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Adaptive Leadership Part One: Ethical Leadership and Historical Roots

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Abstract

Background: Adaptable leadership can be indispensable in times of change, crisis, and growth, however, much like its originating theory of ethical leadership, it can be misused while in practice and it can fail to live up to its potential. Understanding and applying the virtue of altruism helps to protect against the pitfalls of the practice that Heifetz identified. The authors argue that further connecting the practice to adjacent leadership theories while also connecting theory and practice, provide an ethical anchor while allowing the practice to operate inside of modern organizations. **Objectives:** Through this four-part series, the authors aim to enrich the understanding of adaptive leadership with this article focusing on the impact ethical leadership has had on the development of the practice. **Approach:** The authors will move readers through the ethical foundations and history of the practice (past), through modern uses including crisis leadership and shifting hierarchical structures (present), into further development and transformative leadership opportunities (future), ending in a case study to help develop leaders and their understanding of the theory (leadership as practice).

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership Theory; Ethical Leadership Theory; Global Leadership; Altruism; Organizational Development

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Series Preface

This article is part one of a four-part series exploring adaptive leadership. The first three parts of the series will explore different tenets of the practice, the rationale for why this content needs to be explored, and connections to other leadership theories. These foundational elements are dually framed in the timeline of adaptive leadership use and inside of the archetype framework established by Heifetz et al. (2009a). The final part of the series, a case study, takes the reader from the critical discourse into the role of a practitioner. Drawing on the ethics-based foundations of adaptive leadership, its current practical applications, and its potential future uses, this series encourages the reader to embrace Raelin's (2016) concept of leadership-as-practice. The content from Parts One through Three may be applied to enhance the practice of global leadership education through case study discussions.

In Part One, the deep ethical roots of adaptive leadership are connected to the modern dynamics in the study of organizational development and leadership studies. Throughout the series, the use of adaptive leadership in different fields is explored with this first portion pulling its richness from the world of philosophy and ethics. To lay the foundation for the future of the series, the historical contexts of the practice are explored to help create a deeper definition of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership is framed as a virtuous pursuit that is altruistic in nature, however, it can be wielded as a banner by individuals or organizations to make a show of their actions. Altruism without an audience is key to adhering to the strong ethical foundations of adaptive leadership and Heifetz et al. (2009a) warned of problems when there is a dissonance between purported values systems and real-life actions. By exploring the issues with, history of, and connections to related leadership theories, this article lays the groundwork for a comprehensive look at adaptive leadership including an opportunity to put lessons learned into practice. Table 1 aligns the connections and differences between each of the four parts of this adaptive leadership series.

Table 1

Series Progression, Rationale, Connected Leadership Theories, & Connected Heifetz Archetype

Series	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
Timing	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Fall 2025	Spring 2026
Tenet	Virtue, Ethics, & Altruism	Change & Growth	Transparency & Trust	Case Study
In Action	Past	Present	Future	In Practice
Call to Action	Practice benefits from further definition and historical context	Current or recent practitioner exploration	Application and development for the future	Moving from theory to practice, need for Global Leadership education
Connected Leadership Theories	Ethical Leadership, Shifts in Onus from Personal to Outreach	Kotter Dual, Post-Hierarchical, Crisis Leadership, Change Agents	DEI+, Transformative Leadership	Leadership as a Practice
Connected Heifetz Archetypes	Gap Between Exposed Values and Behaviors	Competing Commitments	Speaking the Unspeakable, Work Avoidance	Working Through Common Issues

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the concept of adaptive leadership has gained global attention as leaders face the challenge of navigating complex, rapidly changing environments and cultures (Hamelink, 2015). Ethics plays a fundamental role across fields, including education, medicine, and business. Ethical leadership is vital not only for individual leaders but also for organizations, especially for the organizational culture, and its human capital. Ethics enhances stakeholder and client relationships, can boost revenue, and helps prevent crises such as media scandals. For employees, the organization's human capital, ethical leadership serves as a motivational tool. It helps them feel valued and appreciated, thus increasing productivity and collaboration, and the want to be at work (Western Governors University, 2020). Conversely, poor ethical environments, as Johnson (2025) notes, can negatively impact employee morale.

It is challenging, if not impossible, to create a universally effective ethics system (Winkler, 2022). A critical issue to address is whether dysfunction arises from cross-functional or cross-cultural differences when a universal ethical code is not or cannot be established. Individuals with global mindsets can still adhere to both the unspoken and spoken ethical codes to guide their cross-cultural interactions, both formally and informally (Hofstede, 1998; Meyer, 2014).

Hofstede (1998) highlights those cultural differences— such as those based on national culture—affect various organizational aspects, including structure, motivation, and management practices. The relationship between cultural values and ethical challenges, influenced by globalization and cultural differences, is crucial according to Johnson (2025). Understanding these dynamics underscores the importance of cultural awareness, sensitivity, and respect. Leaders must navigate these complexities to cultivate inclusive environments so that ethics are not undermined. This can begin by fostering human connections with stakeholders and employees and is strengthened through "support-oriented" and "relationship-oriented" leadership, two characteristic traits that Ly (2020) identifies as universally valuable.

In a study on the effectiveness of global leadership competencies conducted by Lange (2015), the results indicated that inquisitiveness is a key competency underpinning adaptive thinking, which enables individuals to navigate complex situations or tasks effectively, efficiently, and ethically. Lange's study also indicated that self-identity and self-confidence are the skills that empower individuals to engage and demonstrate leadership skills in these situations. This interconnection between ethics, cultural diversity, and leadership practices, sets the stage for understanding adaptive leadership.

Defining Adaptive Leadership

As implied by its name, adaptive leadership, developed by Ronald Heifetz and his associates, marks a shift in the traditional role of leaders. Instead of solving challenges individually, leaders modify their behaviors and actions in response to environmental challenges, involving their teams in the process. This notion highlights a follower-centered approach, focusing on the behaviors of the leader and how they aid their followers in changing, adjusting, learning, and growing through the process (Northouse, 2022).

At its core, adaptive leadership involves the ability to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges and shifting circumstances, demanding a high degree of innovation and flexibility (Northouse, 2022). However, this flexibility yields an ethical dimension that must not be overlooked. A global leadership lens further complicates the ethical terrain, as leaders must reconcile local practices with universal standards of fairness, justice, and integrity (Hamelink, 2015). This involves not only an awareness of, understanding, and respecting cultural differences but also ensuring adaptive strategies do not cast shadows on the merits of the leaders and their organization or diminish any group (Johnson, 2025). As global leaders face evolving challenges and diverse contexts, they must adapt their approaches while staying aligned with ethical principles and cultural sensitivities. In the following sections, the authors will explore the intersection of adaptive leadership and ethics through a global lens, examining how leaders can cultivate ethical practices while remaining adaptable.

Necessity of Better Connecting Adaptive to Other Leadership Theories

The call to action for this section of the series lies in expanding the body of knowledge by helping to fill a gap between the amazing work of early scholars in the field of adaptive leadership with the depth of historical context. However, it is important to note that although this series portion focuses on the past and the deep historical scholarship from the world of philosophy and ethics, connections are still able to be made to our modern world. One such area of connection is dealing with outcomes when something does not go right. For example, a break can occur when organizations espouse certain ethical tenets yet, in practice, those values are not in place. This concept is addressed in the context of early ethics discussions put forth by Aristotle in the section Virtue, or “Arete.” Modern authors discuss this discord and Heifetz et al. (2009b) found it to be one of the four archetypes of failures that can afflict adaptive leadership which are briefly addressed in the Gap Between Values and Behaviors section and will be explored further in Part Two and Part Three.

Theories addressing leadership practices, much like other multidisciplinary studies, are born from earlier constructs. Adaptive leadership shares its greatest overlap with ethical leadership theory. Not only are the early scholars on the subject from the world of ethics, the problems that can plague adaptive leadership are also shared with ethical practices. This brings the conversation back to the fundamental importance of authenticity and altruism in discussions about leadership practices and motives. Like ethical leadership, adaptive leadership emphasizes the necessity of recognizing dysfunction when purpose and drive lack altruistic intent.

The foundational background of both adaptive and ethical leadership practices is essentially the same. While adaptive leadership may diverge from ethical leadership studies and develop its own practices, both are foundationally similar and share overlapping principles. Those roots are deep, but alignment is still present in recent scholarship with a cluster of authors exploring and better defining ethical leadership. This includes the work by Brown and Treviño (2006) that focused on better connecting leadership development to the identified moral source/guidance an individual or organization pulls their behaviors from. That moral guidance is at the root of when adaptive leadership can be a success as well as a failure as identified by Heifetz et al.’s (2009b) work surrounding the gap between stated values and real-life behaviors.

Disingenuous behaviors that are not driven from a source of altruism are identified as eventually causing failings in both ethical and adaptative leadership dynamics.

The work by Brown and Treviño also laid the foundation for modern interpretations of the role of transparency and justice in ethical, and thus also adaptive, leadership which will be highlighted in the next two parts of this current series. Brown and Mitchell (2010) further developed the field of ethical leadership where the authors expanded the discussion on ethical leadership to emphasize the role of followership. They advocated for pathways that enable individuals at all levels to develop their own ethical behaviors while incorporating a 360-degree approach for reviewing, modifying, and improving the ethical actions of all members within an organization, team, or unit. In that piece, Brown and Mitchell also encourage articles like this to better develop the theoretical frameworks and community of understanding that integrate ethical leadership into the world of broader leadership theories. The authors call for nuance and connection and that includes doing a deep reach back to the foundational ethical leadership elements that bore out adaptive leadership.

Ethics from the Lens of Ancient Philosophy

According to research such as Sison (2018), the moral underpinnings for ethical leadership were first set by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle. The Aristotelian approach to understanding leadership provided three personal dimensions, or qualities, of a leader (Sison, 2018). First, that one must be wise from a practical standpoint (phronesis); second, one must have virtue (arete); and finally, an ethical leader must possess good intent, as in goodwill (eunoia).

Phronesis, or "Practical Wisdom"

The first dimension, phronesis, or practical wisdom, by Aristotelian definition, includes, but goes well beyond just having the moral aptitude to know "what should be done" (Girado-Sierra et al., 2024, p. 2). Rather, this trait is developed in concert with one's own virtuous journey toward living a good life (Girado-Sierra et al., 2024). It should be noted that not all ancient philosophical definitions of phronesis align with Aristotle's.

For example, Plato, who was Aristotle's teacher, viewed phronesis as more of a subjective pursuit. This perspective, in Aristotle's view, could lead to an apathetic approach to remaining ethical (Girado-Sierra et al., 2024). Contrastingly, the Machiavellian approach to phronesis incorporates shrewd calculation in opportunisms, which can also be compromising to a leader (Girado-Sierra et al., 2024).

As argued by Levine and Boaks (2014), it is arguable that ethics and leadership are not always tightly entwined. The authors note that often in modern leadership, leaders are not necessarily always recognized for their morality. Rather, effective leaders may be those who are viewed as those who are simply effective in the intended capacity of that leader's role.

It is this disparity that may already set the stage for failures in modern leadership studies. A leader may be considered effective if they deliver on meeting the annual budget or achieving a strategic corporate goal, for example. The decision-making by leadership that led to a desired outcome may be considered moral, no matter the cost to the employees who were subject to the questionable practices of that leader willing

to sacrifice true moral integrity to achieve that objective (Ferrero et al., 2020). The complexities in today's world demand special care and attention to one's moral compass, as there is no clear right or wrong, in many cases (Davidson & Hughes, 2020), but clearly, outsourcing ethical leadership structures that are, by design, meant to serve the needs of the organization does not mitigate the moral risks to which the leaders themselves are exposed to.

The idea put forth by Levine and Boaks (2014) as a cautionary message beginning with Aristotle (Girado-Sierra et al., 2024) is an important one to consider. If phronesis, or practical wisdom, is in fact subjective to the environment, situation, or culture the leader is operating within, the acceptable variability could impact leadership in circumstances requiring adaptability. This variability is also highlighted by Throop and Mayberry (2017), who describe circumstances when organizations themselves determine a moral standard for their leaders, depending on the needs of the organization.

If this is the case, when is moral or ethical decision-making given a lower priority, or no priority at all? Engelke and Swegan (2024) note that in many modern models of ethical leadership, an ethical leader is one that "acts in a manner that is consistent with a moral structure or belief system" (p.121). At its surface, the authors point out that this structure or belief system could, in fact, be prescribed by the organization; moral structures could be compromised by several motivations, such as greed, organizational goals, or other self-serving elements.

Virtue, or "Arete"

The second dimension found in Aristotelian philosophy is virtue. As noted by Sison (2018), Aristotle not only considered virtue to be a dimension on its own, but a holistic approach to life itself that all dimensions of leadership are also deeply rooted in. Virtue of a leader is reflected in many leadership theories, although it is not common, if at all, to find a competency-based leadership model that relies solely on ethical aspects of leadership (Engelke & Swegan, 2024). Much like Aristotle's "Golden Mean," the weight of the ethical decisions that are made are on the individual leader. Johnson (2025) describes both Western philosophers such as Aristotle, as well as Eastern philosophers such as Confucius, emphasizing the importance of a virtuous character as part of ethical leadership roles within society, organizations, and family.

According to Niemiec (2019) there are common threads between Aristotle's Golden Mean and the competencies of an ethical leader that are offered in Engelke and Swegan (2024) that demonstrate the reliance that modern ethical leadership models share with Aristotelian and other ancient philosophies. For example, a comparison between Aristotle's virtues (Niemiec, 2019), and competency-based ethical leadership (Engelke & Swegan, 2024) reveals that integrity, in form, is common between the two. The virtue of moral indignation, or justice as fairness, is also present in competency-based ethical leadership as moral courage or willpower. Integrity as an ethical leadership competency is also reflected throughout Aristotle's virtues; arguably, integrity is one of the most comprehensive ways of describing what comprises much of one's ethos, or virtuous character. According to Johnson (2025), the following elements are some of what constitute an ethical leader's character: courage, wisdom/knowledge, justice, humanity, empathy, and transcendence, among other

virtues. Engelke and Swegan (2024) also expand this list to include trust, transparency, and possessing a moral mindset as hallmarks of an ethical leader's character.

Throop and Mayberry (2017) propose that there is a need for a new, evolving set of virtues, which is necessary to address the complexities of leading in today's dynamic world. The authors acknowledge the dependence that has existed on maintaining the spirit of Aristotelian virtues, while also noting that organizations are seeking ways to shift the virtue mindset to learn to instinctually operate ethically in a global setting, while utilizing a revised concept of virtue to effectively address five different forms of transition challenges: 1) adaptive, 2) collaborative, 3) systems, 4) humility, and 5) frugality. Citing the language of Throop and Mayberry offers that "Today's greatest social challenges are not so much technical problems as they are adaptive challenges where the problem definition is not clear-cut, and technical fixes are not available" (p. 222).

Notably, the declaration offered by Throop and Mayberry (2017) highlights the need to acknowledge that organizations often prescribe core competencies unique to their organizational culture. The authors also introduce the idea that if an organization's prescribed 'virtues' do not support flourishing within that culture, they become a hindrance to excellence in leadership and innovation.

The implications for this idea are significant, as it allows for a glimpse into the fragile nature of virtue when it comes to resolving complex ethical dilemmas where there may be competing organizational priorities. As previously illustrated by Girado-Sierra et al. (2024), there is a pronounced risk in an organization's efforts to produce virtuous tenets for itself, where the tendency could be to factor in motivation, such as financial benefit, to moderate the influence of purely acting in accordance with Aristotelian virtues. Despite this, there are calls for an ethical pivot to better accommodate the ethical needs and demands of the extremely complex global environment in which leaders are engaging within (Gohl, 2024).

Eunoia, or "Goodwill"

The third dimension, described by Aristotle, is eunoia, or goodwill. According to Aristotle's teachings, regarding a leader's character, goodwill refers to the intention or motivation behind an act, which is what makes the act good. Based on this premise, even an act that results in a positive outcome is not considered ethical if the intention is not pure. According to philosopher Emmanuel Kant, goodwill is an act of moral duty, regardless of the outcome (Okpo, 2023). When intention matters, one does not have to delve deeply into goodwill to understand that it can easily be corruptible when subjected to the influence of elements such as organizational goals, as well as considering the extreme complexities of leading ethically on a global stage that mandates adaptability, flexibility, and compromise.

The Enduring Role of Philosophy in Modern Leadership

The "why" regarding reliance on ancient philosophies in modern leadership theories is an unquestionable and critically important role in shaping today's leadership studies. As eloquently stated in the following quote found in Sułkowski et al. (2024):

> As we reflect upon the treasure trove of knowledge that history offers, we must also turn our gaze towards the horizon of the future, brimming with boundless possibilities. In an era marked by the digital revolution, the rise of artificial intelligence, and an intricate web of global interconnectedness, comprehending leadership through a modern prism becomes paramount. This necessitates a harmonious blend of age-old philosophical wisdom with the challenges and paradigms of today's world. (p. 3)

Sulkowski et al. (2024) offer the perspective that contrasts what can often be found in modern leadership doctrine; namely, that leadership is not a modern construct "conceived in modern boardrooms or recent leadership retreats" (p. 3). Rather, the authors characterize leadership as "deeply embedded in the annals of human history…bedrock upon which civilizations are built, and empires established…a force guiding, influencing and shaping human society" (p. 3). The argument addresses that leadership's consistent enduring presence should not be mistaken for being static; rather, leadership is dynamic in nature, always changing and morphing to conform to the needs of the present, its paradigm shifts in step with the changes within the society. The authors unite the historical characterization of leadership to its contemporary state by offering that:

> The once singular focus on might and power slowly gave way to more nuanced forms. These forms value wisdom, ethics, and vision. Leaders were no longer just warriors but thinkers, visionaries, and philosophers. This evolution was not serendipitous but intricately linked to the broader tapestry of human thought and philosophy. The symbiotic relationship between philosophy and leadership is profound. While leadership involves making decisions, guiding people, and inspiring visions, its foundations often rest on deeper philosophical principles. Philosophical moorings influence the 'why' behind the leadership actions. Why should one lead with integrity? Why is a particular vision pursued over another? These questions find inspiration in the philosophical doctrines of the times. (p. 3)

Even with disparities between the different moral philosophies, such as between utilitarianism being focused on the greatest good, or most favorable outcome, versus Aristotelian ethics, which is heavily weighted on the moral process itself as being most important to an ethical outcome, there is one common denominator, that being the importance of the human in the equation. Given this, when beginning to explore the "how" related to ethical modern leadership, it becomes apparent that it is arguably more critical now than ever to base leadership studies on ancient moral teachings.

The complexity of the world, and the introduction of quickly evolving technologies that can produce autonomous outcomes previously within the realm of human debate, requires a solid foundation for operationalization. The threat of losing the human element in ethical decision-making can be very real, if not tethered to solid philosophical ideologies. When accepting that the modern changing leadership landscape demands flexibility and adaptability, the accompanying urge to create systems that relieve the human of the responsibility for the ethical outcomes must still be avoided. When outsourcing the creation of policies that define what is ethical for the organization, and for its leadership, it is important not to discard the philosophical

elements that provide a safety barrier for leadership. In the next section of this article, the evolution of leadership thought, and the "how" for addressing today's challenges, will be explored further.

The Evolution to Modern Ethical Leadership

Ronald Heifetz, a leading authority in leadership studies, states that today's challenges for leaders are not technical problems, rather they are adaptive in nature, demanding a different leadership mindset (Throop & Mayberry, 2017). Throop and Mayberry offer the following in response to Heifetz' statement:

> For businesses to flourish, leaders will need to behave in new ways consistent with a finite, complex, uncertain, changing, collaborative, connected and caring world. This will require a shift in dominant virtues that characterize most corporate cultures today. We use the term "virtues" quite broadly to describe dispositions to think, feel and act in skillful ways that promote the aims of a practice. (p.222)

There are two notable points in the above comments from Throop and Mayberry. First, there is a suggestive phrase, namely 'this would require a shift in dominant virtues' that can be understood to refer to adaptability, given the existence of non or less dominate virtues that a leader would rely less on, if not rely on at all. Second, when referring to the term 'practice' as it relates to virtue, there is still a clear connection that exists to Aristotelian philosophical principles. Aristotle's core belief is that to be truly virtuous, one must constantly practice virtuous behavior. Throop and Mayberry do give a nod to Aristotelian virtue ethics when explaining that companies often will identify core competencies or corporate "virtues" that they desire their employees to have. Given this to be truth, is it possible that an organization can manufacture a set of core "virtues" itself that serves its organizational needs, gives its leaders the ability to adapt under a moral code, yet at the same time does not compromise the practice of ethical behavior? The authors do provide a partial answer to this, positing that under the model of effective performance, competencies are complex patterns of "thought, feeling, and motivation imbedded in enduring character traits" (p.222) and not just skills, then the application of 'virtues' if in alignment with Aristotelian philosophical ideology, can result in the flourishing of an organization and its employees, while if they are not aligned, "even the best leaders and innovative strategies are often thwarted by virtues…" (p.223).

There is an enduring influence of the human ethos in ethics and morality, whether in individual behavior or operationalized within an organizational setting. Throop and Mayberry's position is that true virtue nurtures and allows for flourishing, while also preventing unethical practices and strategies from occurring. If this is accurate, then it becomes appropriate to believe that "ethos" in the Aristotelian philosophical sense, is still very much a part of modern leadership practices. According to Wagner (2023) it is certainly plausible that the practical application of philosophical moral concepts as models can be useful, in general terms, for complex ethical decision-making. However, is it possible for an organization to manufacture 'virtuous' tenets that allow for it to flourish in a business sense of the term, yet still allow for the human beings making decisions for it to be able to act in accordance with their ethos? Especially in a fast changing, complex globalized 21st century environment that demands, among other elements, adaptability, there must be an enduring reliance of dominate virtues in the

face of complex, emerging ethical issues (Banks et al., 2021). This is a critical point, given the existence of many potentially conflicting interests that can influence and challenge leaders in a competitive business world.

Davidson and Hughes (2020) explored the dimensions of moral leadership through an educational lens, and how the use of the Defining Issues Test (DIT), the foundation of which is constructed from Kohlberg's moral stage theory, highlight differences in moral reasoning stemming from measurement of specific educational experiences. The DIT is utilized across many disciplines, and the results of which demonstrate that there is a danger in a reliance on the existence of a common moral baseline for leaders. It becomes apparent that due to the complexity of today's ethical climate there is a need for modern ethical frameworks to complement a leader's ethos and allow for ethical decision making in uncertain and often volatile, conflicting ethical considerations.

Discussion

The Gap Between Values and Behaviours

The previous section highlighted that moral gaps could form when attempting to overlay a traditional moral philosophy over a complex ethical dilemma that can exist in our modern world. Wagner (2023) points out that traditional moral philosophies commonly relied on for a moral 'code' are not ideal for today's complicated world, not because they do not provide sound moral reasoning, but because they are ideologies and not ethical models. Moral 'slips' that would be allowed by one ideology, would not be allowed in another. For example, virtue ethics recognizes the best outcome for resolving a moral dilemma may be one that considers both extremes and chooses the path of lesser evils (i.e. The Golden Mean), while Utilitarianism would consider the best outcome as one that achieves the most benefit, regardless of the morality of the steps taken to obtain an outcome. Taken at face value, these two moral ideologies would appear to contradict each other, making them unable to be relied upon for ethical decision-making.

Importance of Identifying Core Essentials of Adaptive Leadership

In conducting research for the article, the authors noted that adaptive leadership found in various publications was either utilized as a descriptive term, or conversely, within the context of a theory, depending on the subject matter of the literature. To minimize any confusion, the authors have elected to provide a comprehensive description of adaptive leadership as a theory, paired with adaptive-innovative theory. As cited in Northouse (2022) "AL [adaptive leadership] endures significant criticism surrounding its lack of theoretical underpinnings, empirical research, clear conceptualizations, and evidence-based support for the framework's basic tenets" (p.24). Pairing adaptive leadership theory with adaptive-innovation theory resolves at least some of this criticism and provides an understanding of adaptive leadership in true practice.

Nöthel et al. (2023) state that adaptive leadership theory is one that is set apart from other leadership theories such as transformational, authentic, and servant leadership because it best captures the complexities of the leader-follower dynamics. While theories such as the aforementioned focus on the leader's influence through elements such as inspiration and motivation; adaptive leadership theory relies on leader and follower roles to leverage social learning to rapidly adapt to a rapidly changing environment that an organization may find itself in (Seibel et al., 2023). As such,

adaptive leadership theory is most deeply rooted in complexity, transformational, and situational leadership theories (Cohocar, 2009; Seibel et al., 2023). Adaptive leadership theory's relationship with transformational leadership theory will be further discussed in Part Three of this series.

Rather than adhere to strict norms of processes, however, Heifetz et al. (2009a) describe adaptive leadership theory as one that is based on leadership adapting the organization's 'DNA.' The term in this context refers to the organization's values, processes and purpose, in order to thrive in uncertain environments. Commonly, adaptive leadership as a theory, when paired with adaptive-innovation theory provides a context for the individual problem-solving styles, either adaptive, by relying on structured processes, or innovative, through adept creative problem solving that often occurs independent of structured processes (Seibel et al., 2023). According to Seibel et al., individual leaders who are adaptive tend to be viewed as more traditional and systematic, preferring an existing structure within which to work within, while innovative individuals tend to be viewed as more freethinking, untethered to structure, and willing to break rules. This topic will be covered more in Part Two as it relates to working around traditional hierarchical structures and in adaptive teams such as Kotter's (2014) well-known dual operating system.

Seibel et al. (2023) point out that, between adaptive or innovative, organizational culture may tend to favor one style of problem-solving over the other. This begs the question, if, given adaptive-innovative leadership theory states that these two problem-solving styles are "independent of intelligence, process, motive, attitude, situation, culture, ethnicity, and learned skills" (p. 24) and are not malleable character traits of individual leaders, can adaptive-innovative leadership theory have an inherent ethical blind spot (Seibel et al., 2023)? More simply put, are innovative leaders more prone to unethical decision-making than adaptive leaders? Conversely, can adaptive leaders be so rigid in problem solving that they too are subject to ethical shortfalls? Neither scenario is ideal, and the discussion is reminiscent of Aristotle's Golden Mean with a virtuous action avoiding both the vice of deficiency and vice of extreme. The pros and cons of adaptive leadership theory will be explored at length beginning in the next of the publication in this series.

Moving from Past to Present

The world of adaptive leadership is broad due in part to its long history of development from the world of ethics. This series aims to build upon the roots of ethical leadership to support the expansion of adaptive leadership knowledge to also incorporate modern leadership-as-practice discourse. As the series advances, adaptive leadership's relationship with other theories and practical uses will continue to be explored. For this part, the authors conclude by providing Figure 1, a visual representation of the explorations that will relate back to the foundational roots of altruistic care, the pitfalls to be mindful of, and the dynamic nature of the practice.

Figure 1
Development of Modern Adaptive Leadership Theory

Note. Authors' illustration (2025).

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