

Development Suggestions for Flexibility

Suggested Readings

Title	Author/Publisher
Find Your Great Work	Michael Bungay Stanier/2008/Box of Crayons Press
Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions	Zachary Shore/2008/Bloomsburg USA
Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and Your Life	Johnson, Spencer and Kenneth H. Blanchard / 1998/ Putnam Pub Group
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People	Covey, Stephen A./ 1990/ Free Press
Leading Change	Kotter, John/Harvard Business Review Press, 1996.
Managing Transitions; Making the Most of Change	Bridges, William/ De Capo Press, 1991).

Activities

→Dealing with Ambiguity

Acknowledge and work with ambiguity

Recognize the importance of working effectively in ambiguous circumstances. Work on developing a positive attitude toward unstructured, ambiguous situations, and view them as opportunities to take initiative and demonstrate your leadership abilities. Leaders will, from time to time, find themselves in situations where they must work toward poorly-defined objectives that have not been clearly outlined by higher-level officials. The more effective leaders view this as a source of managerial discretion rather than a problem. They are able to interpret these vague goals in a variety of ways to garner support for their initiatives. Goal ambiguity can be an opportunity for broadening and redefining a mandate that is becoming outdated and less responsive to clients' needs than it could be.

Seek out ambiguous situations

Use them to develop your ability to adapt to those kinds of circumstances.

→Developing Flexibility

Know your own style.

Identify your most common style in approaching leadership situations. For example, do you tend to be more task-oriented (i.e., more focused on the task at hand than the people involved) or are you more relationship-oriented (i.e., more focused on the people involved than the task at hand)? Make sure that you are able to use either approach as the situation dictates.

Reframe issues and problems in cognitive rather than emotional terms.

Sometimes the way we think about a change can lead us into a cycle of despair and hopelessness. Negative thoughts can often immobilize us. One technique for dealing with such self-defeating thinking is called reframing. Reframing involves challenging the assumption that the problem or issue has only negative impacts. In reframing, you focus on what is positive and controllable about the situation.

Identify paradigms that prevent you from being more flexible and responding creatively to changing conditions.

Assuming there is only one solution to a problem is an example of a paradigm that can prevent us from taking risks or seeing the opportunities for creativity in a situation. When we think, "This is the way I've always done it," we are prevented from seeing other solutions. Likewise, thinking only of what's wrong with an idea or decision will keep us from incorporating any of its good points. Examples of other paradigms are:

- Information is power, so why share it.
- If it isn't broken, don't fix it.
- Creativity is only necessary for those in advertising agencies and software companies.
- If you make a mistake, it will follow you forever.
- We have to follow rules.

List the paradigms that prevent you from being more flexible and adapting to changing conditions or unexpected obstacles. Ask yourself if each paradigm is valid. If not, identify what you can do to challenge the paradigm and change your behavior.

Adapt your style to different people and contexts.

Similarly, ask yourself whether you adapt your style of interaction to the individual with whom you are dealing. This is a matter of sensitivity and common courtesy to the individual, but may also be crucial to developing influence with people and/or gaining support for your initiatives. When contemplating the way in which you will approach an interaction with a given individual, consider each of the following:

The organizational level of the individual (is he/she a subordinate, peer, or superior): for example, many people are relatively comfortable engaging in heated debate with their peers, and this may, depending on the context, be a worthwhile and constructive process. Using the same tone when responding to suggestions or contributions from subordinates may be construed as bullying or intimidation. On the other hand, using a heated tone when interacting with superiors may be interpreted as insubordination and may adversely affect your ability to gain crucial influence and/or support.

The individual's personality: Different people will respond to an adversarial or critical tone in different ways. This can range from open acceptance, to withdrawal, to outright anger.

The context in which the interaction is taking place: A style of interaction that is appropriate for an informal one-on-one conversation is not necessarily appropriate for a formal meeting. Similarly, a style that is constructive in a time of stability may be destructive in times of crisis.

Be open-minded.

Be conscious about improving your adaptability when interacting with others. If you are considered to be opinionated by others (or yourself), you may not be listening enough to what others have to say, particularly under stressful or confrontational circumstances. For example, in the course of discussion or debate, try to avoid focusing more on preparing rebuttals than on listening to alternatives. Use listening skills to force yourself to understand differing opinions before evaluating them. Mentally reverse sides to attempt to see the other person's viewpoint.

Experiment with new approaches.

Recognizing when a particular solution or pattern of interaction is not working is the first step toward developing more flexibility. The next step is to find effective alternative solutions or behaviors. Often this involves experimenting with new approaches to situations. Ask a trusted peer to provide you with feedback when you try to use new approaches. Keep in mind, however, that new behaviors or responses do not become ingrained overnight; it will take substantial practice and time until you and others become comfortable with these changes.

Do not abandon your values.

While behavioral flexibility is necessary, it is just as important that you strive for a balance between rigid inflexibility and the tendency to change your style unpredictably to serve your own agenda. Demonstrating strong behavioral flexibility does not require you to abandon your basic principles, ethics and values. On the contrary, it involves the ability to change the way you express your personal styles and abilities, as appropriate, to suit changing circumstances.

View change positively.

Determine whether your reactions to change allow you to cope effectively with new situations. If not, you need to look at developing a more positive approach. The next time you find yourself reacting negatively to something new or different, determine why you are feeling this way and look for constructive ways to deal with it. Often, negative reactions are based on fear or the subsequent insecurity, which changes bring with them. Understanding the basis of your fear and insecurity will allow you to develop strategies to neutralize their negative effects. For example, if you find yourself reacting negatively to a possible restructuring in your organization because you are unsure about how it will affect your roles and responsibilities, then get involved in planning the change.

Observe how others respond to you.

Watch and listen for signs that you may be exhibiting inflexible behavior (e.g., people avoid or go around you when trying to resolve a problem that involves you). Seek feedback and suggestions on how to be more flexible and approachable from others who are known for being open and receptive.

Develop alternative plans.

When preparing for projects or assignments, develop contingency plans using “what if” thinking.

Seek an assignment in a functional role in which you have little or no previous experience.

Shadow a senior leader with well-developed behavioral flexibility to see if you can learn new approaches to improve your own or better recognize the situations in which adapting your style would be beneficial.

Flexibility Quick Tips

1. Consider how you have adapted to change in the past year. Are you flexible and willing to change, or do you tend to continue to do business as usual?
2. Develop multiple contingency plans so you are not locked into any single course of action.
3. Know yourself and your reactions to last-minute crises. Build in extra time up front if you are uncomfortable with last-minute changes.
4. Analyze your leadership style. Is it flexible? Realize that different people need to be interacted with in different ways and be willing to adapt your style.
5. Make a habit of thinking “outside the box.” Look for novel and nontraditional solutions.
6. Avoid creating rigid systems that are difficult to change. The objective is to design systems that can be constantly adjusted around the changing needs of the organization.
7. Analyze how you have adapted to changes in the past year. Are you flexible and willing to change, or do you tend to continue to do business as usual?
8. Whenever reaching a decision, always consider the downside if the expected does not happen. Make plans in case the decision doesn't work out, or new information becomes available.
9. Consider using a team approach to problem solving: use the team to structure or define the problem and to brainstorm over solutions.
10. Look at issues and problems from all possible angles. Generate a list of all alternatives.