

ADAPTIVE LABS

Adaptive Thinking

Part I — Preparing the Ground

Before a process can improve decisions, an organisation must create the conditions in which reality can be seen, challenged and understood together.

Tomasz Mazurkiewicz

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PART I

Preparing the Ground

Before Adaptive Thinking Can Begin

Adaptive Thinking is a way of understanding reality before deciding how to change it. It does not begin with a preferred solution or the assumption that the problem has already been defined correctly.

It connects perspectives, reveals relationships and keeps decisions responsive to changing reality.

Yet organisations often begin transformation with a solution already in mind: a new system, structure, strategy or operating model. The conversation moves quickly to delivery - who will lead, what will change and how success will be measured.

Before an organisation can change well, it must see its current reality clearly. That is harder than it sounds. Leaders see strategic priorities. Finance sees economics and control. Operations sees flow and friction. Technology sees architecture and dependencies. People closest to the work see practical constraints that may never reach a steering committee.

None of these views is complete. None is irrelevant.

Adaptive Thinking begins before the problem is defined.

Adaptive Thinking cannot simply be introduced as a sequence of steps. It first requires conditions in which people can compare what they see, question their assumptions and connect perspectives without premature agreement.

This is the ground on which an adaptive process depends: shared understanding, permission to challenge assumptions and the ability to connect multiple perspectives into one working picture of reality.

Without these conditions, a process may still produce decisions. It may even produce fast decisions. But it cannot reliably tell whether the organisation is solving the right problem.

Preparing the ground is not a delay before transformation. It is the first act of transformation.

The chapters that follow explain what Adaptive Thinking needs in order to work before describing the process itself. Separate Perspectives show how it can be applied to specific organisational and business questions.

CHAPTER 1

Shared Understanding Before Shared Responsibility

People cannot take responsibility for a system they understand only in fragments.

Organisations frequently ask people to take more ownership. Leaders want teams to think beyond functional boundaries, make better decisions and accept responsibility for outcomes rather than activities.

The intention is reasonable. The sequence is often wrong.

Responsibility is usually discussed as a matter of behaviour: people should care more, act faster, collaborate better and stop protecting their own areas. Yet what looks like a lack of ownership may begin much earlier. People may be making reasonable decisions from different understandings of how the organisation creates value.

Responsibility without understanding becomes compliance.

The organisation people see

Every role creates a particular field of vision. A commercial leader sees customers, growth and market pressure. Finance sees profitability, risk and capital. Operations sees capacity, handovers and service quality. Technology sees systems, data and dependencies. Governance sees control, accountability and exposure.

Each view is real, but each is partial. When people are evaluated mainly through their own targets, their part of the picture can begin to feel like the whole reality.

That is when local decisions become rational inside one function and damaging to the wider system. Sales protects volume. Operations protects stability. Finance protects margin. Technology protects architecture. Each function can present a reasonable case, yet the customer experience or the business outcome still deteriorates.

When everyone is responsible only for their part, no one is responsible for the outcome.

Why responsibility cannot be assigned into existence

A governance model can clarify decision rights. A RACI can clarify roles. A target can clarify expected performance. None of them can create a shared picture of cause and effect.

If people cannot see how their decisions affect other parts of the system, broader responsibility remains abstract. They may comply with a process without recognising the outcome their decisions help to create.

This is why attempts to increase accountability can produce more reporting, more approvals and more defensive behaviour. The organisation adds control where the real gap is connected understanding.

Shared responsibility becomes practical when people can see the relationships between decisions, actions and outcomes across the organisation.

Shared responsibility does not mean everyone owns everything. It means no one can ignore their effect on the whole.

A role is a starting point

Clear roles remain essential. An adaptive organisation is not an organisation without boundaries. Confusion about authority does not create collaboration; it creates delay.

But a boundary should clarify where accountability is anchored, not where curiosity must stop. People need enough visibility to understand what enters their area, what leaves it and how their choices affect the work of others.

A role defines where responsibility starts—not where contribution must end.

This changes the quality of the conversation. Instead of asking only, “Did my function deliver?”, people can also ask, “What outcome did our combined decisions create?”

What leaders make possible

Leaders often become the only place where fragmented perspectives meet. Information travels upwards, decisions are combined at the top and instructions travel back down. This may work in stable conditions, but it becomes slow and fragile when the environment changes quickly.

The alternative is not less leadership. It is enough shared understanding for good judgement to exist in more places.

The role of a leader is not to make every decision. It is to make good decisions possible across the organisation.

That requires leaders to share context, connect competing objectives, explain constraints and make trade-offs discussable. It also requires them to acknowledge when their own view is incomplete.

From alignment to understanding

Alignment is often treated as agreement. But agreement reached too early can hide differences that matter. Shared understanding serves a different purpose: it helps people recognise the same system even when they interpret parts of it differently.

People do not need identical opinions. They need a sufficiently connected view of reality to understand why others see the situation differently and how those differences may affect the outcome.

We cannot share responsibility for a reality we do not understand together.

This is the first condition of Adaptive Thinking. Before people can take responsibility for change, the organisation must make its reality visible enough to be understood across roles and functions. Shared understanding does not require identical thinking. It requires connected thinking. But that understanding can remain adaptive only when people are also allowed to challenge the assumptions on which it is built.

CHAPTER 2

The Permission to Challenge Assumptions

An organisation cannot adapt if reality is allowed to speak only after a decision has failed.

Most organisations say they value new thinking. They invite ideas, encourage debate and ask people to challenge the status quo.

The real test begins when the challenge concerns a senior decision, a successful legacy model or an assumption on which current plans depend.

At that moment, the organisation reveals whether challenge is genuinely part of how it learns or merely part of how it describes itself.

The assumptions that disappear from view

Every organisation operates through assumptions. Customers will behave in a certain way. A process needs a particular control. A market will reward a familiar model. A technology programme will solve an operating problem. A structure that worked before will work again.

Assumptions are not a weakness. Action would be impossible without them. The risk begins when they stop being recognised as assumptions and become treated as facts.

The most powerful assumptions are often the ones the organisation has stopped noticing.

Success can make this worse. When a model has worked for years, questioning it can sound unnecessarily negative. Experience becomes evidence that the future will resemble the past. The organisation protects what made it successful while the conditions around it quietly change.

What silence really means

A meeting can end with apparent agreement while many participants still see unresolved risks. They may stay silent because the decision feels settled, the hierarchy is clear or the cost of being wrong publicly seems higher than the cost of saying nothing.

Leaders may then read silence as support. In reality, they have learned only that people did not speak.

Silence often looks like agreement—until reality provides the feedback.

The organisation loses twice. It loses the information that was available before the decision, and it later spends time explaining why nobody raised the issue earlier.

Safety within challenge

Permission to challenge is sometimes confused with unlimited debate or freedom from accountability. It is neither. The purpose is not to make every decision comfortable. It is to make relevant information discussable before commitment becomes irreversible.

Psychological safety is not freedom from challenge. It is safety within challenge.

A constructive challenge should be specific. What assumption are we making? What evidence supports it? What has changed? What would we expect to observe if the assumption were wrong? What perspective is missing?

This moves the conversation away from personalities and towards the quality of the thinking. Disagreement becomes a way to examine reality, not a contest to defeat another person.

How leaders respond

People learn whether challenge is safe by watching what happens to the first person who tries it. A leader may formally invite dissent, but a defensive reaction, a dismissive joke or a loss of access can communicate the opposite more powerfully than any stated value.

Leaders do not need to agree with every challenge. They need to make it safe to examine one.

This does not weaken authority. Leaders remain responsible for decisions. But authority becomes more reliable when it can absorb information that complicates the preferred answer.

The most credible response may sometimes be: “I still choose this direction, but the challenge has changed how we will test it.”

Changing your mind when reality changes is not inconsistency. It is responsibility.

Challenge as an organisational capability

An adaptive organisation does not depend on a few courageous individuals repeatedly taking personal risk. It builds challenge into normal work.

Assumptions are written down. Alternative interpretations are invited. Decisions include indicators that could prove them wrong. Reviews ask not only whether execution followed the plan, but whether the plan still fits reality.

An organisation does not become adaptive by inviting ideas. It becomes adaptive by changing how it reacts to inconvenient ones.

When people are punished for revealing reality, the organisation eventually operates without it. The questions disappear, the information becomes filtered and confidence grows precisely when it should be tested.

The quality of organisational thinking is limited by the questions people are afraid to ask.

Permission to challenge assumptions is therefore not a cultural accessory to Adaptive Thinking. It is a necessary operating condition. Without it, the organisation can connect only the perspectives that confirm what it already believes.

CHAPTER 3

Multiple Perspectives, One Reality

The whole system becomes visible only when partial views are connected.

Once assumptions can be challenged, different perspectives can enter the conversation. Complex organisations generate many valid descriptions of the same situation. A profitability problem may also be a pricing problem, a process problem, a data problem, a customer problem or a governance problem.

The temptation is to decide which description is correct. Adaptive Thinking begins with a different question: what does each perspective reveal, and what does it leave out?

A perspective is not reality. It is a position from which reality is seen.

The strength and limit of every lens

Expertise helps people notice patterns that others miss. It also directs attention towards familiar categories. Finance translates reality into value, risk and return. Operations translates it into flow, capacity and reliability. Technology translates it into architecture, data and dependencies.

These lenses are useful because they simplify. They are dangerous when their simplification becomes invisible.

Every lens improves visibility in one direction and limits it in another.

Seniority does not remove this limitation. A broader role may provide more context, but no role eliminates perspective. The value of a contribution depends less on organisational rank than on what it helps the organisation notice.

The value of a perspective is not determined by hierarchy. It is determined by what it helps the organisation see.

Why more voices are not enough

Bringing more people into a room can increase information without increasing understanding. Each participant presents a functional view, the meeting becomes crowded and the leader is left to choose between competing narratives.

The problem is not the number of perspectives. It is the absence of a way to connect them.

More perspectives do not create confusion. Unconnected perspectives do.

Connection begins with relationships. How does a commercial promise affect operational capacity? How does a control affect customer effort? How does a technology dependency affect the economics of a business model? How does a local optimisation change risk elsewhere?

The system becomes visible in the relationships between perspectives.

Looking for what is missing

A useful discussion does not ask only who should attend. It asks which parts of reality are currently invisible.

The missing perspective may come from a customer, a frontline employee, a partner, a regulator or a market that does not fit the organisation's historical experience. It may also come from data that is available but excluded because it conflicts with the dominant story.

Blind spots are not created only by what we do not know. They are also created by who is not in the conversation.

This does not mean every decision requires every stakeholder. It means the organisation should deliberately identify which perspectives are essential to understand the consequences of the decision.

Connected thinking

The aim is not consensus. Different perspectives may continue to support different choices. Their contribution is to make the trade-offs visible and the logic of the decision more complete.

Shared understanding does not require identical thinking. It requires connected thinking.

Connected thinking allows people to say: “I see the situation differently, but I understand the relationship between your concern and the outcome we are trying to create.”

That is a stronger basis for action than superficial alignment. It preserves difference while making coordinated judgement possible.

The purpose is not to choose the right lens. It is to understand what each lens reveals and what it leaves out.

One reality, held collectively

No individual needs to understand every detail of a complex organisation. What matters is whether the organisation can combine distributed knowledge into a usable picture of reality.

This picture will always remain incomplete. Adaptive Thinking does not promise certainty. It improves the organisation’s ability to notice incompleteness, test interpretations and update its understanding as conditions change.

No one holds the full picture, but everyone may hold a piece of it.

When multiple perspectives can be expressed, challenged and connected, the organisation is ready to move from preparing the ground to using an adaptive process. It can define the situation more carefully because reality no longer enters the conversation as a single authoritative view, but as a connected picture that can be tested and updated.

PART I — CLOSING

Ready to Begin

Adaptive Thinking does not begin with a tool. It begins when an organisation can hold a more honest conversation with itself.

That conversation requires three conditions.

Shared understanding	People can see how their roles and decisions affect the wider outcome.
Permission to challenge	Assumptions can be examined before reality disproves them.
Connected perspectives	Different views can be combined without being reduced to premature agreement.

These conditions do not guarantee the right answer. They make it possible to ask a better question, understand the situation more fully and change direction when evidence requires it.

The process can begin only when the organisation is ready to see what the process may reveal.

Part II will move from these conditions into the Adaptive Thinking process itself: how a situation is framed, how relationships are explored, how assumptions are tested and how learning is carried into action.