

'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.'

Charles Darwin

Chapter 1

ADAPTABILITY

Adaptability is an attractive quality. We all like to think of ourselves as being flexible and adaptable, a team player, ‘going with the flow’. It means that we are not rigid or stuck and that we are open to change and challenges. I think if you were to ask most people if they consider themselves to be open and adaptable, they would tell you ‘yes’. If you truly are adaptable, then you are more likely to handle change with grace and ease, not be thrown by the unexpected and be a lot happier. Yet most of us are actually a lot more resistant to change than we might perceive ourselves to be.

What is adaptability?

Adaptability can be defined as the ability to change (or be changed) to fit altered or unexpected circumstances. Every one of us has the basic capability to be adaptable; without this being hard-wired in us, we would not be able to function in the world. Throughout our lives we adapt, and indeed we have to. We adapt to school, to new environments, to work, to relationships, to learning and developing. Even though it is natural to resist change because we don’t want to let go, our capacity to adapt is probably also greater than we think. That’s because it’s a basic survival skill – the ability to adapt smarter or faster than any current situation is what has allowed humans to flourish and consistently make progress since caveman days.

Adaptability is more than being flexible – it is about being open to things, even outside our comfort zone, and not expressing pre-conceived judgements such as ‘I could never do that’ or ‘That will

be too hard for me'. Sometimes we say these things only to ourselves rather than openly and what we tell ourselves has a powerful impact on our brains.

We equally cannot afford to think we know everything either! Something new will come along and blow that out of the water, whether it is a new technology, a new process or a new plan. Adaptability is about continually developing more of what we are truly capable of and living up to our potential. This is critical for our skills now and in the future. Unfortunately, it is also something we may well talk ourselves out of more than we think we do.

Change is difficult because we want to stay inside our comfort zone and we will naturally resist anything that requires us to step out of it. Therefore, a conscious effort is needed to do this for those of us less open to change, and even for those of us who are. Our comfort zones are, quite simply, as small or as big as we make them. We make our comfort zone bigger by engaging in more activities, tasks, thoughts and experiences that lie outside of it. The bigger our comfort zone, the more adaptable we will be! The comfort zone is where everything is easy and nothing risky ever happens. Equally nothing great or exciting happens there either. Just outside your comfort zone is the 'stretch zone' where learning and growth happen. This is the place which can feel a little uncomfortable because you might be stretching yourself in new and different ways but you're still able to manage. It's not easy but not impossibly hard either. However, if you go too far in this direction, you'll reach the panic zone which is not a good place to be, as the name might suggest. Learning and growth can't happen here because we are so far out of the comfort zone that we find ourselves in fight or flight mode.

your comfort zone is the key to how adaptable you are. Make it bigger and your ability to adapt soars

The stretch zone is the best place to be and one of the most effective ways to increase your ability to be adaptable is to ensure you are spending plenty of time there.

Here are some ideas to practise getting into your ‘stretch zone’ more regularly. Download the exercise here: <https://unimenta.com/adaptability/>

Adaptability enables us continually to work towards and fulfil our individual potential and to not necessarily stop once we’ve reached a certain level or point in our career and life. This is probably a good thing, given that we are all going to be living and working for longer. Life-long learning is a key skill to cultivate and adaptability feeds directly into this. You may need to reinvent yourself more than once in your career or life stages and even enjoy the opportunity to do so.

The more opportunities there are (or that we are presented with) that invite us to adapt successfully, the better! Doesn’t this mean embracing change rather than our natural first reaction, which is to resist it? Adaptability in our world today means a whole bunch of things:

- keeping calm in the face of difficulties
- embracing uncertainty
- persisting in the face of difficulties
- taking on new challenges at short notice
- saying ‘YES’ to challenges
- dealing with changing priorities and workloads
- improvising
- bouncing back from setbacks and showing a positive attitude
- keeping an open mind
- seeing the bigger picture
- coping well with the unexpected.

Adaptability is all of these, and more. And the best way to build adaptability is to simply train ourselves to become more open to change and uncertainty. Being able to look honestly at this list and have an understanding of where you might find some of these harder than others requires reflection and self-awareness.

When we intentionally put ourselves in situations that are (just) outside our comfort zone, there is no doubt that we grow and that our comfort zone becomes bigger. Being adaptable can lead to tangible results in our work but can also make us feel much happier as we discover what we are truly capable of being or doing and as we fulfil more and more of our human potential. By contrast, not taking advantage of opportunities to live in our “stretch zone” makes our comfort zone smaller as does thinking that once we have reached a certain point we don’t need to keep stretching and growing. If anything, the larger your comfort zone becomes, the more you have to work at getting yourself into stretch as what once may have seemed scary is no longer. A few years ago I had the opportunity to travel to Bangladesh for work – this put me firmly in my stretch zone and was a great thing to do. However, earlier on in my career this possibility would have seemed quite out of reach to me. This year I am actively learning some new skills such as how to make chocolate bars, podcasts for this book and create mosaics – for me these are new challenges that lie in my stretch zone. Next year, who knows! What I do know is that I will continually seek out opportunities, big and small, to widen my comfort zone and hopefully, after reading this chapter or coming along to one of our workshops, you will too!

Why adaptability is a must-have skill

It’s now more important than ever to be flexible and agile, with plenty of resourcefulness and creativity to respond effectively to challenges and grab new opportunities. Why? Because things now change at a far greater speed and pace than ever before and will continue to do so. Change is with us, it seems constant and, as we have seen in recent years, so are disappointment and difficult times. The ability to bounce back, reassess and adapt is a top one. Yet, when change is imposed from the outside, whether that is through world and economic events or through personal changes or even just something new and unexpected, this can create stress which means we can actually become less adaptable and flexible and start

Try this

Pick four words that describe when you are most comfortable, for example, when are you most comfortable in your day-to-day activities and when are you most comfortable at work – what words would describe this for you?

Can you think of a situation where you have remained in your comfort zone?

What is it that kept you in your comfort zone?

What would have been the benefits if you had stepped out (of your comfort zone)?

to exhibit behaviours that are counter-productive to achieving results. According to Ken Buch, Senior Consultant with Managing Concepts Inc., people in the midst of change tend to experience heightened stress levels on a day-to-day basis but at the same time they are expected to function even more productively. He says that these stress hormones remain in the body for extended periods and

actually need to be depleted for people to remain functional and adaptable to change.¹ So, sometimes the difficulty in being adaptable can, quite simply, be a physical reaction. Certainly if you operate in your stretch zone, sometimes you will physically feel a surge of adrenalin and excitement. What isn't so good are the fight or flight physical responses of a racing heart, shallow breathing and sweaty palms leaving you sometimes literally paralysed with fear.

'And the most successful people are those who accept, and adapt to constant change. This adaptability requires a degree of flexibility and humility many people can't manage.'

Paul Lutus

Consider this

Adaptable people see opportunity where others see failure.

To adapt is to grow, to change and to change you must forego what you once believed to be 'right', classify it as 'wrong', and then adopt what you now believe to be the new 'right' and be aware that this is an evolving, ongoing process and does not remain static. If you don't grow, you stagnate. This is something that not only individuals but organisations struggle with – habits that *have* defined their success in the past rather than questioning whether those same habits will *continue* defining success in the future. Chances are, they won't. If they did, then Blockbuster, Borders, and every other company that failed to adapt to a 'new right' (i.e. new reality) would still be in business.

Here are some key reasons why being adaptable is so important for you *now*:

- **Advances in technology mean that we have got to keep learning and evolving**, otherwise we will be left behind. It's easy to be closed to social media surges, constantly changing devices and the demands that technology makes of us. Some of this is simple fear. But adaptability means being open to all

and any changes that come into our lives, even embracing them and then learning how to manage them. Steep learning curves only get steeper if you don't even attempt the ascent!

- **Remote work teams and telecommuting are fast becoming everyday.** We need to learn how to adapt to communicating and working effectively in these environments. Companies need to embrace cultural diversity, and cultural intelligence requires all of us to be far more adaptable than we currently are. Surprisingly, even large multinationals still struggle with global diversity and adapting to different cultures.
- **Multiple generations in the workplace and at home** mean that we need to embrace different attitudes, ways of working and living. We are becoming less insular and more community-focused. This is often imposed on us more than anything else, but is also a good thing. The truth is, our lifestyles have made us quite insular and self-focused. That is all being challenged and changed which might also have great positive benefits.
- **We need to embrace innovation.** There are many opportunities out there for those able to embrace and grab them. These opportunities will go to those who are flexible and adaptable enough to navigate their way. Opportunities happen by taking action and by being open enough in the first place to spot them. That might mean learning something new or being willing to try out things we have never done before.
- **Many people are struggling with major changes to their lifestyles and work** perhaps for economic reasons: being made redundant or not being able to find work easily. Changes such as living with parents for far longer than we'd like to, or suddenly finding ourselves without work but with many more years ahead of us where we want, and need, to work can seem daunting though they need not be.

There's probably no other time in recent history where adaptability has been more important than it is right now!

What sort of things make a person adaptable? These four skills are important:

- 1 Intellectual flexibility** – this means keeping an open mind, being able to integrate new information smoothly and easily and switch easily from detail to the big picture. You may prefer the big picture or you may prefer detail and you need to be willing to strengthen both areas and move quickly from one to the other. This is why I bake or, more recently, make chocolates. I'm naturally more a 'big picture' person but learning to bake has trained me to become more detail-oriented.
- 2 Being receptive** – especially to change! Being able to respond to change with positivity and being willing to try out new ways of doing something or looking at something. Being willing to override any initial resistance that may well be a very natural first response. Again, you can teach yourself to be more receptive – simply by practising acceptance and saying 'yes' to change.
- 3 Creativity** – actively seeking out new things and not being afraid to experiment or improvise. That can mean tapping into intuition and not second-guessing yourself. We are all probably a lot more creative than we think!
- 4 Communication style** – which can be adjusted to suit different contexts or situations. This means being much more aware of your own communication style and preference and being aware of which communication styles to adopt in different situations, even if these differ from your own natural style.

All of these can be learned. Both nature and nurture affect our ability to be adaptable. Remember, adaptability has been present within the human race for millions of years. We all have this innately. Anything that hinders adaptability has been learned (see 'What makes being adaptable challenging?', later in this chapter) and so we may well have to *unlearn* some of this to get back in touch with our inner flexibility and natural openness.

Being adaptable is very important for a healthy and happy life. Everyone faces hurdles and setbacks, personally and professionally. Those who are adaptable get better at dealing with those tough moments throughout their lives by paying attention to their natural response, then changing it when necessary. Like all seven skills, it is down to building your self-awareness.

Consider this

It's important to build adaptability incrementally. You'll be surprised by just how resistant to change you are! Next time you take part in a class or group event, try sitting in a different seat. Next time you go out to dinner, try a different food. Say 'yes' rather than 'no'. Your initial reaction definitely will be to not want to!

An example of being adaptable at work

Let's say you are asked to take on a new project that you know will stretch your skills or to give a presentation at short notice or to prepare for a meeting you do not even really want to go to. These are all situations where your natural response might be to avoid it, to fear it or to feel annoyed by it. Try instead to see such events (or indeed any change or uncertainty at work) as an opportunity to practise becoming more adaptable. How do you do this?

Other skills in this text will definitely help you here – like being proactive and optimistic so this is why it's important to strengthen all seven. With adaptability most of the time it is about adopting a lovely 'yes' attitude, getting yourself into stretch zone and working out strategies for how you will shine within each of those:

- 1 **A new project that will stretch your skills:** Say 'Yes' with enthusiasm and then commit to the new project with all your heart. Learn

everything you can and get ready to take instruction and learn the skills you might need. Relax – be aware when you are tensing up [that's just your body wanting to go into 'fight' or 'flight' mode]. Allow yourself to become excited about the new challenge too. List all the ways in which you will develop and grow. Trust yourself that you can rise to the challenge and you most certainly will.

- 2 **Give a presentation at short notice:** Obviously say 'yes'! Take action and research your topic, find some great images and tap into who your audience is and what they might be expecting. Presentations can be stressful and certainly put most people into stretch but the more often you do them, the easier they become and the bonus impact is a huge confidence boost. Keep things simple. If you have already given a lot of presentations, then do something different this time – add an activity or a joke, if appropriate or be a little more dramatic than you might normally be.
- 3 **Prepare for a meeting you don't want to go to** Say 'yes' – think about who will be there and choose to see this as a great opportunity to get to know them better and to shine. Hone your active listening skills – meetings are such a great vehicle to do this – so that means when you're at the meeting no tuning out, no looking at your phone but listening with intent. I promise you that if we all just upped our listening skills at meetings we would always know what to say and come up with great ideas. Surprise yourself by doing just that. And if you have an idea to contribute, share it.

How being adaptable helps us at work

We are surrounded by ambiguity, and today's workplace is full of changes, uncertainty and complexity. This is all being driven by changing workflow, processes, different kinds of internal reporting structures as well as the market environment and the impact of technology, labour mobility and economics. So it is that the rules of how to succeed in this environment are changing too. The three

examples I have given above could all be within this context and so there may be elements that are unknown and new. Perhaps the meeting is all about looking at a new way of reporting results, for example. The meeting may include other people you do not get on with that well or who are even toxic in some way. Your choices here are to avoid the meeting and justify why you are doing so and to view the potential changes as something to dread. Or you can choose to approach it in a different way as I've described above. It will need to be a conscious choice that you make.

Businesses and people who are unable to or, more likely, do not want to adapt will go the way of the dinosaur and will quietly be replaced by those who know how to and want to adapt to 'new school' challenges or embrace it as necessary to do. Our environment craves people who are flexible and adaptable and who are, as a result, great to work with too.

Try this reflection exercise to help raise awareness of your own adaptability skills. You can download it here: <https://unimenta.com/adaptability/>

Consider this

Large businesses often struggle most with being adaptable and responding fast because there are so many layers of the organisation. Freelancer? Portfolio career or small business? You are in a unique position to be adaptable each and every day and you need to be.

If you are adaptable, you will be perceived as being effective, optimistic, supportive and proactively seeking solutions. If you are not adaptable, you could easily be perceived as being overwhelmed, resistant, stuck and resentful. Even if you aren't! I know how I'd rather be perceived.

In his book *Adaptability: The Art of Winning in an Age of Uncertainty*, strategy and innovation expert Max Mckeown argues that

adaptability is now a threshold requirement for business survival because, as the pace of change quickens, companies are finding it harder and harder to keep up. He says the most successful adaptors are curious and they know that stability is actually a dangerous illusion. Did you know that Twitter was, in fact, a 'plan B' produced by a struggling software company during an ad hoc brainstorm in a playground of all places? Drawing on creativity and even on failure (because of trying different approaches) can lead to innovation, new ideas and success. In fact becoming more adaptable can often include risk taking and making mistakes – once we can adopt the view that there are no 'wrong' decisions, only different decision consequences, taking risks and being willing to make mistakes becomes much easier.

Case study

Blockbuster was a very successful movie-rental chain. Yet it filed for bankruptcy just 6 years after achieving \$6 billion dollars in revenue. Why? Because of a failure to adapt.

The retail stores had a huge selection of movies and new releases with 9000 stores. It had a strong brand with 100 per cent recognition and a customer-friendly experience where you could also buy popcorn and snacks to go with your rental. Most of its profits, though, actually came from late fees if you did not return your rented movie on time. I remember those days well!

Meanwhile, Netflix began its fledgling DVD-by-mail service and later its streaming/online service. Blockbuster was complacent then as it was still earning billions of dollars using its current model. So this made the company late to the game when technology shifted and companies like Apple and Amazon started offering streaming services. Blockbuster would also have had to

radically change its business model from bricks-and-mortar to a completely new way of functioning which, at the time, was unknown and would have meant significant risk-taking and change. By the time Blockbuster did decide to innovate, it was simply too late and the company went bust very fast.

According to the 2018 Workplace Learning Report from LinkedIn Learning,² ‘In the age of automation, adaptability rules’. Being flexible enough to handle a changing working environment and feeling confident in the workplace of the future means not being afraid of change or uncomfortable with uncertainty and feeling comfortable and secure that you will find ways of handling it. A fear response will have you wanting to keep things as they were because you don’t think you will be able to cope with the new. This is so whether you are Blockbuster or an individual. We need to cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity – maybe not knowing the answers but knowing how to find them and trusting ourselves that we will find them.

Adaptability is a key skill that organisations as a whole need to develop and nurture. Anne Loehr, leadership coach to large corporates, with a successful chameleon career herself, says: ‘This means organisational leaders need to embody adaptability as individuals and then embed it into the foundations of the company culture. That in turn means allowing employees to make mistakes, be creative and contribute at all levels.’

In today’s environment, when surrounded by highly intelligent and specialist-knowledge workers, trading on our old knowledge and skills, relying too much on our titles as a definition of our work and what we do and believing in job security are not going to work. We need to adapt by continually evolving and reinventing ourselves. It means continuing to grow and transform and, in a way, become better versions of ourselves. This applies to every level in an organisation,

Top tip

Ask different questions

The questions you usually ask will get you the sort of answers you usually get, which is not so helpful when you need new ideas. For a twist, try asking a new question.

Most of us naturally ask questions that narrow and push to a solution. If something is complex and uncertain, though, that might lead to getting overly attached to a solution that may not be relevant any more.

Push yourself to ask questions like: 'What is most surprising in this situation?' 'What is at the edges of what seems possible today?' 'What data am I ignoring because I don't happen to like what they tell me?'

Different questions open you up to new possibilities and create a more flexible, agile mindset.

and to each of us, regardless of what our job is, always looking for which areas we need to develop and nurture – both within ourselves as individuals and within the organisations where we work or lead.

We ourselves have to take on far more responsibility for this. That can mean working harder to create our own career paths and new opportunities. If the job for life is long gone, then being able to adapt and define our own job roles is even more important. Employers today count adaptability as a key skill and it is often ranked as the highest, along with communication skills, interpersonal skills and a strong work ethic. In any job, in any company, you have to adapt to that company's culture and be able to 'fit in'. If you are working for yourself, you need to constantly adapt to changing market needs, try out different approaches and become used to handling rejection and criticism.

People who are adaptable tend to be both flexible and versatile. Research shows that most people view themselves as being more flexible and adaptable than they really are. That's because we *aspire*

to being flexible, open and adaptable as they are attractive traits. The Emotional Competence Inventory is a scientifically reliable test often used by employers during assessment panels.³ It looks at different aspects of emotional intelligence and measures adaptability on four scales: openness to new ideas, adaptation to situations, handling of unexpected demands and adapting or changing strategy. Employers using this can start to gauge how adaptable an individual really might be, as opposed to their self-perception.

Top tip

Try holding back on forming an opinion and instead actively listen to the person you have might have written off as a lost cause; for example, the group of people at work who seem so different from you that you don't even know their names, or even the one who has seemed close to you but now seems annoying. Keep asking yourself, 'In what ways could I be wrong or missing something?'

Working across different cultures in the workplace also makes demands of our adaptability skills. We need to be willing to accept and work with cultural differences and, the more adaptable we are, the easier that will be to do. But think about mental scripts (see later in this chapter) and we come smack up against possible prejudice and assumptions and not being as open as we might think we are to other cultures. Again, we all like to think that we are, but it's not necessarily the case deeper down.

you are very likely to perceive yourself as more adaptable and flexible than you really are

What makes being adaptable challenging?

Even though we are hardwired to be adaptable, we are also naturally resistant to change and this can stand in the way of being open to

new experiences and opportunities. We also naturally fear rejection, so that is why we may shy away from doing something new or going out of our comfort zone for fear of being rejected. Remember this type of fear can be deeply embedded and is not necessarily rational.

Our mental scripts

One barrier to being adaptable is to do with the way our brain processes any new information. It creates what is known as ‘behavioural scripts’ which are mental models that automate our actions.⁴ An example is how our brains might build a behavioural script for riding a bike. Through practice, this behaviour becomes entrenched and automatic until we can do it without thinking. Our brains will have lots of these scripts, from driving a car, speaking our mother tongue to even cooking a favourite dish. These scripts extend to other experiences and ways of doing things that we have learned. The scripts help us to be more efficient. They influence not only our actions but also what we see and believe. Just as these mental scripts help our brains to ‘file away’ a set of learned actions such as driving or

Try this

Open your mind

An open mind allows fresh ideas to come in and can help you with your plans and goals because answers, ideas and solutions simply come more quickly to an open mind. It can help you see opportunities others might miss, discount or neglect. How to have an open mind? Challenge any limiting beliefs, become more aware of your own ‘mental scripts’ and challenge your own ‘rut’ thinking – if your way of responding to something is comforting, inviting and familiar, try changing it and see what happens!

You can try this out any time simply by noticing how you are responding to something or noticing how you are feeling in a particular situation or with a particular person.

speaking our mother tongue, they also mean we file away learned and set ways of responding to something or behaving in a certain way and this may or may not be positive. If they are negative ways of responding to something, then these types of mental scripts can take a lot of effort to override and ‘relearn’, but this becomes easier the more self-aware you are and the more you realise that you can ‘throw away’ mental scripts and train yourself to learn new ones whenever you like.

Adaptability is linked to youth and vitality. As we get older, we develop more mental scripts, which can really challenge our ability to adapt to anything new. So by developing your adaptability skills, you are tapping into agility, youth and new energy!

Our brain’s efficiency to file away learned behaviours and actions carries a downside. Mental scripts can cause us to ignore the reality of a situation and dismiss any signals or new information because our brains already ‘know what to do’. Mental scripts may also result in clinging stubbornly to the notion that ‘this is how we have always done it’, refusing to understand and accept the realities of a new situation. Henry Plotkin, a psychologist at University College in London, states that ‘We have a tendency to believe that whatever has worked in the past will continue to do so. That means that if something has worked well we’ll do it gain or keep doing it and whatever didn’t work, we’ll tend to simply avoid.’

Our mental scripts can make us rigid and unresponsive to change, as can work or other stress.

Mental scripts can also be linked to limiting beliefs. Limiting beliefs are the internal thoughts that inhibit what we are willing to commit to or do. Many of our limiting beliefs have been held for a long time, and once a limiting belief has been created, we often construct our lives to avoid breaching that belief. Sounds crazy but it’s what we do! If we believe we’re not confident, we’ll avoid activities that push us

out of our comfort zone. If we believe we can't be happy, we will seek out opportunities to evidence that our lives are bad. Here's the key with a limiting belief, they have power because we give them power and they increase their control because we actively seek situations and make decisions that create memories of our limiting belief being correct.

Our propensity to being adaptable can also be challenged if we feel we are in competition with others and/or experiencing discontent or discomfort with a situation – usually this can also be traced back

Consider this

'If limiting beliefs are just statements we make to our self, why are they so difficult to overcome or simply ignore? There are a few reasons. Firstly, you've been running this pattern of behaviour for a long time and your brain is good at it and has learned it very efficiently. Secondly, when your brain locates the limiting belief it also connects to any past decisions and memories of this belief in action. Therefore, your brain is potentially calling on thousands of memories of times you've said no to something because you're simply not confident. Add to this a whole host of memories of remaining inside your confidence comfort zone and we have a firmly cemented approach to a variety of events. Finally, if you just remove the limiting belief you haven't provided the brain an alternative action. When something triggers your unconscious brain to hit the confidence check button it fires to the old program, finds nothing there and becomes confused, in this state of confusion it digs deeper and finds the final thread of a connection to the old limiting belief and creates the same action all over again. Here's the key, once you've removed a limiting belief, you need to replace it with a new belief, so that when the brain is triggered it finds the new behaviour. Prepare to get excited . . . once you do the new behaviour your brain adds in to the mix a new decision and a new memory, making this new approach a little more powerful than it was before.' – Chris Dudley, Life Coach and Founder of The Coach Collective.

to fear or our mental scripts. What's important is to start to understand that our mental scripts and learned behaviours and beliefs can impact what we choose to do and cause us to be inflexible and not adaptable at all, however much we like to think that we are!

You undo limiting beliefs by asking them questions and breaking them down, gaining a greater understanding of why they exist and what purpose they serve. If you'd like to try this out, we have a great exercise to help you do that. You can download it here: <https://unimenta.com/adaptability/>

Finding opportunity

There are always opportunities for us to test our adaptability skills but some of us may not actively seek these opportunities, and this in itself can be a barrier. If we have few opportunities growing up, to travel or try new things, then we may be even more resistant to this later in life. One of the reasons I wanted to start taking my then-five-year-old son with me on some of my business trips to far-flung places, and the reason I've always strongly encouraged my daughter to travel widely, is because many of these trips have opened my eyes on so many different levels and have often challenged my reference norms and what I didn't know were set ways of doing things in that particular culture. I have been fortunate enough to travel to places I would never have visited on holiday, or otherwise. I suppose one could also argue that maybe I would not have travelled to so many places others perceive as being unusual or high-risk, had I not been exposed to so much travel and moving when I was younger. One of the reasons I am so adaptable is because I know I **can** adapt, having experienced different schools, different countries and having had to plunge in and learn a new language and make new friends. It's created a kind of fearlessness, which I now feel very fortunate to have and is why I feel so fortunate to be able to continue travelling as an adult.

As a society in the West, we've become far more protective of our children. They are ferried about everywhere by car, do not play in

Try this

Travel more

If you can afford to do so, take yourself and your family on an adventure! Even if you can't travel abroad, consider visiting different parts of your city or country where you perhaps would not normally consider going. Or go camping and try cooking and sleeping outdoors. Travel really does broaden your horizons.

the streets and any travel is likely to be to holiday resorts far removed from the country's real culture. In the UK, most of our children do not even learn a foreign language! I can remember well other parents' horror that I actively encouraged my daughter to navigate her way alone around the London Underground system at the age of 12. It meant that when she was a teenager, she was the one others relied on for getting around independently. None of her friends had any experience of using public transport independently.

Top tip

If you are a parent, experiment with giving your children or teenagers more freedom and independence – they just might surprise you!

Is this overprotectiveness making our kids less adaptable and less equipped for what the world and life will throw their way? Does it make them less willing to seek out opportunities to stretch their comfort zones? Quite possibly.

Consider this

Even just doing something completely out of your normal day-to-day routine is incredibly good for you and builds your skills of adaptability. So, whether it's travel or just taking a different route to work, if you're doing this kind of thing consistently then, believe me, you will become more adaptable. What is one small thing you could try today or tomorrow to flex your adaptability skills? On our workshops, we encourage participants to think of things. Have a look at the list below for some ideas.

Here are some easy things to try which can help develop your adaptability skills. Go through this list and find something you could do today, tomorrow or next week:

- Approach someone you don't know that well (or normally might not approach) and – compliment them!
- Send someone a gift for no reason
- Make a new recipe you've never tried before
- Ask for constructive feedback/criticism from a colleague
- Reconnect with someone from your past
- Eat something you've never eaten before
- Learn a new skill or find out more about it
- Take on a new challenge at work
- Have that difficult conversation
- **What else?**

Fear

Fear is probably the biggest barrier to being adaptable. Fear of rejection, of failure, of circumstances, fear of change, fear, fear, fear. This fear causes stress which creates physical responses that can

actually prevent us from being flexible and open. It's as if those parts of ourselves simply shut down. This is why the expansion of our comfort zone is *so* crucial, because the more we experience that we can, and do, adapt, the more flexible and open we will be.

How to become more adaptable

'Individuals who cultivate a variety of skills seem brighter, more energetic and more adaptable than those who know how to do one thing only.'

Robert Shea, American author and journalist

By learning how to be more adaptable, we also become better equipped to respond when faced with a life crisis and this in turn helps us to become more resilient. Resilient people often use these events as an opportunity to branch out in new directions.⁵ While some people may be crushed by abrupt changes, highly resilient individuals are able to adapt and thrive. So how do we begin to develop this quality in ourselves and how can educators and trainers develop this in others? How can we make sure this is part of communication skills training, leadership training or any kind of soft skills training?

Our plastic brains

Neuroscience suggests that some people may be more adaptable than others and also suggests we can train our brains, whatever our age. The brain is plastic and flexible, and now new brain circuits can be developed through parenting, education and training that nurture adaptability. Such interventions are, however, thought to be more effective at crucial stages of our development, for example, adolescence. So at the very stage in life where some of us may be very self-conscious about moving beyond our comfort zone, being encouraged to do so can have a permanent impact on how our brain develops, making us adaptable for life! Interestingly, I suppose life

events can also make us more adaptable. For example, I left home completely at the age of 16 and moved house and school several times before that. My family life was disrupted on a regular basis through circumstances and factors completely beyond my control as a child and adolescent. Although these events were stressful in their way and not things that I even wanted, the experience of them at a time when my brain was still developing has made me lifelong adaptable, which I have always valued. Many of our young people in the West, growing up in relatively conventional households, need, therefore, to be given far more opportunities to stretch their comfort zones, whether that is through adventurous travel, volunteering work, trying out new sports and interests or by training and courses that increase their self-awareness of their own communication styles, ability to work in a team and their presenting and performance skills.

Opportunities for being adaptable are all around you

It can be as simple as looking for opportunities to try out new things and being open to new ideas. In small ways, just like going to the gym, we can exercise our adaptability muscles by changing plans at short notice, dealing with unexpected demands gracefully and calmly and doing something new, like singing or learning a new language or another skill. Both singing and learning a new language offer other big fringe benefits and additional skills subsets. For singing: physical awareness, breathing control, presentation skills, listening skills, working in a team, performance skills and self-expression. For learning a foreign language: improving memory, protection against dementia, improving brain resilience, cultural awareness, differentiator at work and helping to understand communication styles.⁶

every day there are opportunities for you to develop your adaptability skills

Experiential learning

Trainers and educators need to give people maximum opportunities to go out of their comfort zone through experiential learning, through ‘real-play exercises’ to encourage creativity and problem solving.⁷ I think adaptability also needs to be better integrated into our education methods as an explicit skill. Many training exercises probably create stronger adaptability as an outcome, though this may not be explicit.

Comedy improvisation is a fantastic tool and we can all learn to embrace some of its principles. I have a very talented American friend and associate, Jon Wilkerson, who uses the principles of improvisational theatre to help people move beyond their own mental scripts and barriers. I want to share with you some of the principles he teaches because they are so valuable to changing behaviour. We also use these principles on our Advantage workshops through games and exercises to build awareness of all seven skills.

Improvisational theatre is a form of theatre popular in the USA. Instead of actors going on stage and performing memorised lines from a script, they must create a scene on the spot complete with fully developed characters, scintillating dialogue and a compelling environment. Life also has no script, which is why embracing these principles is so important.

To do this well, improvisational actors must be able to make bold choices, but they must also be quick to understand, accept and support the choices of others. They must be able to take on different roles with speed and commitment. They must be able to lead as well as follow. They must have tremendous access to their creativity, but also must exercise judgement. They must be able to listen empathetically, but also to make quick reasoned decisions without second guessing themselves. They must be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and recover quickly from mistakes – even seeing them as opportunities. **These are the very same principles that allow a person to most effectively manage their own behaviour and accomplish their life goals.** These are also the skills of being truly adaptable.

Here are the principles; courtesy of Jon Wilkerson.⁸

- **Commitment** – means doing something with as much energy and enthusiasm as possible. When a comedy improvisational actor fails to commit on stage, the scene falls flat. When we fail to commit in life, our dreams grow dim. Whether we are applying for a job, leading a team on an important project, walking up to an influential person at a networking meeting or asking someone on a romantic date, we need to take the plunge, to gather ourselves and jump with both feet into the situation with the firm intention to be the best that we can be. Improvisational actors *practise* commitment. That's why they are good at it. And that is why we use improv exercises in our workshops – so that people can experience the power of commitment and experience themselves committing.
- **Listening** – the ability to shut off the voices in our head and really pay attention to the people and environment around us. This can be very difficult to do when we are nervous and busy thinking about what we should do and say. However, by really giving attention to what our client, team member or boss is saying, we can respond more appropriately than if we are constantly planning out our next sentence in our minds, or worrying whether we have a coffee stain on our sleeves! We also often block new ideas and opposing views, often without realising we are doing so, so being in the moment and truly listening with every ounce of our being is a key skill.
- **Grabbing opportunities** – opportunities are fleeting and, if we don't jump on them fast, they will leave us behind, kicking ourselves. You know that feeling! I know it too and we always know and sense when we have missed an opportunity. In improvisation, this is called 'accepting offers' and an 'offer' is defined as anything another actor says or does. That means *everything* is an opportunity! And if you are trained to do this, you will see opportunities that others won't even notice.

- **Support** – a general attitude of helpfulness that all successful improvisational actors carry with them every moment they are on stage. It is also a common characteristic of anyone who is especially effective at his or her job, whether as a waiter or a CEO. These extraordinarily successful people know that support isn't just praising co-workers or being able to do what someone else is already doing. People who are adept at support know that real help is looking around and noticing what's *not* being done, and then doing it! It means filling in what's missing. So to do this well, you need to be adept at listening, at grabbing opportunities and at committing.
- **Spontaneity** – the ability to act without over-thinking everything you do. It is having access to a sort of instantaneous judgement and being able to follow up on it immediately. It means not second-guessing all of your decisions. It requires good judgement that is built from experience, and it requires trust in your ability to recover quickly from bad decisions and learn from your errors. It is an essential companion to the other principles.
- **Fun** – what is fun? Fun is just fun! It means having a *positive attitude*, and leaning towards what you are doing and not away from it, or resisting it. When we head towards a challenge not only with a determination to succeed but with an expectation that tackling the challenge will be rewarding and fun, we run towards that challenge instead of stumbling towards it reluctantly.

Seven steps to adaptability

The following steps can help you improve your adaptability skills and raise your general awareness, which is where everything must begin. Remember, it really is like exercising a muscle, and requires work!

- 1 **Stick at things** Being adaptable doesn't mean flitting from one thing to the next. Adaptability is closely linked to

resilience, as well as perseverance. Resilient people stick at things. They keep going, even when the going gets tough. This is about your ability to concentrate, discipline and motivate yourself to complete a task or project. Strong application is underpinned by a sense of self-direction or free will, and these in themselves create robustness. As a consequence you are able to be more adaptable because you cope better with setbacks and rejection.

How easily do I tend to stick at things?

What are some triggers that make me want to give up?

What are some strategies I can put in place to help me keep going when I feel like giving up?

- 2 Be willing to learn** We never really stop learning. Be willing to learn new methods, procedures and ways of doing things. Take on new tasks. Try something different. Draw conclusions from new information. And how about that foreign language you've always wanted to learn or that choir you've always wanted to join? It's easy to tell yourself you don't have time. But this is your life and it's not a dress rehearsal. Respond with energy to new challenges, the unfamiliar and the unexpected.

What is a new skill that I have always wanted to learn?

What opportunities are there for me to do this?

How will I make time for this new skill? What am I willing to commit to?

- 3 Improvise** Don't over-think and second-guess everything that you do. Practise being spontaneous – accept that last-minute invitation, change your weekend plans, walk into the presentation smiling with confidence knowing that you will do well (as long as you've put the preparation in, of course!). Grab that opportunity, it might not come again.

What happens when I second-guess things and I'm not spontaneous?

When can I next use improvisational skills? What's coming up in my life where I could be more spontaneous or just decide to attack something in a different way?

- 4 Flex those muscles** It's true that going to the gym will help you be more physically and mentally resilient, and we know that adaptability and resilience are linked, but I am talking about three types of flexibility: a) 'cognitive flexibility', using different thinking strategies and mental frameworks; b)

‘emotional flexibility’, varying your approach to dealing with your own emotions and those of others; and c) ‘dispositional flexibility’, remaining optimistic and at the same time realistic.⁹ Look for as many opportunities as you can to exercise these types of flexibility. The opportunities are all around you in your day-to-day life.

When can I next try exploring different ways of thinking about an issue or problem?

When can I next vary my emotional response to someone I don’t tend to get on with?

When can I next remain optimistic as well as realistic about a situation that is bothering me?

- 5 Adopt a ‘can do’ positive attitude to change** Even though it is natural to want to resist change, try and build up your ability to adapt and respond positively by literally changing your behaviour next time you are faced with a change. Again, start with small steps. You feel disappointed because of a change of plan? Respond enthusiastically even if you don’t feel like doing so. Couldn’t get tickets for a show you’ve been wanting to see? Smile and choose something completely different so you can embrace a new experience. Lost your job? Get upset, yes, but bounce back faster by taking positive action each and every day.

Over the next few weeks I am going to build up my ability to respond positively to changes. I am going to deliberately change my behaviour in three specific situations and note down the results here:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

- 6 Get creative at problem solving** Research suggests that people who are able to come up with solutions to a problem are better able to cope with problems generally than those who can't. So, whenever you encounter a new challenge, make a quick list of some of the potential ways you could solve the problem. Experiment with different strategies and focus on developing a logical way to work through common problems. By practising these skills on a regular basis, you will be better prepared to cope when a serious challenge emerges.

What particular challenge am I currently facing?

Here's my list of ways I might start to solve this problem:

- 7 Have a survivor attitude** Anything can be turned into a crisis or problem, if we want it to. Really, anything! Refuse to see yourself as a victim in any situation and always look for ways to resolve it. If you've always been quite a reactive person, this may be hard to do at first. Remember that you can never be in control of your circumstances and external events, you can only be in control of your own responses and behaviours. The trick is that if you focus on that, as opposed to the circumstances, chances are you'll influence the situation favourably anyway!

What's happening right now around me that could easily be turned into a crisis?

Here's my list of survivor responses to this situation:

A day in the life of . . .

Let's take a magnifying glass to the skill of being adaptable through a day in the life of Fiona. We'll start with a brief introduction to Fiona, to give a quick snapshot of her life.

About Fiona

Fiona is a retired nurse and a widow. She has a small pension but is very concerned and worried about the future and how she will manage. Fiona lives in a small flat that she owns. She does a little part-time tutoring to supplement her pension but probably needs more money. She isn't able to afford holidays or travel, which she used to love. Her family all live overseas, including a daughter in Australia. She's lonely but doesn't like to admit this or show it. Fiona has a small network of friends she sees regularly and visits a local club where she exercises. She is also active online, mainly through Skype and keeping in touch with her family.

Fiona is generally positive about things, even though she worries. She doesn't feel there is much she can do about her situation. She doesn't like thinking about her finances and so avoids this. She's in her early sixties and has only ever been a nurse. She believes she is 'too old' to learn anything new and will confirm this to herself through anything she reads or watches on TV. The more she does

this, the more she finds information and articles and even research to support this view. She feels very sad that she can't travel more and see more of her family. Most of the time she actually feels fairly bored. A long time ago she used to enjoy singing but never took it any further and doesn't read music. Her husband died around five years ago and Fiona misses him and seems to have got herself into a bit of a rut.

Let's have a closer look at a typical day in Fiona's life and how building the skill of being adaptable can help her.

Fiona's typical day

Fiona tends to get up very early and goes for a swim at her club before returning home for breakfast. She listens to a radio programme and does a bit of Sudoku and household chores before meeting a friend for lunch. This friend is busy starting a new flower-arranging business. Fiona is interested and compliments her friend on her talents. Fiona thinks to herself that she is 'not the sort of person to start a business' and that, anyway, even if she did have an idea for a new business, she doesn't have any money to get it going. Fiona tutors a nursing student at her flat mid-afternoon, which she quite enjoys as it keeps her active in the nursing profession. After that she does some gardening and then cooks dinner and watches a little TV. Today Fiona also runs into a couple of other friends. She bumps into one who has just started singing with a local community choir where no auditions or sight-reading is required. Her friend encourages Fiona to join but Fiona feels very timid and unsure about the whole idea of singing again and decides not to. Then she stops to chat with another friend. They chat about how terrible the weather has been and how soon the nights will be drawing in and there hasn't been much of a summer.

Fiona often surfs the Net of an evening or Skypes her family. She was supposed to be meeting up to go to the cinema with an old

work colleague this evening but at the last minute was let down. The outing was planned some time ago and so Fiona felt very disappointed by this and spent the evening at home alone.

What's going on here?

Fiona's life is ticking along but she doesn't sound terribly happy. On the surface, her life seems to be active but actually it's almost as if life is passing her by. She doesn't seem to be making the most of her potential. She has adapted to her life as a widow, yes, but she is not in herself adaptable enough to make more of her life. Yet she is only in her early sixties and there are many many good years ahead of her. She appears to have given up and be resigned to her life as it is now. At the same time she is slightly envious of her friends who seem to be involved in new things and leading busy lives and have somehow reinvented themselves. Fiona probably also feels a little isolated as her family lives overseas and she is unable to afford the travel to see them. She is worried about money and about her future, yet doesn't see herself in a position to do anything about it as her 'working life' has stopped. Her life could be so much happier if she exercised the skill of adaptability. She might be able to earn some extra cash and even save for a trip. Fiona is also quite bored – she has an active mind but isn't really exploiting that and she seems to be living the life of someone much older than she actually is. She likes to plan ahead but she has lost touch with being spontaneous. If Fiona puts some of the ideas about adaptability into practice, it could all look quite different.

Let's revisit Fiona's 'typical day' six months later.

How Fiona's life has moved forward

Fiona was able to visit her daughter in Australia, as her family kindly paid for this visit. The trip came as a welcome surprise and, although it wasn't planned ahead as Fiona would have preferred,

the desire to see her family was strong enough to override this initial discomfort. While she was in Australia, Fiona had sufficient distance from her life to really think about some of the things she wanted to change. The trip away was refreshing and energising for her. She decided to spend a little time taking stock and putting together a plan for herself. Her part-time tutoring is rewarding and Fiona decided to try and do more of this. She offered her services at the local nursing training college, starting with taster sessions. This soon led to a regular group of student nurses wanting group tutoring, which is more cost-effective for them and means Fiona now has regular additional income.

Fiona's day is now spent more actively. In the mornings she is busy putting together revision materials for nursing students, which she plans to compile and offer through a new website she wants to develop. It's early days but she is hopeful that this may be another source of income. She continues to meet her friends but spends more time with friends who are active in various things and this gives her great support with what she is working on. Fiona has also taken more control over her finances by getting some sound financial advice. She has started to save a little money on a regular basis and is planning to take a short weekend trip soon with one of her friends. She also often meets friends at short notice – after all she is not on a fixed schedule and has no family ties.

Fiona generally feels more relaxed and happy about life, which means that now she really enjoys her time gardening, cooking or surfing the Net. Whereas, before, these activities felt a little functional, she now feels there is more purpose to them. She has started to try out new recipes and grow new types of vegetables. She finds that the more she focuses on the things she is able to do, the more productive and relaxed she feels, and the wider her comfort zone becomes. It's tremendously energising. She feels less lonely and has things to look forward to. She's even thinking

about taking a course for starting up small businesses, as well as learning more about using the Internet.

She decided to give the choir a try too. She felt nervous initially, but found it helpful to think about all the new things she had been doing lately and then this no longer felt so daunting.

Adaptability is a skill we can all benefit from. It's not only something that can help you adjust to major life changes and upheaval, but it can also make your life happier and more interesting in the day-to-day. By becoming more adaptable day-to-day, you will be better equipped to deal with bigger changes that come your way. Because they will! And you may want them to.

Interested in learning more?

I've put together some extra resources here:

Books

Goldie, A. (2016) *The Improv Book: Improvisation for Theatre, Comedy, Education and Life*. Oberon.

Hollins, P (2017) *The Science of Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone: How to Live Fearlessly*. CreateSpace.

Newmark, A. (2017) *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Step Outside Your Comfort Zone: 101 Stories about Trying New Things, Overcoming Fears, and Broadening Your World*.

Mckeown, M. (2012) *Adaptability: The Art of Winning in an Age of Uncertainty*. Kogan Page.

Poynton, R. (2013) *Do Improvise: Less Push. More Pause. Better Results. A New Approach to Work (and Life)*. The Do Book Company.

Ryan, M.J. (2009) *AdaptAbility: How to Survive Change You Didn't Ask For*. Broadway Books.

Articles and websites

Buch, K. (2009) 'Adaptability – Leading Through Focused Conversations'. You can download this article from www.managementconcepts.com

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/adaptability-the-surprisingly-strong-predictor-of-career-success>

How being adaptable can influence your career.

You can also find more tips, ideas, curated video clips and exercises to strengthen your optimism skills by visiting <https://unimenta.com/adaptability/>

Sign up too for daily tips – a daily quote, tip and video clip on one of the seven skills direct to your inbox. <https://unimenta.com/seven-skills/>

