

Six Enemies Of Adaptability

– And What To Do About Them

The need to be adaptable – to develop adaptive intelligence at both a personal and organisational level is well stated.

Understood in the context of an exponentially changing world, it is the most important characteristic (both personally and organisationally) to have if one is to thrive in the future.

There can be no more important a conversation. Author and researcher Leon C. Megginson, said that, *‘It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.’*

It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.”¹

So what exactly is ‘adaptive intelligence’?

Essentially it is the capability to use information to manage (challenging) situations, communicate and connect with other people, and educate yourself on the surrounding context or climate.

An important question to then ask is, ‘what are the things that block adaptability’? Or to put it another way, ‘what might be the enemies of adaptability’?

As a leader you want to ensure that the organisation you lead is open and embraces the need to constantly adapt, all too often the opposite is true. There are often those within an organisation that for a variety of reasons, fight hard to preserve the status quo, resist change and ensure that their own particular chieftdom within the organisation remains untouched by the change.

Their efforts to safeguard this can be very subtle and they often appear willing to ‘go along with the change initiatives’ but in reality are resisting the change that you (and others) are attempting to introduce.

This probably rings true for some of the advocacy work and stakeholders you may be engaged with in the field of girls education as well. Dealing with such people is simply part of the leadership equation and how to deal with it comes down to the specific people involved and the situation itself. However there are things that you as a leader can do to ensure that the organisational environment / culture is ‘futurefit’.

There are specific things you can work on within your team / organisation, things that if ignored will thwart attempts to adapt and change.

Here would be six common ‘enemies’ that thwart adaptability; and some tactical questions / suggestions as to how to defeat them.

1. Knowing for certain

“It is not what you don’t know that gets you into trouble.

It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so”²
wrote *Mark Twain*

A ‘knowing for certain’ leads to fixed assumptions. Fixed assumptions lead to an arthritic condition that limits flexibility. When we know ‘for certain’ it means we stop asking questions or that we develop huge blind spots that allow bad habits to breed unchecked. Causality is adaptability.

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *What is it 'you know for certain that just ain't so'?*
- *Add this question to your next team agenda and see what your team come up with.*
- *What are the questions you should be asking, but aren't? Why not?*

2. Habits

Being adaptable requires identifying mind-sets and behaviours that we need to change. Of course 'wanting' to make this change is an important part of the equation!

Habits can get in the way of such change. It is hard to change old habits and develop new ones but this is exactly what adaptability demands. Identifying the habits that are blocking a change in both mind-set and behaviours is the first step in gaining a clear picture of what needs to be done in order to start the adaptive process. Flexible mind-sets and behaviours are an essential part of what it means to be adaptive.

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *What are some of your 'work habits' (the way in which you approach your job)?*
- *Where did they come from and are they still serving a futurefit purpose?*
- *Which of these might need to change as you think about the work you will be doing three years from now?*

3. Fear

Fear is a very real block to developing adaptive intelligence. For some this will be more of an obstacle than it will be for others. The fear blocking adaptability will have many guises: What if I fail? What will I lose? What will I have to let go of? What will others say or think?...and so the questions will keep coming. Fear can lead to a very real paralysis that inhibits or blocks adaptability. Identifying this fear and facing it (easier said than done) is the start in overcoming it and embracing adaptability.

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *When you think of the future – what do you fear the most? Why?*
- *What might be your 'sense of loss' in making any of the changes that you feel will need to be made if you are to adapt?*
- *What are the fears that prevent community leaders advocating for the inclusion of girls' education?*

4. Organisational Hierarchy

A hierarchical structure makes adaptation far more problematic. The reason is that effecting change can only really start from the top in a hierarchy. The lower levels (often acutely aware of the need to change and adapt) are usually powerless to effect the necessary change.

The 'command and control' leadership style that usually is indicative of a hierarchy means that others within the structure are unable to initiate change. Information and control flow 'downwards' and over time there develops unresponsiveness within the lower levels within the structure and a kind of 'wait to be told' type of malaise sets in.

Research reveals that creating opportunities for self-organisation is a characteristic of adaptive intelligence and creating such opportunities results in increased sustainability. This should be all the motivated needed for leaders to ensure that they create such opportunities within their structures!

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *How might your structure be inhibiting the development of adaptive intelligence within your organisation?*
- *How could you increase opportunities for your team / organisation to 'self-organise'? (Why not discuss this with them?)*

5. Short-term Thinking

Short-term thinking means that the changes we make tend to be incremental and the action taken is in response to immediate pressures or opportunities.

Many of the metrics in place drive and reinforce a short-term thinking mentality within business and this is extremely dangerous. Leaders need to lift their heads and ensure that they and their team are 'looking out the window'.

They need to be looking at the horizon and do, what we in TomorrowToday like to call, 'think like a futurist'.

Smart leaders intentionally cultivate questions and conversations that force their team to consider the long-term consequences to the decisions and actions taken today.

The issues around climate change have helped raise the awareness and importance of thinking long-term.

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *How far into the future are you and your team thinking?*
- *What are you measuring (and why)? How might this impact on your ability to think long-term?*
- *How do you help community leaders to see the long term benefits of educating and advocating for girls empowerment?*

6. Spending too much time on the dance-floor:

In the Adaptive Leadership model a distinction is made between the 'dance-floor' and the 'balcony'. The idea is that leaders need to spend more time on the balcony from where they are able to get a different perspective of the dance-floor. When on the dance-floor one's perspective is limited to the immediate surroundings and in a world that is complex, connected and fast changing, being on the dance-floor can be dangerous because of what is unseen. Most leaders spend too much time on the dance-floor. A quick and easy 'test' of this would be to look at your last few leadership team agendas.

The chances are that you will see an agenda dominated by 'operational issues' (the dance-floor) and little that is forcing the conversation to consider the bigger picture, the 'out-there' disruptions that need to be given careful attention.

Spending too much time on the dance-floor inhibits the ability to see the adaption that is needed. It feeds off of 'short-term thinking' and means that dance moves are honed rather than calling for an entirely new dance.

Reflective Questions / Action:

- *Review you last few agendas and put the dance-floor / balcony assumption to the test.*
- *What could your individual / collective balcony look like? How could you begin to access it and how will you create such accountability to such?*

These six 'enemies of adaptability' represent but a start in what might be your most important journey as a person and / or as a leader. Intentionally building the capacity to be 'futurefit' - or to adapt to a changing context in order to thrive, cannot be emphasized enough.

This is important work at both a personal and at a leadership level.

Resources & further reading:

- Shortened versions of the same basic expression have also been ascribed to Darwin. Here are three examples:
 - **It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.*
 - **It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.*
 - **It is not the strongest of the species that survives, but rather, that which is most adaptable to change.*

Sometimes this remark is said to appear in *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's epochal tome about evolution, but there is no substantive evidence that Charles Darwin said or wrote this statement.

In 1963 a Louisiana State University business professor named *Leon C. Megginson*, at the convention of the Southwestern Social Science Association, presented his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the central idea outlined in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

Megginson did not use quotation marks, and the phrasing was somewhat repetitive. Megginson said, "Yes, change is the basic law of nature. But the changes wrought by the passage of time affects individuals and institutions in different ways.

According to Darwin's *Origin of Species*, *it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself*".

Over time, in a multistep process, this passage has been simplified, shortened, altered, and reassigned directly to Darwin.

- *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain: A Book Of Quotations By Mark Twain*, Dover Publications, 1999.