

Learning is necessary in an environment of flux and uncertainty. A maxim commonly uttered by biologists goes something like: “all living organisms have only three options—move, adapt, or die.” This is often not taken seriously by traditional denominational religious organizations—both churches and judicatories—and so many die or are dying. Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, gives insight to religious organizations and to this presbytery in particular for becoming a well adapting and generative organization.

Adaptive learning and generative learning are both necessary for organizations today. Adaptive learning is about responding to the changing environment, and generative learning is about being creative rather than static (or tacitly deteriorating).

In *Leadership Without Easy Answers* Ronald Heifetz argues that the work of adaptive learning is what the leader must help their organization accomplish so that it may successfully face its adaptive challenge. Heifetz makes the distinction between technical challenges and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are problems that can be fixed with technical answers and resources. They are relatively simple to fix and an expert (or a lucky person) can give the right answer that will solve the problem. Adaptive challenges are those for which no simple answer exists. They present when “our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge.”

Heifetz identifies the need for the leader facing an adaptive challenge to create a holding environment. This is a safe place in which diverse groups can talk together about the challenges they face, “to frame and debate issues, and to clarify the assumptions behind competing perspectives and values.” Using the analogy of a pressure cooker, Heifetz refers to the need to apply just enough heat; if there’s not enough heat then nothing happens, but too much heat will let things burn up. To offer or prescribe solutions from on high in order to alleviate the discomfort of the heat would preclude the people from being able to authentically engage and respond to the adaptive challenge.

A temptation for leaders can be to offer technical solutions to adaptive problems before the problem is ready to be solved—especially when the people look to the leader for the solution “from on high” and even plead for or demand a solution. The disciplined, humble leader will not yield to this temptation or pressure. This desire for an answer from a higher or external authority is what Heifetz calls a “flight to authority.” Facing adaptive change is hard work in a discomfiting environment. When either the burden or the anxiety becomes too threatening it is perfectly understandable that the people facing the need to learn would prefer the comfort of a leader simply telling them what to do. And there can be great immediate emotional reward for the leader who gives the easy answer. People can be comforted by a so-called strong leader. But there is another kind of strength that serves the organization better.

A good leader must have the strength to endure the disappointment of the people as the leader disappoints the people’s expectations. The good leader must disappoint people’s expectations at a rate at which they can stand. Heifetz says that leaders must “regulate distress.” If there is not enough distress or pressure, then nothing happens. Leaders

should allow the people to feel the “pinch of reality.” If there is too much distress from disappointed expectations, the people can give up or reject the leader. All of this regulated distress is in service to the end of helping create a learning organization.

Both Senge and Heifetz affirm that the role of the leader for leading through adaptive change is dramatically different from the charismatic leader who provides solutions to problems. The leader for change must be a learner who demonstrates an openness to learn and who can help the organization become a learning organization, not a commander in chief who cracks the whip so that the troops fall in line to take directions.

The practice Heifetz describes as walking “a razor’s edge” is a leadership discernment of how to regulate distress in the organization. Cultivating spiritual connections among leaders and between leaders and God is at the heart of the discernment process for the Christian ministry of the presbytery. In the life of the church this is a spiritual discernment, or discerning where the Spirit of God is at work, leading, calling, prodding or halting.

Prayer and spiritual attention in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition is rightly focused on listening because prayer is initiated by God speaking first. In a presbytery seeking to discern God’s direction for mission, it is therefore essential to spend time listening for God’s voice uttering the word of call. My goal is to build a new expectation: that the presbytery comes as partners and allies to help us discern the dynamic work of the Spirit of God.

The current challenges and opportunities of the presbytery’s extremely diverse regional mission context require collaborative learning. We do not need a plan for the next technical and programmatic steps as much as we need a plan for learning how to learn so that we can change continually, constantly adapting to the changing mission environment that surrounds us. And this is a spiritual work of attentiveness, a work of discerning the blowing of God’s Spirit and the mind of Christ.

The Presbytery of Los Ranchos needs to develop a new way of being and working so that it can discover appropriate new organizational models to help it evolve into a learning organization continually being reformed as it discerns the movement and call of God’s Spirit and Word.