Leadership for Universal Health Coverage

A High-Level Program to Help Leaders Deliver Results

A collaborative Program by GIZ-WB-P4H

Nairobi, Kenya

November 10-14, 2014

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Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges

"The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.

While technical problems may be very difficult and critically important, they have a known solution that can be implemented with current know-how. They can be resolved through application of expertise and through organization's current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things."

Technical Problems

The necessary knowledge about them already has been digested and put in the form of a legitimized set of known organizational procedures guiding **what to do** and role authorizations guiding **who** should do it.

Adaptive Challenges

No adequate response has yet been developed. They require learning to overcome the conflicts in values, or reduce the gap between the espoused values and reality.

They require changes in values, attitudes or habits of behavior.

Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges

Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
1. Easy to identify	1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions	2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work. Implies learning.
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert	3. People with the problem do the work of solving it
4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries	4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions	5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges
6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly – even by edict	6. "Solutions" require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

Source: Adapted from Groupsmith

Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges

	What's the Work?	*Who* does the work?
Technical	Apply current know-how	Authorities
Adaptive	Learn new ways	The people with the problem

(Heifetz and Linsky, 2002)

Identify the adaptive challenge

- Is it a technical or adaptive problem?
- Readjustments on basic routines or new ways to proceed?
- What are the values, beliefs or attitudes that need to change?
- What sacrifices must be made and by whom?

System thinking

- Interdependency
- causality

System Thinking in Leadership Context

Traditional Thinking

- Fragment problems into smaller understandable parts
- Tends to react to events
- Quick fixes for problems

- Rigid approaches
- Linear thinking
- Individualistic

Systems Thinking

- Holistic approach to addressing problems
- Looks for underlying causes
- Recognizes the need for sustainable solutions
- Adaptable approaches
- Dynamic thinking
- Listening the whole and acting collectively