



ADAPTABILITY: KEYS FOR SUCCESS

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It is your first day at work in Belgium at a new job with your U.S.-based company. You're a bit nervous and unsure. You leave your furnished apartment early and head for the train. The directional signs are in two languages that you don't yet speak, but you've mapped out your route online.

Shortly after you arrive, you go to the team staff meeting with your new boss. You are hyperaware of being new as the boss sets the agenda for the meeting, asking everyone to speak English so that you can understand. It hits you that you have moved to a new country, started a new job, gotten a new boss – and perhaps most intimidating of all, you have gained new direct reports, Belgians who have been with the company for many years.

This scenario is the leadership equivalent of being right-handed but trying to write a letter with your left hand. It feels strange. It is awkward and challenging. You were successful back in your home country but your methods and approach may not apply in the Belgian environment. You feel like a beginner again.

Life in Belgium is a rich mixture of languages, cultures and history, and the business environment reflects this complexity. As in many parts of the world, the pace of change (particularly in political and economic arenas) is rapid, and rapidly increasing.

Adaptability – responding effectively to change – has become recognized as a necessary skill for leaders of all kinds of organizations. However, people often seem perplexed about what they can do to become more adaptable. The Center for Creative Leadership has looked at this from a research and educational perspective, and we have gleaned some insights into the nature of adaptability and how it can be nurtured and developed.

These insights take into account what we call “the changing nature of leadership” in light of increasing complexity

of the workplace, and indeed the global community.

Change can be unsettling, unnerving, and intimidating. Even anticipated or welcomed change can cause fear, stress, resentment, and resistance. Rather than denying emotions and negative reactions, or being tough and bulldozing through change (behavior sometimes dubbed in Belgium as “Anglo-Saxon management style”), effective leaders allow the transition process to take place. Through that process, effective leaders can develop greater adaptability in the face of change and resilience in times of difficulty.

Reactions to change often mimic the stages of the grieving process. First comes denial, which is considered the greatest obstacle to organizational or individual change. Next

comes resistance. Then comes a time of exploration, questioning and reflection – if the individual doesn't get stuck in the resistance stage. Here the person will experience a shift from holding on to the past to looking forward to the future.

Finally, commitment emerges, with new ways of thinking and behaving that are consistent with the changing environment.

What is it that allows some people to move through the stages of transition and adjustment to change better than others? The answer seems to be three kinds of flexibility:

- Cognitive flexibility – the ability to use different thinking strategies and mental frameworks. People with cognitive flexibility readily learn from experience and recognize when old approaches don't work.

- Emotional flexibility – the ability to vary your approach to dealing with your own emotions and those of others. An emotionally flexible person is comfortable with the process of transition, moving relatively easily through the grieving, complaining and resistance stages.

- Dispositional flexibility (or personality-based flexibility) – the ability to remain

optimistic and at the same time realistic. An individual with this kind of flexibility will acknowledge a bad situation but simultaneously visualize a better future.

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As with most skills, developing adaptability takes practice. Here's some ways to improve:

**WAYS TO PRACTICE
COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY**

Become childlike in curiosity. Wonder, explore and consider before you judge and decide.

Accept difference. Different is not right or wrong – it is just different.

Have a plan for problems but don't get too attached to a single plan or strategy.

Understand resistance and where it is coming from.

Keep your eyes open. Scan your environment so that you can identify changes and their implications early on.

Commit to learning. Experiment, test, try.

**WAYS TO PRACTICE EMOTIONAL
FLEXIBILITY**

Create support systems (mentors, friends, coaches, trusted peers, etc). Encourage employees to do the same.

Commit to feedback. Provide prompt feedback, both positive and negative. This gives you practice in dealing with the emotional reactions of others.

Be clear, make decisions and act decisively.

However, avoid bulldozing change. Manage resistance by explaining, answering questions and patiently listening.

Find ways to motivate.

Confront problem individuals. Otherwise you hurt morale, foster resentment, and stifle change.

Collaborate – involve others in the beginning stages of an initiative.

**WAYS TO PRACTICE
DISPOSITIONAL FLEXIBILITY**

Be genuine. Leading change by example requires honesty and authenticity. Understand your own reaction to change so that you can be straightforward with others.

Accept change as positive.

Cast a wide net. Build good networks and relationships before change or crisis hits.

Rehearse. Give yourself a chance to practice new skills and behaviors, or to learn about a new situation.

Pay attention to life beyond work. Shifting between work, family and other interests and obligations is a form of adaptability.

The key is to embrace change and use it as an opportunity to grow and learn. The more positive experiences you have with change, the more you become comfortable with and skilled at adaptability. Living and working in Belgium can provide ample opportunity to experience change and practice adaptability. ♦

