Adaptive Challenges:
How to Spot Them and Why it Matters

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Session Goal

Understand the complexities of leading through adaptive challenges

Learning Objectives

Identify differences between technical and adaptive challenges

Explore specific examples of adaptive challenges

Discuss the consequences of approaching adaptive challenges as if they were technical challenges

Review the neuroscience of social cognition and behavioral change

Sample one method to reveal actionable information about adaptive challenges – for individuals and for teams.

Thumb polls

Did you earn your college/university degree in a technical/scientific field?

Do you lead/manage/coach technical teams?

Did you give a "thumbs up" for both questions?

Warm-up

Lean on your own experiences introducing Agile methodology and culture to new organizations and teams.

Estimate the percentage of individuals that embrace and employ Agile with little effort.

What percentage struggle or resist?

Have you been able to uncover or reveal causal factors for observed resistance? If yes, provide an example.

Please be prepared to share highlights from your conversation.

Not all challenges are created equal

Technical challenges can be achieved incrementally.

Meeting adaptive challenges requires a *voluntary* examination of perspectives and attitudes driving behaviors

Adaptive challenges require time, room for experimentation, and internal motivation

Doing the same thing, bigger and better

Incremental growth

Changing behaviors and perspectives to acquire new capabilities

Metamorphosis

Technical for one person, adaptive for another

You know if you are facing a technical challenge if there is a "how to" manual you can follow and meet your goals.
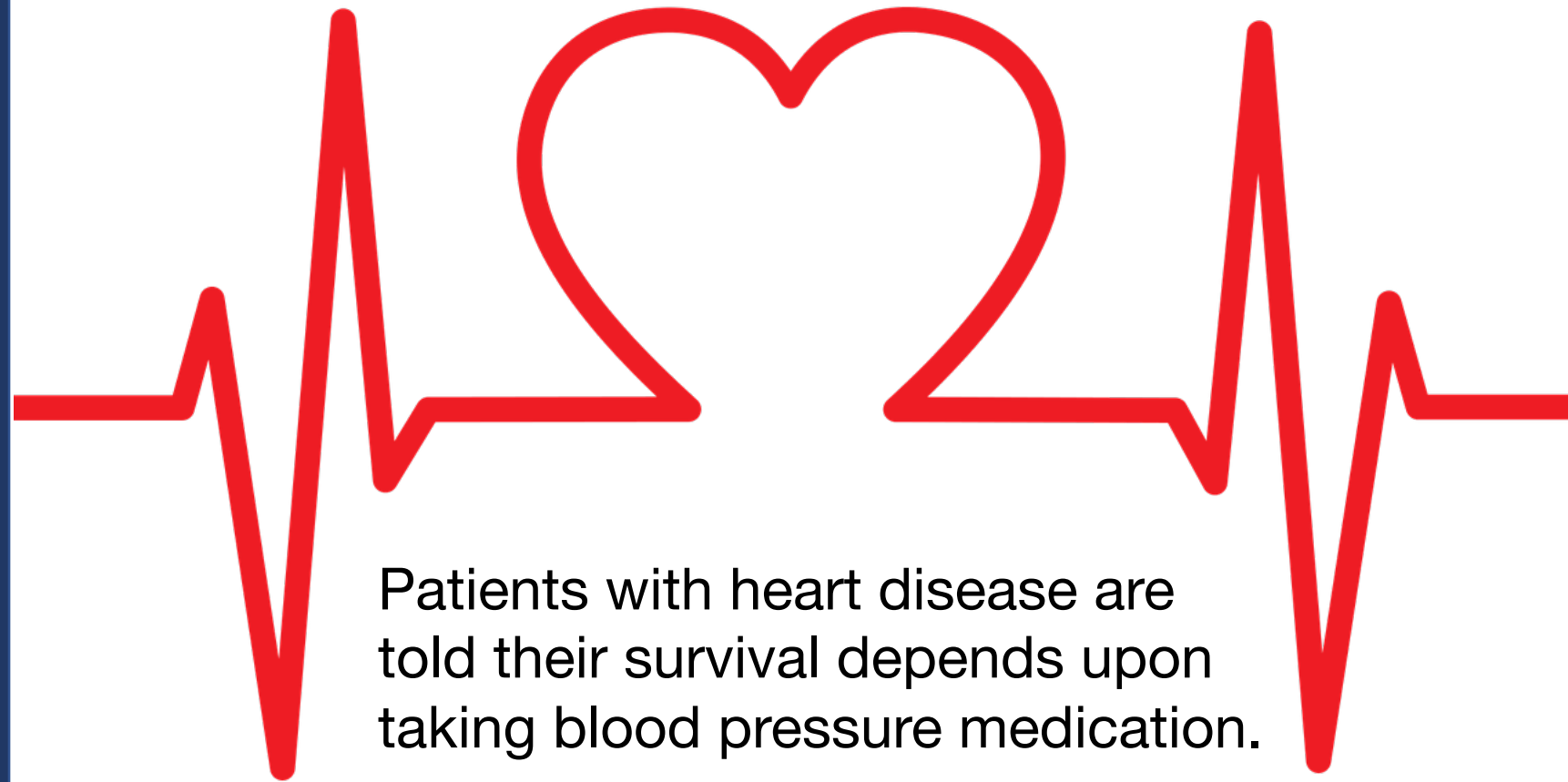

Couch to 5K
A running plan for beginners

What is happening with the person who wants to become a runner, but buys the manual and leaves it unopened on the bookshelf?

Technical for one person, adaptive for another

Patients with heart disease are told their survival depends upon taking blood pressure medication.

On average 1 of 7 patients are compliant with their blood pressure medication.

What is going on?

On the surface, many problems can seem technical.

We might shrug and think "but there is a simple solution."

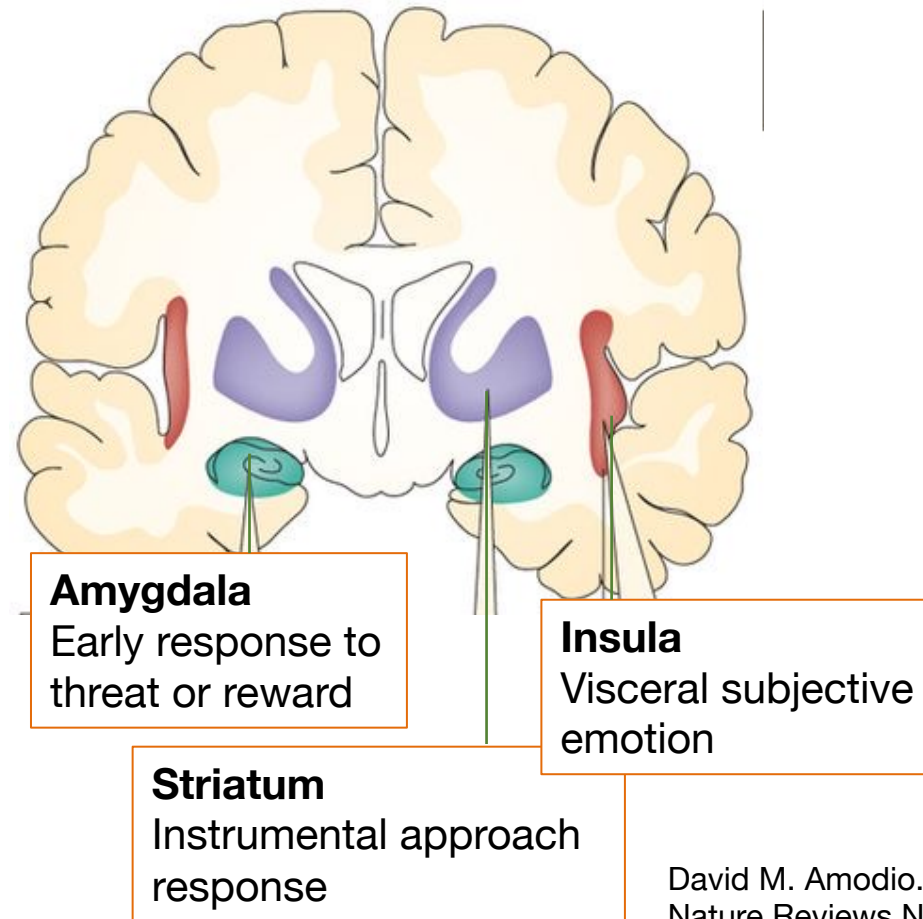**Problem**
Take medication to lower blood pressure

Adaptive Challenge
Change lifestyle to eat healthy, get more exercise and lower stress

Feelings that might fuel competing commitments
- Taking pills is "for old people"
- Vegetables are "rabbit food"
- It's not really that serious (fear of facing mortality)
- People who worry about diet and exercise are superficial and only care about their looks

Social situations activate the same "approach/avoid" system used to process primary biological cues.

Amygdala
Early response to threat or reward

Insula
Visceral subjective emotion

Striatum
Instrumental approach response

David M. Amodio. The neuroscience of prejudice and stereotyping. Nature Reviews Neuroscience 15, 670–682 (2014)

Response	Primary cues	Social cues
Approach	Food, water, shelter	Happy faces, social rewards (status, fairness)
Avoid	Predator, harsh conditions	Fearful or angry faces, social threats (decrease in status, loss of control)

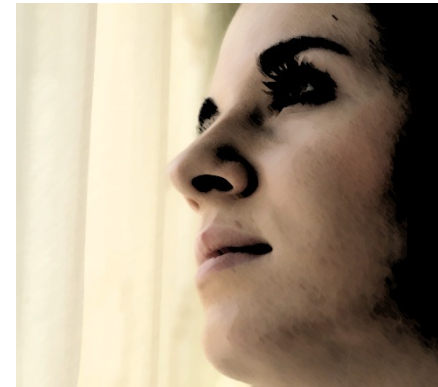David Rock's model of five domains of social cognition: SCARF

Status

Certainty

Autonomy

Relatedness

Fairness

D. Rock. SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. NeuroLeadership Journal, 2008

Our amygdala gets hijacked in the face of perceived threats in any of the SCARF domains.

These strong feelings are layered and complex and derived from a lifetime of specific experiences.
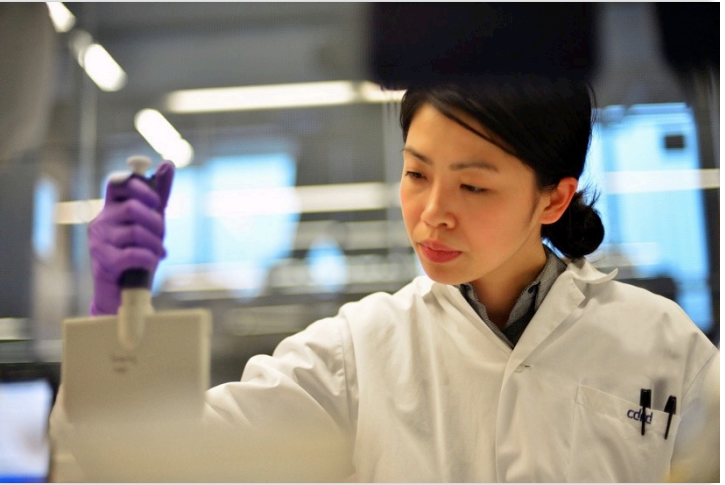
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Technical professionals excel at solving technical problems
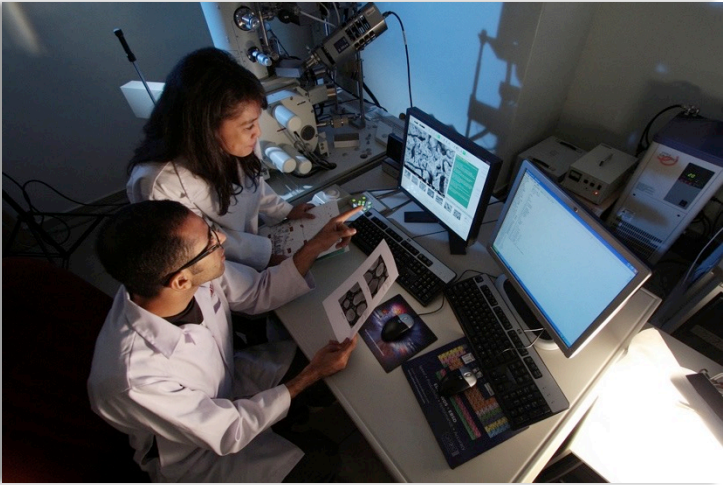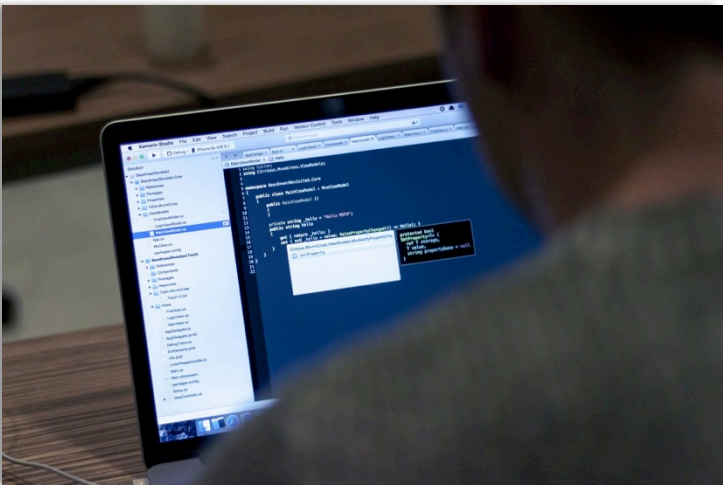
Technical professionals promoted into leadership roles often struggle.

Adaptive challenges require adaptive leadership

What if you could accelerate the process of working through adaptive challenges?

- **Go to the balcony**
- Give the work to the people
- Ask questions to understand, not to solve problem
- Build trust
- Accept conflict as part of working through adaptive challenges
- **Give it time**

A Survival Guide for Leaders. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linksy, Harvard Business Review, 2002

The SCARF model is a framework for our behavioral defenses, like an adaptive social immune system

Biological

Behavioral

Innate
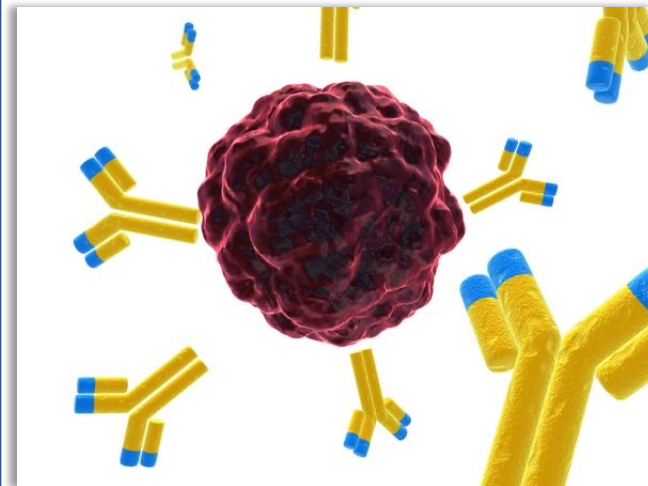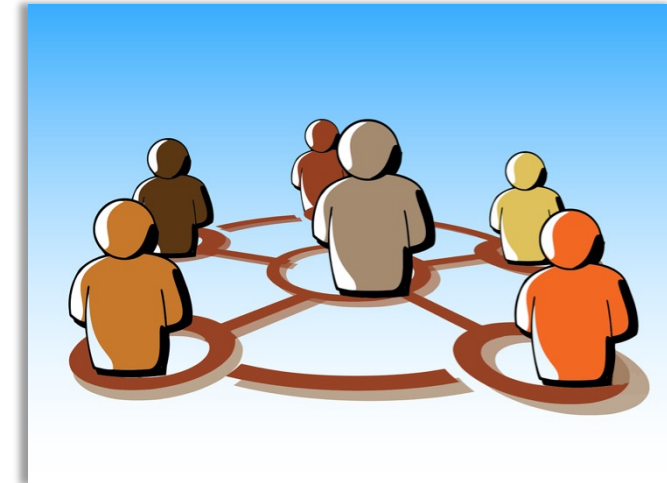
Adaptive

A strong immune system helps us survive and *thrive*.

When does your immune system work against you?

How do we examine and understand immunity?

Behavioral?

Adaptive immunity (and causal events) are not easily accessible for examination.

Biological

- Collect blood sample
- challenge with "foreign"
- observe

The Immunity to Change Map:

A diagnostic tool for individual and team coaching, as a path to actionable information and sustainable change

Improvement Goal	Doing/Not doing	Competing Goals	Big Assumptions
Goal statement			
Does your goal meet the requirements? Check the requirements that apply to your goal.			
☐ True for you			
☐ Originates with you			
☐ Room for improvement			
☐ Is important to you (scale of 1-5)			
☐ Significant for collaborative work?			

Column 1
Picking a goal that *matters*

Important for you, personally and professionally

Room for substantial improvement

You are on the hook for this improvement

Feels true

What do you see?
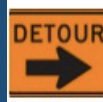
What do others see?

Column 2

So, you say you want to improve.

In column 2 you list all the things you are currently doing (or not doing) that work against your improvement goal.

List behaviors others can observe.

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Column 3

Connect with your gut – what feels "Yucky?"

Column 3 is a beast, and it is broken up into two parts, and does require a break.

The "yuck" box becomes a list of fears associated with changing current behaviors. Vegas rules apply.

Improvement Goal

Goal statement

_____
_____
_____

Does your goal meet the requirements? Check the requirements that apply to your goal.

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Doing/Not doing

Competing Goals

Big Assumptions

Column 3

Turn your fear statements into goal statements under the box.

Not only do we want to avoid feeling yucky, afraid, weak, stupid, lazy, unnecessary, etc.; we are committed to avoiding feeling those things at all cost.

In column 3, we surface our behavioral immune system.

Improvement Goal	Doing/Not doing	Competing Goals	Big Assumptions

Improvement Goal

Goal statement
_____
_____
_____

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Column 4

What assumptions do you have about "rules" and expectations that keep you beholden to your pre-existing goals?

Improvement Goal	Doing/Not doing	Competing Goals	Big Assumptions

Goal statement

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- ☐ Significant for collaborative work?

Actionable information comes from hypothesis testing, journaling, and reflection.

Why test?

To **get information** about your Big Assumptions (BA).

Specifically, how accurate are they?

General guidelines for testing:

Safe

Modest

Actionable

Research mindset

Tests your big assumption

How?
What data/evidence would lead you to question your BA?

1. Imagine a realistic situation in which you behave as if your big assumption is true.
2. Change what you would normally do in that situation.
3. What happened? Collect data on the outcomes.
4. Track your results and re-evaluate

Only test one Big Assumption at a time.

Additional work by Kegan and Lahey