



How to Become More Adaptable in Challenging Situations

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In unfamiliar, high-stakes situations, it can be difficult to remain calm and open-minded. Our instinctive reaction is to stick with what has worked for us in the past. That's normal, and it can work well in familiar situations. But defaulting to old habits in new situations that call for new solutions is usually a recipe for failure. The challenge is that new, high-pressure situations often create a level of anxiety that triggers the very reactions that tend to limit us, stifling innovation. This is the adaptability paradox: When we most need to learn, change, and adapt, we are most likely to react with old approaches that aren't suited to our new situation, leading to poorer decisions and ineffective solutions.

Navigating periods of turbulence successfully requires leaders to adopt a sophisticated form of self-mastery that we call Deliberate Calm. "Deliberate" refers to the awareness that you have a choice in how you experience and respond to a situation. "Calm" refers to rationally considering how best to respond, without being governed by old habits.

"Deliberate Calm" is a solution to the adaptability paradox. It enables leaders to act with intention, creativity, and objectivity, even in the most challenging circumstances, and it helps us to learn and adapt to novel challenges when the stakes are highest. The practice of Deliberate Calm — and it is a practice — changes our relationship with uncertainty.

Deliberate Calm in practice

Here's a hypothetical example. Jeff is a sales director at a consumer goods manufacturing company facing technological and market disruptions as well as slow sales. When his boss calls with a warning that his numbers need to improve, he feels pressure, frustration, and anxiety. He responds in the style that has worked for him in the past, telling her, "I'll fix it." He tells himself he just needs to redouble his efforts and pull out all the stops to sell more. Except it's possible that his new reality can't be fixed with old approaches, and that they'll keep him in this tough spot. What if the carrots-and-sticks method that was successful in the past doesn't work? In this situation, setting new sales goals, building in more incentives and consequences for performance, and telling his team to work harder and do better is likely to fail or backfire. And when pushing harder in the old ways continues to fail, this is when panic can set in, triggering Jeff to pull the same levers even harder, rather than adapting to a new reality and discovering new solutions.

If Jeff were to practice Deliberate Calm, he would take a deep breath, take stock of his situation, and discuss it candidly with his boss. He would admit that he doesn't have all the answers, that the traditional approaches aren't working, and that he sees signs that the competitive landscape will make it harder to maintain sales. He may still feel anxious, but he'd accept that retreating to the false security of old methods is a form of denial that provides only a brief respite. He's better off surfacing underlying concerns, managing through his own discomfort, and opening a dialogue about exploring new approaches. He can also advocate for ways to find new responses and ask for help in developing new ideas.

Next, he should think about how to approach his sales team. In this hypothetical scenario, Jeff's traditional carrots-and-sticks method will fail, because fundamentally new approaches are needed to solve novel challenges. Instead, he needs to explore the situation, invite new ideas, and admit he doesn't have all the answers. The team might feel stress, but Jeff can provide some hope and optimism — along with some clear-eyed realism about the situation. He can invite his team to help discover new solutions in a way that promotes creativity and learning without fear of punishment, rather than reactive "more of the same" tactics that are showing diminishing returns. There are no guarantees, but this response is far more likely to result in new solutions and successful outcomes in the face of uncertainty.

Does the practice of Deliberate Calm actually work? Yes. We designed a Deliberate Calm leadership program for a global pharmaceutical company that put 1,450 leaders through weekly practice sessions for approximately 30 minutes per week for 12 weeks, and then measured changes in their behavior and their performance (including self-assessments and assessments by their boss, teammates, and other colleagues). The results were striking. Compared to a control group (those who were asked to try to improve the same behaviors and outcomes, but who did not participate in the program), participants in the capability program showed three times more improvement in the targeted behaviors and outcomes, including overall leadership performance, adaptation to unplanned circumstances, optimism, relational effectiveness (e.g., empathy, compassion), collaboration and teaming (e.g., fostering psychological safety), and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Additionally, their sense of well-being improved 7.5 times more than that of the control group. Open-ended comments from the participants suggested that they experienced as much benefit in their personal lives as they did at work.

Three skills to develop to become more adaptable

How can you start? There are three major elements to cultivating Deliberate Calm:

Learning agility is about learning from experience, experimenting with new tactics, approaching new situations with a growth mindset, seeking and learning from feedback, and applying these lessons in real time to new situations. The principle is that leaders need to be learners even in the most challenging circumstances. It is difficult to overestimate how important this is: One meta-analysis of dozens of empirical studies found that adaptability and learning agility were the top predictors of a leader's performance and potential.

You can build this muscle by, for example, setting your intention each day for how you want to show up for challenging situations. This may sound something like: "Instead of trying to have an answer ready for all difficult, unexpected challenges today, I will approach them with curiosity and an open mind, inviting multiple perspectives." Doing

this helps you remain open to feedback, learn, and adjust your response that otherwise may have been an unhelpful default reaction.

Emotional self-regulation is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, and to channel those emotions into productive ways of thinking and acting. Research has consistently shown that leaders with greater emotional self-regulation perform significantly better, as do their teams. Before you can regulate your emotional responses, you first need to become aware of what triggers them and what these responses tell you, because they can provide very valuable information.

Try to keep a diary for a couple of days, writing down moments where you feel emotionally triggered, and describe your thoughts, bodily sensations, and actions in that situation. After a week, you will have a number of these entries, and you can start to see a pattern. The more you do this, the easier it becomes to be aware in the midst of an emotional response. That's when you can start regulating, learning not only to process the unhelpful emotions but also to become comfortable with the discomfort they bring.

Dual awareness is the integration of internal circumstances (experiences, thoughts, emotions, and responses) and external ones (an objective reading of the situation and what it calls for). We are integrating two important things — the awareness of our own emotions, assumptions, and reactive habits, especially under pressure, and the nature of the situation we are facing. By taking a moment to take stock of ourselves and the situation, we better understand not only our true motivations and intentions, but also what the situation calls for, and how our habits and tendencies will serve us in this moment. This makes it possible to observe yourself while in action — and then match your responses to the demands of the moment.

This is where practicing emotional regulation comes in. The more you become aware of your own triggers, as well as what there is for you to learn on the go, the more you will be able to pause and reflect on what the situation actually requires. Even just asking the question, "What does this situation call for? What is most helpful for this problem?" is in and of itself a technique to regulate your own emotions. The flexible

back-and-forth between reflecting on the situation and reflecting on what you need to address it is not only an effective response to the situation, it's also an effective response to set yourself up for success in the moment.

During periods of transformation and systemic change, you can learn to possess all three of the above skills with reflection, healthy habits, consciousness, and practice. Change is hard, and big transformational change is especially hard. We often need to create a powerful sense of urgency to motivate people — yet the very “burning platform” that activates people to really change can also create a highly reactive environment where people struggle to learn, innovate, and adapt. Deliberate Calm can help us thrive in uncertain times. It is not once and done; Deliberate Calm needs to be learned and re-learned so that the adaptability paradox loses its force. Practice may not make perfect, but it will certainly make better. When leaders are creative, innovative, and open, their entire organizations benefit.

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