

Handout: Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges

The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. - Heifetz

Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Easy to identify2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work3. People with the problem do the work of solving it4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational Boundaries5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges6. “Solutions” require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

Adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” Harvard Business Review, January-February 1997; and Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky, Leadership on the Line, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.