

Adaptability: Responding Effectively to Change

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Executive Brief

In today's business world, the complexity and pace of change can be daunting. Adaptability has become recognized as a necessary skill for leaders to develop to be effective in this environment. Even so, leaders rarely know what they can do to become more adaptable and foster adaptability in others. This guidebook contributes to a greater understanding of adaptability and the cognitive, emotional, and dispositional flexibility it requires. Leaders will learn how to develop their adaptability and to become more effective for themselves, the people they lead, and their organizations.

Three Elements of Adaptability

Overview

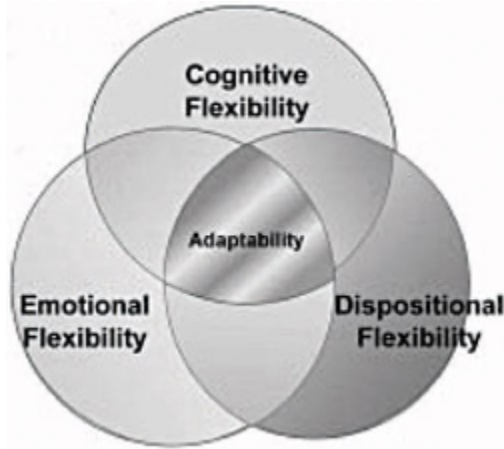
We know that leaders need to respond effectively to change in the organizational environment, but what is it that allows some people to adjust to change better than others? The answer involves three components:

- Cognitive flexibility is the ability to use different thinking strategies and mental frameworks.
- Emotional flexibility is the ability to vary your approach to dealing with your own emotions and those of others.
- Dispositional flexibility (or personality-based flexibility) is the ability to remain optimistic and at the same time realistic.

This three-part framework of adaptability was originally developed in 1999 by Steve Zaccaro of George Mason University. Subsequent research conducted by Paige Bader, Steve Zaccaro, Cary Kemp, and the CCL faculty in the context of CCL's Looking Glass Experience program has confirmed this framework. These studies have identified specific behaviors tied to each element and have found that having just one of these characteristics is not sufficient for leader adaptability. Leaders must exhibit two of the three characteristics to be perceived as adaptable. Scoring high on all three elements indicates that a leader is highly adaptable.

Adaptability can be developed. All three types of flexibility can be learned and improved by practicing the behaviors tied to each. The more adept a person is in being cognitively, emotionally, and dispositionally flexible, the more adaptable he or she will be in leadership roles.

Three Elements of Adaptability



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How Adaptable Are You?

In times of change—whether good or bad, unwanted or sought after—how do you adjust and adapt? Reflect on two or three recent changes at work or in your personal life. Take a few minutes to jot down how you felt, what you did to adapt, and how you responded to others in each case.

In what ways were your responses to the various changes similar, and how were they different?

Also consider your behaviors from the perspective of others. If your colleagues or family members saw you, what words might they use to describe you?

Now read through the following list of qualities and perspectives of flexible leaders. Put a check beside any items that describe you during times of change:

- I accept change as positive.
- I see change as an opportunity.
- I adapt plans as necessary.
- I effectively involve others in the design and implementation of change.
- I quickly master new technology, vocabulary, and operating rules.
- I seek corrective feedback to improve.
- I sort out my strengths and weaknesses fairly accurately.
- I lead change by example.

- I take into account people's concerns during change.
- I effectively manage others' resistance to organizational changes.
- I relate to all kinds of individuals tactfully and fairly.
- I understand and respect cultural, religious, gender, and racial differences.
- I adjust my style to changing situations.
- I admit personal mistakes, learn from them, and move on.
- I value working with a diverse workforce.
- I am comfortable managing people different from myself.
- I am optimistic; I see the glass as half full.
- I am not easily irritated when things are not going my way.

How many boxes did you check? Are you surprised by your answers? Are you as adaptable as you thought?

Cognitive Flexibility

Mark, the CEO of a national textile company, failed to recognize and understand the implications of the offshore trends happening in his industry. Convinced that he would be able to maintain his customer base and supply chain resources, he chose to ignore the advice of his VP of sales and marketing—to vertically integrate and diversify his product line. Two years later he was forced to reduce his workforce and lay off workers who had been in his business for more than twenty years. Had Mark been able to engage in dialogue with his management team and taken the information seriously, he might have developed a deeper understanding of the rapidly changing climate and created strategies to stave off the financial impact. Mark's reluctance to change was something he struggled with both at home and at work. By not facing reality and making sense of his environment, Mark put the future of his company at risk.

Leaders who have cognitive flexibility are able to incorporate different thinking strategies and mental frameworks into their planning, decision making, and managing of day-to-day work. Someone who works Plan A while having Plans B, C, and D in mind is cognitively flexible. He or she can simultaneously hold multiple scenarios in mind and can see when to shift and inject a change. Cognitive flexibility indicates nimble and divergent thinking, an interest in developing new approaches, the ability to see and leverage new connections, and the propensity to work well across the organization. Leaders with cognitive flexibility readily learn from experience and recognize when old approaches don't work.

Recognizing characteristics of a leader with cognitive flexibility is one thing, but what is it that they actually do? Our research shows that they habitually do three key things:

Scan the environment. Leaders need to be able to identify changes as they occur. It is critical to know the context of your business environment so that you will be able to discern new trends and opportunities in order not to be caught by surprise. Managers who are successful at scanning the environment continuously solicit information about relevant factors from knowledgeable sources and, more important, use that knowledge to reshape their understanding and perspectives. They are able to acknowledge that a change has occurred and can visualize how it will affect the organization.

Develop understanding, or “sense making.” Detecting coming change is the first part; understanding it is the second. Managers need to diagnose and interpret the meaning of changes for themselves and their units. Sense making, the process of developing a collective understanding of a situation, is important to adequately interpreting and comprehending information. Seemingly dissimilar views often result in powerful opportunities for change once each person or group has come to a full and shared view. This process may include divergent thinking—for instance, contemplating a totally new direction that turns an obstacle into an opportunity, or an old idea into an innovative practice. Dialogue— conversation balanced by advocacy and inquiry—is a powerful tool for creating shared meaning among teams and individuals.

Create strategies. Managers need to develop a strategy that responds to environmental changes. In other words, they develop several possible strategies, recognizing that they cannot predict exactly how a situation will play out. Cognitive adapters are able to move past strategies that are comfortable and have worked in the past, because they understand they may not work in a present situation. In fact, they seek out or test new approaches. Cognitive adapters also devise varying strategies for leading. In particular, they find different ways to communicate their interpretation of changing events and the needed responses. Here, the ability to persuade effectively and address the emotional aspects of change becomes critical.

Emotional Flexibility

Art, a second-generation owner of a large regional construction company, moved into his position after his father stepped down because of health reasons. The change caused a stir within the organization, as Art Sr. was a well-loved and respected figure. Art Jr. struggled with letting his staff see his emotions regarding the change, knowing that he was much more reserved and introspective than his gregarious father. He knew his leadership style would be dramatically different. Working with an executive coach, Art began to journal and get in touch with his own reactions and emotions. What he soon realized was that he never knew what his father’s vision for the company was and, therefore, couldn’t lead effectively without having made sense of that. He engaged in a series of meetings and interviews with staff and spent many hours on the construction sites forming relationships with his employees. Within a few short weeks, he gained clarity about his role as leader and the company’s future. He hosted lunches and face-to-face meetings during the transition, sent out a personal note to each employee asking him or her to stay engaged with the organization, and set up an open-door

policy. Feeling more comfortable about things, Art moved his attention to growing and maintaining the company, producing record earnings the next quarter.

Leaders with emotional flexibility vary their approach to dealing with their own and others' emotions—an area that many leaders often fail to consider. An emotionally flexible leader is comfortable with the process of transition, including the grieving, complaining, and resistance. Adapting to change requires give-and-take between the leader and those experiencing the change. A leader without emotional flexibility is dismissive of others' concerns or emotions and shuts down discussion. At the same time, an emotionally adaptive leader moves the change or agenda forward. He or she doesn't "give in" to emotions or get pulled off course by concerns.

Demonstrating emotional flexibility requires that you do these things:

Understand and manage your own emotions. Being emotionally flexible requires you to first demonstrate an awareness of your own emotions. This means acknowledging and presenting your emotional responses in an authentic way, thereby helping others to do the same. Leading is emotionally difficult work. Leaders who ignore the emotional element and deal with only the "reality" will be less effective and will eventually suffer from the strain. Leaders need energy and the fortitude to deal with change; care of your emotional self can help you maintain the necessary vigor.

Connect with and address the emotions of others. Emotionally flexible leaders are aware of what subordinates and peers are feeling. They need to consider this emotional aspect and respond to it in helpful and positive ways. Being open and forthright, along with creating a safe space for people to express their emotions, will go a long way in gaining commitment.

Engage emotionally to help others get on board. Often in the midst of change, leaders assume that people will automatically be motivated and engaged. What they fail to realize is that while they may be committed to the initiative, others may be in denial or resistance. By acknowledging the reality of the situation with genuine emotion and support, you encourage others to connect with the change and stay engaged. It is impossible to move through transition with apathetic, disconnected colleagues.

Maintain a balance between emotion and action. Empathy and good listening are key; emotionally flexible leaders find a good balance between allowing enough time for the struggle and helping to resolve it and move on. They allow the expression of negative emotions and discourage wallowing in them. Such leaders are comfortable connecting with *and* rather than *but*. Leaders strike that balance when they say, "I'm listening and understanding the challenges, *and* here's what we're going to have to do to try to move this forward." If they say, "I heard what you said, *but* we have to move on," they are dismissive and belittling of the concerns.

Dispositional Flexibility

Elaine, a division president, is about to announce a major downsizing. Drastic cuts have been avoided as long as possible; now she sees no other choice. Even so, Elaine is doubtful the new plan will result in the savings and efficiency she needs to avoid a plant closing. When the layoffs are announced, employees are predictably angry and upset. Elaine sticks to her script, citing competitive pressures, the need to make deep cuts, and the importance of pulling together to turn things around. To those around her, Elaine is falling short on two fronts: she's not dealing with the reality people are facing, nor is she offering a sense of hope or confidence that pulling together will make a difference.

Leaders who display dispositional flexibility operate from a place of optimism grounded in realism and openness. They will acknowledge a bad situation, but they simultaneously visualize a better future. These leaders figure out what they need to be optimistic in the current context, no matter what the difficulties and challenges. They are neither blindly positive nor are they pessimistic and defeatist. Ambiguity is well tolerated. Dispositionally flexible leaders see change as an opportunity rather than as a threat or danger.

Dispositional flexibility can be seen in the following actions:

Be genuinely and realistically optimistic about change and communicate that optimism to others. Leaders who are dispositionally flexible are confident that both they and the team can be effective in the new environment. They identify what is positive about the new experience or situation and build on it.

Balance expressions of uncertainty with a positive attitude. Effectively communicating with others and focusing on the positive must be balanced by realism and a willingness to give voice to uncertainty. Dispositionally flexible leaders allow others to understand the questions and issues behind their concerns and doubts. Often this can lead to constructive brainstorming and conversations, and it frequently uncovers new approaches and solutions.

Support others through the process of change. Leaders who are adept at the dispositional aspects of flexibility encourage others in the organization or team to go with the flow of change. They elicit contributions from others, sincerely commend others for their innovative contributions, and introduce those who are new to the organization or team as a way of acknowledging that change has occurred and new group dynamics will emerge. They are highly visible and energetic.

Know your own tendencies related to change. Dispositionally flexible leaders demonstrate an awareness of their own preferences and behaviors, but are able to modify their behaviors as needed. They are comfortable experiencing new things, trying new approaches, and working through ambiguity.

Developing Adaptability

As with most skills, developing adaptability takes practice, practice, practice. Here are ways you can practice cognitive, emotional, and dispositional flexibility and improve your overall adaptability.

Ways to Practice Cognitive Flexibility

- Become childlike in curiosity. Ask lots of questions. Wonder, explore, and consider before you judge and decide.
- Accept difference. Different is not right or wrong. It is just different.
- See and be seen. Get out and see for yourself what is going on. During difficult, changing times, employees need to see the management team.
- Have a plan for problems. Clarify your approach and procedures for dealing with resistant employees, managing a crisis, or making a quick decision in the face of uncertainty. But don't get too attached to a single plan or strategy. Have Plans B and C at the ready.
- Understand resistance. Be informed about the underlying concerns and issues that may account for people's resistance during change.
- Keep your eyes open. Stay informed about the changing pressures facing the organization and the industry. Scan your environment so you can identify changes—and diagnose their implications—early on.
- Commit to learning. Adapting requires learning. Good learners find ways to learn in any situation. Experiment, test, and try.

Ways to Practice Emotional Flexibility

- Create support systems. Look to mentors, friends, coaches, trusted peers, professional colleagues, family members, and others to serve as your support system in times of change. Encourage employees to do the same.
- Commit to feedback. Provide prompt feedback, both positive and negative, to employees. This gives you practice in dealing with the emotional reactions of others while facing your own emotions or resistance or both.
- Act decisively. When faced with a tough decision such as laying off workers, be clear, make decisions, and act decisively. Even though doing so may be difficult, it's harmful to waver or avoid reality.
- Stretch your direct reports. Use your knowledge and expertise to broaden the range of problem-solving options and expertise for direct reports.
- Avoid bulldozing change. Effectively manage others' resistance to change by explaining, answering questions, and patiently listening to concerns.
- Find ways to motivate. Consistently interact with staff in a way that is motivating and encouraging.
- Confront problem employees. Move quickly to address them. Otherwise, you hurt morale, foster resentment, and stifle change.
- Listen. Learn to use effective listening skills to gain clarification from others. This will help you identify resistance and concerns while modeling preferred behavior.

- Collaborate. Involve others in the beginning stages of an initiative. This way you are more likely to take into account other people's concerns, as well as their ideas. It also helps you gain the commitment of others.
- Change your approach. Get comfortable using a broad range of methods and techniques so that you can adjust your management style to changing situations.
- Face reality. Adapt to changing situations with realism, openness, and optimism.

Trusting the Process

A colleague on an expatriate assignment shared a story about an emergency trip to the hospital. Jim, typically eager to work and live in new cultures and take on new experiences, found himself in a hospital where the staff spoke French and Flemish. The staff members were performing their usual routines. When the nurse took his temperature and showed him the thermometer, he read 35.6. He thought, "Hmmm, is that good or bad, hot or cold?" He recalled some things he had learned in high school science and was soon able to determine that he had no fever. In spite of the unknown and sometimes surreal moments going through surgery and recovering in a foreign hospital, Jim simply trusted the process. He believed that the staff knew what they were doing. In fact, he said, "I was probably less nervous because I couldn't make out most of the conversation."

Ways to Practice Dispositional Flexibility

- Be genuine. Leading change by example requires honesty and authenticity. Understand your own reaction to change so that you can be straightforward with others.
- Accept change as positive. Find ways to see the benefits of change—not just for the organization, but also for yourself and your coworkers.
- Adapt your plans. Accept that you cannot know everything or control everything. Be prepared to shift according to changing external pressures or internal dynamics.
- Cast a wide net. Involve key people in the design and implementation of change. This requires building good networks and relationships as a matter of course.
- Rehearse. Give yourself a chance to practice new skills and new behaviors, or to learn about a new situation. Rehearsing can quickly make the unfamiliar familiar.
- Immerse yourself in the new environment. Jump right in to meet the people and learn the ropes in a new situation. Join activities, take a tour, and invite people for lunch or coffee.
- Coach employees. Make it a practice to mentor and teach employees. This allows you to set clear expectations and guide employees in how to meet those expectations. It also provides you a venue in which to deal effectively with resistant employees.
- Pay attention to life beyond work. Shifting between work, family, and other interests and obligations is a form of adaptability. Attend to life and work issues—and use the interplay as an opportunity to practice your flexibility.
- Seek feedback. Keep a clear perspective on what you are doing. Find ways to receive feedback (both positive and negative) from a variety of sources.

Getting Worse to Get Better

Jake recently decided upon a new career path. After being downsized, he decided to pursue his passion—photography—as his profession. An award-winning amateur photographer, Jake started his own business as a freelance photographer, with the goal of opening his own studio. In addition to adapting to run the business, Jake soon realized that he would need to retool his skills to meet the demands of professional photography. He worked with a colleague to enhance his technical understanding and ability and to refine his skills. A key moment came when Jake admitted that the quality of his work would suffer for a time while he tried new approaches and put new ideas into practice. This was a tough lesson for a perfectionist who was accustomed to success. But with his long-term goal in mind, he accepted this different perspective, began to soften his inner critic, and sought out opportunities to practice and experiment behind the lens. By adapting, he is on his way to achieving his dream.