Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges

My firm belief is that the Church as a whole, and St. Andrew's as part of it, is in the middle of what is almost entirely a time that is filled with adaptive challenges (rather than technical problems). That is, everything is becoming different than it was, and we have to listen to the Spirit and to each other and to the world around us in order to thrive and grow into something that will be different that what we have known since about 1950. If you've not encountered it very much before, here below is a bit of how Heifetz explains the difference. Our job as the leaders of the church is to work as hard as we can to calmly identify and separate ***technical problems*** (e.g. we need better reporting to individuals and groups about their month-by-month budgets and spending, …) from ***adaptive challenges*** (e.g. it really doesn't solve the problem long term to have a capital campaign for an assistant rector, because we've proven from past experience that is not what will grow the church—the people have to grow the church because they believe in its work and are excited to be there and are enthusiastically involved—***then*** there ***will be*** $, long-term and sustainably, to support an assistant.)

This below is from Ronald A. Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie's *The Work of Leadership* and Heifetz *Leadership without easy answers*. (Harvard University Press)

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES
The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

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
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

Adaptive Challenges
- An adaptive challenge is a situation for which solutions lie outside the current way of operation.
- The challenge may be difficult to clearly identify.
- Applying existing procedures and know-how does not provide the solution needed.
    - In adaptive challenges, it is critical to get stakeholders involved in developing and implementing solutions. Authority figures and leaders no longer carry the burden of problem solving since the solutions do not lie within current expertise or operations. Adaptive work requires investment and ownership, whereas technical work does not.
    - We often fool ourselves into thinking that if we just hire the right person with the right skills, that the adaptive challenges we are trying to resolve will be easily resolved. Acknowledging that adaptive challenges do not have easy solutions and that the solutions do not come from certain expertise, but rather from a process of learning and adapting, is the key to moving the collaborative group in a positive direction.
- Adaptive challenges require us to literally adapt and evolve in terms of learning new ways of thinking, doing and being, or risk extinction. Much like in biology, groups are like organisms that must adapt with their changing landscapes and environments. They must determine what pieces of their history to carry forward, but also what pieces of their past they need to let go of in order to move forward and evolve. Adaptive work causes us to think about what we should keep doing, start doing and stop doing.
- Adaptive work involves: loss, the opportunity to develop new competencies, experimentation and risk, and time.
    - Because of these factors, it is not unusual to encounter some resistance from our partners and others who are wildly invested in what we are about. Heifetz says that resistance to change is resistance to loss. We are human and loss of what is important to us is often difficult.
    - In adaptive work, we must try solutions that are new and maybe quite different. Inherent in adaptive work is the need to become comfortable with not knowing what the next move might be.
    - There is also the issue of allowing time for adaptive solutions to have an effect; don't react too quickly to the discomfort that comes with not knowing.

[Fr. Keith] You can tell that I have been working hard these first eight months to "fix" lots of technical problems: communication was lacking, adult education was lacking, prayer life was lacking. All of these were identified in your rector search profile, and for the most part, they are technical problems and so as new rector I could address them myself. (That's the first row of the table from Heifetz below.) Now we have to move on to more adaptive challenges that can't be simply "fixed" and need the insights, inspiration, imagination, effort, and leadership of everyone—vestry and beyond.

Kind of Work	Challenge Definition	Solutions and Implementation	Primary Locus of Responsibility for the Work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and Adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and Stakeholder
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholder