



The Power is in the Process: Solving Adaptive Challenges in a Technical World

by Olivia Ortmann, Education Associate, South Carolina Department of Education,
Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development

How many times have you said the power is in the process but you wished the process could be shortened, skipped, or even ignored? If you walked into my classroom years ago or into my cubicle today, you would find a sign that reads: "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going." We say there is power in the process; however, often we do not embrace a mindset to match this belief.

A place worth going is one where those closest to the learning are the ones leading the work. That's what the Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI) is all about. In order to create sustainable change some technical work is required; however, it's the adaptive shifts that allow change to take place. (See [this video](#) to learn more about technical vs. adaptive challenges).

As lead of the South Carolina Collective Leadership Initiative, I found myself struggling to make it all continue as initially designed during a pandemic:

Composition of CLI in 2020

- Three cohorts
- 26 schools
- More than 125 collective leadership team participants
- 12, seven-hour, face-to-face days planned and ready to execute for 2020-21



Libby J. Ortmann is a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) with more than 30 years of experience in education. Libby earned both her B.A. and M.Ed from the University of South Carolina. She previously served as a middle school teacher, curriculum coach, and lead instructor for the state's alternative certification program. Currently, Libby is an Education Associate leading South Carolina's Collective Leadership Initiative.

Do I forge ahead with all the technical pieces in place? Or do I model collective leadership as adaptive work and a powerful, messy process?



This story is about the constant struggle working in a technical culture when the challenges require adaptive work. The pandemic we are experiencing provides the opportunity for me, as well as the Collective Leadership Initiative, to model adaptive work and create adaptive solutions. I identified three obstacles as I struggled to sustain the collective leadership work for the cohorts:

- We work in a technical culture;
- There is an inability to recognize that technical solutions cannot solve adaptive challenges; and
- There is reluctance to be authentically adaptive with session delivery and planning for our work.

Collective leadership is the powerful process that provides the opportunity to shift our mindset to adaptive work when solving challenges. In order to tackle these obstacles, I modeled being adaptive by taking risks and being transparent so that our collective leadership school teams could do the same.

Taking Risks

The activities that are turning out to have the greatest impact on our work and learning are the ones that require taking risks. Trying something based on what cohort participants need or based on what educators in our schools say is a need is powerful — even if it fails and we have to regroup.

For example, I had to let go of the planned agenda for each cohort and every module designed for full-day, face-to-face delivery. I had to ask myself if another plan was feasible while maintaining the integrity of the work. There was the looming risk of the schools in our cohorts deciding not to participate or limiting engagement. I took these concerns to the experts, team members of our collective leadership schools, and listened. With the help of our CTQ partners, we transformed all agendas and modules and adapted to two short webinars versus an all-day face-to-face session. We monitored the revised agenda and shortened the webinar even more after collecting feedback from the first module. I learned that I had to embrace what I have always told educators: “less is more.” And, this does not have to mean the key outcome is compromised. Being clear, concise, and letting go was a risk worth taking and modeling.

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Listening, acting, and being intentionally transparent takes time and is an example of adaptive work. Activities that require growing and transforming using adaptive solutions for adaptive challenges impact our practices. In the process of modeling adaptive work there have been many growth opportunities. We had the opportunity to model what collective leadership is all about. We had the opportunity to “walk” the belief that adaptive shifts, if realized, will impact the adaptive work. We had the opportunity to model what working in a state of ambiguity looks and feels like. Most importantly, we had the opportunity to lead collectively with South Carolina educators who openly embraced messy, adaptive work with the support of SCDE and CTQ.

We took a risk and the reward was great. More educators participated and stayed engaged longer than anticipated.



We continue to take risks and work in a space with no clear answers. We model a willingness to work against traditional ways of operating. In taking these risks, we transform the work and discover challenges and solutions collectively. While the pandemic surfaced the struggles of living in a technical culture, it also opened up opportunities to do things differently.

Where might I model a mind shift?

Transparency

I chose to model transparency. As a result, our collective leadership schools modeled and mirrored transparency. The risks were shared in this reciprocal process.

I was transparent and vulnerable when I shared with the cohorts that I did not know how the modules would look or be structured, but I assured the schools that I would focus on their needs and be collective and collaborative in our work together. Their need to leverage collective leadership for the here and now replaced any pre-planned agenda. I remember sharing the transformed plan with a cohort and even reshaping the next module in real time as they communicated what they needed for our next engagement.

A turning point in this story was when we modeled letting go of traditional ways of collective leadership to adapt to our cohort schools' needs. We did not need to plan for our virtual sessions to be an exact replica of our face-to-face sessions. Cutting out, cutting back, and being clear has served to transform and strengthen the power of the process. Being really clear on identifying the adaptive challenges allowed us to leverage the adaptive, collective process to solve them.

Based on these lessons learned, risk-taking and transparency will continue to guide the Collective Leadership Initiative. The process of identifying adaptive challenges and then collectively seeking adaptive solutions is key to sustaining the work. This has now become the “default” mindset in collectively-led schools.

The power is still in the process. I believe not only are there no shortcuts to any challenge worth solving, but there is no way to approach adaptive challenges apart from adaptive solutions. Anything short of this kind of process will not effectively transform our system, our schools, and our districts.

The work is hard and slow.

Technical challenges are temporary. Adaptive solutions are enduring.

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