

The Adaptable Leader

Change is a natural and inevitable part of organisational life. It is crucial for leaders to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances and situations, and to encourage others to do the same. This article looks at why adaptability is such an essential quality and what the characteristics of an adaptable leader are. It also provides some best practice advice for becoming more adaptable and how to foster adaptability in others.

Why is adaptability important?

Organisations today rarely stand still. From developing new, more efficient ways of working, to launching new products to the market, change is a common feature of organisational life the world over. Change can make many employees feel anxious, confused, and in organisations where frequent change occurs, exhausted. Leaders should set a good example to peers and team members by embracing change as a natural part of working life, and adapting to organisational changes that are introduced.

What does adaptability mean?

In a study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Dr Elaine Pulakos and her colleagues identified eight dimensions of adaptive performance. [1] These dimensions include: [2]

1. handling emergencies or crisis situations
2. handling work stress
3. solving problems creatively
4. dealing with uncertain and unpredictable work situations
5. learning work tasks, technologies and procedures
6. demonstrating interpersonal adaptability
7. demonstrating cultural adaptability

In terms of characteristics and qualities, an adaptable leader is likely to:

- be **resilient**
- be **calm under pressure**
- act as a **role model** for those struggling to adapt to change
- manage **ambiguity** effectively
- keep an **open mind** when new changes are introduced
- be a **strong communicator**
- work well with **diverse groups of people at all levels of the organisation**



Becoming more adaptable

As a leader, it's essential to take steps to develop your own adaptability. Here are some top tips for doing this:

Come out of your comfort zone

Avoid becoming stuck in a routine, or wedded to certain tasks or activities. When possible, seek opportunities to branch out and try something new - this might involve working with people or departments you've never worked with before, or contributing to unusual projects or activities. Making changes to your own working life will help you be more resilient when organisational changes from an external source are introduced.

Get involved

It is likely that you will have a role to play in some or all of the change initiatives taking place in your organisation. However, you should aim to contribute to any changes in which you are not a main stakeholder, if at all possible. This will help you understand the purpose and benefits of the change, and articulate these effectively to your team. It may also give you the opportunity to influence certain aspects of the change.

Keep an open mind

Do you sometimes find yourself automatically challenging or questioning change, or thinking of reasons why proposed changes shouldn't take place? If so, try to curb this instinct the next time a change is proposed, and take a few minutes to give it some serious consideration. By all means, make a note of the concerns or questions you might have, but give some thought also to the **potential benefits** of the change,

and consider what **additional information** you might need in order to form a balanced opinion about it.

Reflect

Take some time to evaluate how adaptable you truly are, and consider what steps you might need to take to develop your adaptability. You might find it helpful to **ask for feedback from a trusted peer or colleague** or to undertake a more structured **360 feedback exercise** that includes your team, manager, peers, and clients.

Learn from others

If you know someone who is particularly adaptable, why not ask them for some advice? Find out what they have done to develop their adaptability, and whether they have any hints or tips they can share with you.

Encouraging others to become more adaptable

As well as developing your own adaptability, it is also vital to encourage your peers and team members to become more adaptable to the changes taking place in your organisation. To this end, you should aim to **model the behaviours and characteristics of adaptable leadership** at all times.

It is particularly important to set a good example **when new changes are announced**. Be supportive of the change, articulate the anticipated benefits clearly and address any initial questions or concerns that peers or team members may have calmly and objectively.

As the change is implemented, continue to encourage team members to adapt to the change by providing them with **support and reassurance**, and giving them access to any **development opportunities** that will help them work more effectively in the changed environment.

Summary

Adaptability is a key leadership quality, and one that is particularly valuable in today's ever-changing working world. As a leader, it is vital to be adaptable, and to encourage others to embrace and adapt to the changes that are introduced in your organisation. Doing this will help to ensure that employee engagement and motivation remain high, and that you and your team are able to support the organisation effectively during periods of change.

[1] Elaine D. Pulakos et al, 'Adaptability in the Workplace: Development of a Taxonomy of Adaptive Performance', *Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. 85 (2000).

[2] The eighth dimension - 'demonstrating physically oriented adaptability' relates to physically demanding roles and includes characteristics such as 'adjusting to challenging environmental states such as extreme heat, humidity, cold or dirtiness'.

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