

ECS Adaptive Leadership Learning Community Summary Report

Overview of Adaptive Leadership

Effective leaders must be equipped to navigate diverse, and at times divergent, views and priorities. The capacity required to build partnerships across maternal and early childhood systems of care is highlighted in the Maternal Child Health (MCH) Leadership Competencies which states, “the foundation of a healthy community is a highly qualified, diverse workforce that can positively affect these factors at the individual, community, and policy levels... To be an MCH leader requires specific knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, and values.” Adaptive leadership is a comprehensive approach that expands upon the practice of the MCH Leadership Competencies and supports leaders to anticipate, identify, and address complex change. More specifically, the adaptive leadership approach includes identifying adaptive work from a balcony perspective; engaging others in shared leadership with a shared vision; holding space for distress and conflict; and ensuring diverse teams are engaged in the work.

Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) awardees had expressed an interest to the Early Childhood Systems Technical Assistance Coordinating Center’s (ECS-TACC) team in accessing leadership capacity building supports as they seek to better understand and address complex change in their states’ maternal and early childhood systems. Awardees recognize and have stressed the importance of effectively engaging family leaders, building strong relationships with advisory members and health partners, nurturing professional development, sustaining staffing strategies, and conflict management. Adaptive Leadership within maternal and early childhood systems allows leaders to go beyond addressing challenges and finding solutions — it enables leaders, their teams, and partners to adapt and thrive in the face of challenge, preparing them to take on the process of complex change. An adaptive leader distinguishes the type of challenge presented in order to find the most effective solution, seeking collaboration and relationship-building along the way.

Adaptive Leadership Learning Community

The Adaptive Leadership Learning Community (ALLC) set out to support the development of ECCS awardees’ leadership capacity and their overall work to influence systems change. Touching on MCH Leadership Competencies, the ALLC helped awardees to apply adaptive leadership concepts to their work within ECCS and the larger maternal and early childhood systems. ALLC content delved into foundational leadership concepts, building on concepts introduced in ECCS’ base year webinars such as principles of collaboration and adaptive leadership, including the differences between managing and leading and change management. Through the ALLC, awardees had the opportunity to engage in dynamic discussions, peer sharing, and real-world application of content. The ALLC sought to equip awardees with the confidence, skills, and tools necessary to identify complex change in their system-building efforts, enact creative solutions, engage diverse voices in the process, including community providers, family leaders, and state-level partners.

Structure of the ALLC

The ALLC was held over a six-month period, from January to June, in monthly hour-long sessions. Prior to the first session, participants responded to a [leadership self-assessment](#) that asked them to rate their familiarity, comfort level, and ability to engage in different aspects of leadership. The assessment also asked about their commitment to the ALLC, what they would like to learn, expectations, and comfortability with group sharing. A combination of this data and data gathered through the ECS-TACC registration form was used to determine what competency areas participants were most interested in. The facilitators focused on providing key content with limited lecture time to engage the group in rich dialogue and peer sharing. Each session focused on a concept or facet of adaptive leadership, opening up with a community builder (an ice breaker question intended to foster relationship building among participants) and a recap or discussion on any pre-work assigned. The facilitators then introduced content through PowerPoint presentations, pausing to ascertain what resonated with participants. Following the short presentation portion (ranging from 10-15 minutes on average), the group discussed what they just learned and applied it to the challenges they were experiencing within their ECCS work. Participants were then given questions related to the concepts to discuss further in small breakout groups with their peers. The group reconvened to debrief the small group discussions and explore any additional questions that came up, themes, and action steps.

Topics and Content

Session 1 provided an overview of adaptive leadership as a framework and the role of a leader. Participants were introduced to the idea of transformative systems change and its connection to adaptive leadership and effective collaboration. Through this concept, participants learned the essential elements of change processes, leadership, and collaborative practice. Since the adaptive leadership framework was still relatively new to the participants, facilitators outlined what makes adaptive leadership different, including the complexity of challenges, the requirement to develop a shared vision, reliance on diversity of thought, experimentation to rearrange the status quo, and focus on equity. Participants engaged in a discussion about their roles and strengths as leaders.

Resources:

- Adaptive Leadership (book chapter — pre-work)
Northouse, P.G. (2016). Adaptive leadership [Chapter 11]. *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
<https://public.huddle.com/b/kENXKr/index.html>

Session 2 introduced the concept of ‘getting on the balcony’ (changing your vantage point to see the full picture) in order to obtain a better perspective of the work and the challenges associated with change. The group was able to practice getting on the balcony using an image exercise that allowed them to make observations in real time. Participants were able to apply this concept to their ECCS work and identify times they have gotten on the balcony or aspects of their work that would benefit from a balcony perspective. Prior to the session, participants were asked to complete an Eco Mapping activity in which they identified key partners and organizations they work with and define their relationships with them. Through this activity, participants were able to identify their strongest and weakest relationships, communication and reciprocation level with

each partner, and what relationships need to be cultivated. As a group, participants discussed how it felt to employ the practice of getting on the balcony.

Resources:

- Eco Mapping (pre-work)
Change Matrix, LLC
<https://public.huddle.com/b/ogywpR/index.html>
- Moving Between the Balcony and the Dance Floor (video shared in session)
Kansas Leadership Center
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFbnoCPt5lQ>

Session 3 focused on leading with and without authority and how an adaptive leader has the skills and knowledge to do both. Often, leadership is conflated with authority, so participants were asked to consider when they relate and when they don't. Participants recognized when formal boundaries exist and the importance of nurturing across formal hierarchical boundaries in inter-agency work. Facilitators explored the advantage of having authority and the work that can still be done without authority. Participants were given quiet time to complete an exercise identifying where they have authority and when they lead without authority.

Resources:

- Five Strategies to Lead Without Authority (pre-work)
Grainger
<https://www.grainger.com/know-how/business-operations/people-management/kh-lead-without-authority-five-strategies>
- Leading With and Without Authority Quadrant (session activity)
Change Matrix
<https://public.huddle.com/b/yjzoKM/index.html>

Session 5* delved into the difference between technical and adaptive work, including concrete ways to determine which you are dealing with. When work is technical, the problem and solution are both clear and the work does not often require diverse perspectives and voices. Primary responsibility for technical work often lies with the formal leader. Adaptive work on the other hand, requires innovation and learning to both identify the root problem and create a solution. With adaptive work, competing perspectives emerge and primary responsibility is shared. Participants shared change challenges they were facing within their ECCS work and worked together to identify the technical and adaptive aspects of the challenges, as well as how to address them.

Resources:

- The Distinction Between Technical and Adaptive Challenges (video shared in session)
Kansas Leadership Center
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lq31Zt2_iUA

**Session 4 was canceled due to low attendance after a schedule change.*

Session 6 offered content about leading through conflict and participants were able to share their conflict style (determined through a self-assessment) and how their family of origin approached conflict, as lived experience and culture contribute to one's identity as a leader. Facilitators introduced five dominant styles of leadership within conflict, determined by level of assertiveness and cooperation: competing, avoiding, compromising, accommodating, and collaborating. Participants learned about the three roles that leaders fill in conflict — partner, facilitator, and arbiter — and considerations for how they show up. The group discussed the phases of addressing conflict and how conflict has shown up in their ECCS work.

Resources:

- Conflict Styles Assessment (pre-work)
United States Institute of Peace
<https://www.usip.org/public-education-new/conflict-styles-assessment>

Attendance

The ALLC started off strong with 60-75% attendance in the first two sessions. By session 3, attendance fell to 50% and experienced a significant drop to 30% in session 5 and 20% in session 6. It is important to note two awardees experienced staff changes which resulted in their departure from the ALLC and at least two other participants communicated that they had to withdraw due to competing priorities. The participants that continued to attend remained engaged throughout.

Session	Date	Awardee-affiliated Participants	Awardee-affiliated States	States Represented
Session 1	1/25/23	13	8	CO, LA, MN, NV, PA, SD, VA, VT
Session 2	2/22/23	11	8	CO, IL, LA, MN, NV, PA, SD, VA
Session 3	3/22/23	10	7	CO, IL, ME, MN, NV, PA, VA
Session 4	canceled	-	-	-
Session 5	5/24/23	6	4	CO, NV, PA, SD
Session 6	6/28/23	4	3	CO, NV, SD

Communication

ALLC participants received regular communication from facilitators to encourage continuous participation. Facilitators emailed participants with pre-work and reminders for upcoming sessions at least twice leading up to each session, as well as a reminder email the day of and calendar invitation push at the start of each session. Participants also received follow-up emails with links to the PowerPoint slides and session recordings in Huddle and the post-session survey after each session. Though the Huddle discussion board was available, and the group received reminders and encouragement to utilize it, there was no activity.

Goals and Outcomes

Facilitators anticipated that ECCS awardees would emerge from the ALLC with an understanding of the adaptive leadership approach to build more effective collaborations and develop a shared vision, shared expectations, and shared leadership within their team. ALLC learning objectives included gaining a greater understanding of adaptive leadership concepts necessary for transformative and sustainable change within maternal and early childhood systems; identifying technical and adaptive work in complex change efforts; expanding critical leadership skills such as observing context, engaging others in the work, identifying the adaptive work, and active listening; and learning about shared leadership, engaging diverse voices in the work at every level. The facilitators believe that the ALLC achieved these goals. The content shared with awardees facilitated the learnings detailed in the ALLC objectives and large and small group discussion further solidified this knowledge. The facilitators also believe that the ALLC goals were met for those that remained committed to attending all sessions and are confident that if all participants remained engaged, they would have achieved the learning objectives.

Evaluation of the ALLC

Findings

For the purposes of this report, due to the low Community of Practice (CoP) survey response rate, data obtained through the (5) post-session CQI surveys is included to provide a more complete picture of evaluation findings. Results from the CoP survey released by ECS-TACC were limited due to a low response rate (n=1). The available results point to confirmation of the facilitators' belief that the ALLC achieved its goals. The respondent indicated that they were satisfied overall with the ALLC. Results show that the respondent found the topics covered useful: role as a leader (5 – very useful), getting on the balcony (4 – useful), leading without authority (4 – useful), adaptive vs. technical work (4 – useful), and leading through conflict (4 – useful). Overall, the respondent felt that the ALLC had a clear focus, provided useful resources, helped them achieve better results in their ECCS work, and effectively built knowledge sharing and learning (4 – agree). In terms of relationships, the respondent strongly agreed that the ALLC provided a welcoming environment that was conducive to relationship building and granted them a sense of belonging. The respondent expressed that they “don’t think we can hear enough about adaptive leadership” and “wishes more people would have participated.” The respondent also recommended greater frequency of sessions to “build momentum and trust.”

Findings from the CQI surveys support the findings from the CoP survey. Over the course of the ALLC, the CQI surveys received an average of 70% response rate. One hundred percent (100%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions were useful and applicable to their work. Respondents indicated generative group dialogue and breakout room discussions as the most liked features of the sessions. All (100%) respondents expressed providing more breakout room time and overall longer sessions as areas of improvement.

Recommendations

Findings from both surveys, as well as informal qualitative feedback, indicate that the ALLC was successful overall in terms of learning goals and building community. Participants resonate with

the adaptive leadership framework and concepts and are able to actively apply them to their ECCS work. Based on the data gathered on the content of the ALLC, it is recommended that ECS-TACC continue to incorporate opportunities for learning about and practice of adaptive leadership in future offerings. Awardees seem eager to build their leadership skills and learn strategies to navigate adaptive challenges. The facilitators believe that a continuation of the ALLC or individual coaching would be paramount to the development of strong ECCS leaders, equip teams with valuable tools, and have a positive impact on states' maternal and early childhood system building efforts.

It is also recommended that a future ALLC (and other learning communities) be delivered more frequently than once a month to possibly decrease attrition rates. It is believed that spacing out the sessions led to lost momentum and engagement in the subject material. Future sessions should also be increased from 60 to 90 minutes to allow more time for content and discussions.

Appendix A — ECS-TACC CoP Survey Results

Only one participant responded to the ALLC participant survey.

Question	Response (n=1)
Role	ECCS Lead
Overall satisfaction	Satisfied
Please rate on a scale how useful you found the ALLC to be in terms of the following topics.	1=Not very useful; 5=Very useful
My role as a leader	Very useful (5)
Getting on the balcony	4
Leading without authority	4
Adaptive versus technical work	4
Leading through conflict	4
The ALLC...	1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree
Had a clear focus	4
Gave me a sense of belonging	1
Helped me build relationships and network with others	1
Benefitted my daily work from the relationships established	4
Motivated me to share work-related knowledge	4
Provided a useful set of resources for participants	4
Provided a welcoming environment	4
Helped me achieve better results in projects and programs	4
Effectively built knowledge sharing and learning into the community	1
Please check how you feel after participating in the ALLC	I need more time to think about the information gained from the learning community
What was the most helpful aspects of participating in the ALLC? (open-ended)	I don't think we can hear enough about adaptive

	leadership or learn concrete skills that it requires.
What was the least helpful aspect of participating in the ALLC? (open-ended)	I wish more people would have participated.
Please provide any recommendations for ways to strengthen the effectiveness of the ALLC. (open-ended)	I wonder if consecutive Fridays would work better than 1x/mo. Frequency to build momentum and trust.

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