

Adaptability: Enhancing your leadership effectiveness in times of change

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Coping with change requires flexibility – if you don't vary your tack as the wind shifts, you'll end up on the rocks.



IN A RECENT leadership development program, we asked the participants to introduce themselves and share a current leadership challenge. One participant described how he and his family had just been whitewater rafting on the Colorado River in the western part of the United States. He said the “experience was exciting, exhilarating, unpredictable and exhausting. Come to think of

The Looking Glass Experience program provides managers with a realistic and supportive environment for learning how they lead and influence in the context of an organisation. Participants learn how to make difficult decisions under pressure in order to discover how their leadership style impacts their organisation and those they work with. The realism of the Looking Glass Inc. ® business

mergers, and general unease about the future of whole segments of the industry.

In a recent survey of 86 executives conducted by Ernst & Young and Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, participants cited regulatory changes (38 per cent), competitive dynamics (29 per cent) and market accountability (19 per cent) as the top three threats that they and their organisations will face in the next two years. The effects of mergers and acquisitions, corporate restructuring, downsizing, globalisation, off-shoring practices and the threat of terrorism are affecting more and more industries. It is a truism of today’s business environment that the only thing that remains certain and predictable is change – and change is more copious, rapid and complex than ever before.

Leaders and their organisations are not only expected to perform with optimal efficiency and results, they are being asked to do so in complex and tumultuous contexts. Suffice it to say, change is omnipresent in our professional and personal lives, and in the political, economic and

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it,” he added, “it felt very much like every day at work. You see, my current leadership challenge is how to manage all of the whitewater at work!”

UNDERSTANDING THE TERRAIN

In today’s business world, the pace and rate of change can be overwhelming. Companies – even entire industries – can find themselves turned upside down, seemingly overnight. The ‘once-in-a-company-lifetime’ reorganisation is now a regular occurrence. The need for leaders to be adaptable is generally acknowledged, but there has been little insight into what adaptability actually looks like and how it can be developed as a leadership skill.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), George Mason University and the United States Army partnered in a collaborative research project to deepen the understanding of adaptability and its role in leader effectiveness. The results of this research project led to the design of a training module focused on understanding the behavioural aspects of adaptability. This experiential module was recently introduced into CCL’s open enrollment business simulation, The Looking Glass Experience.

simulation provides participants with a realistic and safe action-learning experience. And, while the program focuses on learning to lead in the context of an organisation, it also provides a greater understanding of change. To help leaders cope with complex business challenges and the increasing pace of change, CCL decided to refresh the traditional change module with our research on adaptability.

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RIDING THE RAPIDS

Statistics bear out the prevalence, increasing scope and, sometimes, devastating effects of change in the business world. Of the 100 largest US companies at the beginning of the 20th century, only 16 exist today. A look at particular industries makes the level and impact of change appear even more staggering: for instance, the semiconductor industry went from a year (2001) of more than 80 per cent growth and unbridled optimism, to a year (2002) of 40 per cent decline, massive layoffs and

environmental arenas. Our participants in the classroom regularly talk of information overload; of needing to be in contact, and contactable, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Metathesiophobia – that’s the tongue-tying word for fear of change, a fear that most people, if they are honest with themselves, will admit to having experienced. Change, even when it’s relatively minor and even when the individual wants it, can be

unsettling and unnerving – and, as a result, intimidating. And, with fear usually comes stress, resentment, and maybe even resistance to the change.

For leaders, to fear and resist change, and to balk at venturing into the unknown, can be their own, their followers' and their

On the day of the change activity at CCL, Brian just sat in a chair in the corner of the room with his face in his hands. "I can't do this – it's too much like what I've been through at work", he said, shaking his head. "I don't have the ability to cope with this."

Ephemerality – not quite so

organisations are often shifted about at breakneck speed.

Institutional loyalty is hardly what is used to be. The US Bureau of National Affairs recently reported that employee turnover is occurring at the highest rate in nearly 20 years, and it is common for people in organisations to be quickly shuttled in and out of different assignments. The ability to deal with this type of change – losing employees and team members and working with new and unfamiliar colleagues – has a profound impact on overall organisational effectiveness and productivity.

ADAPTABILITY: A CRITICAL SKILL

Research conducted by CCL has identified flaws that can contribute to derailment (ie, to a manager previously seen as successful and full of potential for continued

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organisation's undoing. In the Looking Glass simulation, it is not uncommon for a participant to resist taking part in a powerful change activity. Take, for example, the case of 'Brian'. He was an easygoing, successful global sales manager in a large pharmaceutical company. Recently, after a succession of complicated mergers and acquisitions, he was told to cut his sales force by 20 per cent in a matter of weeks. A champion of his staff and believer in developing his team, Brian was faced with the agonising decision of letting go very competent and talented people. The emotional toll on him was very hard for him to bear; not wanting to let his employees see this, he kept a 'stiff upper lip', mostly masking his emotions.

tongue-tying, this word refers to the increasingly rapid rate at which technology is becoming obsolete and being replaced, requiring individuals and organisations to engage in a constant learning process. Consequently, internal work systems and processes are growing cumbersome and inefficient, leading to more

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confusion and chaos. In addition, the people who make up work groups, teams and whole

advancement, being fired, demoted or held on a career plateau). Among the top four reasons cited as a cause of derailment, the inability to develop or adapt was the most frequently cited reason for derailment among North American managers. Other top flaws noted were: poor working relations, inability to build and lead a team, and failure to meet business objectives. Conversely, the most frequently cited success factor for North American managers was the ability to develop or adapt.

If leaders don't understand and develop their own adaptability and that of their subordinates, new initiatives can be halted, stifled or left as a bold new idea without a plan for implementation. When a new direction or change in course



emanates from an organisation's top leadership, for instance, managers and their teams are expected to immediately understand and embrace the vision and move it towards implementation, seemingly without hesitation. To understand and get on board with the new vision and to inspire subordinates to do the same, managers must be adaptable. If leaders can gain an understanding and clear picture of

significant learnings to others within the organisation.

Behaviours associated with cognitive flexibility are: scanning the environment; developing an understanding, or sense-making; and creating strategies to respond to change.

Scanning 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

more importantly, use that knowledge to reshape their understanding and perspectives (ie, draw lessons from experience). They are able to acknowledge that a change has occurred and can visualise how it will impact the organisation. They shift their language from past tense ("we used to do this...") to future tense ("we will need to do this...").



Developing an understanding, or sense-making. This is important to adequately interpreting and comprehending information. It includes divergent thinking; for instance, contemplating a totally new

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adaptable behaviours, it will help them face change and transition more effectively.

Adaptability is often thought of as a 'magic bullet', yet many people are at a loss to recognise it when they see it, let alone define it. To help remove the mystery, we have focused on three main forms of adaptability – cognitive, dispositional and emotional flexibility – which, when combined, result in leader effectiveness.

1. Cognitive flexibility.

This is understood as the ability to use different thinking strategies and mental frameworks. Simply stated, it is being able to learn from experience and recognise when old approaches don't work. We know from CCL's research that, on average, it takes 16 to 18 months to learn from an assignment. So if mistakes are made, often they aren't realised as learning opportunities if executives, particularly high-potential managers, are promoted out of the original context. This moves them beyond the experience: they don't have the opportunity to think about it in new and different ways, and they certainly don't pass along

that you are able to discern new trends and opportunities in order not to be caught by surprise. Frequently, our observations focus on the familiar instead of 'forewarnings' – the unusual or out-of-pattern occurrence. For example, in the manufacturing industry, more and more jobs were shifted from the US to Asia and South America as markets there became stronger as a

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result of new international trade laws and agreements. Some senior executives were able to spot the implications of this early enough to shore up their businesses to stave off losing jobs, while others refused to believe that their industry was changing and were hard hit with mill closures, massive layoffs and even bankruptcy.

Managers who are successful at scanning the environment continuously solicit information about relevant factors from knowledgeable sources, and,

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. Seemingly dissimilar views often result in powerful opportunities for change once each person or group has developed a collective understanding of the situation.

Creating strategies. Cognitive adapters see every interaction as an opportunity to influence

those they work with, and devise varying strategies to achieve this goal. They are good at spanning boundaries to solicit input and communicate change. They have a sense of purpose and clarity about how to move through the change or confusion and utilise different modes of communication to maximise their reach. Instead of communicating verbally in a

from others, brainstorming and recognition of innovative contributions to elicit new ideas. Leaders who display dispositional flexibility tolerate ambiguity well, are open to new experiences and demonstrate an awareness of their own preferences.

Consider the story of 'Franklin', a 20-year employee who applies for a promotion. Although passed over

within her firm and with clients. Her husband is suddenly downsized, leaving the family financial burden on her shoulders. For many months, Melissa takes a 'stiff upper lip' approach. Finally, after nearly collapsing under the stress of always being 'on' at work, she confides in a few close colleagues and clients who offer her support and understanding. Melissa's honesty and emotional release enable her to come to terms with her situation. She then weaves her newfound understanding of hardship and resiliency into her work, which brings new meaning to her practice and allows her to be more authentic as a person and a leader.

When we practice monitoring, filtering or otherwise managing our emotional responses to change, usually others are able to sense or 'see through' such behaviour. Studies on lying and deception tell us that our body language, tone of voice, eye movement, eye contact and other non-verbal cues all conspire to reveal the truth, despite

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formal setting, cognitive adapters will often use informal networks of people to 'spread the word'.

2. Dispositional flexibility.

The ability to remain optimistic and, at the same time, realistic is key to dispositional flexibility. A colleague said this was personified by the person living in Belgium who happily heads outdoors, but who carries an umbrella – just in case. Successful adapters see change as an opportunity rather than as a threat or danger. They are not unrealistic: they will acknowledge a bad situation, but simultaneously visualise a better future. Research shows that POW camp and Holocaust survivors were not always the ones who believed they would be set free next month, or even next year, but rather the ones that acknowledged the desperateness of their situation and held on to the belief that while things might get worse, one day they would prevail.¹

Leaders who are adept at dispositional flexibility have the uncanny ability to paint a picture for others to hold onto as they move through turmoil. These adapters are 'present' during times of change, emotionally and physically. They are highly visible and energetic, and use generative strategies such as soliciting input

for the promotion, and clearly disappointed, he see this as a positive message instead of a discouraging defeat. Franklin decides to go into a full professional reflection, and access all of his possible career choices. He is too 'young' to fully retire; yet, staying – which is an option – clearly has unwelcome implications. He focuses and uses his informal and

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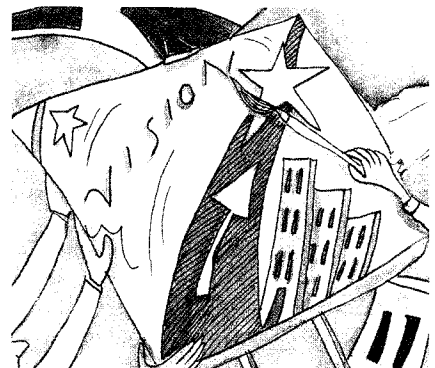
formal networks for feedback. All this leads him to decide that this might be a good time to consider that career change he's had on hold for the past few years.

3. Emotional flexibility.

This is the ability to vary your approach to dealing with your own and others' emotions – an area that many leaders often fail to consider. 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. Take 'Melissa', for example. Melissa works in a large consulting practice and has high visibility

our best efforts to keep it under wraps. When our verbal and non-verbal messages don't match, people are more prone to believe what they see than what they hear.

Emotionally flexible leaders are aware of what subordinates and peers are feeling.



Often, as leaders, we are privy to information about impending changes before others in the organisation get wind of them. So in the marathon that is the change process, it is as if we are already a

sense of both patience and urgency. However, these can be reconciled: it is one thing to allow the expressing of negative emotions and quite another to encourage wallowing in them.

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few kilometers ahead of the rest of the group. This gives us time to process the change and begin the transition – we've probably also



had time to be angry, to grieve or even to resist. It is easy to forget that others need the same period of grace. Being open and forthright, along with creating a safe 'space' for people to express their emotions, will go a long way in gaining commitment.

Finally, maintaining a balance between emotion and action is critical. It indeed seems paradoxical to have to lead with a realistic

Consider, for a moment, the publicity surrounding Brazilian runner, Vanderlie de Lima. You may remember that he was in the lead the Olympic marathon race in Athens. You may also remember, while he was in the lead, an angry protestor shoved him off course, and he finished third.

Important to note in this story is the way de Lima handled the situation. When he entered the Olympic stadium for his final lap,

sign that the pace of social and technological developments is going to slow down, at least in the near future. To be effective leaders, we must therefore accept this and respond productively to change: by, for example, appreciating that what at first can seem to be insurmountable challenges can, on reflection, be opportunities to learn and grow. And not just for us – setting a positive example will assist others to overcome the fear and resistance that often accompany change.

That said, however, change can test even the strongest person's fortitude and cloud organisational initiatives. The key to having the winds of change push you and your organisation forward, rather than over, is to develop cognitive, emotional and behavioural adaptability, which is founded on another learnable skill, active self-awareness. Knowing yourself

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de Lima spread his arms like the wings of a bird in flight. He was the epitome of grace under pressure, having chosen to enjoy the moment and not to focus on the disappointment. The funny thing is, for us, and, we've discovered, for many other people, this 'mere' bronze medal performance was one of the most pleasing and memorable of the entire Olympics.

CONCLUSION

In today's busy world, change is ever present. Nor is there any

makes it possible to know others, and to steer them safely and usefully through turmoil, like the guide on a whitewater raft. Or, put another way, adaptable organisational leaders are like captains on sailing ships: they don't avoid the buffeting winds, they use their skill and crew to catch them.

ENDNOTES

- 1 V Frankel, 1985, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press.

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