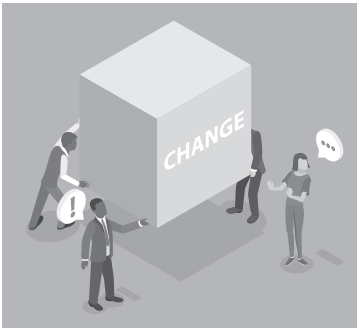




From Resistance to Resilience: Adaptive Leadership to Navigate Organizational Change in Uncertain Times

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Change as an Imperative in the Current Times

The last decades have marked a critical turning point for equity and justice leaders in the United States. Major shifts such as the legalization of marriage equal-



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ity, growing public awareness of gender-based violence and greater levels of accountability amplified by the Me Too movement, the national racial justice reckoning following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others, alongside the rise of the Black Lives Matters; and the evolution of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts across sectors are a few examples of how the public discourse around justice has been reshaped in a meaningful way at a national level.

Much of the momentum for these and other social transformations has come from anti-oppression movements led by historically marginalized communities. The Civil Rights Movement, led by Black Americans, worked to advance civil rights for BIPOC individuals across the nation and created a model that encouraged other groups to strive for their own liberation. Women's Liberation and the Feminist Movement arose when women involved in activism on behalf of civil rights and anti-war work saw that their own subordination

was also a political issue. The American Indian Movement, surged into people's consciousness when it coalesced as a national organization and undertook actions that brought it to the attention of non-Indigenous Americans. Gay, Lesbian, and queer liberation movements developed in the context of civil rights and women's liberation and have fought tirelessly in favor of queer freedom and equal treatment under the law.³

Alongside these significant steps toward equity and justice, we have also witnessed increasing pushback from sectors in positions of power. In recent years, this resistance has intensified through policies and state actions that undermine constitutional and human rights — including the erosion of due process and protections against unreasonable searches — alongside deep funding cuts for social services, the broad rollback of institutional DEI efforts, and the continued targeting of vulnerable communities, including Trans, immigrant, and Black and Brown communities. This has placed growing pressure on nonprofit and public interest leaders, communities, and pro-justice organizations as they continue working to protect hard-won progress and respond to rapidly shifting social and political conditions.

As a result, many nonprofit leaders see this as a time of existential threat to their organizations and the communities they serve as they face increased demand for their services and significant cuts to their funding.⁴ A recent report on the impact of recent policy and funding changes on community leaders, organizations, and communities in Washington state describes these shifts as “devastating.” The report highlights the negative effects of these recent changes on the well-being of community leaders, the reduction of resources available to meet growing service demands, and the ongoing

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struggle organizations face to remain sustainable amid these challenges.⁵

How can organizations navigate this complex and uncertain landscape, and what path forward allows them to continue providing essential services, withstand current conditions, and remain grounded in their principles and values? While there is no single solution to challenges of this magnitude, there are some approaches that can offer meaningful guidance. In this article, we invite readers to consider several of these, including: 1) adaptive leadership, 2) continuous improvement mindset, and 3) appreciative inquiry, alongside other key lessons around change and resilience. We offer these as meaningful methods that can strengthen our strategies to navigate uncertainty with intention, remain agile in the face of change, and respond effectively to evolving community needs while sustaining long-term impact. Moreover, embracing these unwelcome circumstances and transformations may create an opportunity to shift from a state of resistance to one of resilience, enabling us to reimagine how we carry out our work and how we pursue lasting system transformation.

Adaptive Leadership and Continuous Change

In times of uncertainty, leadership at the organizational level plays a vital role in helping teams move strategically and prepare for unexpected, and often unavoidable, changes. Effective leadership provides clarity of purpose, supports thoughtful decision-making, and creates conditions for teams to remain focused and aligned even as circumstances evolve dramatically. Leadership development, therefore, becomes essential. It enables organizations to adapt, grow, and address complex challenges with intention rather than reactivity.

Grounded in this understanding, it is important to clarify what we mean by leadership. We view leadership as a set of behaviors not defined by positional power or absolute authority, but by mutual respect, shared responsibility, and a commitment to transcendent human values. At its core, leadership entails:

- **Articulating a compelling vision** that motivates and inspires others, sparks imagination, encourages hope, and invites co-creation.
- **Equity Centered Decision Making:** Leadership requires the use of an equity lens for decision-making practices and prioritization.

- **Embrace Adaptability & Accountability:** This involves a commitment to embracing continuous change so that organizations remain responsive to the evolving needs of communities most impacted by oppression and marginalization.

We believe that leadership can *and must* be learned and taught. It is best understood not as a title, but as a role, one that allows individuals to move fluidly between leading and following based on context and needs.

Leadership is a relational, ethical process oriented towards change and mutual motivation.⁶ As Robin Gerber noted: “Leadership is about change. It means intentionally achieving a helpful, ethical purpose and doing so in a process of reciprocal motivation between leaders and those they hope to lead.”⁷

This set of behaviors becomes especially vital in times of uncertainty, enabling teams and organizations to respond thoughtfully to evolving challenges and unexpected demands, and to embrace strategic adaptability.

Adaptation to new possibilities and obstacles is a critical component of human survival. This process has evolved with the growth, complexity, and variation in structure, governance, and strategy of social, political, and commercial realms. Our understanding of how to successfully manage this process has also evolved. One management practice that meets the complexity of our current systems and organizations is adaptive leadership. We understand adaptive leadership as “... the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive... [it] is specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive.”⁸ New and shifting landscapes demand new strategies and skills, as well as the leadership to mobilize them. These innovations and variations help organizations thrive under challenging circumstances rather than perish, regress, or contract. “Leadership, then, must wrestle with the normative

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questions of value, purpose, and process.”⁹

Adaptive leadership asks leaders to recognize the difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are those that can be resolved through existing expertise.¹⁰ For example, a common technical challenge within organizations is determining how to accurately track expenses across departments, which can be addressed through a technical solution such as developing clear accounting policies and standardized financial processes. On the other hand, adaptive challenges are often ambiguous and require collective sense-making, experimentation, and learning.¹¹ For instance, embedding new wellness policies and practices to strengthen organizational culture may require gathering meaningful feedback from staff and fostering a co-creation process between employees and decision-makers to ensure shared ownership and accountability.

At its core, adaptive leadership prioritizes spaces of empowerment where open dialogue is welcomed, and people feel comfortable contributing ideas, challenging assumptions, and exploring new possibilities together. Inclusive participation becomes a strategic asset, ensuring that a wider range of perspectives informs decision-making and strengthens outcomes. This approach also demands a commitment to ongoing learning, cultivating the conditions for innovation so teams can respond effectively to changing realities.¹²

Embracing Change and Adaptation: Recent Learnings

Like many peer organizations, our team at JustLead Washington,¹³ engaged in a period of deep reflection to determine how best to navigate the shifting socio-political landscape surrounding pro-justice work. This moment also brought significant challenges, including reduced funding, increasing service expectations, and persistent uncertainty linked to recent pushback against DEI and equity-focused initiatives. In response, we were compelled to strengthen our focus on evaluation and assessment, advance long-term strategic planning, adapt curricula to emerging realities, and make thoughtful decisions about immediate priorities. This process of reflection and adaptation ultimately

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generated several important lessons that informed the organization’s direction and approach:

1. We Must Remember the Shoulders We Stand On

A critical lesson is the importance of remembering that today’s pro-justice work is rooted in the efforts of leaders and movements that came before us. Their perseverance, strategies, and victories expanded access to justice and challenged systems of oppression, offering both guidance and hope for the work ahead. The pursuit of equity and justice has never been linear; it has been shaped by cycles of progress and resistance; of expansion and contraction. While movements often revisit familiar tensions, they do not return to the same place. Each turn brings new insight, stronger strategy, and deeper collective power, gradually advancing a broader vision of justice, belonging, and liberation.

For instance, we intentionally engaged experienced advocates from our pro-equity community- which included visionaries, builders, and partners- to gather input and co-develop training sessions for our broader network. These efforts elevated their lived experiences, strategies, and perspectives about current challenges, offering powerful reminders of the cyclical nature of equity and justice work. For our team, revisiting past struggles and successes helped ground our hope, sharpen our perspective, and inform more strategic decision-making.

2. Revisit the Organization’s Mission Regularly

Frequently revisiting the organization’s mission, along with its core principles and values, is essential to maintaining clarity and direction. Using this lens helps teams stay grounded in their purpose and helps to reconnect with the fundamental reasons the organization exists. In times of uncertainty, anchoring decisions in mission and values becomes even more critical, fostering alignment, strengthening collaboration, and ensuring that both internal efforts and external partnerships remain focused

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on meaningful and transformational impact. This exercise proved essential during our team and board retreats, creating space to affirm our shared values and collective commitment to justice and equity work, while strengthening our sense of unity by revealing the powerful common thread that binds us to an aspiration for belonging.

3. Embrace a Continuous Improvement Mentality

Periods of significant change require organizations to remain attentive to both outcomes and the quality of their services to assess whether they are fulfilling their mission and responding to emerging needs. Although improvement may feel secondary when organizational stability is at risk, our experience demonstrates that asking intentional questions is essential:

- How can we respond to community needs now?
- What must be reprioritized?
- What support is required to support others?

Creating structured opportunities for dialogue, gathering information, and inviting feedback allows organizations to remain aware of shifting realities, adapt services accordingly, and strengthen accountability by applying lessons learned. Engaging community members is a fundamental component of a continuous improvement mindset. Partners, program participants, and clients are uniquely positioned to assess the impact of services, offering critical insight that helps guide prioritization and identify what is most needed to support them.¹⁴

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Engaging in strategic planning during uncertainty

proved to be a powerful way to prioritize resources, clarify direction, and make intentional choices about where to invest energy.

4. What Are Our Assets? — An Appreciative Inquiry Lens

Applying an appreciative inquiry perspective encourages organizations to approach change through a strengths-based lens. As a transformational framework grounded in organizational change theory and the human sciences, appreciative inquiry centers existing assets, bright spots, and effective practices while inviting teams to imagine future possibilities rooted in collective strengths rather than perceived deficits.¹⁵ By asking generative questions and incorporating storytelling, creativity, and imagination, organizations can reframe challenges as opportunities. Recognizing and investing in what is already working becomes a key strategy for sustaining momentum.

5. Strategic Planning and Long-Term Sustainability

Engaging in strategic planning during uncertainty proved to be a powerful way to prioritize resources, clarify direction, and make intentional choices about where to invest energy. This process also strengthened our work and collaboration with our partners by creating opportunities to identify shared challenges, align on common goals, and ensure that our strategic direction stays rooted in supporting the communities we serve. Beyond immediate decision-making, strategic planning allowed our organization to continue imagining future possibilities, nurturing creativity, and intentionally building initiatives that support long-term sustainability and the continued delivery of services.¹⁶

6. The Two Rs: Moving from Resistance to Resilience

Efforts toward systems transformation inevitably encounter resistance. Examples of recent external resistance are policy changes, funding cuts, public criticism, or attempts to dismantle equity initiatives, often creating destabilizing conditions for organizations and communities. At the same time, internal resistance also surfaces, as uncertainty activates natural human

responses such as fear, grief, immobilization, or flight. Rather than viewing resistance solely as a barrier, it can serve as important information, revealing where attachment exists, where power dynamics are shifting, and where deeper support is needed. If resistance is inevitable, resilience becomes essential. “Beyond mere recovery, resilience encompasses the ability to adapt, transform, and sustain performance under adverse conditions.”¹⁷ In this context, resilience is not endurance at any cost; it is the capacity to remain grounded in values and strategic intent while making thoughtful adjustments, and holding firm to equity commitments as conditions evolve.¹⁸

7. Prioritize Collective Wellness

Sustaining pro-justice work in times of uncertainty requires intentional attention to individual and collective wellbeing. Rest, mental health support, connection to community and environment, creativity, and moments of joy should not be overlooked; they are foundational to long-term sustainability, presence, and effectiveness. When people feel supported and grounded, they remain engaged in complex work while reducing burnout and cultivating resilience and hope. Integrating wellbeing into decision-making processes ensures that organizational priorities support not only outcomes, but also the people who make the work possible.

At JustLead Washington, over the past few years, we have intentionally integrated a range of wellness practices into our work. These efforts include team-building activities such as hikes and outdoor gatherings, strategic office closures to promote rest and work-life balance, flexible remote work options, and access to executive coaching opportunities for staff. These practices function as vital infrastructure that supports the emotional and psychological stamina required for sustained change.

Equally important is the culture of care we have nurtured as a team. When any one of us is struggling, we name it—and we support one another in concrete ways. Sometimes that means redistributing workload; other times it means encouraging someone to take a mental health day, stepping in unprompted, or simply offering space to talk, vent, or process. It is what it means to honor our humanity in the work. Without that, this work would be significantly harder, and certainly less sustainable. Our ability to show up for the communities we serve is directly tied to the ways we show up for each other.

A Pathway Forward

The instability of the current moment offers a powerful opening: uncertainty-driven change can be embraced as a disruption to welcome, as an opportunity for learning, deeper alignment, and meaningful organizational growth. When teams are willing to pivot strategically, they create conditions for more responsive services, stronger support for frontline workers, and greater innovation.

Adaptive leadership, continuous improvement mentality, and appreciative inquiry invite organizations and individuals to navigate uncertainty with intention, curiosity, and responsiveness. These approaches also offer a pathway for moving from a state of resistance to one of resilience. Rather than depending on rigid hierarchies or predetermined solutions, together they center flexibility, shared ownership, and creative problem-solving as essential leadership capacities.¹⁹ They also underscore that the strongest strategies emerge when communities, partners, and staff are actively engaged in shaping the direction of the work.

Change, adaptation, and resilience are essential elements of our ongoing pursuit of equity and justice. While welcoming them can be complex and nuanced, strengthening our understanding of these elements can help reinforce our collectives and provide a roadmap for collaborative, effective, and strategic action.

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