



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Moving from the dance floor to the balcony

## Introduction

This learning tool links with the short film ‘Moving from the dance floor to the balcony’ which is available on the website next to this. If you have not already done so, please watch the film before using this tool.

The transition from social worker to practice supervisor can be challenging. One of the key differences is that you occupy a very different position in a team (and if you have worked in the team before as a practitioner you will have to renegotiate relationships in your new role as a manager).

Heifetz and Linsky (2009) coined the phrase ‘Moving from the dance floor to the balcony’ as part of the development of adaptive leadership theory, based on their research conducted at Harvard University. Adaptive leadership theory is a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organisations to adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems.

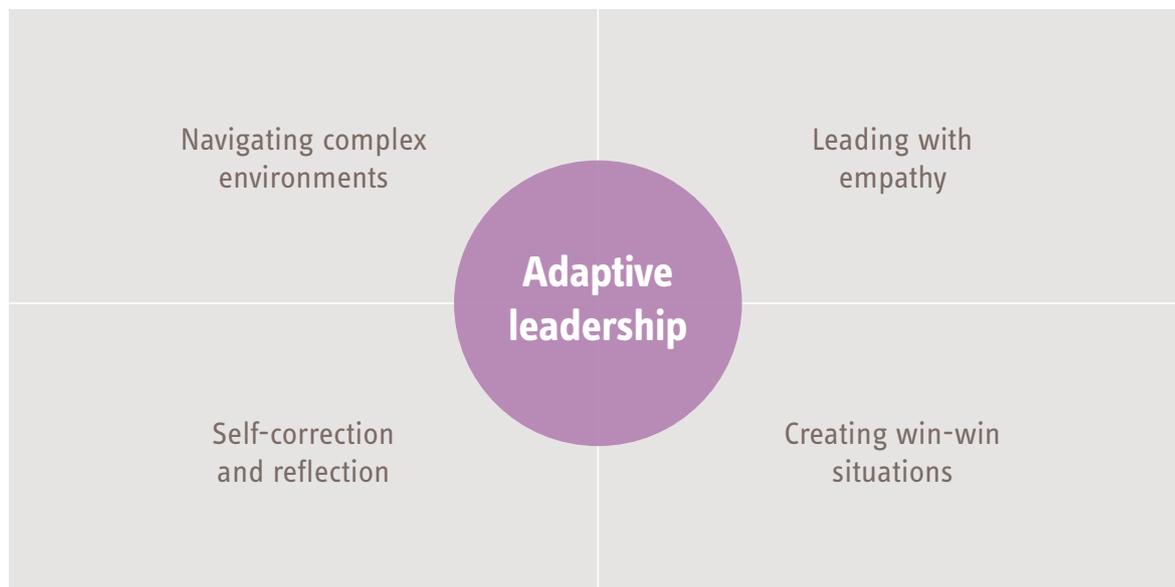
‘Moving from the dance floor to the balcony’ is, therefore, both a technique that can be learned and a description of what managers and leaders need to be able to do. It describes how you need to be in amongst the action with your team (on the dance floor) as well as having a clear focus on how effectively your team is working (which you can only see from the balcony). This learning tool will help you review your work as a practice supervisor and consider how this concept might help you explore your leadership role and understand which tasks are better suited to a balcony or dance floor position.

## What is adaptive leadership?

The ability to maintain perspective in the midst of action is as critical for social work practice supervisors as it is for many other professionals. An adaptive leadership framework (see figure 1 below) can help when there are no easy solutions, and supports leaders to make changes based on a diversity of viewpoints in complex working environments.

There are four dimensions that adaptive leaders keep in mind:

- > navigating complex environments
- > leading with empathy
- > learning through self-correction and reflection
- > creating win-win solutions.



Adaptive leaders lead with empathy, support team members to be autonomous and independent, and find solutions that work for all stakeholders. They can create the conditions that enable teams and organisations to achieve common goals in an uncertain environment.

## Thinking more deeply about moving between the dance floor and the balcony

### What do we mean by 'dance floor'?

This is the operational work, the everyday activities we are involved in as managers and leaders, the detail and the busyness, the thick of it.

#### Questions which could be useful to consider here are:

Where do you get involved directly, in what kind of activities? And is this helpful or not?

How do you feel being on the dance floor?

What information do you gain on the dance floor?

How might any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS (a model which describe aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality - Burnham, 2013) impact on your involvement on the dance floor? .

## What do we mean by 'balcony'?

This refers to the bigger picture, how your team fits into the organisation and its goals, what changes may need to be implemented and how they will impact on the team, the nature of your team as a whole – its strengths and challenges.

### Questions which could be useful to consider here are:

What kind of activities require you to be on the balcony?

How do you feel being on the balcony?

How do you see the social GRRRAAACCEEESSS impacting your team from this perspective?

What do you do with the information you gain on the balcony?

Moving from the dance floor to the balcony describes the mental activity of stepping back from the action and asking, 'What's really going on here? Where do I need to be? On the dance floor, or the balcony?'

Heifetz and Linsky (2009) use the expression 'reflect in action by spending time on the balcony and the dance floor' to illustrate how leaders need to metaphorically step away (head up to the balcony) while in the midst of their daily work (the dance floor). This enables leaders to gain a different perspective and gather insight, not only on issues but also on their own behaviours and beliefs.

If leaders stay over-focused on their operational work (on the dance floor) without seeing the issues and themselves as part of the big picture (from the balcony), they may lose sight of the big picture, forget what the work actually is, and exhaust themselves with busyness. But staying 'on the balcony' too long may result in others viewing the leader as disengaged, irrelevant, or manipulative.

Optimal ‘time on the balcony’ allows you to see patterns, re-evaluate assumptions, and make novel connections. Optimal engagement ‘on the dance floor’ builds credibility, allows you to see and feel what those on the frontline experience, and understand what the work is asking of their people. Both perspectives are necessary, and adaptive leaders must learn to do both.

It is likely that, at times, you already exercise this ability. For example, have you ever introduced something in a team meeting and felt it wasn’t going well? This is a case of spending time on the balcony (gauging where others are at) and being on the dance floor (giving the presentation).

## Challenges

Taking a balcony perspective is challenging and stepping back and seeing the big picture is complicated by several factors. For example, as a supervisor when you get some distance, you still must accurately interpret what you see and hear. This is easier said than done. You'll also need to observe your own actions. Seeing yourself objectively as you look down from the balcony is perhaps the hardest task of all. You can learn to be both an observer and a participant at the same time – sometimes described as being able to reflect on action in action (Schön, 1991).

When faced with complex problems (which is an everyday experience in social work practice) it's vital that we learn from the present. The supervisor who pays attention to the present looks out for the way the team and wider system is currently moving, which might get in the way of or contribute to the future they'd like to create.

This present-scanning needs to be done on the balcony and the dance floor. So the complex adaptive leader (Heifetz et al, 2009; Obolensky, 2014) needs both the wide-angle glasses to peer at the present and the ability to move fluidly between the dance floor and the balcony. The ability to learn from the present on the balcony and the dance floor is not something anyone is born with, nor is it a lofty goal, impossible for all but the chosen ones to attain. Rather, it's a set of practices and habits we can each work at improving every day.

You can access further tools in this section of the website, such as 'Using supervision agreements' and 'Exploring expectations in the supervisory relationship', which give more information about how to do this.

Finally, it is important to note that the reflections you have engaged in throughout this tool are a useful starting point to guide you in thinking about your future development as a supervisor, and being clear about your current needs in your own line management supervision.

For this reason, you may find it useful to talk with your line manager about what this activity has made you think about in terms of your own development, specifically the kind of supervision relationship which would be helpful to you as a practice supervisor.

## Reflection points

Having read the ideas presented in the first part of the tool, please spend some time thinking about your role as practice supervisor in relation to the questions below:

What helps you move between the balcony and the dance floor?

What gets in the way of your ability to do this and what might you do differently?

How does who you are impact on your ability to move between the two?

## Getting into the habit of moving from the dance floor to balcony

On a few different days take a few moments to determine how your time was split between the 'dance floor' and the 'balcony'. The split will be different for different people on any given day. It's about asking yourself if you are aligning what you are doing with what you want.

Ask those around you for feedback so you can recognise your patterns of behaviour through conversations with others who know you well. Get a perspective from people who know you less well but can see you from a distance. Find out the views of those who are very different to you. Listen to the message behind their words rather than hearing criticism.

## Observing yourself

When you are next in a meeting, pay attention so you can notice what is happening while it is happening, even as you are a part of it. Observe the relationships and see how people's attention and reactions to one another can vary: supporting, thwarting, or listening.

Watch people's body language but be mindful of your interpretations as body language is not universal. When you make a point, resist the instinct to stay perched on the edge of your seat, ready to defend what you said. A technique as simple as pushing your chair a few inches away from the table after you speak may provide the literal and figurative distance you need to become an observer.

You can read more about other forms of leadership theory applicable to social work in the 'Being a social work leader' knowledge briefing, in addition to the tools 'What makes an effective leader?' and 'Situational leadership', available from this section of the website.

## Other ways you can use this tool

You might find it useful to meet with other practice supervisors in your organisation to jointly discuss what aspects of your role are suited to being on the balcony and the dance floor.

You could talk about the ideas presented in this tool with your team as a whole to get their feedback and perspective about when they find it useful for you to be on the dance floor or balcony.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

## References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed.) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

Heifetz R A, Grashow A and Linsky M (2009). 'The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world'. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

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