

# Section 5



## ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

### Key Points

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- 1 What Is Adaptive Leadership?
- 2 Characteristics of Adaptive Leaders
- 3 Building Adaptive Leaders

Adaptive leaders learn to live with unpredictability. They spend less time fretting about the inability to establish a routine or control the future and focus more on exploiting opportunities.

Dr. Leonard Wong

From L. Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

## Introduction

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*Adaptive leadership* is an approach to command based on the situation and factors such as mission, Soldier capabilities, geography, weaponry, and more. This “reality on the ground” approach to leadership can give you as an Army leader both a strategic and a tactical edge in the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE).

But adaptive leadership is more than just reacting to the immediate situation. Adaptive leaders anticipate and employ a broad-based style of command. As an adaptive leader, you take risks and make decisions, learn from events, and adjust plans accordingly. You are able to switch from one critical task to another without hesitation. You focus on your primary purpose and handle multiple tasks within missions.

You will learn more about the theory of adaptive leadership in this section, but first, consider the story of how one PFC reservist earned a decoration for his quick thinking, initiative, and adaptive leadership during an ambush in Iraq.

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### First Reserve Soldier Receives Silver Star for Iraq

As the 724th Transportation Company was welcomed home from Iraq Feb. 25, [2005,] the first Army Reserve Soldier . . . received a Silver Star [in the Global War on Terrorism].

SPC Jeremy Church of the 724th was presented the third-highest medal for valor by Army Reserve Chief LTG James R. Helmly during a unit homecoming ceremony at Fort McCoy, WI.



*SPC Jeremy Church (right)*

Church earned the medal when his convoy was attacked April 9 by more than 150 insurgents in an ambush. . . .

Church was the convoy commander's driver in the lead vehicle. His actions are [credited] with saving the lives of at least five Soldiers and four civilians.

After dodging explosions, obstacles and small arms fire in the ambush "kill zone" while firing his M-16 out the window, Church led vehicles from his convoy into a secure perimeter set up by a company from 2-12 Cav. He then carried his wounded platoon leader out of the vehicle to a casualty collection point for treatment.

Then Church led the cavalry troopers back into the kill zone for a recovery mission.

"[Specialist (then-PFC)] Church identified the assistant commander's vehicle amidst heavy black smoke and flaming wreckage of burning fuel tankers to find two more wounded Soldiers and four civilian truck drivers," his citation reads, adding that he carried wounded over to a recovery vehicle while exposing himself to continuous enemy fire.

When . . . the wounded were loaded in the truck, there was no room and Church volunteered to remain behind. He climbed into a disabled Humvee for cover and continued firing at insurgents until the recovery team returned. He then loaded up several more wounded before evacuating.

*Armed Forces Press Service*

## What Is Adaptive Leadership?

Leonard Wong, in his monograph entitled *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*, cites the work of Warren Bennis, a prominent leadership researcher, who defines **adaptive leadership** this way:

. . . [T]he critical quality of a leader that determines how that leader will fare in a crucible experience is *adaptive capacity*. Adaptive capacity allows leaders to respond quickly and intelligently to constant change. It is the ability to identify and seize opportunities. It allows leaders to act and then evaluate results instead of attempting to collect and analyze all the data before acting.

Bennis argues that effective leaders usually have experienced one *crucible experience*. He defines a crucible experience as "both an opportunity and a test. It is a defining moment that unleashes abilities, forces crucial choices, and sharpens focus. It teaches a person who he or she is."

Adaptive leaders may struggle in the defining experiences they encounter, but are able to successfully work through them and succeed. They learn new lessons, acquire new skills, and gather new information that enable them to achieve their goals. Furthermore, adaptive leaders go through a continual process of challenge, adaptation, and learning, which readies them for the next challenge.

### adaptive leadership

*leadership that engages the environment based on situational factors such as mission, Soldier capabilities, geography, weaponry, and more*



*Soldiers conducting night operations*

## Critical Thinking

How did SPC Church demonstrate adaptive leadership skills? What environmental factors did he have to consider before deciding to act?

## Characteristics of Adaptive Leaders

According to Wong and others who study leadership theory and traits, to be an adaptive leader you first need to be mentally flexible and agile. You must cultivate strong conceptual skills along with speed and precision in your decision making. You must become technically and tactically proficient and model this behavior for your subordinates. Adaptive leaders exhibit **poise** under pressure and are able to operate autonomously under the general framework of the superior officer's intent. As an adaptive leader, you employ a broad-based leadership style, considering diverse and conflicting views in your situational assessments.

### poise

*a state of balance  
or stability*



*Successful communication with Iraqi residents is a key leadership function.*

## Critical Thinking

Reflect briefly on the Army's emphasis on leadership attributes and core leader competencies in the Be, Know, Do philosophy. Do you see any resemblance between adaptive leadership characteristics and the Army's Leadership Requirements Model?

## Building Adaptive Leaders

Unfortunately, you can't take a short interactive tutorial and receive a certificate that guarantees you are "hereby adaptive." As the characteristics of an adaptive leader suggest, training and education are the foundation of this leadership style. Building the technical and critical-thinking skills that allow you to recognize situations, then act, adapt, and change takes time and effort.

In other words, you can learn to be an adaptive leader. When you embrace lifetime learning, you prepare the soil for adaptive leadership to grow. When you entrust subordinates with responsibility and authority, empower them to take prudent risks, accept mistakes as opportunities to learn, and help others to learn to cope with constant change, you show that you are becoming an adaptive leader and that you are interested in developing your subordinates into adaptive leaders.

## Preparing Soldiers to Become Adaptive Leaders

Wong, who served more than 20 years as an Army officer, suggests that the important “crucible experience” of the Iraq war is helping form a new cadre of adaptive leaders, and that the Army will benefit from such experience. He writes that junior Army officers in Iraq are developing undeniable adaptive leadership skills. His interviews with many junior officers indicate that they have developed and demonstrated an impressive adaptive capacity. They quickly learned lessons from each situation they encountered. They developed new skills as needed and moved on to new levels of achievement.

According to Wong, adaptive leaders competently deal with three aspects of the COE: **ambiguity**, complexity, and change.

### Ambiguity

You have already studied the leadership trait that enables you to be “intent-centric” versus “plan-centric.” Officers in the COE deal every day with the unpredictability of the asymmetrical environment. While planning is critical to your mission, you should not develop overly detailed plans. You need to look at your commander’s strategic point of view, consider the commander’s intent, and build a workable plan for your team.

### Complexity

As an adaptive leader, you will not just go over and “fight a war.” One minute you may lead a raid and, as soon as that mission is complete, you might start rebuilding a water treatment plant that serves a network of villages. Adaptive leaders switch gears quickly to deal with the complexity of the COE and asymmetrical warfare.

### ambiguity

*the state in which something can be understood in two or more possible ways; something that is not clearly defined*





You have to be flexible to what comes down. You could be doing a presence patrol . . . saying “Hi” to a kid and your vehicle is there a few hundred yards away getting mortared. Now you are talking to this little kid, and you hear on the radio that the rest of your platoon is over there getting mortared, and they want you to maneuver to try to catch the guy who just mortared. So you have to switch from one thing to another.

A US Army lieutenant serving in Iraq

From L. Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

### Change

This is the only constant. As an adaptive leader, you must anticipate and master transitions. Assignments can be simultaneous, distributed, and continuous—and each assignment is constantly changing. You must manage and adapt to this aspect of operations while leading and motivating your team.

### Becoming an Adaptive Leader

There’s no adaptive leadership prescription you can take. Effective, adaptive leaders do distinguish themselves, however, by focusing on critical issues, which include the following.

#### Knowledge of Self and Soldiers

This includes your understanding of your strengths and weaknesses, experience, and knowledge. You must be in tune with your Soldiers’ and your unit’s skills and abilities, motivation, and attitudes. In other words, do you know what you and your Soldiers are capable of?

#### Mission and Intent

You must understand your mission at hand and the intent of your superior officer. A good framework for understanding this aspect of adaptive capacity comes from restating the task, purpose, and end state the commander has proposed. As an adaptive leader, however, you can think through the intent both strategically and operationally and visualize results.

#### Environment

As an adaptive leader, you are a student of the environment around you. You must know and understand the situation you and your unit face. Many external factors affect how a commander chooses to lead, including your unit’s readiness; enemy activity, capabilities, and tactics; civilian population factors; weather and terrain; timing; and political implications.

#### Education and Experience

What you know about tactics, techniques, the enemy, your people, the environment, history, and so forth informs your decision making. What you have experienced forms a prism through which you can visualize and process information about your mission and intent, the operational environment, and your possible courses of action. This foundation builds your confidence to face any situation.



*Military Police react to incoming small-arms fire.*

We don't know whether we are going to get rocks thrown at us, or mortars, or a handshake, or a cup of tea. It really doesn't depend on what neighborhood we are going to. It doesn't matter what we are going to do. The level of hostility is something that we cannot predict.

A US Army lieutenant in Iraq

From L. Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

## Critical Thinking

What acronym have you learned that includes many of the factors cited under "Environment"?





The things that I have experienced [in Iraq], beyond the Soldier environment, just going around and really experiencing the Middle East, you know, another part of the world and just being in a new environment, interacting with the interpreters, I think that is where the real experience comes in.

A US Army officer in Iraq

From L. Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

### Leadership Style or Decision

Choose the style of leadership or course of action most appropriate given all the factors of the situation and the environment, your mission and your commander's intent, and your knowledge of previous results in similar situations. This affects your Soldiers' motivation and commitment to complete their mission.

### Communicating and Motivating

An essential aspect of any leadership model is your ability to communicate and motivate. You cannot implement decisions or effectively lead without the ability to communicate your decisions and motivate your Soldiers to execute your orders. As an adaptive leader, you behave much like a transformational leader, because your focus is on the purpose and vision of what your Soldiers need to accomplish. You must work hard to communicate effectively so that your Soldiers understand the situation from their own point of view.

### Results and Consequences

Your education and experience play a significant role in your becoming an effective adaptive leader. Feedback through results and consequences not only influences your future missions and your commander's intent; it continues to build your depth and breadth of experience and knowledge. This experiential learning further strengthens your ability to select appropriate leadership styles and make effective decisions.

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### A 2LT Describes Serving in Iraq

Our equation is filled with variables that constantly change—the weather, people, different dynamics that we have no control over. If we tried to control them, we would be breaking the rules. It is important that we understand our constraints, understand our limitations, understand the variables that are out there, and then learn how to deal with it. There are certain things that you are not going to be able to control—the emotions your Soldiers run into, the problems your Soldiers have at home, the complex situation between the Shiites and Sunnis, the cultural barrier, the standoff between Western culture, Christian culture, and Muslim culture. There are certain things that we won't understand because it is a totally different environment. . . . To prepare . . . officer[s] for this, to prepare anyone for this, you need to just constantly test [them], put [them] in very challenging

situations, and allow them to sort of think and act under pressure and stress. That is essentially what you do here. You are given a task and expected to perform. . . . You see the true colors of people because you see a lot of these guys get bent out of shape. You get tired, you get frustrated, you get mad, you start screaming. You are, like, “This is all [messed] up.” You understand their frustration. You got to pull yourself back. You got to remain calm. You got to come with, “Okay these are the changes, and this is how we are going to change our plan.” You got to be able to think on your feet. You got to be flexible. I can’t stress that enough. That has been our success here (Wong, 2004).

A US Army second lieutenant in Iraq

The goal of COE implementation in Army training is to produce a force of leaders, Soldiers, and units capable of rapidly adapting and optimizing capabilities to achieve mission objectives—to fight and win—in a complex and evolving environment across the spectrum of conflict. COE implementation is less about equipping and organizing our training venues to reflect the COE and more about seeing warfare through a different lens.

*From US Army, TRADOC, *The Contemporary Operating Environment**

## Critical Thinking

How can a platoon leader foster an environment in the platoon that is conducive to developing adaptive leaders?

## Critical Thinking

Do the Army troop leading procedures support adaptive leadership?



# CONCLUSION

The “reality on the ground” for a combat leader is a complex mix of information, events, and circumstances that can guide you in making command decisions. What you know about tactics, techniques, your enemy, your Soldiers, recent events, the environment, geography, and terrain—and more—is the frame of reference from which you plan and act.

Since an essential aspect of any leadership model is the ability to communicate with and motivate your Soldiers, you should be resourceful and flexible in appropriately adapting your leadership style to a given situation. Thoroughly understanding your mission and your commander’s intent enables you to practice this adaptive leadership. This resourceful approach to command builds your team’s trust, motivation, and commitment to perform.

Learning by observing results adds to your command repertoire and continues to build the depth and breadth of experience and knowledge you and your Soldiers possess. This experiential learning in turn further strengthens your ability to select appropriate leadership styles and make effective decisions in future situations.

## Key Words

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**adaptive leadership**

**poise**

**ambiguity**

## Learning Assessment

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1. What are some of the key characteristics of an adaptive leader?
2. What are three aspects of the COE that adaptive leaders must effectively deal with?
3. Describe the asymmetrical environment the Army faces under a wartime posture.
4. Explain why the adaptive leadership style is well suited to the challenges of the asymmetrical environment of the COE.



**Can you find the opportunity within the chaos? Because you can't organize the chaos of the battlefield.**

GEN Peter J. Schoomaker

From L. Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*

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