Instead, encouraging persistence through the disequilibrium of challenge exemplifies the fourth behavior of maintaining disciplined attention (Giacalone, 2017).

Giving the work back to the people, the fifth behavior of adaptive leadership, is the action of having the people connected to the challenge become empowered to address it (Heifetz et al., 2009). This behavior supports the adaptive work of relinquishing authority-based leadership in lieu of collective responsibility. Being intentional regarding openness to collaboration requires inclusiveness, agility, and vulnerability on the part of the leader. This goes hand in hand with the final behavior in this model of protecting leadership voices from below. With an attitude that the leader and follower roles are a dynamic or fluid concept, there must be trust so the adaptive work can be accomplished by empowered team members (DeRue, 2011). With these six leader behaviors, Heifetz and Laurie (2001) and Heifetz et al. (2009) assert that adaptive capacity can be built within any organization.

With the attitude of allowing space and opportunity for people to face challenges, adaptive leaders are not the solvers or saviors (Northouse, 2015). Instead these leaders focus on encouraging people to deal with change, which is an inevitable eventuality. Mobilizing people within dynamic contexts are unique to this kind of leadership.

Within the adaptive framework, leadership should be taking place daily and should be considered an exercise in perpetual growth and learning. A shift from an authoritative lens to one of adaptability can feel uncomfortable but has the potential to ease the burden by sharing the leadership load across members. With these six leader behaviors, Heifetz and Laurie (2001) and Heifetz et al. (2009) assert that adaptive capacity can be built within an organization. Therefore, supporting the development of adaptive capacity and creating adaptable leaders is relevant in today's environment (Sanders, 2010). Further research and development are recommended in the work of adaptive leadership for use by leaders in the field (Northouse, 2015). Such research would be beneficial, validating the theory and promoting its use in large organizations.

## Research Methodology

### Design

This descriptive study sought to determine what dimensions of adaptive leadership (Northouse, 2015) were exhibited by educator preparation leaders in Louisiana's 20 IHE-based programs. This description is based on leaders' self-reflections of their adaptive leadership practices based on Northouse's (2015) Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ). Northouse (2015) states that the ALQ is not designed for research purposes because validity and reliability have not been established. Accordingly, this study was only descriptive in nature, and no inferential analyses were used.

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### Instrumentation

The ALQ is a 30-scaled item questionnaire that yields results on an individual's adaptive leadership style based on six dimensions: Get on the Balcony, Identify the Adaptive Challenge, Regulate Distress, Maintain Disciplined Attention, Give the Work Back to the People, and Protect Leadership Voices from Below.

### Sample

Participants were leaders in educator preparation at IHEs in Louisiana. Based on the number of IHE-based educator preparation programs in Louisiana, results represent a 60% response rate (n=12).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All IHE-based educator preparation leaders in Louisiana were solicited to participate, and data were collected via a Web-based application. Because the ALQ, according to documentation accompanying the tool, is designed for practical application and has not been tested for validity and reliability, results are only descriptive in nature. Accordingly, descriptive statistics were calculated by dimension and across dimensions.

## Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistical results from the ALQ. Means ranged from 3.13 to 4.07 on a 5-point scale. Results show that the dimensions with the highest means also had the lowest standard deviations. Regulate Distress (m=4.07) and Maintain Disciplined Action (m=3.80) had the highest means with the lowest standard deviations, SD=.88 and SD=.92, respectively. This indicates that participants believed, among all six dimensions, their adaptive leadership skills were strongest in these two categories with a majority of ratings at 3 and 4, reflected by the narrow spread of means.

Contrastingly, a comparable relationship exists between the lowest mean and lowest standard deviation. Give the Work Back to the People (m=3.13, SD=1.20) was the dimension in which participants rated themselves lowest and also the dimension with the widest spread of means. This indicates that participants believed that, among all six dimensions, the greatest area for growth is within this dimension. The standard deviation of 1.20 further indicates noticeable variation in individual ratings, which is reinforced by both a median and mode of 3.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics across Dimensions

| | Get on the Balcony | Identify the Adaptive Challenge | Regulate Distress | Maintain Disciplined Action | Give the Work Back to the People | Protect Leadership Voices from Below |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| Mean | 3.42 | 3.47 | 4.07 | 3.80 | 3.13 | 3.33 |
| Median | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Mode | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| SD | 1.12 | 1.10 | 0.88 | 0.92 | 1.20 | 1.15 |

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## Conclusion

The ALQ results serve to inform regarding the degree to which leaders view themselves on each of the six dimensions of adaptive leadership. With this sample (n=12), which represents a 60% response rate of educator preparation leadership in institutions of higher education in Louisiana, the results are shown above for each dimension. The scores indicate at what level leaders exhibit the behavior for the given dimension. As a whole, the sample was most inclined to Regulate Distress (m=4.07). This demonstrates that these leaders cultivate an environment that feels safe and calm, allowing team members to address difficult situations with confidence, and this finding is consistent with those of Heifetz et al. (2009) who found that a leader's ability to balance followers' discomfort with change while facilitating the change is important to successful implementation.

Another dimension exhibited by these leaders (m=3.80) is Maintaining Disciplined Action. Leaders who demonstrate this dimension effectively have the team members face challenging problems and prevent avoidance of these issues. Two dimensions were found to be weaker, as self-reported by the leaders themselves. According to Giacalone (2017), these leaders maintain and encourage persistence through the disequilibrium change can bring.

The dimensions with lowest scores were Giving the Work Back to the People (m=3.13) and Protecting Leadership Voices from Below (m=3.33). Giving the Work Back to the People includes empowering the team to think and work to solve their own problems (Heifetz et al., 2009), and Protecting Leadership Voices from Below involves an openness to accepting unique contributions from low-status team members (DeRue, 2011).

These results can inform leaders in educator preparation and guide conversations and development opportunities for leaders. Further, it is recommended that this work be expanded to include faculty and other stakeholders to allow for multiple perspectives in identifying strengths and needs in educator preparation leadership.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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## Human Participants

Ethical guidelines were observed in accordance with the rules and regulations of each author's institutional human subject research policies and JHEPALS's guidelines.

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