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The Case for Adaptability

The only thing that is certain in life is change.” This is one adage I have come to strongly associate with my own life. It started early, as a child growing up in a middle class Bengali family that moved around every two or three years. As a result, I shifted schools seven times before heading to a boarding school in the hills. Twenty three years of work life has seen me move 10 jobs and half a dozen cities in India and abroad. But this is hardly unique: change is a way of life for most professionals today. However, while change is a reality of life, it can also be daunting. Think about the ordeal the entire family goes through every time we change a location. It disrupts everything from the spouse’s job, the kids’ school, and one’s social network – the list goes on. The whole rigmarole of relocation takes a toll on everyone.

Coping with change

Business school does not teach us how to cope with this continuum of change. I would strongly argue, though, that sustained success, in one’s personal as well as professional life, is deeply linked to how adaptable one is. In today’s fast-paced, constantly-changing work and personal lives, adaptability is an essential competency. Simply put, there are three ways in which we respond to change: “Take it badly and be negative”; “Be neutral and passive”; or “Embrace change as an opportunity”. Adaptability – which Webster’s Dictionary defines as the “ability to change or be changed in order to fit or work better in some situation or for some purpose” – is what determines how we respond to change and cope with its consequences.

Let us take some examples to understand how adaptability has been critical to progress and success over the years. Germany’s rebirth following the annihilation it faced in World War II is nothing short of a miracle. During the war, carpet-bombing by the Allied forces levelled up to 80 per cent of the historic buildings in Germany’s main cities. Never before had so much been lost – and yet, never before were there so many new beginnings. Most of the buildings in Germany today were erected after 1948 – indeed a remarkable tale of coping with change.

Over the last two decades, the Internet and mobile devices have changed the way we live and work and, as a result, most of us have had to adapt to this wave of change to remain relevant and competitive.

Why do some of us adapt better to change while other’s struggle to cope with the challenge?

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What does it take to be adaptable? There is no formal theory on adaptability. Here are a few simple lessons to help improve our “adaptability quotient”.

Lesson 1: Expect the Unexpected

For those who believe in meticulous planning, I have some sobering news. There are plans, and then there is reality. While being plan-full is good, it’s prudent to keep in mind that plans are a means to an end, not the end in itself. After all, one often has to change course depending on the situation. The US Marines, for example, train in three key areas: weapons, team and mission. While mission training is based on plans, every commander knows that plans go out the window as soon as

the first bullet is fired. The real key, then, is to empower the mission team.

Lesson 2: Don't Carry Baggage

All of us carry baggage in the form of past knowledge, experiences, beliefs, opinions, fears, likes and dislikes. This comes in the way of being open to change, and as we get older, the baggage gets heavier. Mind-space is finite, and in order to learn, we must first unlearn. The ability to adapt is directly linked to how one is able to shed the baggage of the past. It's like letting go of old furniture. Every time we move locations, my wife and I argue about whether or not to move all our stuff. Initially we moved our things and always realised they did not go well with the new house in a new place. It's only after a few moves that we have learnt to take the critical personal belongings and shed the rest. "Travelling light" (physically and emotionally) improves adaptability.

Lesson 3: Be a Roman when in Rome

My wife's sister lives in New Jersey with her husband and two daughters, who moved there as college students. They have fully integrated into the American way of life. In striking contrast, my sister's family – she lives with her husband and two daughters in Los Angeles – is more Bong than the most ardent Kolkata Bengali families. They have created a mini Kolkata in LA, and celebrate everything from Pujo to Rabindra Jayanti. The heart is still in India while compulsions like work and kids keep them physically in LA. While I am not judging which model is right here, it does help to move on when a change happens, rather than clinging to the past. Embracing change and letting go of the past improves adaptability.

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Lesson 4: Have an Open Mind and Flex your Style

Nothing I had learnt in all those grinding years of formal education prepared me for what I faced when I moved to my first international assignment in Dubai. With a diverse team of colleagues from China, Colombia, Guatemala, Lebanon, Turkey and the UK, I quickly understood the challenges of managing a diverse team. What worked with my team in India did not work in my new role. I had to flex my style of managing or face failure. Fortunately for me, it all worked out quite well at the end, and I emerged a much more inclusive leader. It was really about "different strokes for different folks".

Lesson 5: Be Confident but Be Prepared and Stay the Course

Finally, it's about "change agility" which is being confident of one's ability to handle change, while being mentally prepared to overcome the obstacles that are bound to come in the way. In all my change experiences, I have noticed one common phenomenon: it always gets "worse" before it gets "better". This is true both on the work and the professional front. Every time we move, the family is miserable the first three months, after which things normalise and we start enjoying ourselves. Recognising and being prepared for the challenges that change brings, and then staying the course, are critical elements of adaptability.

Adaptability in the Work Space

There are some circumstances from the work space which require us to adapt, and it is relevant to discuss a leadership theory that talks directly to the concept of adapting to situations.

The Fiedler Contingency Model was created in the mid-1960s by Fred Fiedler, a scientist who studied the personality and characteristics of leaders. The model states that there is no one best style of leadership. Instead, a leader's effectiveness is based on the situation. This is the result of two factors – "leadership style" and "situational favourableness." Take the example of a task-oriented leader who moves into a role vacated by a respected and loved person. To be effective, the new leader must curb his or her instincts, and focus on building trust with the team. Similarly, to successfully

handle a project that is not well defined, a relationship-oriented leader who has the trust of the team must adapt to a more task-oriented style.

Change in our work environment requires us to adapt. This could be a change of role or location, a new boss, or new team members. In all my moves, the five lessons that I explained earlier have always stood me in good stead. It's all in the mind, and the key is to shed the baggage of the past and focus on the merits of the future. I am two months into a new role as CFO for a joint venture company in Vietnam, and I am living the change experience once again. It is early days yet, but I am hoping my change agility will see me through.

The other aspect of adaptability is in the area of business performance. Most organisations today have clearly defined success criteria for business performance, and management rewards and remuneration are closely linked to the delivery of these metrics. Many mid- to senior managers will know only too well the feeling of putting in enormous effort but still ending up with sub-par business KPIs, and therefore low personal rewards. However, one has to adapt to this reality. There is also re-structuring to consider. As old business models come under pressure, most organisations are looking to de-layer and re-size themselves. Outsourcing is a buzzword in staff functions like HR and finance, and change – often disruptive – is a reality in the business world.

Adaptability and the Work Life Balance Continuum

Here is a fresh perspective on how we can help address the WLB challenge in a meaningful way. Typically employees like to treat their work and personal “time zones” as two separate and distinct compartments with no overlap. The week is the work zone and the weekend is the personal zone. Dissonance and discord creeps in as soon as the work zone encroaches upon the personal zone. Having

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spent a number of years working in a multi-cultural environment outside India, I have seen Western professionals handle this dilemma very effectively: instead of thinking about work and life as different “zones”, they look at them in terms of “moments”. There are work moments and there are personal moments. For busy professionals, the unlock lies in being adaptable with work moments in one's personal zone, and taking advantage of personal moments in the work zone.

Adaptability in the Personal Space

The benefits of adaptability are not limited to the workplace, but apply equally in one's personal space. Indeed, it is a life skill. I learnt this early on in life in a boarding school, where I had to adapt to the colder climate, doing things independently, being disciplined or getting punished, living together with 300+ boarders, some of whom turned out to be dear friends for life. Those 8-odd years taught me to be adaptable and ready for whatever life was to bring on. As one gets older, the need to adapt to health challenges is a reality. Life is a mixed blessing and one must learn to take the rough with the smooth. It's our change-agility that makes the journey less painful and more enjoyable. Finally, I look at our son, who has moved four cities and six schools, straddling Spanish, Tamil and Arabic as a 3rd language, and I see someone who has learnt to adapt early in life. We feel bad about the trauma he goes through as he strives to create his identity in a new environment every time we move. At the same time, we are proud of the way he adapts and comes out stronger. Kids adapt the fastest, and we have a lesson or two to learn from them. My wife and I certainly have.

In Conclusion

Adaptability is a much needed life skill that has equal applicability in our work and personal space, and indeed in striking the right balance between the two. The things to keep in mind are being change-agile, learning to let go of past baggage, and staying the course as things get worse before they get better. There is strong case for adaptability: Simply put, the more adaptable we are, the more enjoyable life's journey will be. ■