

# FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

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# 1 THE OBJECTIVE – WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

In this session, you will learn:

- About the meaning of adaptability and flexibility and their importance in life and work;
- About change and how change affects us;
- About strategies to react to and manage change at the workplace;
- About strategies to control your emotions under pressure.

## 2 WHAT ARE ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT

Adaptability means being able to adjust to changes and unexpected situations in a positive way. **It means being able to change your way of thinking and doing, if situation demands it.** Flexibility means to be able **to react quickly to new circumstances and to find compromises with people about how to do something.**

**Adaptable and flexible people like change and see it as an opportunity.** They are open-minded and creative as well as highly motivated and resourceful. This makes them resilient to negative changes and frustrations they experience. They are not afraid to fail. When faced with difficulties, they are able to find internal motivation and manage their emotions to respond and adapt in the best possible way. This brings them more success and happiness in life.

### 2.1 Importance of adaptability and flexibility in the workplace

Your value as an employee will increase if you can show that you are adaptable and flexible. The world is changing faster than ever and the same is true for the workplace. Trends and technology are changing all the time and today employers expect employees to be able to do more than a single job.

This means you must be ready and able to learn and find creative solutions by adapting to the ever-changing demands.

Examples on how to show that you are flexible and adaptable:

- Offer to help a co-worker if you see that they are overworked;
- Learn a new skill to be able to handle new and ever-changing demands;
- Propose new and more efficient ways of working;
- Propose multiple solutions to problems.

Adaptable and flexible people are highly valued by employers and co-workers alike. They are able to adapt and react to changing work circumstances and different co-worker personalities, which makes them reliable and trusted employees. It also makes them good leaders and role models to others.

Flexibility and adaptability are also helpful in case you lose your job or wish to change it. You will easily adapt to a new situation and be willing to look for opportunities even in industries and sectors you never tried before. When you find a new job, you will quickly learn new skills and be successful.

### **3 WHAT IS CHANGE AND HOW IT AFFECTS US**

The world and we with it are changing all the time. There are personal changes that happen to us all, changes in the workplace, technological changes, economic changes, environmental changes and more. Everything that happens brings some kind of change. This means some kind of change will happen to you, eventually.

**Change is stressful to us because it creates uncertainty.** Often even the biggest or most negative changes like a change of job or a divorce are less problematic than not knowing how you will be able to live with the consequences and you keep asking yourself “How will I manage?” or “What will the future bring?”.

You should not ignore stress that changes are causing you as it can lead to depression and even mental illness. Instead of ignoring it, you should address the causes of the stress.

You cannot escape change but you can learn to manage the negative effects it has on you. Some people are better at this than others are. The secret of success is to view and approach changes the right way. To do that, you must first understand how change affects you.

We all go through the same process when we experience change:

- **Stage one: Denial** – At first, we do not think that change is needed or we deny that it is already happening. We react to the idea of change by saying for example “This is not important” or “I do not need to change anything”.
- **Stage two: Anger** – After some time, when we realize that we cannot avoid change, we react to it with anger and other negative emotions.
- **Stage three: Exploration** – After we accept that change will happen, we try to explore options to make the change more acceptable to us by seeking compromises like “What about this, can I do it like this instead?”.
- **Stage four: Acceptance** – At last we fully accept that change will happen. We learn to live with change, embrace it and make it a part of our life.

### 3.1 How to manage change effectively

Going through change means making a transition from something known and familiar to something unknown and uncertain. This can be hard especially if you see the change to be something negative.

You can make the process of change less hard and more successful if you are prepared for it and learn how to manage it. How can you do this? Here are some effective change management strategies that you can use with any type of change:

- **Visualize your perfect future** – Always have a vision of what your “perfect life” should be. Regardless of the change you are going through, keep the vision alive. Have pictures of things that you need in your “perfect” life in your home or office to remind you of your vision.
- **Know your emotions** – Be aware that you experience change in stages (denial, anger, exploration, and acceptance) and that each stage brings certain emotions. Going through change can be similar to mourning and can be very stressful.

- **Know what you really want** – Ask yourself what you really want and do not try to get what you think others expect you to have. Do not try to get rich or receive a big promotion at work if you do not feel it in your heart and mind.
- **Take care of your health** – Eat healthy, exercise and get enough rest. Being healthy will put you in a right mind-set and help you cope with any change better.
- **Stay positive** – You cannot avoid change but can choose how you see it. View change in a positive light. Do not be pessimistic about your future. Have a “can-do” attitude.
- **Take control** – Anticipate change and prepare for it as much as you can. Use **critical thinking skills** to analyse your options and choose the best response. When possible, be active and take control of the situation.

## EXERCISE

Here is a simple visualisation exercise to help you imagine your perfect future and start working on it. Visualisation is a powerful tool used by many successful people and top athletes to achieve better results.

1. Know what you want in life – Before you can visualize it, you have to know what you really want in life. Think about what you like, what makes you happy and ask yourself “If I could have anything, what I would like to have in my life?”.
2. Describe your vision in detail – This is the most important part. When you know what you want, write it down on paper in detail. You can use pictures to make a representation of what you want to achieve in your “perfect future”.
3. Visualize it with emotions – Now imagine your “perfect future”. Imagine sounds, sights, tastes, smells that go with it, and allow yourself to feel emotions connected to it. Imagine that you are living your “perfect life” right now.
4. Take actions – Understand that you will not achieve your “perfect future” in a day. Instead of thinking how far it is ask yourself what you can do daily to get closer to it and make small steps towards it.
5. Do not give up – Understand that there will be challenges on your way to success. During your visualisation, imagine these challenges. Imagine how you face them, continue tackling them and finally overcome them. In your mind, find the ways to motivate yourself and defeat the challenges you face.

## 3.2 Knowing what you can and cannot change

To really manage any change, **you must be able to recognise and accept that there are some things that are beyond your control.** If you are unable to do this, you will keep failing and get frustrated, without understanding why. Accepting this fact, on the other hand, will make you more at peace and allow you to focus your time and energy into what you can control and manage.

When in doubt, ask yourself “Can I do anything to change this change to happen or to change the final result?” If the answer is a clear “No”, let the issue go and stop worrying about it.

For example, you lost your job because the global recession bankrupted your company. You have no control at all over the global recession and are not responsible for it. There is no point in despairing and blaming the world for losing your job.

Instead, **focus on what you can realistically change and control.** Getting your old job back is not an option. Ask yourself “What can I realistically do to change the situation?”. As you are now jobless, a realistic thing to do is to focus your energy on finding a new job that will be even better than the last one, maybe even in a different industry.

### EXERCISE

Think about the following questions:

- Did you ever solve a bad situation by changing your way of thinking and doing?
- Did you ever fear change only to later find out that it was actually an opportunity for improvement?
- Did you ever have to accept that some problem is beyond your control? Was it hard for you? Did anything change after that?

## 4 REACTING AND ADAPTING TO WORKPLACE SITUATIONS

### 4.1 Managing negative feedback

Negative feedback from your co-workers or your boss can upset you, because no one likes criticism. As much as you do not like it, it is very likely that you will receive some type of negative feedback at some point in the future. The good news is that if you know how to deal with it you can turn even the worst criticism into something positive.

Here are some effective strategies to manage workplace critique and turn it into a positive:

- **React calmly** – When you receive a harsh or even untrue criticism you must resist the need to react immediately because then your emotions are high and you are not thinking clearly. Instead, take some time to clear your head and prepare a proper response. Taking a walk or waiting until the next day to respond is the way to go.
- **Understand the issue** – Sometimes you do not understand the criticism. You must be sure to understand what the problem is so you can make necessary changes and improvements. You must use **active listening** to be sure that you understand the person that is giving you the feedback. Repeat what they are saying and ask any additional questions to avoid misunderstandings.
- **Take responsibility** – Do not try to avoid responsibility. Avoid statements like “It is not true” or “It is not fair”. If you made a mistake, own it and do not try to put blame on others. Also, be careful not to apologise too much. If you clearly made a mistake apologise once and then focus on improving and avoiding further mistakes.
- **Use criticism to your advantage** – You can use negative feedback to your advantage if you embrace it and acknowledge your shortcomings. Then you can start working on improving yourself. In this way, you will show your co-workers that you can handle criticism and have a positive attitude towards change.
- **Let it go** – Do not be too emotionally invested and do not look at the negative feedback as a comment about you as a human being. Even if you feel very bad about it allow yourself to let it go. Do something pleasurable like reading, listening to music or going out with some friends. Stay positive and focus on doing a good job.

## 4.2 Dealing with a job interview rejection

Invitation to a job interview is a positive sign, it shows that you have attracted attention of the employer and are standing out among other candidates. It means you did something right. However, invitation does not necessarily mean you will get the job. Rejection can be hard but also an opportunity to approach job interviews with more initiative and creativity.

To increase your chances of being hired, you should think about some **different and creative ways of self-presentation**, that will make you to stand out among all other candidates. Instead of simply writing a formal application letter and preparing answers to standard interview questions, you can try some of the following:

- **Create dynamic self-presentations** – Present yourself in an active and visual way. Make a slide presentation of your skills. Use many pictures and little text to make the presentation more interesting. Present skills and accomplishments that will clearly show that you can do the job. Use this as a way to show your creativity. The presentation is not a substitute for your application letter but an addition to it.
- **Make a video even before the interview** – If you have basic video-making skills make a video to personally explain and show why you are the best candidate and submit it before the interview. Video is not for everyone but it is a powerful medium that will stand out. Be creative and keep the video under three minutes.
- **Be direct** – Use a less formal and a blunter way of writing and speaking about why you feel you should get the job. Do not sugar-coat or exaggerate the facts. Be charming and honest. Stay respectful. Say or write something like “Even though I do not have all the skills needed I am a fast learner and a hard worker”.
- **Use a referral** – Always try to find somebody inside the company to recommend you for the job. This will greatly increase your chances of being hired.

These strategies are not for everyone. Some employers could react negatively to an unconventional presentation. Before using one or more tactics above, try to get a good understanding of the company, their values and style to see if they will appreciate it.

Rejection does not mean that you are not valuable. There are many more candidates than jobs. **Rejection is not unusual**, even if you are very qualified. Learn from the experience, try to understand why you were rejected, work on it and try again.

### 4.3 Reacting to sudden unexpected situations

In life and at work unexpected events are common. They put us under pressure and cause stress, especially major negative events like sudden news of illness or major unexpected reorganisation at work. Stress hinders your problem-solving abilities just when you need them the most. This can lead to bad decisions and even more stress.

Although you cannot predict or avoid the unexpected, you can learn how you react to it to reduce stress and increase your performance under pressure. To do so, just follow these steps:

- **Pause, think, then respond** – When surprised you often react without thinking. Reactions are subconscious and unpredictable. It is much better to respond. Responding means **taking a pause** to think and consciously decide what to do. To be able to control your reactions practice breathing deeply while counting to ten. You can also visualize pushing a button to freeze the situation giving yourself time to respond.
- **Stay positive** – You usually fear the unexpected but just because something is unexpected, it does not mean it is bad. Your attitude and response determines in many ways if an event will be good or bad. You can choose to see it as an opportunity or a failure and respond with new initiative or disappointment. Even a seemingly disastrous event like the loss of a long-time job can be a start of something better.
- **Trust in your abilities to handle it** – Do not panic and do not give in to despair. Surely, this is not your first unexpected situation. Remember all the times you successfully handled similar situations and be confident that you can handle this one too.
- **Ask people for help** – You do not have to deal with an unexpected situation alone. Ask people for advice. They can bring much needed skills and clarity to the situation. Avoid blaming them for the situation.
- **Carry out your plan** – After some thinking and seeking people's advice it is time to act. Keep in mind that you are dealing with an unpredictable situation that can change at any moment. Actively manage your plan and be ready to make quick changes. If other people are helping you be in contact with them and coordinate your actions.

- **Have a plan ready to prevent future problems** – After you handle the situation, it is time for analysis. Go over the reasons for the situation, what you could do to handle it even better and prevent it from happening again. Also, ask other people to tell you how they saw what occurred to get a better understanding of the situation.

### EXERCISE

Think about the following questions:

- Have you ever received negative feedback at work or in life? How did it make you feel? Did you change something because of it?
- Are you often rejected at job interviews? Did you notice something that all the rejections had in common and you can improve?
- Did you ever react without thinking about it to a negative situation? Could you do better if you took some time to think and respond more calmly?

## 5 CONTROLLING YOUR EMOTIONS UNDER PRESSURE

Every day you encounter many situations that make you react in different ways. Unexpected and unpleasant situations can catch you off-guard and make you react inappropriately or even violently and this can have serious and long-term consequences.

For example, a driver cuts you off on the way to work. You react in anger, cursing the driver. When you get to work, you are still on edge. Later the boss criticises you mildly because of a small misunderstanding. This pushes you over the edge and you lash out shouting, cursing and even punching a hole in the wall. This creates a bigger problem with your boss and co-workers, and you will have to pay to fix the wall. During the drive home, you are much stressed and your hand hurts from punching the wall. You miss a red light and almost cause an accident. You display aggression towards police and get a big penalty. Your day is ruined and it is only five o'clock...

Reactions like that happen when you allow your emotions to guide you instead of logic and reason. When anger, fear, insecurity and other negative emotions take over, you do not think and plan, you simply react.

You decide how to approach any situation because “Things only have the meaning you give them”. Knowing how to manage your emotions instead of them managing you will allow you to respond to stressful situations with much more control and have much better results. Here are some effective ways to manage strong emotions:

- **Allow yourself time to think** – The most important thing in a stressful situation is to be able to wait for some time and think before reacting. Even a few seconds is enough to calm your emotion and allow your reason to decide what to do. This can make a difference between punching someone in the face and responding with a smile. When angry, count to ten or even a hundred while breathing deeply. If you can, take a walk or a break to get some space between you and the source of your anger.
- **Look for positives** – Some people look for the negatives in every situation. It is better to look for positives instead. Asking, “what can I learn from this” instead of “why do these stupid people bother me every day” will allow you to better understand your triggers and avoid them more effectively.
- **Have a reminder** – Wear a wristband, a necklace or a similar item to remind you to manage your emotions. It will help you raise your awareness and stay focused on your goal to be more emotionally balanced and in control.
- **Practice mindfulness** – Mindfulness calms your mind and helps you be more aware of your surroundings. With regular practice, it gives you the ability to control negative emotions and cope with the stress caused by changes and the uncertainty they bring. It only takes a few minutes each day to practice.

## EXERCISE

Here are two examples of mindfulness exercises. You can find many more on the internet.

**Mindful Breathing:** You can do this exercise standing up or sitting down. All you have to do is focus on your breathing.

1. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth slowly. Make each cycle about 6 seconds long. Let your breath flow effortlessly.
2. Let your thoughts wander freely. Let go of any tasks or projects that need your attention now or later. Focus only on your breath.
3. Focus intentionally on your breath as it enters your body and fills you with energy.
4. Focus on your breath as it enters your mouth and leaves your body.

At first try to do the exercise for a minute then extend it to two, three minutes or more.

### **Mindful observation:**

This exercise improves your ability to observe even the simplest things on a deeper level and connects you with your natural environment:

1. Find a natural object near you like a tree or a bird and observe it with focus for about two minutes. Relax and simply focus on the object.
2. Look at the object as if you have never seen it before. Take in every aspect of it, allow it to mesmerize you.
3. Allow yourself to feel its natural energy and understand its purpose in nature.

## EXERCISE

Think about and answer the questions:

- Do you ever pay attention to your emotions when you are under stress?
- Do you agree with the statement “Things only have the meaning we give them”?

Do you or did you ever practice any kind of meditation to calm and manage your emotions?

## 6 CONCLUSION

Adaptability means being able to change your way of thinking and doing if a situation demands it.

Flexibility means to be able to react quickly to new circumstances and find compromises with people about how to do something.

Adaptable and flexible people like change and see it as an opportunity. They are creative and not afraid to fail because they always find creative solutions to problems. This also makes them valued employees.

Change is stressful to us because it creates uncertainty. When something big happens to us we start asking ourselves “How will I manage?” or “What will the future bring?”. You should not ignore stress that chances are causing you. Instead of ignoring it, you should address the causes of the stress.

When we experience change, we are first in denial, then we feel anger, then we explore options to make change more manageable and finally we accept it and live with it.

You can learn how to deal with and manage change better. The most important thing is to stay calm, understand your emotions and stay positive. You must also know and accept the things you cannot change and focus your energy on what you can control.

In the workplace, we face unexpected situations and negative criticism. You will deal with them better if you take a moment before you react in anger, ask people for help and trust in your ability to manage. You can use any negative criticism to your advantage if you accept justified criticism and make improvements.

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