

Adaptive Leadership Spotlight: Practicing the Principles

Addressing Public Health Challenges through Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps leaders navigate complex change, foster innovation, and enhance resilience in uncertain environments. Adaptive challenges are characterized by being unclear, lacking a known solution, and requiring shifts in values, roles, and approaches in order to make progress. Adaptive leadership tools help leaders diagnose challenges, step back for a holistic view, invite multiple perspectives, and mobilize those involved to experiment with action.

Public health leaders highlighted how they apply core adaptive approaches and the impact on their leadership:

Getting on the Balcony

Intentionally pausing and stepping back from the action to gain a holistic view of adaptive challenges.

“It's important to take a step back onto the balcony to see the full extent of the problem [and] to view all the components of the adaptive challenge and break them down into manageable technical tasks.” – **Morgan K.**

“When I can feel myself becoming defensive when important feedback is raised, I revisit the Observation, Interpretation, Intervention tool to slow down and look more objectively at a challenge...[and] explore how others might interpret the same objective information.” – **Katrina H.**

“If I feel lost or confused, if I feel pressured to make a decision, it's cue now to take a moment and ask myself why I feel that way.” – **Sam J.**

Exploring Values, Loyalties, and Losses

Looking closely at stakeholders to build empathy and understand what people fear giving up or protecting.

“Overcoming the feeling of 'zero sum game' and seeing where others' values or losses are helps me better understand the issue at hand. It's not always the change, but the fear of loss.” – **Sam J.**

“The stakeholder analysis gives a clearer understanding of who is involved. You don't always realize that you are a major stakeholder and this can impact the ability to pull away from the challenge.” – **Morgan K.**



Leveraging Your Authority & Exercising Leadership

Using the power of your role and leadership actions to mobilize teams to address their shared challenge.

“Moving from authority to leadership in an organization is itself an adaptive challenge. It is helpful to consider people's values, loyalties, and losses throughout the process.” – **Katrina H.**

“I hope they feel empowered and I hope they see and feel that their opinion and skills matter to the agency, and really, our mission.” – **Sam J.**

Taking Incremental Action

Implementing experimental actions and adjusting your approach to achieve desired results.

“An incremental approach calls for people to be more comfortable with ambiguity, which can sometimes be challenging to navigate. I've aimed to address this by acknowledging it when it comes up.” – **Katrina H.**

“The incremental approach...forced me to work on the challenge piece by piece without jumping over important sections. This ensured I took the time to return to the balcony and tackled the uncomfortable components that I had been avoiding.” – **Morgan K.**



Featured Adaptive Leaders:

Katrina Harwood, Deputy Director, Coconino County Health and Human Services, AZ

Sam Jarvis, MS, Community Health Division Manager, Johnson County Public Health, IA

Morgan Klinzing, MPH, Disease Prev. & Control Program Manager, Florida DOH, Clay County, FL

NACCHO's Adaptive Leadership Resources

Adaptive Leadership Academy

The Adaptive Leadership Academy is a cohort training to strengthen your leadership practice. The Academy engages participants in monthly:

- Live learning sessions to review unit concepts
- Peer Advising with coaches to workshop participant challenges
- Discussions and activities to apply concepts to real-world scenarios



NACCHO's evaluations from four cohorts between 2022-2025 demonstrate:

- **98%** reported improvement in their **overall leadership capability**
- **92%** reported an improvement in their perspectives on **practicing leadership** and their **leadership actions**



"The Academy gave me skills and tools to **better address complex problems** I face within my organization."
-2024 ALA Participant

The Academy helped me in **tackling what seemed like a giant problem** by taking it step by step.
- 2023 ALA Participant

Adaptive Action Guide and Companion Workbook

This tool combines Adaptive Leadership theory with continuous quality improvement to help public health practitioners address complex, adaptive challenges. Use the workbook and guide to apply Adaptive Leadership concepts to your own challenge.



Visit NACCHO's [Adaptive Leadership webpage](#) to learn more about the Adaptive Leadership Academy and access resources.