



Why leaders struggle with self-development (and what to do about it).

ADEPTION INSIGHTS SERIES

Unpacking insights and themes from the real life experiences, challenges, goals and reflections of thousands of leaders — to support better leadership development journeys.

Why leaders struggle with self-development



Leadership is needed at every level of organizations today—from the C-Suite to the front line. In our rapidly changing world, leaders at all levels need to be able to accurately identify and respond to a wide range of challenges. This report examines how leaders are thinking about and approaching the challenges they're coming up against. By analyzing 1,532 responses to the question **'What is currently your biggest leadership challenge, and how are you approaching it?'** (collected from coaching conversations on the Adeption platform), we aim to highlight actionable insights for leaders and leadership development professionals

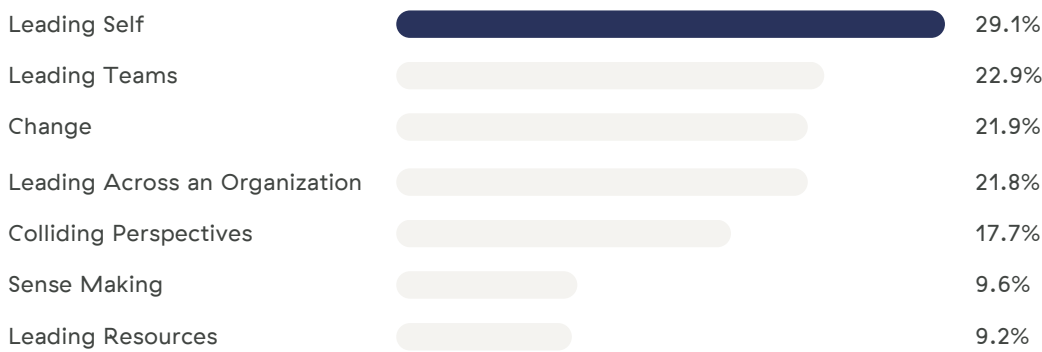
Responses were categorized across two key dimensions (see the appendix for full definitions):

- 1. **Challenge Themes:** Identified using common leadership development topics and conditions.
- 2. **Approach Framework:** Utilizing a bespoke Adaptive-Technical framework (see Technical vs. Adaptive Challenges: A Quick Guide).

ADEPTION INSIGHTS

WHAT IS CURRENTLY YOUR BIGGEST LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE? THEMES

Percentage of leaders who mentioned each theme



29.1%
of the challenges
leaders are facing
relate to leading
self

Figure 1. Percent of participants who mentioned each theme in their response (multiple themes allowed per response).

While leaders are facing a myriad of challenges, a significant 29.1% of leaders identified challenges specifically related to Leading Self. Drilling down further, 12.5% of the total sample revealed **difficulties in managing their own development journey**. So as leadership development practitioners, how can we support leaders better? To understand where opportunities exist to focus support and intervention, we looked at how leaders are framing these challenges.

HOW ARE YOU APPROACHING YOUR CHALLENGE? APPROACH FRAMEWORK

Percentage of approaches that relate to self-leadership challenges (using the Adaptive-Technical Framework)

Uncertain No, vague or poorly described approach



Technical: Mentions known solutions and available resources



Emerging Adaptive: Mentions some adaptive elements, includes technical elements. The approach to the challenge is not fully developed.



Strongly Adaptive: Mentions opportunities to adapt and experiment because the solution is unknown, mentions buy-in, collaboration, and diverse perspectives.



36.6%
discussed their
approach with
vagueness or
uncertainty

Figure 2. Percentage of approaches that relate to self-leadership challenges (single Adaptive Technical rating per response).

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In this deep dive analysis, 36.6% of all approaches that demonstrated uncertainty or vagueness related to self-development challenges (Leading Self). **This underscores the value of making leadership development widely available, as individuals grapple with managing their personal growth without external guidance.**

Further, 30.7% of Technical approaches were directed towards self-development challenges. This could indicate that **leaders are defaulting to established methods to approach self-development**, thinking, "If I need to learn something, I can research the best way and just do it." rather than recognizing the impact of context and taking a more experimental approach. Alternatively, this might suggest a **perceived lack of agency** over their development.

Additional analysis of all Uncertain responses (across all categories of leadership challenges) revealed an interesting pattern: these leaders were significantly less likely to use pronouns referring to other people. In fact, 52.3% used only self-referring pronouns, compared to 19%–36% in other framings. This suggests **leaders who shoulder challenges alone may find it considerably harder to articulate the actions or experiments needed to move forward**. Even in self-leadership others can play an important role in development, for example through mentoring and coaching.

IN ACTION

So, what can we do with these insights? This section outlines actionable strategies for creating greater clarity around approaching challenges and prioritizing self-development.

“The impact of self-leadership on any team's dynamics cannot be overemphasized as it not only fosters a higher level of productivity but also fosters an environment where every member of the team feels valuable. But these positives can only be enjoyed by having and being an effective leader—one who is self-aware, self-managed and intrinsically motivated. – [Jon Michail, Forbes](#)”



Technical vs. Adaptive Challenges: A Quick Guide

Technical challenges are well-defined problems that can be addressed using established procedures, expertise, and existing knowledge. Troubleshooting a computer issue by following a step-by-step guide is a technical challenge and approach. If you follow the instructions, you'll resolve the problem.

Adaptive challenges are complex and ambiguous problems that require adaptive shifts in mindset, values, and behaviors. Implementing a new company-wide software system, for instance, is an adaptive challenge. It requires navigating the complexities of user adoption, training needs, resistance to change, and integration with existing workflows – it's rarely a straightforward, "follow the instructions" scenario.

FRAME IT TO TAME IT

The leaders we work with often find enormous benefit in simply framing a challenge as either technical or adaptive. Complex situations often include both technical and adaptive elements. Recognizing these distinct components empowers leaders to tailor their actions and approaches more effectively.

REFLECTION

Try this reflection question, or use it to coach others:

- Is your challenge, or its individual components, adaptive or technical?

DON'T GO IT ALONE

Development can be hard, so creating an environment and ecosystem that supports personal growth is key. Set yourself up for success by inviting others into the process. Leaders love our Feedforward tool, a simple way to get started.

TOOL

FeedForward

[Read More](#)

NAVIGATE NEW CAREER PATHWAYS

The modern career landscape is constantly shifting, and leaders need to actively develop the agility to thrive within it. Sam Fernando, a Global Chats guest speaker shared this perspective.

“What do we need to do as individuals, how do we need to develop, to have agency for how we adapt into this, what I often really refer to as a big washing machine. – Sam Fernando

VIDEO

Watch this clip and more from the [Global Chat](#)

COLLIDING PERSPECTIVES

Mentoring can be a great support for self-development, and it doesn't always need to be a formal arrangement. Consider people you have an organic connection with, from whom you can look to for guidance and support. Or, challenge yourself to pick someone influential who doesn't necessarily champion you, using the opportunity to improve the working relationship and gain fresh perspectives. Our Global Chats guest, Kim Ballinger, tried this idea and shared her experience.

VIDEO

Listen to Kim Ballinger's [experience](#).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Adeption has delivered leadership development experiences to thousands of leaders over 10+ years, empowering them to 'learn how to learn' and drive their continuous development forward.

The data used in this report comes from 1532 responses to the question 'What is your current biggest leadership challenge, and how are you approaching it?' from the Leadership Mindset Indicator assessment digital debrief on the Adeption platform. All responses were free text and at least 30 words long. This is a cross-organizational sample. Due to the nature of the data export the number of organizations in the sample is unknown.

Challenges were tagged with the relevant theme tags from a total of 25 possible themes. These themes were grouped by common leadership development topics and conditions.

The overall challenge approach framing was assessed using a bespoke Adaptive-Technical framework.

Challenge themes:

Leading Self: Responses mentioned managing their own continuous development, communicating effectively, or making decisions.

Leading Teams: Responses mentioned managing a cohesive team culture, having courageous conversations, setting clear and realistic priorities, developing and growing skilled staff, balancing giving guidance with giving instructions, attracting and on-boarding new talent, caring for team wellbeing, or delegating to others.

Change: Responses mentioned navigating external changes, or organizational restructure or transformation.

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Challenge themes cont.

Leading Across an Organization: Responses mentioned being authentic in an organization, creating a shared purpose or strategy, balancing short term needs with long term strategy, or managing cross functional teams.

Colliding Perspectives: Responses mentioned balancing multiple perspectives, generating buy-in for projects, or dealing with narrow or fixed viewpoints.

Sense Making: Responses mentioned the need to explore new possibilities, or pressure to deliver simple solutions for complex problems.

Leading Resources: Responses mentioned workload balance, or that the team lacked capability or knowledge (not related to the team being too busy).

Adaptive-Technical Framework

Three dimensions were scored when assessing the framing of a challenge and its approach:

1. Protection (Technical) vs. Exposure (Adaptive)
2. Simple Solution (Technical) vs. Complex Evolution (Adaptive)
3. Resources and Constraints

Responses were scored as Uncertain where the dimensions above were not clear or unmentioned. Evidence from at least two was required to give an overall Adaptive-Technical rating.

Uncertain: The challenge is vague or poorly described, with little to no discussion of the approach taken.

Technical: The challenge is framed as a threat or annoyance to the status quo, solvable with a known solution and people playing their fixed roles. Requires, and is constrained by, a lack of discrete resources (time, staff, expertise, money, etc.).

Emerging Adaptive: The challenge and approach have some aspects of Strongly Adaptive framing, but are not consistent or fully developed. Technical framing may still be present.

Strongly Adaptive: The challenge and approach described as a valuable opportunity to adapt and experiment to create new norms. The solution is not known, or a 'right' answer may not exist. The issue is framed as key questions or polarities, and the resources needed are buy-in, collaboration, and alternative perspectives. Constrained by resistance to change.

ABOUT ADEPTION

How Adeption can help you grow agile leaders for the future of work.



ASSESSMENTS

A scalable solution for individual or team growth as a one-time development boost or regular pulse-check. Learn more about Adeption's [Leadership Mindset Indicator](#) assessment.



WORKSHOPS

Designed to enable behavioral shift through iterative action and experimentation in the "flow of work" while fostering collective leadership intelligence.



PLATFORM

The digital platform uses AI to scale development and support pull-based learning. A coach on-demand, leaders access tools, insights and support at their point of need.



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Using our B3 methodology across all touchpoints, programs are designed to grow agile leaders within a supportive development ecosystem.

TALK TO US

