

Flexible Flyers

A Leader's Framework for Developing Adaptability



In today's business world the complexity and pace of change can be daunting. In this environment of rapid change, leaders are coming to recognize that they need to develop adaptability to be effective. The process of developing adaptability begins with learning and practicing three types of flexibility—cognitive, emotional, and dispositional.

Leaders all over the world are facing unprecedented challenges: new cultures, new jobs, new markets, new everything. Dramatic change often creates feelings of uncertainty, self-consciousness, and even fear. Most leaders know from experience that even minor change can have a powerful effect.

Given the current complexities of work, the sheer volume of information flowing in, and the rapid changes taking place, it makes sense for leaders—and the people they lead—to be adaptable. Adaptability is no longer a nicety or a coping mechanism—it is a leadership imperative. Without the ability to adapt to change, leaders previously seen as successful and filled with potential are likely to be derailed—fired, demoted, or held on a career plateau.

Many of the challenges facing organizations today are adaptive chal-

lenges—systemic challenges with no clear-cut solutions. Whereas technical challenges require redistributions of resources and well-defined plans of action, systemic challenges involve creating new processes, systems, or skills. The increased complexity of today's organizational challenges requires leaders to work in new ways. They need to be skilled adapters.

THREE ELEMENTS

So it's a given that today's leaders need to respond effectively to change in the organizational environment. But what is it that allows some leaders to adjust better to change than others? The answer involves three components:

Cognitive flexibility: the ability to use a variety of thinking strategies and mental frameworks

by Allan Calarco and Joan Gurvis

Emotional flexibility: the ability to vary one's approach to dealing with one's own emotions and those of others

Dispositional flexibility (or personality-based flexibility): the ability to remain optimistic and at the same time realistic

This three-part framework of adaptability was developed in 1999 by Steve Zaccaro, a professor of psychology at George Mason University. Subsequent research conducted by Zaccaro, Paige Bader, and Cary Kemp in the context of CCL's Looking Glass Experience program has confirmed this framework. These studies have identified specific behaviors tied to each component 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 components 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 at being cognitively, emotionally, and dispositionally flexible, the more adaptable he or she will be in leadership roles.

Cognitive Flexibility

Leaders who have cognitive flexibility are able to incorporate a variety of 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 the characteristics of leaders with cognitive flexibility is one thing, but what is it that these leaders actually do? Research shows that they tend to do three key things:

Scan the environment. Leaders need to be able to identify changes as they occur. It is critical for them to know the context of their business environment so they will be able to discern new trends and opportunities and not 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 by engaging in sense making. Detecting coming change is the first key to cognitive flexibility; 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 for 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 respond strategically to environ-

mental changes. When doing so they should develop several possible strategies, recognizing that it is impossible to predict exactly how a situation will play out. Cognitive adapters are able to move beyond strategies that have worked in the past because they understand that these strategies may not work in the present. In fact cognitive adapters seek out or test new approaches. They also devise varying strategies for leading. In particular they find different ways to communicate their interpretations of changing events and the needed responses. The ability to persuade effectively and address the emotional aspects of change becomes critical.

Emotional Flexibility

Leaders with emotional flexibility vary their approach to dealing with their emotions and those of others—an area that many leaders often fail to consider. An emotionally flexible leader is comfortable with the process of transition, including grieving, complaining, and resistance. Adapting to change requires give-and-take

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between the leader and those experiencing the change. A leader without emotional flexibility is dismissive of others' concerns or emotions and shuts down discussion. An emotionally adaptive leader, however, 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 leaders to do the following:

Understand and manage their own emotions. Being emotionally flexible requires leaders to first demonstrate an awareness of their own emotions. This means acknowledging and presenting their emotional responses in an authentic way, thereby helping others to do the same. Leading is

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emotionally difficult work. Leaders who ignore the emotional element and deal only with the "reality" will be less effective and will eventually suffer from the strain. As a leader you will need energy and 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, goes a long way toward gaining commitment.

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

Maintain a balance between emotion and action. Empathy and good listening are key; emotionally flexible leaders find a balance between allowing enough time for the struggle and helping to resolve it and move on. They allow the expression of negative emotions and also discourage wallowing in them.

Dispositional Flexibility

Leaders who display dispositional flexibility operate from a place of optimism grounded in realism and openness. They acknowledge a bad situation but simultaneously visualize a better future. Such leaders figure out what they need to be optimistic about in the current context, no matter what the difficulties and challenges. They are neither blindly positive nor 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 when leaders engage in the following actions:

Show genuine and realistic optimism 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 with 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. This can often lead to constructive brainstorming and conversations and frequently will uncover 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 in order to acknowledge that change has occurred and new group dynamics will emerge. They are highly visible and energetic.

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

A CHANCE TO GROW

In today's business environment change is fast and constant. For leaders the implications are both personal and organizational—and the consequences of not adapting to change can be severe. The key is to embrace change and use it as an opportunity to grow and learn. The more positive experiences that leaders have with change, the more they become comfortable with and skilled at adaptability. The process of developing adaptability begins with leaders learning about and deepening their cognitive, emotional, and dispositional flexibility. ✍