C-TEN Executive Summary
Meeting Title: The Art of Adaptation: Leading Yourself and Others Through Change
Meeting Date: October 13, 2026

Overview

This C-TEN session explored why change so often stalls inside organizations: **change now arrives faster than people can comfortably adapt, and the brain's instinct to protect, rather than connect, is often what gets in the way.**

Natalie Johnson, co-founder of Vital Work, keynote speaker, and author, shared her work with HR leaders on leadership, well-being, and "intentional culture." She noted that roughly 70% of change efforts fail, not because the change is bad, but because of a human adaptation error rooted in how we are wired. She introduced two strategies for the **"art of adaptation"**: **manage your own energy** by pausing and focusing on what you can control, and **prioritize connection over protection** by noticing whether you are above or below the line. Members added their own experience, including a candid discussion of how senior leaders decide what they can control and when to step in.

Key Insights

1. Change Is Outpacing Our Ability to Adapt

- The pace of change has spiked beyond human capacity to adapt, as illustrated by a change curve developed by Eric (Astro) Teller of Google X.
- When change comes this quickly, teams **react** rather than pause and **respond**. If we keep reacting, our ability to adapt declines over time.
- Members shared what has helped them through change: listing the positives, thinking big but acting small, building relationships first in a new role, being transparent, and listening more.

2. Protection Often Disguises Itself as High Performance

- Anxiety, doubt, or impatience about a change activates the amygdala, which pushes us to "move now, react now, don't think," making transparency and relationship-building much harder.
- Protection can look like **isolation**, **efficiency over connection**, **silence over courage**, or **avoiding** the hard conversation. Each gets work done but limits collaboration and innovation.
- Drawing on Peter Drucker, Natalie noted that friction, confusion, and underperformance occur naturally; the rest requires leadership, and leaders' behaviors are contagious.

3. Strategy One: Pause and Manage Your Own Energy

- The first step is simple: **don't react**. A pause settles the amygdala and brings the prefrontal cortex back online. She cited a UCLA study in which simply naming an emotion quieted amygdala activity.
- Practices members named, such as building relationships, being transparent, and listening, all take deliberate management of one's energy.

- People rarely burn out from what they control; they burn out trying to control what they cannot.

4. Separate What You Control, Influence, and Cannot Control

- **Cannot control:** other people's behavior and feelings, timing, decisions made without input, and the ultimate impact of the change.
- **Can influence:** the response to a decision, how we talk about the change, how we meet, plan, and support people.
- **Can fully control:** our own thoughts, reactions, and behavior.
- Natalie's example: when new regulations restricted some of her clients' content, her team stopped spending energy on what they could not change, adjusted their language, and ended up with full classes and waiting lists.

5. Knowing When to Use Power, and When to Share or Hold It

- A member asked how senior leaders distinguish what they can control from what they cannot, particularly in a complex political environment.
- Members suggested knowing your organization, picking your battles, and recognizing that having the power to decide does not mean you should use it.
- One described the **"pocket veto"**: letting a matter sit and giving people time to adjust, while recognizing that time can be dangerous if issues needing attention are left alone.
- Natalie connected this to **power with, not power over**: a leader's role is to create clarity, set guardrails, and ensure accountability sits with those who can act. If everything is high priority, nothing is.

6. Strategy Two: Prioritize Connection Over Protection

- **Above the line**, we are open, curious, and committed to learning. **Below the line**, we are closed, defensive, and committed to being right.
- We are hardwired to go below the line because the brain cannot always tell a threat to survival from a threat to ego. It is normal, but not the state for creativity or hard conversations.
- Natalie encouraged leaders to ask "where am I?" often. Members noted that people move above and below the line depending on pressure and responsibility.

7. When You Fall Below the Line: Reset and Protect the Team

- **Practice "trampolines and resets":** small actions such as deep breaths, writing down what you are grateful for, stepping away, or telling yourself to respond rather than react.
- **Protect your team** by being honest, transparent, and a little vulnerable ("I'm below the line today; please give me grace"). Others often respond "me too" and step in to support.
- Sharing the language across a team makes it easier to ask, "How can we make this an above-the-line conversation?"

Solutions & Best Practices Highlighted

Pause Before Responding

- Allow a moment before reacting, and name the emotion you are feeling to help settle the stress response.

Sort the Situation

- List what you cannot control, what you can influence, and what you fully control, then focus on the last two.

Lead With Transparency and Relationships

- Share the status of a change, including what is not yet known, so people do not fill the gaps with their own stories.

Model and Reinforce the Behaviors You Want

- Recognize connecting behaviors verbally in groups and address unhelpful ones one-on-one; focus your influence on your intact team.

Build Resets and a Shared Language

- Identify two or three personal resets, and introduce above/below-the-line language so team members can name where they are and ask for support.

Member Reflections

- Many executives like change "other than the parts that are different than before."
- Early reactions are often too strong; time and experience can shift perspective, though not every issue can wait.
- Knowing what to leave alone and what needs attention is part of the "art" of executive judgment, not a formula.
- Leaders who take on every issue can dilute their impact; a considered pause can carry more influence.
- Protecting the team is often a leader's first instinct, and doing so can help the leader get back above the line.

Next Steps / Takeaways

- **Pause before reacting; the pause brings thoughtful response back online.**
- Sort a current challenge into what you can control, influence, and cannot control, and focus on the first two.
- Decide deliberately where to engage, where to share power, and where to hold back.
- Ask "where am I?" above or below the line, identify your resets, and be transparent with your team when you are below.
- Consider introducing shared above/below-the-line language to your leadership team.
- Follow-up from today's session: slides, the recording, a link to Natalie's book, and this summary will be shared with the full group.