

THE ADAPTIVE LEADER:

Managing Change and Uncertainty in the 21st Century

By: Les Woller

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists on trying to adapt the world to himself.

George Bernard Shaw

Irish Author

Many suggest that today's business world is filled with more complexity and the pace of change is far greater than in any other period in history. Just think about your day to day – the dozens of decisions, constant pressures, relentless changing environments and conditions of uncertainty – the list could go on and on. **Adaptability** has become a necessary skill for leaders to be effective in this environment, but few are discussing its importance. Similarly, leaders rarely know what they need to do to become more **adaptable** and spread this critical trait to those around them. However, it is a trait that leaders can develop and continuously use to adapt to their constantly changing environments. The 3 key areas leaders need to focus on in order to develop **adaptability** are **1) Level of Awareness: getting off Autopilot, 2) Reflection: Learning from experiences, and 3) Application to Targets**. Leaders who excel in **adaptability** and continue to adapt to changing conditions will be those who are able to successfully navigate through a turbulent world of change and take charge.

Adaptability is certainly not a new term, but in the context of its application to behavior change, it is quite new and quickly developing as a critical trait of a successful leader. Typically **adaptability** is used in reference to adaption, as a metaphor taken from a biology context. And now days, it is most commonly used in the IT world in reference to software development. However, adaptability in the behavioral context can be defined as the “**willingness and ability to think and act in a manner that adjusts to new, different, or changing conditions appropriately to meet one's objectives or interact constructively with others and the environment.**” Ultimately it is the ability to respond effectively to changing conditions.

The US military is well known for its training and emphasis on adaptability in regards to battle warfare. For years now they have recognized the importance of ensuring not only their senior leadership, but also that field leadership is **adaptable**. Imagine going into a conflict with a set plan and set information regarding enemy troops position, strength and supplies. Once you arrive, the field completely changes. Your opponents are twice the size, with significantly stronger fire power than anticipated. The strategy is going to change on how to engage the

enemy. The ability to be **adaptable** is critical to success. **An adaptable leader is able to continuously “reassess” the information he knows, become more aware of the new realities, and create a new strategy for behavior which is appropriate to his new environment.**

There is no doubt that adaptability is needed now more than just about any other time in history. The probability that leaders will see constant changes to the environments and spheres they influence is investable. If you think back to the world of work in the 1980's, certain words come to mind: stability, predictability, clarity, loyalty. If you fast forward to the business climate today, the words that jump out are: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, speed and ambiguity. Just think about the pressure and stress for short term results, temporary projects, work shifts, international transfers and constant corporate takeovers. The only way that successful leaders can manage through these turbulent waters is to increase their adaptability. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) described adaptability as there **“is no longer a nicety or a coping mechanism. Adaptability is a leadership imperative. Without the ability to adapt to change, a manager previously seen as successful and full of potential is likely to be fired, demoted, or held on a career plateau.”**

AWARENESS

In today's volatile environment, you must be in touch with what's going on inside of you, not just outside of you. You must be aware of reality if you are relying on a routine autopilot like process when things become too complicated or if you lapse into a self-protective mode every time a project hits a snag. That is the first key to your becoming **adaptable – increasing your awareness**. Too often many leaders are stuck on what is at times referred to as “autopilot”. Defined, **autopilot describes a mode of living or working in which little purposeful or deliberate thinking takes place**. It is synonymous with unconscious behavior. When people are on autopilot, they fly through their daily decision making; without focused thinking consciously. Their responses to any given situation are controlled by events that took place in the past. Rather than taking a step back, and gaining perspective before deciding what to do, they are at the mercy of their conditioned responses.

Self awareness prompts your ability to switch off of autopilot. It provides you with a process to **pause, reflect, ask questions for clarification and problem solve**. As a result, you generate a variety of response options, at least one of which will be much more effective than your conditioned response.

In this sense, awareness is really about the ability to step back and observe yourself. If you think of your work life as a drama, then you want to be more than an actor in it – an actor who simply recites rehearsed lines and lacks the ability to improvise. **You want to be both actor and director**. In the latter role: 1) Take a step back; 2) observe the action and make changes;) to improve the drama, while it is being performed.

Ultimately, becoming more aware is as simple as “waking up” and applying fresh thought and thinking to each situation, not continually operating in the same old habitual patterned way of thought.¹ In this way self-awareness facilitates adaptability. It keeps you off of “autopilot”, a state of low awareness that prevents you from changing as conditions change. On autopilot, you don’t question yourself, which inhibits learning as well as adaptability. It is so easy to lose touch with reality, when on autopilot. Many leaders just coast through decisions and manage a crisis in the same way they always have, without checking back in with the new realities. This is a recipe for failed leadership, but can be overcome, starting with increasing our level of awareness.

REFLECTION

Increasing your awareness is not enough to become an **adaptable** leader. It is not enough to switch off autopilot. As important as this is, it still leaves you operating on a surface level. You need to dig deeper in order to learn from your experiences and apply them to become **adaptable**.

Reflection is the critical step in creating a coachable moment. When you enter a coachable moment, you have the chance to learn from your experience and transfer that learning to a similar situation in the future. **Reflection essentially captures the learning that takes place in a given moment, rather than allowing it to vanish.** Typically, we don’t reflect on our experiences therefore we don’t learn from them. Too often, we get caught up in all sorts of side issues and don’t concentrate on why we behaved or didn’t behave a certain way and why it did or didn’t work. As a result we are likely to repeat our unproductive behavior, which is likely not **adaptable** to new and changing environments.

When you start asking yourself “Why” questions, you enter this reflective learning zone. For instance in any given situation as you become aware and move into reflection you need to understand why you did what you did. When you understand this and make sense of it, it allows you to see what you would do differently in the future. This learning nugget is essential for changing your behavior. However, the real trick is to learn how to do this online or in the event. That is the essence of true adaptability. Being able to learn in the moment and change direction or behavior. Basically, asking why questions and reflecting allows for you to consider alternative ways of action.

CONTINUOUS ADAPTABILITY

Learning nuggets really serve little to no purpose unless they are properly applied to targets or goals you might have. Learnings you acquire through being aware and reflecting need to be appropriately applied to new situations each time. **By taking these lessons and learnings and**

¹ Angier, Natalie. “Mirrors don’t lie. Mislead? Oh, yes.” International Herald Tribune. 2008.

appropriately applying them, constantly thinking them through afresh for the appropriateness of each situation, this is at the heart of adaptability. Once you capture a learning nugget, it can't just sit and you assume it will automatically be applied to the next similar situation. Rather, it also will need to be constantly thought through afresh.² This keeps you on your toes though and keeps you thinking, engaged and checked into reality of the situation. It forces you to ask more "what", "why" and "how" questions. Therefore, **adaptability** needs to be continuously pursued and applied in all situations rather than just something you learn once and never think about again.

THE VALUE OF ADAPTABILITY IN THE TWNETY-FIRST CENTURY

Adaptability is the answer. Many leaders today are asking what tools they need to lead their organization successfully through a world of uncertainty and **adaptability** isn't just the tool, it is the toolbox. **Adaptability** needs to be continuously applied to all skills and situations. **The adaptive leader, is no doubt the leader of tomorrow.** Leaders who are self-aware, highly reflective and continuously think things through afresh are leaders that are going to be successful in a day and age of constant changes. Those who are willing to become **adaptable** and put in the required practice and constant application, will see multiple benefits:

1. Increased awareness
2. Improved resiliency
3. More sound relationships/networks
4. Better choices
5. Improved performance³
6. More versatile

Although **adaptability** is likely an easy trait to understand, it is not so easy to master. But those who are willing to focus on it and apply it, will stand out among other leaders and find successes they would not have otherwise.

² Argyris, Chris. "Teaching Smart People How to Learn." *Harvard business Review*, 1991.

³ Hallowell, Edward M. "Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform." 2005