
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS THAT ENABLE LEADERS IN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT SEMINARIES TO ENGAGE IN ADAPTIVE WORK

AMY DRENNAN AND MICHELLE LOUIS

Abstract

This article describes a study exploring values, beliefs, and practices of leaders engaged in adaptive work in evangelical protestant U.S. seminaries, informed by concepts in the literature on adaptive leadership. A model entitled Attitudes and Behaviors Enabling Adaptive Work Engagement was developed to illustrate these attributes, and this article focuses on exploring sobered hope, tenacity, and personal humility. The authors delineate these attributes and suggest implications for practice, including ways that faculty and administrators in theological education can engage in adaptive work.

The United States is experiencing a unique cultural moment of rapid and complex change, such that “the 21st century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress.”¹ Significant shifts are occurring in economic, political, racial, and religious sectors, enhanced by explosive technological growth. These shifting realities are in turn fundamentally altering the vitality and perceived relevance of Christian churches and the educational institutions that train religious clergy.

Faculty and administrators of seminary education must lead in ways that enable their institutions to respond to these shifts, capitalizing on the opportunities they present for a reexamination of organizational processes and policies. One example of a significant sociocultural shift that must be addressed is the weakening of mainline denominational identities in the United States. As a result, numerous clergy are bi-vocational and seek less traditional

Dr. Amy Drennan is Executive Director of Vocation Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Michelle Louis is the founder of The Leading Mind

¹ Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 187.

pathways to receive credentials—a trend that has disrupted the enrollment and financial stability of numerous seminaries.² In addition, today's graduate theological schools are populated by an increasingly diverse ethnic, racial, economic, political, and religious student body. However, as the theological scholar Willie Jennings argues, the Christian imagination within theological education has largely silenced the voices of racial and ethnic minorities in the past fifty years, ignoring the unequal distribution of resources and power within its structures and curriculum.³ The lack of inclusion of diverse perspectives in theological education hinders contemporary seminarians from effectively serving multiethnic and multiracial communities of Christians.⁴ The digital revolution is another significant shift that invites theological institutions to consider new approaches to educational delivery, content, and formation of students.⁵

Examining and adapting aspects of theological education is critical because seminary graduates occupy roles of significant influence; these leaders often shape individuals and communities of faith in thoughts and behaviors related to citizenship, social justice, spiritual formation, and right living.⁶ A seminary graduate

² Pew Research Center, "Appendix B: Classification of Protestant Denominations," May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/appendix-b-classification-of-protestant-denominations/>; Daniel O. Aleshire, "The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World," *Theological Education* 46(2) (2011): 69–80; Alice Hunt, "Waiting for a Divine Bailout: Theological Education for Today and Tomorrow," *Theological Education* 46(2) (2011): 61–68.

³ Willie J. Jennings, "The Change We Need: Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 49(1) (2014): 35–42.

⁴ Aleshire, "The Future," 6980; Andy Crouch, "The Future Shape of Theological Education," *Catalyst*, March 1, 2013, <http://www.catalystresources.org/the-future-shape-of-theological-education/>; P. Jesse Rine and David S. Guthrie, "Steering the Ship Through Uncertain Waters: Empirical Analysis and the Future of Evangelical Higher Education," *Christian Higher Education* 15(1–2) (2016): 4–23.

⁵ L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones, "Deep Trends Affecting Christian Institutions," *Faith & Leadership*, Oct. 22, 2012, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/l-gregory-jones-and-nathan-jones-deep-trends-affecting-christian-institutions>.

⁶ Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

enters a world characterized by “supercomplexity,” a context that necessitates unpredictable combinations and variations of knowledge, skills, and tools for wise and agile decision making.⁷ Graduate theological schools are vital institutions of learning and formation of leaders who can respond to contemporary issues with ancient Christian wisdom and whose perspective is theologically informed.⁸ If seminaries are not intentional about adequately preparing students for this twenty-first century world, then they are not fulfilling the purpose for which they were designed. Thus, seminary leaders have an urgent task: They must reenvision and redesign pedagogical, organizational, financial, curricular, and assessment structures in ways that extend beyond modest and incremental changes to instead “directly challenge the basic tenets of what leading, teaching, and learning in schools...should look like in the new context of the twenty-first century.”⁹

This article describes research conducted on the attitudes and behaviors that enable leaders to foster significant changes in Evangelical Protestant seminaries (EPSs). We argue that as leaders adopt particular attitudes and behaviors needed to facilitate changes, they are catalytic in creating the institutional capacity required to respond to massive social shifts and to educate seminarians in relevant ways. The following section describes the methodological approach and conceptual frameworks used in this study.

Framework of the Study: Adaptive Change

Superficial change to graduate theological education is not sufficient to respond adequately to pressing cultural and societal trends, nor will these types of changes fully address the deeply embedded problems inherent in its organizational structures and pedagogical approaches. Some leaders within EPSs leverage particular types of change that can more comprehensively address

⁷ Ronald Barnett, *Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (Philadelphia: The Society for Research Into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2000), 6.

⁸ Mark Labberton, personal communication to author, Dec. 19, 2017.

⁹ Tony Wagner, et al., *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 9.

the internal and external shifts required. Heifetz and Linsky described two broad categories of challenges in organizational settings: *adaptive* and *technical*.¹⁰ A technical challenge, such as declining enrollments, can be approached and solved with an existing and straightforward solution, such as creating an additional degree program to attract new students. Alternatively, using the same example above, confronting an adaptive challenge would cause leaders to evaluate underlying reasons why certain student demographics choose to enroll in other comparable institutions or find alternative means of obtaining clergy training. In this example, no obvious or existing solution is available; adaptive challenges are not as readily discernable or solvable because they expose the gap between an institution's deeply embedded "priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties" and its inability to realize them in daily contexts.¹¹ Although both types of challenges must be confronted in any organization, solutions to adaptive challenges lead to deeper changes than solving technical problems because the former emerges from an analysis of value systems and practices. These changes result in a strengthened capacity to function in less predictable, more dynamic environments.¹²

The task of transforming theological education is recognizing that education is primarily adaptive work because the traditional forms of theological education that were designed to serve and support communities of faith in past generations are no longer adequate to equip seminary graduates to face the leadership challenges of this era. In this study, an adaptive change framework enabled the authors to explore how some faculty and administrators understand, articulate, and enact particular attitudes and behaviors to work actively toward deep change within their organizations. A central criterion of the participants in this study was their previous or current engagement in adaptive work within their seminaries. Heifetz et al. define adaptive work as "holding people through a sustained period of disequilibrium during which they identify

¹⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).

¹¹ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 19.

¹² Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 11.

what cultural DNA to conserve and discard, and invent or discover the new cultural DNA that will enable them to thrive anew.”¹³ This study also investigates how change agents in seminary education build on their personal strengths and qualities in the context of challenge to catalyze organizational change.¹⁴

Participant Selection and Research Methodology

Participants were chosen for this study through a nomination process in which leaders from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) who had vantage points to engage with the breadth and variety of faculty and executive administrators in EPSs suggested participants for the study. Participants met all of the following criteria: They had (a) worked a minimum of five years in an EPS, (b) initiated a major change effort in that context during the last three years, which had (c) challenged deeply held assumptions (d) by innovatively addressing significant problems instead of relying on existing structures for solutions.

Although the particularities of the adaptive changes were not the focus of the study, it was evident through the interviews that these leaders were endeavoring to solve complex issues, including the extension of degree programs to incarcerated students, the advancement of more evidence-based practices in education, the protest of racially insensitive photographs featured on their campus, the flattening of power between faculty and staff, the challenge to the overwhelmingly white and male demographics of the senior leadership, the shift to online over residential education, and the decision to relocate an entire campus to a new city.

Twelve EPS faculty and administrators agreed to participate in two rounds of semi-structured interviews, separated by approximately three months. The participants represented diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and emerged from the EPS institutions in which they currently work. In addition, two of the

¹³ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 303.

¹⁴ Martin E. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* 55(1) (2000): 5.

participants were female and ten were male, and there were four faculty and eight administrators within the participant group.

To better understand the perspectives and behaviors of leaders in theological education who are engaged in adaptive work, a grounded theory methodology was useful. This approach captures rich data in participants' responses and enables researchers to consider the categories that emerge from the interviews in the development of a relevant and meaningful theory.¹⁵ As opposed to other qualitative methods that might rely on external sources of data, a grounded theory methodology allows a robust, accurate, and interactive collection of data that is not determined by preconceived categories.¹⁶ Data analysis occurred through the constant comparison method, whereby data are grouped into preliminary categories according to focused and axial coding procedures, and eventually clustered into themes.¹⁷

Personal Attributes Identified in the Data

Through the methods previously described, the data analysis yielded six attitudes and behaviors of the leaders in EPSs that enabled them to engage in adaptive work. The first of these attributes is *sobered hope*, which reflected the participants' hopeful attitudes that their efforts transcended their individual aims to connect to God's greater purposes for the institution and the world. Their attitudes included sobered thinking, which assisted them in incorporating the foreboding realities of theological education with the new possibilities in the unknown future.

These leaders also displayed *tenacity* to advance adaptive work initiatives despite the resistance and sabotage they encountered. Several participants refused to view a block or an impediment to their work as the final answer; they capitalized on the obstacle as an opportunity to identify new pathways toward their goals.

¹⁵ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1967), 46.

¹⁶ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 97.

¹⁷ Charmaz, 343.

The third attribute that worked in tandem with their tenacity was the participants' *personal humility*, which they demonstrated by decentering their reputation and success to champion the institutional mission and efforts of others. Leaders' humility restrained them from relentlessly pursuing goals for their personal success or notoriety, instead focusing their attention and energy outside of themselves and on the interests and advancement of others and their institution.

Fourth, leaders displayed *strategic attunement*, or an ability to creatively and attentively regulate anxiety, conflict, and feelings of loss by noticing and regulating their own responses as they attended to others. This attunement, however, was directional in that it aligned others with the adaptive work initiatives of the leader.

In addition, participants exhibited an *anchored adaptability*; they rooted their adaptive work in the legacies of their institutions, inspiring others to appreciate and build on the successes of the past, without remaining bound to the past. The leaders' flexible and adaptive thinking enabled them to remain aware and adaptable to present circumstances as they built a capacity among others in the institution to tolerate ongoing change.

The sixth and final attribute demonstrated by leaders was their continuous *self-reflection*, which resulted in greater self-awareness; the leaders engaged in sincere scrutiny about many aspects of their adaptive work, including relationships to power, weakness, and identity. This self-reflection highlighted their engagement with power structures, exposed their defenses about appearing weak or making mistakes, and aided them in connecting their work to their calling from God. Ultimately, this attitude of continuous self-scrutiny and learning afforded leaders the opportunity to reflect on their missteps and successes when engaging in adaptive work initiatives. From an awareness of their weaknesses, leaders learned to mobilize their strengths in pursuit of their goals.

Detailed Discussion of Three Attributes

Because the themes of *sobered hope*, *tenacity*, and *personal humility* were the most prominent themes in the data, these concepts are the focus of the remainder of this paper, which will

examine them in greater detail. In addition, they provide a helpful snapshot of how attributes work in tandem to help leaders engage adaptive work.

Sobered Hope

One of the most salient attributes among the participants was what is identified in this study as sobered hope. Consistently, the leaders expressed that graduate theological education needed to change and that their work was in service of this goal. One participant desired the reformation of EPSs because he was convinced that they are “needed by society.” Another participant insisted that he pursued this work because theological education was “part of God’s desire to work out His redemptive purpose in the world.” At the same time, the participants identified formidable realities facing EPSs. One participant predicted that his institution must “change or die.” The hope of the participants was not based on wishful thinking but rather on the unshakable confidence that their adaptive work was grounded in a larger narrative of God’s direction, which fueled them with motivation, purpose, and meaning.

One executive leader described efforts to embrace the shift to online (over residential) education, an unpopular decision that forced faculty to undergo new pedagogical training and to translate their courses to a new delivery method. Despite the resistance, this leader displayed infectious hope that something new could emerge as a result:

The world is in motion, God is in motion...we have to be in motion, you know? We have to adapt...we’ve gotta [sic] be able to change...deep change is lasting change. So, organizations probably do need to die... but I also believe institutions can, if they’re willing, be reborn. I’m hopeful in that, you know?

A second faculty participant described efforts to remove monuments on campus that had exacerbated wounds already deeply felt by students of color. Reflecting on these efforts, this participant articulated his hope:

This is a tough mountain and it's bigger than any mountain I've ever encountered before, but there is a top to this mountain. I will get to the top and the vista from the top will be so amazing—that I will know the climb was worth it. And, I know that the next mountain will be even harder...but when I get to the top...that panorama will be better than this one. Somebody's gotta [sic] be the purveyor of hope...hopeful people can take on huge obstacles.

Finally, a seminary president who endeavored to bring his institution through a significant campus relocation admitted that the gravity of the current state of graduate theological education is such that change is the only option:

We cannot assume that the broader constituency of evangelicalism is going to change related to theological education. Therefore, we cannot assume that we can keep doing what we're doing, the way we're doing it, and expect to grow. If all the external indicators are negative, why would we think that we can keep doing what we're doing, the way we're doing it, and grow? So, [this is] the mandate for change.

The participants engaged with adaptive work because they were driven by a hope to accomplish goals that served broader purposes in their institutions. At the same time, they were realistic about the challenges inherent in these efforts. Participants also enacted *tenacity* to advance adaptive work initiatives based in their hope, and despite the resistance and sabotage they described. As noted in the following section, these leaders reframed obstacles as opportunities to discover new paths forward.

Tenacity

The participants' goals compelled them to give substantial amounts of energy, time, and effort to achieve their objectives. In this work, participants described significant challenges and obstacles such as public opposition from colleagues and members

of the community, job demotions, and threats of losing programs and/or funding in response to their attempts to enact changes. Participants reported their responses to these obstacles: “I am kind of relentless...stubborn, really [laughs].” Another participant insisted, “I didn’t give up because I’m probably too stubborn...I don’t like to be told no”; another participant articulated, “I don’t give up. I never take it personally. I’ve learned...this is not so much about me. It’s just the system.” Another insisted, “I just kept bugging people till somebody folded. And so, when people say, ‘It can’t be done,’ that in and of itself is energizing to me.”

For many participants, obstacles to their adaptive work were not an end but rather an invigorating opportunity to create or discover new pathways forward. One leader typified this attitude, saying, “I think [about] the possibility of multiple ways to get from A to Z, that it’s not gonna [sic] always be one way. So, [I am] aware that one roadblock doesn’t mean the whole thing’s done.” Another executive leader described the mindset that helps him find new pathways when facing obstacles:

I’m always saying that you never hit a wall like this. [Slaps fist into flat palm]. You never hit a wall head on. There’s always some bit of angle that you can spin forward...some kind of forward momentum that you can sustain through any kind of barrier you hit. There’s something you can learn. You hit over here (taps one side) and something opens up over here that maybe you hadn’t seen before (taps other side). There’s always something that you can build on...I just refuse to be stymied [laughing].

These leaders responded to the barriers they encountered with a bolstered determination to reframe adversity as an opportunity to create new pathways forward.

Personal Humility

A third prominent attribute, which worked in tandem with their tenacity, was the participants’ display of personal humility. Participants explained the importance of maintaining focus on

how the change initiatives promoted the mission of the institution, rather than their own status or reputation. One seminary president articulated, “It needs to be most about the mission and not about you as the individual leader...which [fundamentally] means...some sacrifices.” An executive leader echoed this notion by articulating that his actions and behaviors were secondary to other purposes, saying “What I do, who I am, what I’ve been given is not just for my sake. It’s for the sake of something much bigger, much more important than I am. Whether that’s the institution, [or] the broader mission of God.”

Some participants revealed that when they facilitated adaptive changes, they often sacrificed their personal reputation or popularity to promote the missional outcomes of their organization. One leader explained:

I think it helps tremendously if you’re willing to say an institution matters more than I matter...because then you’re willing to do whatever you think is necessary—including tak[ing] blame or giv[ing] credit. Leaders need to give credit and take blame, rather than give blame and take credit.

Participants highlighted a tension between enacting disruptive changes in an institution and maintaining a positive personal reputation with those affected by the changes. However, they insisted that fixating on a positive reputation was inimical to facilitating the changes they attempted to make. An executive leader echoed the detrimental consequences of adaptive leaders who nurtured their personal legacy over that of the institution:

[Focusing on approval of others] stymies change because it creates a whole other motivation for change or not changing that places the institution at a lower level of importance than the individual...it causes you to say, “Let’s just...hang tight and everybody will be happy, and speak well of me at the retirement party.”

Finally, one leader noted that choosing to focus on the institutional mission over his reputation or legacy advanced the adaptive changes that he endeavored to make, saying:

I make it more about honoring the mission of the institution. What you're doing is not for your own satisfaction or aggrandizement or even future position in school. It's more about...this is something I truly believe in, I'm passionate about...I think that this adaptive change is needed if...our school [will] be around another 100 years and thriving.

Leaders in this study demonstrated a tendency to display humility by endorsing the mission of the institution over their personal reputations or professional legacies.

Overview of Theoretical Model

The relevance and relationships between these attributes and several others were placed into a model that represents the attitudes and behaviors associated with participants' adaptive work, referred to as *Attitudes and Behaviors Enabling Adaptive Work Engagement*. One goal of grounded theory methodology is to better understand the linkages between emergent themes, and we offer a model that captures these relationships. It is presented as a metaphor and is intended to serve as a building block toward the construction of a more robust theory as new data are added with future research. The selected metaphor is that of a helicopter in flight. The following section explains the ways in which this metaphor bears similarities to leaders engaged in adaptive work.

Leaders and Helicopters as Instruments of Mission

A helicopter is one of the most versatile instruments of flight ever invented. These machines have the dexterity to maneuver in any direction and maintain high speeds in forward flight, both of which provide greater ease in agile navigation of landscape contours

than is possible with fixed-wing aircraft.¹⁸ Though helicopters vary in size and shape, most share the same basic components. The parts highlighted in the model for this study include the main rotor blades on the top of the aircraft, which generate lift; the secondary rotors on the tail of the helicopter, which counteract the torque of the main rotor; and the main rotator nut, which secures the top blades in a central hub.¹⁹ These elements relate to this study's emergent model in that helicopter pilots cannot fly without experience, intentionality, and continuous attention to one's surroundings so that the helicopter can closely navigate rugged terrain safely.

Heifetz and colleagues wrote that individual leaders can optimize their strengths to create solutions and mobilize others to respond to internal and external pressures and build healthy and adaptive institutions.²⁰ Similar to the unique aspects and components of a helicopter in flight, leaders of adaptive work are instruments who accomplish missions through the deployment of their unique attitudes and behaviors within the landscape of their institutions.

The leaders in this study exhibited an ability to lead in different frameworks and multiple levels, including emotional, spiritual, and self-reflective directions. In addition, the leaders highlighted confrontations with forces that impeded their forward momentum, including economic downturns, declines in enrollments, unforeseen crises, emotional resistance, reverting to the status quo, and internal sabotage. In this study, amidst the changing landscape of graduate theological education, individual leaders had an impact on how they could present and invest in the change that the organization requires. Their attitudes and behaviors allowed them to assess the shifting terrain and utilize positive attributes to respond with accurate and flexible adaptations to their surroundings so they could safely "land" in a new location, achieving the goals toward which they aimed. A helicopter in flight must be aware of the dangers of gaining too much altitude; in a similar manner, leaders in this

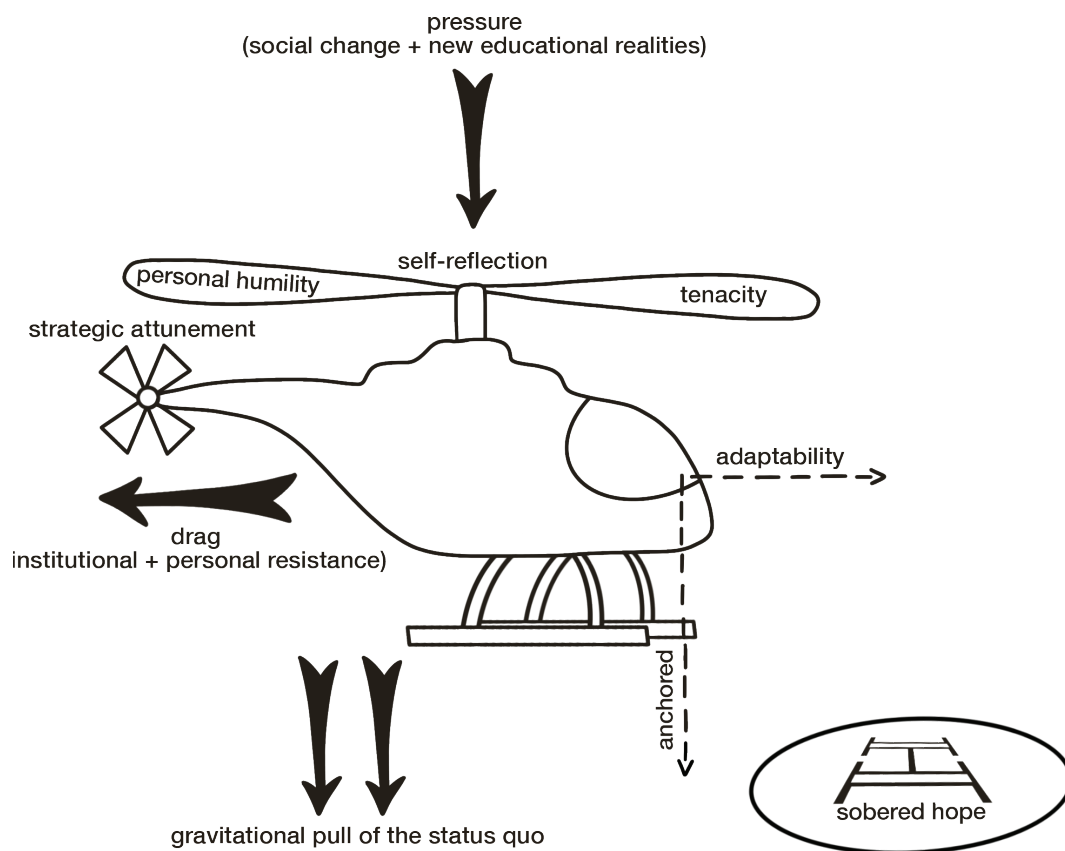
¹⁸ Federal Aviation Administration, *Helicopter Flying Handbook* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014).

¹⁹ Federal Aviation Administration, 1–3.

²⁰ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 181.

study recognized that their proximity to the ground (the people and situations involved in the changes) was crucial to establish accurate maps of the context and collaborative partnerships that sustained their adaptive work. In summary, these leaders of adaptive change embody the metaphor of a helicopter in flight by employing their attitudes and behaviors toward navigating their internal and external forces with agility and awareness, hovering in vantage points to strategically assess themselves and their environments, learning from new information to improve the overall mission, and accomplishing specific adaptive work goals.

The following graphic reflects a helicopter in flight with the identified attitudes and behaviors that emerged from the data depicted as its various components.



Placement of Three Attributes in the Model

This model of a helicopter in flight suggests that the various parts of the aircraft do not work independently of one another, but rather in concert to complete its mission successfully. In the same way, the leaders did not singularly utilize each attitude and

behavior to serve their adaptive work, but rather simultaneously engaged these attributes to aid their adaptive work engagement. The following section explains the placement of the highlighted attributes sobered hope, tenacity, and personal humility and the external literature that supports each theme.

Sobered Hope as the Motivation to Engage in Adaptive Work

Leaders were motivated by a hope that their adaptive work was in service of a greater goal—a target—toward which they aimed all of their other attitudes and behaviors. This goal transcended their individual reputation, role, work, or institutional survival to focus on impacting a vessel (their institution) that they believed God was using for a broader purpose in the world. Similarly, though helicopters serve a multitude of missions, the purpose of helicopter flight is to accomplish a mission toward which they aim their efforts, which is depicted as the “H” landing pad in the model. Snyder’s Hope Theory is relevant for explaining how “hopeful thinking” is goal-directed and motivated by a sense that one has the capacity to create pathways to attain these goals, and can proactively strategize ways past inevitable obstacles or impediments.²¹ When referencing their adaptive work goals, each participant revealed that they were willing to withstand challenges and setbacks because they were certain that their work to change their system was in service of a greater goal—a target—toward which they aimed all of their other efforts. This goal surpassed their individual needs; they believed they were working in service of a broader purpose.

These hopeful attitudes were tempered with a sober recognition about the challenges of their educational contexts and the unpredictable future of theological education. This attribute aligns with Collins’s “Stockdale Paradox,” a term to describe a survival strategy that helped prisoners of war endure devastating treatment in captivity.²² This strategy involved a paradoxical mindset of “retain[ing] faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the

²¹ Charles H. Snyder, “Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind,” *Psychological Inquiry* 13 (2002): 249–275.

²² James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 86.

difficulties” and at the same time “confront[ing] the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”²³ Researchers found that the optimists in the Prisoner of War (POW) camps—those who did not admit their savage reality but rather (naively) believed their release was imminent—were the least likely to survive. Collins suggested that the coexistence of the paradoxical attitudes that constitute the Stockdale Paradox is noteworthy because it is a signature mindset of all leaders who create greatness. The participants in this study were hopefully engaged yet realistic about their adaptive work efforts in institutions that were described as hostile to changes or in the throes of chaotic transition.²⁴ These leaders demonstrated dualistic thinking that inspired them to pursue their mission yet remain sober and disciplined so they could confront the most severe facts of their current reality.

Tenacity to Propel Adaptive Work

The attribute identified as tenacity is labeled as one of the main rotor blades on the top of the helicopter, which creates lift and forward movement.²⁵ This location is significant; without the leaders’ tenacious attitudes and behaviors, the goals would be in sight and the motivation and pathways would be evident, but there would be no internal grit to persist when encountering a barrier or challenge. These participants reflected Heifetz and Laurie’s assertion that adaptive leaders must maintain an emotional capacity to withstand the criticism, uncertainty, frustration, and tension associated with the changes they pursue.²⁶ In addition, Heifetz and Linsky insist that leaders must maintain disciplined action to counteract a system’s tendency to revert to a former state of equilibrium or focus on technical issues.²⁷ Psychologists define tenacious goal pursuit as persistent, intentional, and active efforts

²³ Collins, 86.

²⁴ Collins, 87.

²⁵ Marshall Brain and William Harris, “How Helicopters Work,” How Stuff Works, April 1, 2000, <https://science.howstuffworks.com/transport/flight/modern/helicopter.htm>.

²⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, “The Work of Leadership” *Harvard Business Review* 75 (1997): 124–134.

²⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 27.

to shift one's life circumstances to align with one's preferences, goals, or projects.²⁸ The participants verbalized confidence in their ability to lead others through change; they were willing to pursue unpopular or politically barbed change efforts because they were convinced that their personal pain was less important than the end goal. These leaders' dogged assurance is supported by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which explains the development of one's internal confidence and motivation.²⁹ *Self-efficacy* is defined as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions."³⁰ This self-efficacy belief is a fundamental factor that determines the extent to which people persist in their efforts as they encounter obstacles.³¹ Maddux noted that self-efficacy is not one's perception of one's skill, but rather one's "beliefs about [one's] ability to coordinate and orchestrate skills and abilities in changing and challenging situations."³² Specifically, people with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist in the face of challenges because they have confidence that they can find effective ways to proceed, which was a characteristic attitude of participants in this study.

Humility to Extend Adaptive Work

Finally, personal humility was reflected in the participants' intentional actions to decenter their reputation and success to instead champion the institutional mission and efforts of others. On the model, this attribute is labeled as the second blade of the main propeller. Without this secondary propeller blade, the lift of the helicopter would be lopsided, and the trajectory of the helicopter would be compromised. In a similar way, the leaders in this study enacted the twin attributes of tenacity and personal humility by consistently focusing their attention and energy outside

²⁸ Jochen Brandstädter and Gerolf Renner, "Tenacious Goal Pursuit and Flexible Goal Adjustment: Explication and Age-Related Analysis of Assimilative and Accommodative Strategies of Coping," *Psychology and Aging* 5(1) (1990): 58–67.

²⁹ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: Freeman, 1997).

³⁰ Bandura, vii.

³¹ Bandura, vii.

³² James E. Maddux, "Self-Efficacy: The Power of Believing You Can," *Oxford Library of Psychology: Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds. C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 336.

of themselves and on the interests and advancement of others and their institution. The attribute of personal humility, though not directly identified in adaptive leadership literature, is a central premise of leading adaptive work. In the process of “giving the work back to the people” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 305), adaptive leaders refuse to take complete ownership or responsibility to solve challenges, but rather decenter themselves so that others take responsibility for advancing the work.

Historically, the concept of humility has been incorrectly understood as a diminutive self-concept of unworthiness and low self-esteem; however, recent definitions suggest a different understanding of personal humility, drawing insight from psychological, philosophical, and theological sources.³³ A comprehensive definition of personal humility includes the following: (a) accurate estimation of one’s abilities and achievements, (b) capacity to admit imperfections and limitations, (c) openness to ideas of others or to contradicting information, (d) low self-focus, in a way of forgetting oneself and recognizing the larger context, and (e) appreciating the value, contribution, and effort of all things and people.³⁴

A similar concept in psychological literature, *quiet ego*, is defined as constructing one’s self-identity with “a subjective stance toward the self and others in which the volume of the ego is turned down so that it might listen to others as well as the self in an effort to approach life more humanely and compassionately.”³⁵ To better understand this concept, the researchers also identified the opposite construct of quiet ego as *noisy ego*, characterized by a singular focus on one’s own needs in the immediate moment and a fixation on how present circumstances might enhance one’s self-image, social status, or material progress rather than the action

³³ June Price Tangney, “Humility,” *Oxford Library of Psychology: Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds. C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 483–490.

³⁴ Tangney, 485.

³⁵ Heidi A. Wayment and Jack J. Bauer, “The Quiet Ego: Motives for Self-Other Balance and Growth in Relation to Well-Being,” *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being* 19(3) (2018): 881–896.

itself.³⁶ Many participants in this study described their self-talk to quiet the temptation to take credit and accolades for their work. It is important to note that leaders did not assume that their ego was not involved in the work, but rather, that they intentionally regulated this impulse for the sake of others and the institution. Through the intentional act of focusing on a mission and other people outside of themselves, these leaders greatly enhanced the likelihood that their adaptive work would succeed.

The participants exhibited an unshakable motivation and indefatigable drive to accomplish the goals that they understood to ultimately serve a greater purpose. Yet, seemingly paradoxically, the participants consistently noted that in their drive to accomplish adaptive work, they often deferred credit to others. The twin attributes of tenacity and personal humility are highlighted by Collins, who examined the attributes of organizational leaders who developed a moderately successful company into a tremendously successful one.³⁷ His research revealed that leaders possess five levels of capabilities and traits, including management and team member skills. Though Collins's original research aimed to downplay the role of top organizational leaders, his results revealed that each great company possessed a leader with the superior "Level 5" qualities that advanced the company in times of transition.³⁸ According to this study, Level 5 leaders built great organizations through "a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."³⁹ These leaders did not lack ambition, but rather "channel[ed] their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company."⁴⁰ The participants in this study reflected this notion of Level 5 leaders—they were humble and full of drive, self-effacing and unabashed, seeking victory and willing to credit others

³⁶ Heidi A. Wayment, Jack J. Bauer, and Kateryna Sylaska, "The Quiet Ego Scale: Measuring the Compassionate Self-Identity," *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being* 16(4) (2015): 999–1033.

³⁷ Collins, 21.

³⁸ Collins, 21.

³⁹ Collins, 13.

⁴⁰ Collins, 21.

for success.⁴¹ This unique combination of attitudes and behaviors fostered a balance such that the leaders need not diminish zeal for the mission nor the opportunities to highlight the contributions of others.

Critical Findings of the Study

One primary finding from this research is the notion that the leaders' embodiment of these positive attitudes and behaviors was a conduit for infusing adaptive change into their institutions. One participant reflected this notion of personifying the process of change:

To be an agent of really *good* change, I think...a person has to be willing to be formed by the change itself... that kind of vulnerability is analogous to administrative change. Change means things shift, and you can't know exactly what this is until you go through it. And to go through it and submit to what you're hoping... [means that] you become like that which you want to look like.

As the leaders practiced the attitudes and behaviors needed to facilitate changes, they were simultaneously injecting these attitudes and behaviors into the system itself—the leaders were a critical intervention to shift the system. Thus, a central finding of the study *is* that the intentional attitudinal and behavioral formation of faculty and administrators to embody the changes they endeavor to infuse into their institution is the disruption needed to bring change to graduate theological education. This premise is critical; graduate theological institutions must adopt new practices to continue a healthy and balanced trajectory of growth and transformation. If the leaders of these institutions are not also on a path of personal learning and discovery, the institutions and the leaders have the potential of becoming complacent and obsolete.

A second compelling finding of this study highlights the untapped potential of faculty members in the role of facilitating adaptive work. Faculty can be critical players in the work of

⁴¹ Collins, 22.

institutional change through leadership initiatives.⁴² However, participants identified the resistance of faculty members as the most common obstacle to adaptive work in their institution. Research by Tagg shows that faculty are inclined to embrace a status quo bias, which stems from an overriding desire to avoid loss and to bestow value on that which one owns.⁴³ This bias is counter to adaptive work; when faculty attempt to keep their situations stable and certain, new opportunities go unseen. Tagg noted that making substantial gains in higher education initiatives will require a greater understanding of the sources of faculty resistance rather than blaming the personalities of faculty themselves. Given the important initiatives from the faculty members highlighted in this study, the need to discover and unlock the potential of faculty to engage adaptive work is critical.

Practical Applications: Practices and Disciplines to Foster Adaptive Work

A number of implications flow from this study. As stated above, intervention by leaders is critical in shifting their institutions—thus, it is paramount to consider the intentional formation of faculty and administrators to lead adaptive work. EPSs will grow and transform by identifying and investing in leaders who have the potential to engage this work—or have already displayed a proclivity to engage in adaptive change efforts. Once identified, institutions can invest in the development of these leaders by earmarking funds to create programs focused on enhancing adaptive work skills and the spiritual formation that undergirds the entire process of a seminary leader's formation. Practically, this could involve skill-building and emotional competency development in the following areas: (a) learning to recognize adaptive work opportunities, (b) creatively engaging the obstacles that hinder faculty from adaptive

⁴² Adrianna Kezar, *Rethinking Leadership in a Complex, Multicultural, and Global Environment: New Concepts and Models for Higher Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008).

⁴³ John Tagg, "Why Does the Faculty Resist Change?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 44(1) (2012): 6–15.

work, and (c) encouraging learning alongside expertise. These components are further explored in the following section.

Learning to Recognize Adaptive Work Opportunities

The authors of this study contend that leading organizational change in EPSs is not an option; it is vital to developing and maintaining a healthy, vibrant, relevant educational institution. An effective leader in higher education must facilitate changes that help institutions adapt to external and internal challenges, trends, and disruptions and prepare graduates for the complexities of their world.⁴⁴ However, many well-intentioned leaders focus the bulk of their time, energy, and resources on less-effective types of changes, assuming that technical fixes and the expertise of the past will create a larger capacity to embrace change within institutions. When technical fixes such as realigning organizational structures, changing curricula, hiring new faculty, and creating events are linked to a deeper analysis of systemic values, it is more likely that these efforts will advance innovation rather than maintain the status quo of the institution.⁴⁵ Practically, an effective solution to promote this type of innovation would be to provide adaptive leadership training to help faculty and administrators jointly engage in adaptive work. This training would include skill-building to differentiate technical and adaptive problems, to recognize one's strengths and interest in promoting change, and to acknowledge the losses associated with the changes. Building these skills among faculty and staff will help these leaders pinpoint the emotional and personal resistance to change that often limits the creative, innovative, and adaptive thinking needed to move academic institutions into the future and shape students to be prepared for a changing world.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, A. Grashow, and M. Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Heifetz and Linsky, 60.

⁴⁶ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 32.

Creatively Engaging the Obstacles That Hinder Faculty From Adaptive Work

As highlighted previously, institutions often incentivize faculty to pursue research, scholarship, and publishing opportunities rather than to expend time, energy, and resources facilitating adaptive work. Therefore, the nature of adaptive work often opposes the kind of expertise that propels faculty careers. In addition, the vocational formation of many faculty is not naturally aligned to advance adaptive work. Rather, faculty members often must negotiate a complex set of internal barriers to engage adaptive work, including (but not limited to) feeling incompetent, adopting a learning mindset over a knowing one, and managing fears of irrelevance in new structures and systems that are changing in ways that they cannot fully predict or control. One leader in the study noted that faculty are among the most autonomous entities with the greatest amount of independence and intellectual freedom at EPSs. However, faculty members often assume their involvement in institutional improvement would be invisible and a loss of time, energy, and money that creates no lasting value.⁴⁷ In addition, many faculty members might benefit from maintaining the status quo in their organization, which counteracts a sustained inclination to embrace change. Addressing the factors that influence these barriers will be necessary to invite faculty into a greater partnership with adaptive work in EPSs.

In spite of the hinderances, faculty members in this study demonstrated leadership acumen and strategic planning that promoted change in their institution. A significant reason for this work was that these faculty members were encouraged and incentivized by their supervisors or executive team to fulfill adaptive work. They were given course load reductions, additional titles, greater access to the president, financial resources to support their programs, and space in their workloads to cognitively and emotionally engage adaptive work. Given that faculty endowments such as higher salaries, raises, stipends, and grants are emblematic of the value of a faculty member's expertise, it would benefit

⁴⁷ Tagg, 7.

institutional leaders to connect the value systems for faculty to support and promote innovative new ideas.

Encouraging Learning Alongside Expertise

One research participant insisted that “no magic bullet” will solve the critical issues facing EPSs, and academic leaders are mostly distracted by the constant daily barrage of situations and minor crises to which they must respond. However, research shows that professional effectiveness increases among those leaders who practice constant *sensemaking*, which requires a disciplined and ongoing process of discernment and reflection.⁴⁸ Leaders who utilize sensemaking into their daily work incorporate a continuous skill cycle of noticing a situation, interpreting the information based on one’s internal assumptions, and deciding the next step of action.⁴⁹ Branson and Martinez identified this effective practice of intentional meaning making in leaders they identify as *reflective practitioners*. According to these authors, reflective practitioners are observers in a constant learning stance who utilize “a continual movement from experience to reflection and study, and then on to new actions and experiences.”⁵⁰ Adopting this type of personal awareness brings knowledge of one’s self into a cycle of reflective-action that brings about a more thorough and meaningful relationship with the world. This praxis-oriented behavior fuels new actions that help leaders respond with their fullest self to new and changing contexts.⁵¹

Ironically, numerous participants in this study stated that maintaining this type of learning stance in EPSs can be challenging because expertise is often valued over admitting failure or a lack of knowing. Particular forces and processes of habituation—even in educational institutions—counteract the process of learning

⁴⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Joan V. Gallos, *Reframing Academic Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 18.

⁴⁹ Bolman and Gallos, 19.

⁵⁰ Mark Branson and Juan Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 40.

⁵¹ Branson and Martinez, 40.

in one's context.⁵² To their detriment, faculty and administrators are often trained to never admit they are without answers. In addition, institutions enact practices to award those who extend their opinion over those who ask questions. Over time, the process of avoiding the pain of uncertainty or ignorance blocks a leader's new understanding and creates teams of people who (tragically) are skilled at keeping themselves from learning. The authors of this article recognize that reconstituting educational institutions to value expertise and learning equally is no easy feat. However, this study has shown that leaders in EPSs can engage in a dual process of learning and developing expertise, which will cultivate the personal humility and self-awareness to ask questions, create new avenues of learning, and facilitate the ability to solve complex issues.

Conclusion

The environment in which graduate theological education is situated is experiencing seismic change. Institutions of ecclesial training have the opportunity to influence communities of faith, which navigate significant economic, religious, political, technological, and racial concerns.⁵³ In addition, pressures are forcing graduate theological institutions to restructure and assess their educational models to construct more appealing, effective, and efficient approaches.⁵⁴ This time in history necessitates a distinct type of leader who can advance into this unknown future with tenacity, humility, and hope. It is precisely this context of massive change that established the need for this study, which identifies the attitudes and behaviors that enable leaders in EPSs to engage in the kind of adaptive work that can be instrumental in ushering in new forms of graduate theological education.

In this article, we have highlighted the disruptive and shifting terrain through which leaders of adaptive work are engaging. The time to analyze institutions and develop leaders who facilitate

⁵² Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 113.

⁵³ Barna Group, *What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

⁵⁴ Reynolds and Wallace, 106.

changes is now; the way in which graduate theological leaders respond to the issues highlighted in this article will indeed write the futures of their institutions. The reason for such efforts is evident: God will continue to engage in the redemption and restoration of this world—with or without graduate theological education. However, our assertion is that graduate theological schools can remain viable instruments through which God will work, if its leaders commit to not merely reacting to a shifting climate, but proactively respond to disruptions and shifts with an intention to shape the future.

Call for papers. Do you have an idea for an article that could be published in the JRL? Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay (rmartin@wesleyseminary.edu).

Call for Book Reviews. Book Review editor Michael Wilson has a list of books to review (receive a free book!), or suggest your own, at mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu. No unsolicited reviews accepted.

Guidelines for articles and book reviews are located at arl-jrl.org.