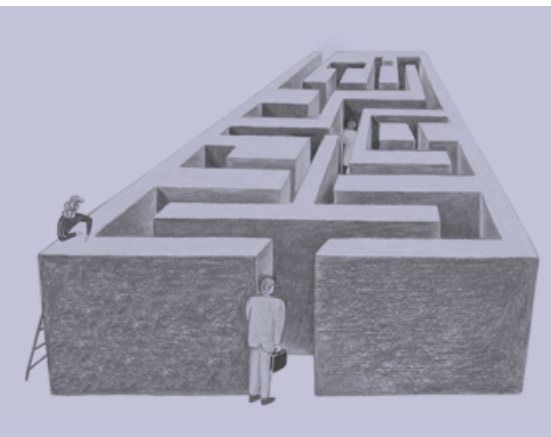


Change Factor

Making the Case for Executive Adaptability



If the ability to lead and manage change is the great differentiator in today's increasingly fast-paced business environment, then executives who can adapt to change, rather than simply cope with it, will be the ones who consistently deliver outstanding results. A model to frame adaptability focuses on two dimensions: *courage* and *curiosity*. With motivation and opportunities, both can be developed.

Adaptability is no longer merely a leadership asset; it is a prime requirement. Adaptable leaders recognize that leading and managing change is the sine qua non of today's business world, and they urgently seek new ways to solve novel problems, master new skills, and embrace new challenges with grounded innovation. Such leaders are simultaneously optimistic and pragmatic. Employees who work with adaptable leaders can look to effective role models who embrace change as an opportunity to differentiate their organizations as cutting edge and responsive to their markets and clients. Without the ability to adapt rapidly to changing marketplace conditions, today's leaders are likely to

be derailed—held in place, demoted, or even fired.

In this article we present a model that defines and frames adaptability, and we offer case examples to illustrate the model and the essential role that executive adaptability plays in today's constantly evolving business world. We outline a multidimensional approach to personal learning that articulates how and why adaptability can and must be developed by leaders who are truly committed to achieving consistent excellence.

TWO DIMENSIONS

A simple model to frame adaptability is based on two dimensions: *courage* and *curiosity*. True innovation and

by **Stu Kantor, Kathy E. Kram, and Fabio Sala**

business process improvements require both these elements.

Courageous executives demonstrate alignment among their personal values, goals, and actions. They walk their talk, even when their point of view is unpopular. They demonstrate a willingness to challenge people, processes, and systems in the face of discontinuities among company values, goals, and actions.

Leaders who excel at interpersonal courage often form authentic relationships with their colleagues—the kind of relationships that generate deep emotional commitment to both individuals and the company. But these leaders also demonstrate the ability to make tough decisions regarding people while considering the best interests of the organization. Courage includes the capacity to tolerate risk, ambiguity, and anxiety. Leaders high in courage welcome constructive criticism, admit and learn from their mistakes, and are aware of their own limitations.

Curiosity is an inherent desire to learn from every opportunity in one's environment. Curiosity drives leaders to ask questions that help them understand how new information affects their business, their customers, and their employees. It comes from an internal hunger to find out how and why things work the way they do, a passion for new experiences, and a desire for continuous learning. Curious executives search for root causes in pursuit of objectivity and optimal solutions. They are flexible, comfortable with change, and eager to harness diverse points of view. They seek feedback on their actions and use that feedback to guide their commitment to personal development.

These key dimensions of executive adaptability are seen in different degrees in four types of leaders: the Good Citizen (low courage and low curiosity), the Steadfast Visionary (low curiosity and high courage), the Creative Accommodator (low

courage and high curiosity), and the Pioneer (high courage and high curiosity). The following case examples illustrate how courage and curiosity play out in the real world.

Case Example 1: The Good Citizen

Josh became a project manager at a groundbreaking Internet marketing company within eighteen months of his arrival. Because of his careful attention to detail, excellent people skills, and strong orientation toward results, he quickly advanced to positions of increasing responsibility and projects of greater visibility and strategic importance to the company. He developed a reputation for being able to motivate his teams to work long hours at a fast pace and consistently achieve ambitious goals. Not surprisingly, he was fast-tracked up the management ranks and was widely seen as having a great future.

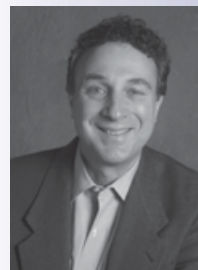
However, Internet marketing is a constantly changing landscape, and Josh seemed unwilling or unable to experiment with new business models. Clients demanded innovation, and Josh appeared stuck on doing things in the same way that had brought him early career success. Senior executives became concerned that Josh was not looking forward or thinking strategically.

Josh came to be seen as a Good Citizen and a strong executor, one who led project teams competently and delivered solid work on time. But he did not demonstrate the ability or even an eagerness to anticipate marketplace changes and adapt accordingly—he seemed content to rely on his winning formula and to establish himself as an outstanding project manager who could be counted on to deliver operational excellence. Clearly missing from his repertoire of leadership capabilities were both the courage to tolerate the risk of potential mistakes and the curiosity to explore new ways of increasing market share.

Although Josh was a solid and reliable manager, the results of his short-

comings reveal the value of executive adaptability, of having a talent for transforming one's leadership style, actions, and strategy to meet changing business parameters. Great executives typically do one of two things well to create value for their companies: they either create truly new ways of doing things or they improve on existing strategies and processes. Both innovative and high-performance business cultures create environments that encourage curiosity and reward courage, and successful leaders model and exemplify these orientations. The key to driving continuous performance improvement is adapting one's current business strategy and execution process to changes in the marketplace.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Case Example 2: The Steadfast Visionary

Robert, a senior executive with a large airline company, had an impressive academic and employment pedigree. Although he was very bright, results oriented, and highly ambitious, he significantly underdelivered and eventually derailed.

He possessed the confidence that is critical for visionary leaders, but he was not open to feedback and input from important advisers, was stubborn, and did not alter his strategic

himself were becoming obstacles to the future success of the business.

He was courageous and presented several forward-thinking ideas that moved the company ahead at critical points. However, he lacked curiosity about the root causes of change in the marketplace; he was committed to staying the course. Consequently, he missed critical cues and opportunities when the business could have adjusted to emerging market forces and competitive realities.

Case Example 3: The Creative Accommodator

Tom, the CEO of a high-tech organization he founded and ran for ten years, was well regarded by everyone in the company. The firm came into its own after the dot-com bubble burst, emerging as one of the most successful organizations in its class. Tom surrounded himself with executives in his image—people who were open-minded, genuine, and driven by a desire to break new ground in the industry.

Although Tom was successful in building the company, he had difficulty holding people accountable and could not adapt to shifting needs as the company matured into a highly focused, operationally efficient, results-oriented organization. Tom was high in curiosity—that was what helped him build such a successful company. However, his limited courage prevented him from adapting to do what was needed to take the company forward. He could understand and state what was required but could not act on it—he lacked the decisiveness that truly courageous leaders demonstrate. This ultimately led to a culture of mediocrity and underperformance.

INWARD AND OUTWARD

Adaptability is expressed both inwardly and outwardly. Internally expressed adaptability is driven by

personal curiosity and courage. Executives have to reflect on their feelings and reactions to situations, fears, and desires in order to effectively manage their own motivations and their interactions with others.

Self-awareness is critical to both individual leadership effectiveness and organizational performance. A considerable degree of courage is necessary to explore honest feedback from others and openly examine one's own values, motivations, and behavior. Externally expressed adaptability is driven by an outward-focused curiosity and courage; such adaptability is observed in executives who scan and read external signals from colleagues, competitors, business operations, and the marketplace in order to respond effectively to the constantly changing business environment.

Naturally, executives vary in their capacities for both curiosity and courage. The Good Citizen is low on each of these dimensions, although he or she may be a competent manager of others and a company contributor, particularly in stable organizations. The Steadfast Visionary has courage but, because of a strong conviction to go with what he or she believes is right, may not think sufficiently outside the box to come up with new approaches. The Creative Accommodator is curious and can develop innovative strategies, but these strategies may not be recognized or seriously considered by the organization because of the leader's lack of courage. That brings us to the fourth type of leader.

Case Example 4: The Pioneer

As chief technology officer for a major health care services company, Sarah was highly curious—she was intense in her need for continuous learning. She not only frequently benchmarked best practices with industry peers but also read widely outside her own immediate discipline, applying lessons learned prag-

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vision in response to dramatic changes in the competitive environment of the airline industry. Ultimately he was unwilling and unable to learn how his basic assumptions about the business and

matically and insightfully. For example, she drew on her college studies in Greek philosophy to further her desire to “know herself.” She described herself as a lifelong learner. She was continuously looking for ways to understand and thereby uncover opportunities for change in strategic direction and performance improvements. Despite five quarters of double-digit growth for her company’s flagship product, she introduced a major shift in the company’s marketing strategy that she hoped would ensure growth well into the future.

Despite having achieved significant growth and improved organizational performance, Sarah continued to encourage and seek innovative approaches to strategic challenges to better serve clients. Her curiosity and courage drove her to continuous excellence.

Pioneers personify adaptability. They have sufficient courage to challenge existing business practices and the creative urge and the curiosity to think outside the box to come up with dramatically new ways of approaching current problems.

A mature organization operating in a relatively stable market will continue to perform well with a majority of its executives functioning as Good Citizens, but an entrepreneurial venture in a highly volatile and growing market will need an abundance of Pioneers to secure a first-mover advantage. Consequently, a critical step in a talent management process should be to assess whether the leadership core of the organization is made up of individuals with the right combination of curiosity and courage to successfully meet current and ever-changing business needs and challenges.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

A senior executive team in one organization recognized the curiosity and courage of a young executive and decided to promote him very quickly,

with the expectation that he would be able to handle the challenge. As a result of the executive team’s confidence in this leader and his ability, he was given the opportunity to take on a strategically important role. He delivered excellent results and strengthened the leadership core of the organization. Here is how it happened.

The Adaptable Leader

When Jackson was promoted to the chief operating officer position in a global financial services firm from two levels down in the sales organization, he leapfrogged over a dozen natural candidates for the job. His colleagues and competitors for the COO role saw him as a knowledgeable and engaging salesperson and viewed his success as largely a function of his tireless energy and boundless optimism.

Most people doubted his ability to succeed in his new role; they thought he was far too green to manage multiple products and services across a wide range of businesses. They didn’t realize how excited and motivated he was by his challenge or how committed he was to reaching his full potential.

Jackson knew everyone saw him as a prototypical salesperson and understood that perception as reasonable. After all, he had spent his entire seventeen-year career in sales and sales management. What people did not realize was that Jackson’s career was grounded in sales because he saw an opportunity to progress quickly in that field, not because he lacked ability or interest in other aspects of business. What others also didn’t appreciate was that Jackson was strikingly realistic about his strengths and weaknesses and fascinated by every aspect of his company. He was well aware of the risk he was taking by leaving the security of the deep relationships he had built with customers and his sales support team, but he demonstrated the curiosity and courage needed to take on a

broader set of responsibilities. Fortunately, several senior executives were fully aware of his passion and commitment to both the company and his professional development.

Soon after he was promoted, Jackson participated in an executive development program that included both functional learning and one-to-one leadership coaching. He brought the same energy and open-minded curiosity to his personal development and the COO role that he had brought to every new sales relationship. He leveraged those relationship skills to improve collaboration across all business units. He relied on his deep understanding of clients’ needs to relentlessly drive clients’ perspectives into every product and service the company offered. After three years as COO, he was appointed president and CEO of the firm.

FROM WITHIN

Few would argue that executive adaptability is not an important leadership competency, but some may believe that adaptability is a static personality trait rather than a learnable business skill. They may also believe that people can’t do much about low levels of curiosity and courage. But even those seriously lacking in courage or curiosity, or both, can enhance their capacity to adapt—if they possess sufficient desire to do so.

We believe that enduring personal change originates *within* each individual. Many executives are skeptical about leadership development efforts; they are often reluctant to change what they see as the tried-and-true strategies that brought them where they are.

We also believe that leaders require accurate self-assessment, honest and constructive feedback, strong motivation, challenging opportunities, and the chance to practice their newly developing capabilities inside their real work settings (as opposed to the

classroom) to achieve their highest potential. We have found that to develop adaptability in a rigorous and systematic way at the individual and organizational level, executives need a combination of individual study (such as executive coaching and mentoring assignments), action learning (such as peer coaching and project-based assignments), leadership development programs (such as competency-based training programs and case studies), real work assignments to broaden perspectives (such as job rotations, task force assignments, and job sharing), and alignment of organizational processes (such as performance management that rewards and encourages adaptability). All of these things create a *learning infrastructure* that provides executives with a rich source of experiences that cultivate their adaptability as leaders.

COACHING UP

An executive coaching relationship can provide the structured environment necessary for real development and personal change. An effective coaching relationship enables executives to explore themselves and their ways of doing business with a professional who understands both organizational life and behavioral science.

Establishing an effective coaching relationship is no small feat. The coach's professional credibility alone is not sufficient. Rigorous data collection, including numerous interviews and 360-degree-assessment surveys, provides a vehicle for launching a meaningful collaborative relationship. Businesspeople respect solid data and individuals who do their homework thoughtfully and thoroughly. A coach's knowledge of the client coupled with a commitment to the developmental process builds a bridge of common purpose and trust.

This approach to executive development must be strategically tailored to real-life performance goals and organizational success. Otherwise it

is unlikely that the organization's culture and practices will support the individual's efforts to develop adaptability. The coaching client's organization must benefit in observable and measurable ways.

Many leadership development programs occur in classroom settings where 360-degree feedback is generated and individuals have the opportunity to examine these data with the help of a development professional. During these programs, participants are encouraged to reflect on their leadership capabilities and to plan for their continuing development beyond the classroom experience. With specific developmental goals and action plans in hand, participants move forward with clear opportunities to practice new behaviors and attitudes.

ONGOING LEARNING

Executive coaching and relational learning among peers—in the context of educational programs and as stand-alone initiatives—are powerful interventions when it comes to developing executive adaptability. However, years of experience and research have shown that onetime interventions are not sufficient to ensure that leaders will not relapse into old behaviors and routines in the face of challenges and crises at work.

Organizations that acknowledge the need to make their leaders more adaptable should consider how to encourage a culture that makes ongoing personal learning an important priority and relatively accessible to organizational members at all levels. Leaders armed with new self-awareness and insight into behaviors that will enhance their effectiveness in leadership roles must establish practices back at work that encourage regular reflection on experiences, alone and in dialogue with others. An essential ingredient of continuous learning and the development of executive adaptability is the formation of a *personal board of advisers*.

This board, chosen by the executive, consists of a handful of individuals inside and outside the immediate work environment whom the executive trusts and regularly consults for feedback and counsel.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Leaders can improve their adaptability—their capacities for both courage and curiosity—if the necessary conditions for personal learning are in place. Challenging assignments combined with opportunities to reflect with others who are willing and able to provide honest and constructive feedback, coaching, and support create a powerful developmental process.

A continuous learning culture enables both individuals and organizations to recognize how they can improve the essential executive capability of adaptability. Successful leadership and organizational development strategies include opportunities for assessment, practice of new behaviors in combination with ongoing support and encouragement, timely feedback, and rewards for development and execution of innovation and business performance improvement.

Are mechanisms in place to provide executives with regular and valid feedback on the effects of their behaviors at work? Does the organizational culture encourage and respect learning from mistakes? Are executives given opportunities for periodic retreats from the action to find space for reflection and renewal? These are some of the questions that must be asked by leaders who want to encourage executive adaptability.

When these questions are adequately addressed, organizations will be able to develop the leadership talent needed to effectively address key strategic challenges. Courage and curiosity will drive innovation and change, and both individual and organizational performance will rise to new heights. ✍

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