



LEADERSHIP insights

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Change Change Change **Adapt.**

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Searching for a stretch goal in 2014? **Adaptability is one of the most sought-after qualities in a leader, and being inflexible, even if you are technically talented, derails more careers than any other issue.** Think about the last time things did not go as planned or a change came about that you did not care for. How did you respond? Do you “go to the mat” for things to be done the old way?

I grew up hearing that Charles Darwin’s quote was “survival of the fittest,” but he actually said, “**Survival of the most adaptable.**” While we definitely have an instinct to survive, the brain fights us a little on adapting. Our brains like “grooves” and that is why developing habits is great for helping us to do the things we might not always feel like doing (working out, getting up early), but sometimes the hook of habits can put us on autopilot and blind us to new ways of solving problems. **It’s worth developing some mental agility muscle.**

Switch your response from “that’s WRONG” to “that’s DIFFERENT.” The latter is a small change that keeps your mind’s door from slamming shut. It offers you a chance to listen and learn. And you don’t have to speak the words “that’s wrong” to believe it yourself, or for others to believe your body language that says so.

Be a secret early adopter. Is it possible that you have already earned a reputation as inflexible? Then find something new to learn about (the latest gadget, a function your electronic medical record can do that no one else knows yet) and learn all about it. Offer to share what you have learned with others to show them you are willing to learn and grow and they will be more likely to keep you in the loop of communication in the future. One of the pitfalls of being seen as a resister is that people avoid telling you about changes because they dread hearing, “That will never work/we tried that years ago/why fix what isn’t broken, etc.” This information vacuum feeds your old reputation and creates a vicious cycle for you. Break it.

Make a daily practice of trying something new. Tie your shoes with the opposite loop first, park in a different spot, work in a different location. Flip a meeting agenda bottom to top. Small actions, but the brain responds and it will help when more weighty issues need you to be more open minded.

Work on your internal perception that “change is difficult.” Our ability to adapt (or not) shows up most in times of change. “When things settle down, we’ll be able to _____ (fill in the blank).” We hold our breath and tighten our muscles through change just waiting for comfort. Adaptability is working toward getting comfortable **DURING** the change. Examine this belief about change by looking back on past changes that ended up being just fine. How much time and energy did you spend struggling? What did you miss? What would you have done differently if you had known it would all be ok?

Consider that if you are digging in your heels, it may be about some kind of fear. Experiencing fear is perfectly legal, but many of us hide it as if we have secretly committed a crime. Fear of change is usually tied to a perceived loss. There are antidotes to these fears of loss:

- ➔ **Loss of Competence** – Address with skill building.
- ➔ **Loss of Status** – Take initiative to reach out to others to build new relationships.
- ➔ **Loss of Freedom** – Ask for ideas; ask to share your ideas; discuss alternatives.
- ➔ **Loss of Certainty** – Identify what you can control.

Can you be too adaptable? We are not going after a “Gumby” level of flexibility here. Some signs you may be over-flexing:

Others perceive—or you feel like—you are wishy-washy. Sometimes flexibility is born from trying to please everyone (everyone but you perhaps?) If so, a) Welcome to a popular club, and; b) Examine your motives to find a more attainable purpose than pleasing everyone.

You are not feeling confident. It does take confidence to be an effective leader, but confidence is a journey with its ups and downs. Self doubts are natural when you are new to your role, you have recently increased responsibilities, or when you don’t have any training in an area that you must now lead. These self-doubts may leave you swaying with whatever wind is blowing the strongest. Find a mentor who can help you crystallize a vision of where you are headed. The details may have to stay flexible, but a clear destination will give you that North Star to guide the way.