Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges

A chart that illustrates the difference between the technical and adaptive aspects of the work. The latter entails a focus on transforming beliefs, which will result in greater outcomes for students. Adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie’s *The Work of Leadership*. 
TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VS. ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.

**TECHNICAL PROBLEMS**

1. Easy to identify
2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert
4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions
6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict

**ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES**

1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work
3. People with the problem do the work of solving it
4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries
5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.
6. “Solutions” require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

**EXAMPLES**

- Take medication to lower blood pressure
- Implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions
- Increase penalty for drunk driving

- Change lifestyle to eat healthy, get more exercise and lower stress
- Encourage nurses and pharmacists to question and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physicians
- Raise public awareness of the dangers and effects of drunk driving, targeting teenagers in particular