Understanding Adaptive Mindsets • Supporting Adaptive People •
Building an Adaptive Workforce

The Problem
Every day, the news headlines make the problem more apparent. Whether it is scientific reports that tell of new findings about how climate change may profoundly alter the world we have known and knew how to manage; or new discoveries that change the way we even think about that future – we are headed into a world of rapid change, great uncertainty, surprises and in some instances outright not-knowing. Or whether it is news of yet another catastrophic event that instantly changes the lives of not just families but entire communities, as Hurricane Harvey’s flooding did in Houston, or Hurricane Maria did across the Caribbean – we are collectively headed into a world of more frequent, traumatic disruptions. Or whether it is news of technological revolutions, economic reconfigurations, fundamental policy shifts or sociocultural shifts – we are seemingly barreling down a road of transformative change. These changes are welcomed and propelled by some and rejected and resisted by others.

No one in public office, academia or most other institutions has been formally trained in how to deal with these sorts of challenges, all happening at once and feeding off each other. And yet, unprecedented levels of uncertainty, trauma, and constant change and transformation is the outlook for urban planners, engineers, psychologists, emergency first responders and decision-makers everywhere. Those who will be called on to lead and support communities in this future need insights, training, and support to do so well.

Landscape Assessment
With the help of initial funding from the Seed Fund this project has begun to undertake two landscape assessments to better understand how best to offer a constructive response to the problem posed above.

The Literature Landscape. Our team conducted an extensive search for relevant literature from a wide range of disciplines – from cognitive, military and medical psychology to business management, education, organizational development, depth psychology, adaptive management, leadership, arts and the imagination, social capital and emergency response – to better understand what is known about “adaptive mindsets.” We have come to broadly define this term as the combination of characteristics in individuals (and in their social or institutional context) that allow them to respond in an agile and resilient fashion to constant change, uncertainty, surprises, trauma, and even transformative challenges. Expected outputs: A White Paper summarizing our insights to date as well as a short, animated video to quickly introduce interested audiences to core ideas. Both will inform the expert workshop (below).

The Practitioner Landscape. Our team has used a number of opportunities (e.g., National Adaptation Forum 2017, Annual Meeting of the National Estuarine Research and Reserve System 2017; Social Coast Forum 2018) to gauge interest and to initiate collaboration with individuals who “live and breathe” the type of work environment and challenges described above. Several of the approached individuals are “boundary workers,” i.e., people who work at the interface between science and practice, who have eagerly joined the project team. This indicates enthusiasm for the project idea and its potential to deliver practical benefit. They have committed (and have initiated the process) of doing a more systematic “needs assessment” among their colleagues. Kristen Baja, Climate Resilience Officer at the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, will assess needs and interest among US urban practitioners. Kristen Goodrich, Coastal Training Program (CTP) Coordinator for the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) together with Susanne Moser will conduct a survey
among other CTPs in the NERR system to understand work pressures, needs and interests in professional support and trainings. We have initiated additional outreach to the Sea Grant Extension Service network – another group of “boundary individuals” working in regions of the US that already experience the worsening impacts of climate change. **Expected outputs:** A synthesis of the needs and outreach undertaken, which will provide a clear understanding of the potential audiences and their needs for information, training and support to be developed through this project. The synthesis will inform the expert workshop and trainings.

**Expert Workshop**

On the basis of the literature review and synthesis – which will acquaint us with leading experts on the “adaptive mind,” and the assessment of practitioner needs and interests, we will conduct a 5-day intensive inter- and transdisciplinary workshop that has the following (preliminary) goals: (1) to refine, rework and update the emerging synthesis from the underlying disciplinary findings and derive higher-level insights and principles; (2) to discern what aspects of “adaptive mindsets” are trainable and how to do so; and (3) to link the identified practitioner needs and interests with the emerging training content. **Expected outputs:** A workshop involving 25-30 individuals to be held at the Aspen Global Change Institute; videos of workshop presentations and discussions made widely available at the AGCI website; a peer-reviewed publication reflecting workshop outcomes; and guidance for the next phase of the project.

**Training Development and Pilots**

Guided by the outcomes of the expert workshop, the literature review and needs assessments, we will work with experts in adult learning and in the development of trainings to translate insights gained through all project components to date into training materials that can be delivered in desirable and effective ways (TBD). We envision a modular approach for shorter and more extensive training sessions. These training materials will be tested in pilot programs with precisely those audiences that were engaged through the landscape assessment (USDN, NERRS, Sea Grant Extension), using those programs’ respective annual meetings to reach as many network members as possible. Trainings will incorporate evaluation to collect feedback that will help us refine the training approaches and materials. **Expected outputs:** Initial and refined training materials (training guide, exercises, background readings, supporting resources).

**Peer Support**

Experience from the ongoing work of USDN and the NERRS CTP program suggests that one-off trainings are insufficient; trainings delivered by outsiders are helpful but do not meet the ongoing needs of trainees taking on new behaviors and practices, and they are not economically sustainable. At the same time, within each of these existing organizations and networks, a peer-learning culture is already well established. Such peer-learning and peer-support communities can help solidify insights, reinforce new practices and provide exactly the kind of social support we already know helps individuals be more resilient and adaptive. **Expected outputs:** Identification of key leads in each of the existing networks who are willing to anchor the peer support and learning network of trainees around becoming more adaptive.

**Expected Outcomes**

The project takes a multi-pronged approach to improve understanding, build capacity, and support professionals who work on the frontlines of climate change. This work will lay the intellectual and practical foundation for wider distribution to other professionals in years to come. We view the adaptive mind as a learnable foundation for professionals to become sought-after leaders who can help communities navigate a world of rapid, often traumatic, and ultimately transformative change.