



Why Adaptability?

As a protective factor against burnout, developing your capability to be adaptable will support you through stressful work situations, including organizational changes, work tasks or projects that require you to adjust your approach, and identifying alternate solutions to a problem.

How Adaptable Are You?

Your survey responses indicate you are capable of rising to meet the needs of the problems you face on the job and can be open to new ideas and suggestions.

That said, you are more comfortable with relying on established approaches and tried-and-true methods to problem-solving. Shifting away from tried-and-true methods may be challenging at times, particularly with complex or difficult problems. The following step-by-step framework will support your success through those situations.

Build Your Adaptability

First, let's go through steps to building adaptability, and then take a look at some examples on where to start:

Step 1: Start Small: Think about your routine tasks or minor aspects of a work project and identify one piece for which the consequences of change or adaptation are low. Of these, choose a specific small task that you feel comfortable experimenting with or modifying.

Step 2: Reflect on the Existing Approach: Take a moment to reflect on your current approach and consider if there are any adjustments or improvements that could be made. Identify one or two areas where you can try something different.

Be open to the idea that there may be other perspectives or methods that can enhance your current approach. If you feel discomfort or resistance in stepping out of your comfort zone or trying something new, it is okay to acknowledge that. Remind yourself that discomfort is a normal part of growth.

Step 3: Experiment and Adapt: Implement the identified modifications or alternative methods in your approach. Be open to experimenting and trying out new ideas. Keep the changes manageable and within the scope of the small task.

Approach the experimentation with a mindset of curiosity and openness. Remind yourself that the purpose is to explore and learn, rather than aiming for immediate perfection or flawless results.

Again, any initial discomfort you might feel is a sign of growth and progress. Recognize that it is natural to feel a bit uneasy when trying something new or stepping away from familiar methods.

Step 4: Observe the Results: Pay attention to the outcomes and effects of the adapted approach. Assess whether the changes have led to any positive impact, improved efficiency, or increased effectiveness. Consider both objective and subjective measures of success.

Be sure to notice and validate any emotional or mental shifts that occur during the process. Acknowledge any positive emotions, such as excitement or satisfaction, as well as any challenges or frustrations that may arise.

Step 5: Learn and Iterate: Reflect on the lessons learned from the experiment. Identify any valuable insights, strengths, or areas for improvement. Adapt the approach further based on your observations and feedback received.

Step 6: Recognize and Celebrate: Acknowledge the progress you've made and celebrate the win! With this win you have stepped out of your comfort zone. Recognize and appreciate the positive impact you created.

Starting Small Examples

Here are some examples of small tasks that may be appropriate choices to apply to the six-step framework.

1. Team Meeting Agenda

If you're responsible for creating the agenda for a team meeting, try a different format or approach. Instead of following the usual structure, experiment with a more collaborative or interactive format that encourages active participation and engagement. It could involve incorporating icebreaker activities, allocating time for open discussions, or introducing a new meeting tool for brainstorming or idea sharing.

2. Email Communication

Choose a routine email communication task to adapt. For instance, if you typically send out lengthy and detailed emails, try condensing and simplifying your messages to make them more concise and reader-friendly. Alternatively, experiment with using bullet points or visual elements to enhance clarity and readability. Observe how these adaptations impact the effectiveness and efficiency of your email communications.

3. Task Organization

Choose a task or project where you typically follow a specific workflow or organization method. Challenge yourself to adapt and try a different approach. It could involve rearranging the order of tasks, experimenting with new project management tools or techniques, or delegating certain responsibilities to team members. Observe how these adaptations impact your productivity and overall project outcomes.

4. Meeting Participation

During a team meeting, consciously adapt your participation style. If you tend to be more reserved, challenge yourself to contribute more actively by sharing ideas, asking questions, or offering suggestions. On the other hand, if you typically dominate discussions, practice adaptability by stepping back and actively listening to others, allowing space for diverse perspectives and contributions.

5. Problem-Solving Methods

When faced with a problem or challenge, experiment with different problem-solving methods or frameworks. Instead of relying solely on your usual approach, explore alternative techniques such as brainstorming, mind mapping, or the 5 Whys technique. Adapt your problem-solving process based on the specific nature of the challenge and observe how it influences your ability to generate innovative solutions.

Support Your Adaptability Practice

Recognize Incremental Progress: Appreciate the small steps and progress made along the way. Change can be gradual and iterative, and by acknowledging the progress we achieve at each stage, we cultivate a sense of accomplishment and motivation.

Maintain an Optimistic Attitude: Change can be uncomfortable, but maintaining a positive attitude can make it easier. Simply choosing to view change as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat shifts your brain into a resourceful, problem-solving state.

Be a Continuous Learner: With change often comes the need to learn new skills or tools. Embrace lifelong learning, stay curious, and be open to upskilling and reskilling.

Stay Connected: Adaptability requires alternative points of view. Seek support from your colleagues, superiors, or mentors. They might be able to provide guidance, share their experiences, or offer new perspectives.

Seek Support and Foster Collaboration: Remember to reach out for support when facing challenging situations. Engage in open communication with colleagues, supervisors, or mentors. Collaborate with others to share the workload, seek different perspectives, and benefit from the collective wisdom of the team.

Additionally, engaging in cross-functional projects allows you to gain exposure to different perspectives, approaches, and ways of working. It provides an opportunity to develop your adaptability skills by adapting to diverse working styles and finding common ground.

Practice Open-Mindedness: Actively seeking out different perspectives, challenging your own assumptions, and being receptive to new ideas and approaches can help your growth in adaptability. During conversation with colleagues, try “active listening” in order to suspend judgment and understand their viewpoints. Engaging in constructive discussions, which encourage the exchange of ideas, also fosters adaptability, as well as openness and collaboration. Finally, cultivate your curiosity! Ask questions and seek out new information.

Continue to Develop Your Problem-Solving Skills

When tried-and-true methods fail us, adaptability involves finding creative solutions to challenges. Some general tips include breaking down complex problems into smaller manageable tasks, seeking out different perspectives, and thinking creatively about potential solutions. You may also want to consider practicing flexible problem-solving.

Flexible Problem-Solving

Problems can interrupt our forward progress. Unforeseen hurdles have the potential to derail our plans and often leave us feeling stressed and stuck. Flexible problem-solving skills help us reduce our stress and find our way to one or more viable solutions.

Here are some tips on applying your adaptability in flexible problem-solving:

- 1. Clearly and Narrowly Define the Problem:** Focus is key to effective problem-solving. This helps prioritize potential solutions that may be interesting but do not address the core issue that needs to be resolved.
- 2. Brainstorm to Generate Multiple Possible Solutions:** Turn the pressure down and give yourself space to be flexible, open, and creative. Instead of settling on the first plausible (usually the most familiar or logical) explanation or solution, generate several possible solutions. Generating possible solutions can take different forms, including having conversations with others (see the next step) or by allowing yourself to “journal” about it. Try writing freely and creatively on the problem and potential solutions for 20-30 minutes.
- 3. Diversify Your Thinking:** Seek out different perspectives and approaches to the problem. Engage with people from different backgrounds, read widely, and consider alternative ways to address the issue. Also, as we are introduced to new perspectives, we become more flexible in our thinking, and this improves our creativity in problem-solving.
- 4. Ask Many Questions:** Problem-solving involves thinking critically. Probe assumptions, explore potential consequences, and ask multiple “What ifs?” Don’t be afraid to question your own understanding and ask others for their perspectives.

5. **Let it Go:** Incorporate “combinatory play” into your flexible problem solving. Take a break, occupy your mind with something else, preferably something you enjoy. This can spark creativity for potential solutions. Albert Einstein solved many tough mathematical problems by taking a break from them and playing his violin. He coined this practice “combinatory play,” and defined it as “the act of opening up one mental channel by dabbling in another.” Einstein asserted combinatory play was essential to his problem-solving.
6. **Maintain Patience and Persistence:** Problem-solving often requires time, patience, and persistence. Don’t expect instant results, and don’t give up when things get tough.

Watch Out for Overuse

It’s important to strike a balance between adaptability and stability in order to keep adaptability working for us (reducing stress), rather than against us. Highly adaptable individuals may face challenges related to prioritization, overcommitment, lack of boundaries, continuous pressure to adapt, and inadequate support systems.

Adaptability does not mean constantly pushing yourself beyond your limits. Set realistic expectations for yourself, taking into account your capacity and well-being. Be kind to yourself and allow room for rest and recuperation.

Focus on Priorities and Essential Tasks: In times of change and uncertainty, it’s important to focus on priorities and essential tasks. Identify what truly matters and allocate your time and energy accordingly. Let go of non-essential tasks or delegate them, when possible, to reduce overwhelm.

Overcommitment: Adaptable individuals may find themselves constantly taking on new tasks, roles, or responsibilities due to their openness to change. While this can be beneficial in many cases, it can also lead to overcommitment. By continually adapting and taking on more without considering their own limits, individuals may become overwhelmed and experience burnout.

Lack of Boundaries: Adaptable individuals may struggle with setting and maintaining boundaries. Their willingness to accommodate new situations and approaches can sometimes result in blurred lines between work and personal life. Without clear boundaries, they may find it challenging to disconnect from work, leading to chronic stress and burnout.

Continuous Pressure: Adaptable employees often face ongoing pressure to adjust to new circumstances and meet changing demands. This can create a constant state of high stress, as they feel the need to adapt quickly and frequently. Over time, this chronic pressure can contribute to burnout if they are unable to find relief or establish a sense of stability.

Inadequate Support Systems: Adaptable individuals may be less likely to seek or receive support when facing challenges or stress. Their tendency to adapt independently and find solutions on their own may result in a reluctance to seek help, leading to a lack of support networks. This lack of support can increase stress levels and contribute to burnout when individuals feel overwhelmed and unsupported.



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