

WORKING WITH ADAPTION- INNOVATION IN LEADERSHIP PRACTICE: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT'S MISSING?

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The current paper reviews examples of working with organizational leaders and integrating adaption-innovation (A-I) theory and its associated psychometric, the Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI; Kirton, 1985). Three specific in-depth cases are reviewed and analyzed, and a series of learning insights are shared. A set of key enabling factors are argued to transform A-I related insights to valuable actions. These include emotional intelligence capabilities focused on self-and-others; the role of a structured learning process to aid reflection and action; effective coping behavior that sustains the options for action; and examples of the sourcing and use of diversity. Areas for further research into practice are also described.

Introduction

I first heard about Kirton's Adaption-Innovation (A-I) theory in 1999, when attending a U.K.-based Masters-level module on creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. As part of the learning process, we completed Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI) and received feedback on how we each preferred to solve problems, more adaptively or more innovatively.

The insights resonated, and, by 2004, I would started a consulting business, and had trained to use A-I theory in our work.

The current paper is based on reflections on the insights from practice, having worked through more than 3,000 client uses of the KAI over 18 years. While there are many A-I related studies of teams and leadership, there are relatively few published articles of real

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leaders in real organizations, reflecting on their own learning as they sought to apply insights from A-I theory. The current paper seeks to address the gap in the literature.

Adaption-Innovation Theory

A-I theory is fundamentally one of differences in thinking style, applied to problem solving. Kirton (1989), the originator of A-I theory, distinguished between opportunity, motive, level, and style. *Opportunity* is provided by the environment in which we work and live. The challenge here is one of perception, as many opportunities (or threats) are likely to coexist, but, without us perceiving them, there is no framing of a problem. *Motive* provides the process by which we concentrate, channel, and direct our energies toward the goal. It relates to our intensity and persistence in pursuing that goal. Motive also helps explain why we choose some opportunities rather than others. Having chosen the problem to address, Kirton distinguishes between level and style. *Level* describes the capacity we bring, and can include technical, leadership, and interpersonal skills as well as experience. It can also include specific skills in working through the creative problem-solving process.

Kirton defined *style* as the “strategic, stable characteristic – the preferred way in which people respond to and seek to bring about change” (Kirton, 2011). In other words, how we prefer to solve problems. One of Kirton’s main contributions to the understanding of creativity was providing evidence that level and style are unrelated. Having more or less capability to bring to a particular problem says nothing about the characteristic manner in which problems are solved. No problem-solving style is better than the other, each having advantages and disadvantages given the problem to solve.

The core of the difference in styles revolves around the degree of structure people prefer to use while solving a problem. People with a more adaptive preference prefer to use more structure; whereas people with a more innovative preference prefer to use less structure. For example, the more adaptive prefer to work within the bounds of the prevailing structure, and to appreciate its proven, enabling potential. They are less sensitive to the current structure’s limiting aspects. The more adap-

tive are also more likely to gain a consensus between people—consensus being a social structure. Their value is clear: they are able to produce solutions that can be implemented within the prevailing approach, and to do so quickly, with lower cost and risk, and by improving what is already legitimized. One of the potential “blind-spots” for the more adaptive is that they may persevere with an existing structure for too long—after its value has receded.

The more innovative find the existing structure more limiting. They may perceive the existing structure as being the cause of the problem and are much more likely to challenge and change the prevailing structure to solve the problem. Through bringing insights from unexpected sources, beyond the existing boundaries, innovators are more likely to suggest potentially transformational solutions, that might develop completely different services and ensure the survival of the organization. Alternatively, their solutions may be more risky, harder to secure agreement, and tend to change the existing approach, even when it is still delivering value.

These are some of the trait differences of more adaptive and more innovative individuals, but trait preference is not the same as behavior. Work demands and relationships will require us to stretch from our preference which Kirton termed coping behavior. Motivation is the raw fuel for driving our coping behavior, enabling us to push ourselves beyond our preference to get work done when the problem requires us to behave more adaptively or more innovatively. And with greater experience we learn strategies to cope effectively, and this becomes key to our effectiveness and well-being.

The further we stretch away from our preference, and the longer the time, the more energy it takes, and this rises exponentially. This is an important point: when we are tired we have less motivation to stretch away from our preference. At times like this we revert back to our style preference, with all its pros and cons. The more adaptive will become more detailed, methodical, and structured, but too much attention to process may slow down progress; the more innovative will revert to proliferating more ideas, challenging established norms, but may have difficulty turning ideas into action.

Of course, teams solving complex problems need people to bring different perspectives, frames, experiences, and energies, which puts an onus on team leaders to make good use of these differences. Leaders are likely to have two challenges regarding the leadership of diverse teams. The first is in accessing enough diversity. Where the current team is too narrow in range of thinking, some different thinking needs to be brought in, as illustrated in Case 1 below. The second is in learning how to maximize the presence of diversity, and Cases 2 and 3 demonstrate leaders' approaches to this in practice.

As a methodological point, while this article accesses selected case study raw data from an earlier publication (Sheffield, 2019), it extends the analysis of implications for leadership practice in relation to A-I theory. This analysis is further informed by more recent work with organizational leaders, reflections from these leaders, and reflections from the author.

Case Studies

CASE 1: DEALING WITH A LACK OF COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

This law firm had established an internal project team to set up online services as a channel for existing and new legal services. The team would talk to internal stakeholders, especially divisional directors, and prioritize the development of e-business ideas from concept to implementation to realized value. Nine months after the team had been recruited, things were not going so well. I received a call from the team leader and was invited to help. When I walked into the team's main office room, I saw hundreds of post-it notes over the walls. There was little evidence of focus.

I learned more about their work challenges. The team of five people had been talking with their divisional directors, who were the service "owners" for specific legal offerings. Their usual response was to say: "Yes, we could do that ..." As a result, their list of potential services was growing, and their internal customers expected results. But with their slim resources, the team had to prioritize to deliver anything. Nine months into the work, with expectations rising, their reputation was beginning to diminish and team morale was falling.

The five team members completed the KAI inventory, and received their results, shown in Table 1.

This team was made up of individuals who were all innovative, and the leader was the most innovative of the team. Understanding how they had been recruited provided insights into how this had happened. The team had responded to an internal advertisement for this new project, written along the lines of:

Applications are welcomed for an exciting new, strategic project. Our business wants to develop an online presence and be at the leading edge of service development in our industry ... (Sheffield, 2019, p. 157)

The advertisement had unwittingly attracted people with a more innovative problem-solving preference. After providing feedback from KAI results, team members quickly grasped what was happening. The team had started with a strong sense of excitement, had generated many possibilities very quickly, but was now struggling to use sufficient structure to focus its efforts. They needed more adaptive behavior.

The leader had several insights. First, he understood the critical value of adaptive behavior and discussed this with his team. He saw that they needed to prioritize ideas, and use a structured process, with criteria, to do this. Second, people were already tired, so he allocated work to fit people's KAI preference. This improved both job satisfaction and work productivity and lowered stress levels. Third, where coping behavior was unavoidable, the leader talked to team members about who had capacity for this. Finally, over the next 2 months the team recruited a junior solicitor and an administrator. Both of whom provided a more structured approach, giving the team improved breadth and balance along the adaption-innovation continuum.

Nine months later, the team was offering legal services online. One of them—an employment law training package—was already selling well. The team's

Table 1 E-Business Team (N = 5)

Mean score	Range	Leader score
116	104–131	131

Note. The adaption-innovation theoretical range runs from 32 to 160, with a general population mean of 95. Individuals scoring between 32 and 95 are adaptive with individuals positioned closer to 32 being more strongly adaptive. Individuals scoring 96–160 are innovative with individuals positioned closer to 160 being more strongly innovative.

internal reputation was much improved and so was their external market profile. They were gaining access to business development opportunities, winning new clients, and new revenue.

CASE 2: A CASE OF EFFECTIVE PAIRING

Ted headed up an emergency department of a large hospital trust in the South of England. He applied for and won a place on a regional healthcare leadership development program, run by me and fellow tutors in the United Kingdom. On the program, Ted's KAI score of 82 placed him as a strong adaptor—more adaptive than around 75% of the population. He was not surprised, stating to me:

It made me laugh. Because, reflecting on what I know now, it showed me what I know, which is that I work within boundaries. If I don't have boundaries, I find it quite scary and quite stressful ... If I know what the limits are, it helps me come up with the solutions and move things forward. (Sheffield, 2019, p. 159)

We talked again 6 months after the leadership program. Ted described a story where he had applied what he had learned from A-I theory. Patient flow was a constant challenge for the department: keeping people safe, absorbing new people into the space, while getting people out the other end. All the while within the constraints of limited beds, while looking for opportunities to move people to other hospital wards. The standard approach was that patients would wait until the in-patient ward says: we have a space, and they would move out of emergency.

Ted's colleague, Jo, had an idea: could each of the other departments take one extra patient from the emergency department, thereby reducing the pressure on it? Jo was broadening the location and boundary of the problem from emergency to "out-there." Ted's initial response was to control the problem, keeping it within his department.

The initial response from other departments was that they were unconvinced: why should they share ownership of the problem? Ted described Jo as being more of a typical innovator: challenging traditional approaches; not bounded by assumptions of approaches; a lateral thinker. She started talking to more people in the

hospital—not taking no for an answer. And people started to listen to her. She was doing all of this on her own time, and Ted realized that he needed to support her. He attended formal meetings in his senior role, and with his authority and more consensual style, Ted reassured influential people in the wider organization. He smoothed the idea's path. He also supported Jo, recognizing that a challenge to prevailing approaches was needed. Ted gave Jo formal time to develop the idea and fought for her to get paid for these extra efforts.

The idea worked. Agreement was built, and as a result, the hospital agreed to routinely share the load, and embedded the change into policy: an adaptive activity, and a boon for the longer-term sustainability of change.

CASE 3: RECRUITING A "BRIDGER"

Donna was the head of a business unit for a global business services organization. Her business supported small and medium sized business across the United Kingdom. I had been coaching Donna through a transition stage of her leadership role, over a 12-month period. During this time, we brought together her team of direct reports, and everyone completed the KAI.

The conversation below outlines the business and leadership challenges, her learning, and the approach Donna took.

Donna: "... We had identified a strategic need to diversify into different markets, where we could take our existing solutions ... And there were changes in the market, generally, towards a more technology-enabled world. We had already seen significant growth and were profitable, but we had to change to achieve a vision of aspirational growth and quadrupling our business in a very short time. And I was struggling to bring the team with me. I always felt that I was running ahead of them, and I was finding that frustrating." (Sheffield, 2019, p. 164)

Rob: Yes, I remember that: it felt like there was a gap growing between your vision and their daily practice.

Donna: Yes, we talked frequently at our planning and strategy meetings around the future and where we needed to get to ... We'd allocate tasks, but it still felt

like they'd stare at me, a bit blankly. I was concerned that it was about my communication: am I getting this across well enough? Were they excited? Did they 'get' it? When I tested that with them, they said, "Yes, we can see where the business is going to grow." But the reality of getting there was a real challenge. (Sheffield, 2019, p. 165)

Table 2 indicates the KAI scores of the group. Individuals were each provided personal feedback as well as the overall team pattern.

What is not shown in the table is that there were two sub-groups of results. Four team members clustered at the adaptive end, one around the mid-point, with Donna and another being more innovative. And she had an insight.

I realised I was getting these people to make a leap. I was saying 'just make the change now and we'll deal later with the fallout'. And they didn't see that could possibly be achieved ... That didn't stop us needing to change our business, but I was in a situation where people were focusing on the day-to-day work, that they had to do. And they were comfortable in that ... I'd still get blank looks when I was talking about the vision. I'd say to myself: 'We've been through this many times now, is it how I'm communicating it?' But then I'd rethink and say to myself: 'Hold on – for these guys, we are making change. Which is different to my view of what change really means.' And being able to reflect on the folks in the team, made me able to accept that we were OK for now. (Sheffield, 2019, pp. 165–166)

Donna did two things. She recalibrated her expectations of her existing staff. She needed them to provide the process and customer foundations that would always be important, and she gave more credence to the incremental change they were producing.

Secondly, she understood that it is not always easy to disagree publicly with the leader! Especially when that leader's thinking style is significantly different

to most of their team. Someone with a more adaptive way of thinking might be able to translate Donna's more transformational vision into meaningful and workable tasks with the rest of the group. She recruited "V," who acted as what Kirton described as a *bridger*. Serving as a bridger is a social role and not related to any particular problem-solving style. In Donna's view, V's style was situated between the more adaptive cluster and more the innovative group, including Donna. V was able to focus on customers' needs; spend plenty of time with team members, turn grander aims into more local requirements, and ensure the team's ongoing commitment.

These two efforts affected staff retention and engagement for the better, as Donna summed up:

... I learnt that the more adaptive people are good at managing people, workloads, and making sure that clients are renewed and reviewed: our traditional business. With that at the core, it gives us a platform of stability to both transform the business and make sure we're still delivering what we need ... They've liked having V as part of the team. She's calm! She's not running ahead all the time. With me, they'd be thinking: 'I'm not sure what she's talking about. And she's excited about it.' Which meant they'd rather sit there silently than dampen my mood. These experiences made me realise that, in order to grow our business; I need other people who can focus on running the business, and see the vision, and I can't do all of that. (Sheffield, 2019, pp. 167–168)

Through bringing in someone to "bridge" the cognitive gap between more adaptive and more innovative individuals in a team, Donna was applying one of Kirton's principles of good bridging: she was enabling all group members to focus their resources on real problems that contribute to the group's overall survival (Kirton, 2011).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RESEARCH GAPS

These cases illustrate some general principles I have seen repeatedly in practice. First, turning insight into useful action requires sufficient emotional intelli-

Table 2 Business Services Team (N=7)

Mean score	Range	Leader score
98	82–123	120

gence. What helped in each of these cases was a combination of:

- The self-awareness for the leader to question their own approach.
- Enough empathy to appreciate the effect of their actions on others.
- The adaptability to consider alternative approaches once they recognized that the current one was not working.

When the more adaptive and innovative understand their own strengths and limitations, and genuinely respect the value that others can bring, new possibilities emerge. Both the self and social-oriented capabilities matter. With respect to emotional intelligence, more research is warranted to understand how the more adaptive and the more innovative may resolve conflict in teams differently. For example, might the tendency of the more adaptive to secure consensus lead to better conflict-handling skills? And might the preference of the innovative to readily challenge assumptions lend themselves to gradually learning more diplomatic ways of challenging?

Second, a prolonged period of learning and reflection helped these leaders in the three cases. A combination of training, coaching, and consulting, conducted over months, helped leaders understand themselves better, reflect on their team members' preferences, and plan informed action on a change they wanted to make. This raises another area for research: What learning designs might best aid sustained and desirable change, informed by insights from A-I theory?

Third, we saw different approaches to collaboration in teams. First, the pairing of Ted and Jo in Case 2. From experience, pairing is probably the most common application of diversity in organizations. Two people meet and discuss work concerns when they think differently, care about the same problem, and respect each other. In Case 3, we saw a different approach, when Donna had the humility and self-awareness to accept

that she was not the right bridger and brought in "V" to fill that role. As a team's positional leader, one may feel compelled to take the bridger role. Think again. The further away from the group average one's KAI score, the more coping it will take to do it well. Ask yourself whether you are the best bridger available. Accept that the positional leader's real role is to galvanize the diversity of others, rather than demonstrate one's own problem solving flair.

More academic research is needed to examine context-specific instances of leaders wrestling with problem-solving style issues in their work. It is recognized that these three case studies provide evidence of successful resolution of cognitive gap and much can be learned from cases in which cognitive gap is unsuccessfully resolved.

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