

# UNDERSTANDING TECHNICAL VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

## PURPOSES & BENEFITS

This tool helps a group to diagnose types of challenges they are facing, whether they are within the group or outside of the group but impact the group's community organizing work. Once they type of challenge is diagnosed, the group can then better work towards effective solutions based upon the challenge type from a collective understanding.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

The collaborative group can use this tool to:

- Identify and understand the differences between adaptive and technical challenges and their different solution approaches.
- Help diagnose the type of challenge(s) the collaborative group is facing, whether internal within or external to the group, and then discuss the different solution approach(es) to the challenge(s) once diagnosed.



## UNDERSTANDING TECHNICAL VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

### Technical Challenges

- A technical challenge is a challenge that can be addressed with existing expertise, protocols and operations.
- Implementing solutions to technical challenges often falls to someone with the authority to address them.

### Adaptive Challenges

- An adaptive challenge is a situation for which solutions lie outside the current way of operation.
- The challenge may be difficult to clearly identify.
- Applying existing procedures and know-how does not provide the solution needed.
  - In adaptive challenges, it is critical to get stakeholders involved in developing and implementing solutions. Authority figures and leaders no longer carry the burden of problem solving since the solutions do not lie within current expertise or operations. Adaptive work requires investment and ownership, whereas technical work does not.
  - We often fool ourselves into thinking that if we just hire the right person with the right skills, that the adaptive challenges we are trying to resolve will be easily resolved. Acknowledging that adaptive challenges do not have easy solutions and that the solutions do not come from certain expertise, but rather from a process of learning and adapting, is the key to moving the collaborative group in a positive direction.
- Adaptive challenges require us to literally adapt and evolve in terms of learning new ways of thinking, doing and being, or risk extinction. Much like in biology, groups are like organisms that must adapt with their changing landscapes and environments. They must determine what pieces of their history to carry forward, but also what pieces of their past they need to let go of in order to move forward and evolve. Adaptive work causes us to think about what we should keep doing, start doing and stop doing.
- Adaptive work involves: loss, the opportunity to develop new competencies, experimentation and risk, and time.
  - Because of these factors, it is not unusual to encounter some resistance from our partners and others who are wildly invested in what we are about. Heifetz says that resistance to change is resistance to loss. We are human and loss of what is important to us is often difficult.
  - In adaptive work, we must try solutions that are new and maybe quite different. Inherent in adaptive work is the need to become comfortable with not knowing what the next move might be.
  - There is also the issue of allowing time for adaptive solutions to have an effect; don't react too quickly to the discomfort that comes with not knowing.

## TECHNICAL & ADAPTIVE WORK

The table below applies the technical and adaptive challenges work outlined on the previous page, relating it to:

- How the challenge type is defined
- The solutions and solution implementation
- The primary locus of work responsibility

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Kind of Work	Challenge Definition	Solutions and Implementation	Primary Locus of Responsibility for the Work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and Adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and Stakeholder
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholder > Authority

Adapted from Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.