

# Is Your Team Ready for Adaptive Management?

## The Enabling Conditions Critical to a Successful Adaptive Teams Transition



Imagine you're stepping onto the basketball court with your team. You've practiced for countless hours and you've all drilled the plays hundreds of times. You always play the same way, and you usually win. But this game, as the first quarter buzzes to an end, it's clear your opponent has your team's number. How do you adjust your strategy to meet these new demands? Who leads the charge? Can you all openly voice your opinion?

This example could go well: The team could adjust its playing style to match the opponent's plays, call timeouts to check in for further tweaks, and come back to win the game with an adapted playing style built through open conversation, data review, and group review. The team could also not succeed: Team leadership doesn't want to try something new, the players can't weigh in with their coach to present their ideas, and the general attitude is that their usual strategy usually works, so why change now?

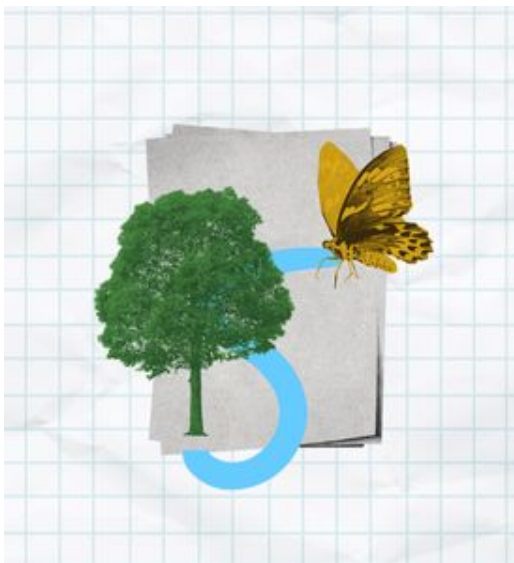
These two examples do not differ structurally — the team is the same size, has the same skills, and brings the same experience to the table. But culturally, these teams exhibit stark differences.

This same cultural differentiation between teams can come up in approaching complex problems in conservation. For conservation teams who face high degrees of uncertainty in their work, an Adaptive Teams implementation approach can provide a more effective roadmap to achieving strategic goals and outcomes. But, some teams will succeed more readily at this transition than others. Adaptive Teams can be easier to adopt and more effective under the right conditions, involving the team's structure, team member attitudes, leadership approaches, and the nature of the team's work.

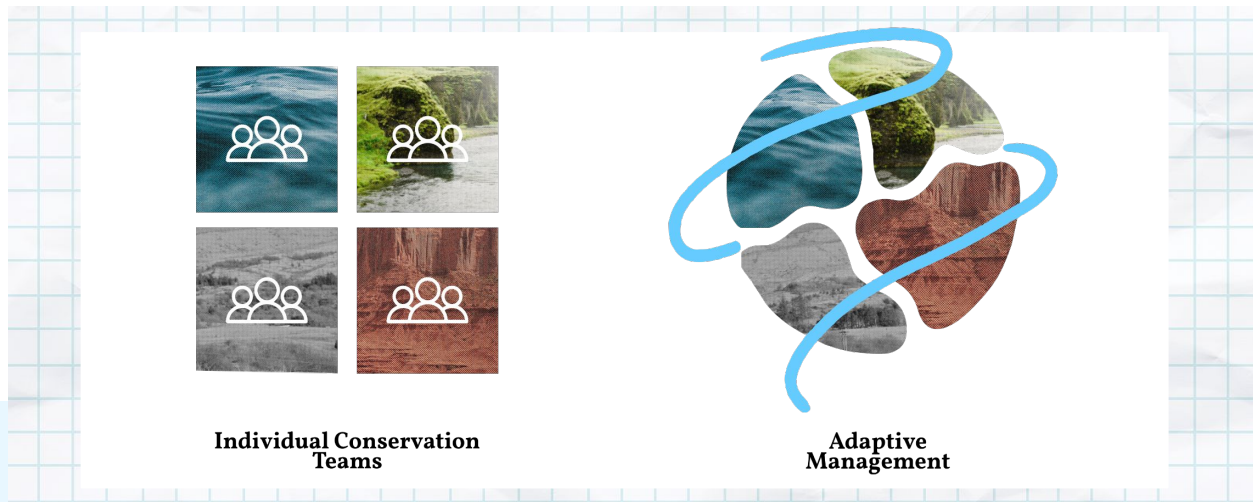
### A FRAMEWORK FOR ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

This guide is for TNC teams who want to integrate more adaptive management practices into their way of working. These resources are based on our work with numerous conservation teams at TNC and we hope this guide can be a helpful starting place for you!

[EXPLORE THE FRAMEWORK →](#)



In The Agility Lab's work with many conservation teams across TNC, we've identified a set of enabling conditions that signal a team will succeed in a transition to Adaptive Teams (see box, below). Several of these conditions are structural, such as having flexible funding and a team consisting of 4 to 9 members. But mindset and leadership's openness to change can serve as an even stronger indicator that a team will see powerful benefits from an Adaptive Teams approach.



## IS YOUR TEAM LIKELY TO SUCCEED WITH AN ADAPTIVE TEAMS TRANSITION?

The following conditions are true of teams most likely to see the most benefit from an Adaptive Teams approach and support from The Agility Lab. Consider your team's enabling conditions and how you might improve them during your journey to operationalize Adaptive Teams:

### NATURE OF THE TEAM:

#### Structural

- Team consists of 3-10 people (ideal range is 5-7)
- Each team member has the majority of their time dedicated to this team's work.
- Funding is flexible & contractual obligations allow for pivots.

#### Cultural

- Team members exhibit a growth mindset and are motivated to try adaptive management.
- Team is aware they are experiencing things that need a different approach
- Team members are comfortable with the idea of working iteratively in short cycles.
- Openness to pivot in case learning indicates that a change of plans is necessary.
- Team shows signs of feeling empowered to take initiative, solve things for themselves, and have examples of making changes
- There is support from leadership, and roles are clear within the team (including a project or strategy manager who will help to hold the adaptive management cadences)

### NATURE OF THE TEAM'S WORK

- The work is compelling and impactful, with audacious goals
- Team has direct control over the work they're being held accountable for, and aren't just limited to influencing others
- The team is facing relatively high uncertainty, which can mean that the team is in the early stages of tackling a problem, faces uncertainty in getting to scale, or is navigating the uncertainty of adapting previously successful approaches in changing circumstances.

“‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast,’ as the saying goes,” says The Agility Lab Latin America Region Lead Coach Guillermo Tafurt. In this piece, we share insights on the cultural enabling conditions from The Agility Lab team members, based on their experience in working with the esteemed TNC conservation teams around the world.

**Get more information:** [Review our Enabling Conditions Rubric to see how ready your team is to transition to Adaptive Teams processes.](#)

## Learnings From The Agility Lab

### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF TEAM MEMBERS IS CRITICAL

“Several years ago, Google did a study to look at what differentiated their most effective teams from their somewhat or less effective teams. The No. 1 finding was ‘psychological safety.’ **A team’s ability to be honest with one another is a critical ingredient for a high-performing team!**”

— August Ritter, Co-Founder & Managing Director

“Without psychological safety — where team members feel safe to engage, share ideas, and take risks — Adaptive Management struggles to take hold. When meeting together, if people check phones, keep laptops open, have side conversations, or turn off cameras in virtual meetings, trust erodes, and progress stalls. **Adaptive Management thrives when teams are fully present, listening, and contributing.**”

— Guillermo Tafurt, Lead Coach

### SURFACE THE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES UPFRONT

“It’s valuable to **ask the Team Lead to surface the systemic challenges they face that might be slowing them down or frustrating the team.** One great question that helps gauge initial conditions and the current working reality for the team: If we were to schedule a meeting with the whole team, how far out would that be?”

— Zach Nies, Senior Advisor



#### ADAPTIVE TEAMS

A guided implementation approach that helps teams learn by doing, incorporate new information to adapt their approach, and build team trust and respect.

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## OPENNESS TO PIVOT

**“A Team Lead's willingness to change and the openness with which they encourage their teams to adapt are fundamental and make a real difference.”**

— *Diego Parra, Regional Lead, Latin America*

**“Appointing a ‘strategy manager’ to have the brain space to think about the bigger picture** can be incredibly helpful. Having someone dedicated to thinking about tracking toward impact, what conversations the team needs to have when, etc., can be a game changer for practicing Adaptive Management.”

— Sarah Ngo, Program Director

“When a team knows something isn’t quite working, they might not know how to fix it. That’s totally okay! In Adaptive Teams, the cycle of reflecting and adapting allows teams to get it wrong then try again. **The most important thing is the desire to grow and change together.**”

—Molly Lutz, Agile Manager

## CONTROL OVER THE ABILITY TO DRIVE PROGRESS

“There is often a **direct correlation between teams being able to effectively adaptively manage their work and the amount of projects a team is contractually obligated to complete**. This challenge compounds when a strategy or team lead lacks the ability to guide prioritization decisions. (eg. They aren’t able to say, “While Project A is important, it’s lower urgency than Project B, so we will de-prioritize it for this quarter and reallocate people power to Project B.”)

—Emma Ruffin Kuhn, Program Director

“If a team doesn’t feel empowered to make changes when something isn’t working, sustained Adaptive Management is really hard to do! **Teams that feel ownership of their processes and solutions can achieve remarkable things.**”

—Molly Lutz, Agile Manager

“A team is built on a network of commitments. **The fluidity with which its members are able to make commitments, as well as report on whether or not they are fulfilled,** impacts the fluidity toward progress.”

— *Diego Parra, Regional Lead, Latin America*

# Let's collaborate.

Take two minutes to let us know about your project and we'll be in touch to explore how we might work together.

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