

ATD Soft Skills Series

Adaptability in Talent Development

Esther Jackson

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PRESS

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About the Series



The world of work is changing. As companies once prioritized radical workplace performance and productivity improvements, they focused on training their employees with the purpose of getting more work done faster. But companies have learned that while their people might be increasingly productive, they aren't working better, particularly with each other. Lurking on the horizon is always greater automation, which will continue to shift the balance between the needs for hard and soft skills. Employees of the future will spend more time on activities that machines are less capable of, such as managing people, applying expertise, and communicating with others. More than ever, soft skills are being recognized as a premium.

Enter talent development.

TD professionals play a unique role in addressing the increasing demand for soft skills. They work with people and on behalf of people: A trainer facilitating a group of learners. A team of instructional designers working cross-functionally to address a business need. A learning manager using influence to make the case for increased budget or resources. But how can TD professionals expect to develop future employees in these soft skills if they're not developing their own?

At the Association for Talent Development (ATD), we're dedicated to creating a world that works better and empowering TD professionals like you to develop talent in the workplace. As part of this effort, ATD developed the Talent Development Capability Model, a framework to guide the TD profession in what practitioners need to know and do to develop themselves, others, and their organizations. While soft skills appear most prominently under the Building Personal Capability domain,

these crucial skills cross every capability in the model, including those under Developing Professional Capability and Impacting Organizational Capability. Soft skills enable TD professionals to take their instructional design, training delivery and facilitation, future readiness, change management, and other TD capabilities to the next level.

Just as TD professionals need resources on how to develop talent, they need guidance in improving their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills—to be more adaptable, self-aware and empathetic, creative, team-oriented and collaborative, and influential and persuasive. This ATD series provides such guidance.

Organized with two parts, each book in the ATD Soft Skills Series tackles one soft skill that TD professionals need to foster in themselves to help the people and organizations they serve. Part 1 breaks down the skill into what it is, why it's important, and the internal or external barriers to improving it. Part 2 turns the lens on the daily work of TD professionals and how they can practice and perfect that skill on the job. Featuring worksheets, self-reflection exercises, and best practices, these books will empower TD professionals to build career resiliency by matching their technical expertise with newfound soft skill abilities.

Books in the series:

- *Adaptability in Talent Development*
- *Emotional Intelligence in Talent Development*
- *Creativity in Talent Development*
- *Teamwork in Talent Development*
- *Influence in Talent Development*

We're happy to bring you the ATD Soft Skills Series and hope these books support you in your future learning and development.

Jack Harlow, Series Editor
Senior Developmental Editor, ATD Press

Series Foreword



Oh, Those Misnamed Soft Skills!

For years organizations have ignored soft skills and emphasized technical skills, often underestimating the value of working as a team, communicating effectively, using problem solving skills, and managing conflict. New managers have failed because their promotions are often based on technical qualifications rather than the soft skills that foster relationships and encourage teamwork. Trainers as recently as a dozen years ago were reluctant to say that they facilitated soft skills training. Why?

Soft Skills: The Past and Now

The reluctance to admit to delivering (or requiring) soft skills often starts with the unfortunate name, “soft,” which causes people to view them as less valuable than “hard” skills such as accounting or engineering. The name suggests they are easy to master or too squishy to prioritize developing. On both counts that’s wrong. They aren’t. In fact, Seth Godin calls them “real” skills, as in, “Real because they work, because they’re at the heart of what we need today” (Godin 2017).

Yet, as a society, we seem to value technical skills over interpersonal skills. We tend to admire the scientists who discovered the vaccine for COVID-19 over leaders who used their communication skills to engage the workforce when they were quarantined at home. We easily admit to not knowing how to fly an airplane but readily believe we are creative or can adapt on the fly. We think that because we’ve been listening all our lives, we are proficient at it—when we’re not. As a result, we put much more emphasis on developing our technical skills through advanced degrees and post-higher education training or certifications

to land that first or next job than we do on mastering our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Fortunately, many businesses and their leaders are now recognizing the value of having a workforce that has technical knowledge supported by soft skills. That's good because soft skills matter more to your career than you may envision. Consider: as a part of the Jobs Reset Summit, the World Economic Forum determined that 50 percent of the workforce needed reskilling and upskilling. The summit also identified the top 10 job reskilling needs for the future. Eight of the 10 required skills in the 21st century are nontechnical; these skills include creativity, originality, and initiative; leadership and social influence; and resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility (Whiting 2020). LinkedIn's 2019 *Global Talent Trends Report* showed that acquiring soft skills is the most important trend fueling the future of the workplace: 91 percent of the respondents said that soft skills matter as much or more than technical skills and 80 percent believed they were critical to organizational success (Chandler 2019). A Deloitte report (2017) suggested that "soft skill-intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030" and that employees who practice skills associated with collaboration, teamwork, and innovation may be worth \$2,000 more per year to businesses. As the cost of robots decreases and AI improves, soft skills like teamwork, problem solving, creativity, and influence will become more important.

Soft skills may not be as optional as one might originally imagine.

Soft Skills: Their Importance

Soft skills are sometimes referred to as enterprise skills or employability skills. Despite their bad rap, they are particularly valuable because they are transferable between jobs, careers, departments, and even industries, unlike hard or technical skills, which are usually relevant only to specific jobs. Communication often lands at the top of the soft skill list, but the category encompasses other skills, such as those included in the ATD Soft Skills Series: emotional intelligence, adaptability, teamwork, creativity,

and influence. These personal attributes influence how well employees build trust, establish accountability, and demonstrate professional ethics.

Soft skills are also important because almost every job requires employees to interact with others. Organizations require a workforce that has technical skills and formal qualifications for each job; however, the truth is that business is about relationships. And, organizations depend on relationships to be successful. This is where successful employees, productive organizations, and soft skills collide.

Soft Skills and the Talent Development Capability Model

Talent development professionals are essential links to ensure that organizations have all the technical and soft skills that are required for success. I sometimes get exhausted just thinking about everything we need to know to ensure success for our organizations, customers, leaders, learners, and ourselves. The TD profession is no cookie-cutter job. Every day is different; every design is different; every delivery is different; and every participant is different. We are lucky to have these differences because these broad requirements challenge us to grow and develop.

As TD professionals, we've always known that soft skills are critical for the workforce we're responsible for training and developing. But what about yourself as a TD professional? What soft skills do you require to be effective and successful in your career? Have you ever thought about all the skills in which you need to be proficient?

ATD's Talent Development Capability Model helps you define what technical skills you need to improve, but you need to look beyond the short capability statements to understand the soft skills required to support each (you can find the complete model on page 40). Let's examine a few examples where soft skills are required in each of the domains.

- **Building Personal Capability** is dedicated to soft skills, although all soft skills may not be called out. It's clear that communication, emotional intelligence, decision making, collaboration, cultural awareness, ethical behavior, and lifelong learning are soft skills.

Project management may be more technical, but you can't have a successful project without great communication and teamwork.

- **Developing Professional Capability** requires soft skills throughout. Could instructional design, delivery, and facilitation exist without creativity? You can't coach or attend to career development without paying attention to emotional intelligence (EI) and influence. Even technology application and knowledge management require TD professionals to be adaptable, creative, and team players for success.
- **Impacting Organizational Capability** focuses on the soft skills you'll use while working at the leadership and organizational level. For you to have business insight, be a partner with management, and develop organizational culture, you will need to build teamwork with the C-suite, practice influencing, and use your EI skills to communicate with them. Working on a talent strategy will require adaptability and influence. And you can't have successful change without excellent communication, EI, and teamwork. Future readiness is going to require creativity and innovation.

Simply put, soft skills are the attributes that enable TD professionals to interact effectively with others to achieve the 23 capabilities that span the spectrum of disciplines in the Capability Model.

Soft Skills: The Key to Professionalism

So, as TD professionals we need to be proficient in almost all soft skills to fulfill the most basic responsibilities of the job. However, there's something even more foundational to the importance of developing our soft skills: Only once we've mastered these skills can we project the professionalism that will garner respect from our stakeholders, our learners, and our peers. We must be professional, or why else are we called TD professionals?

Professionalism is the driving force to advance our careers. To earn the title of TD professional we need to be high performers and exhibit the qualities and skills that go beyond the list of technical TD skills. We

need to be soft-skill proficient to deliver services with aplomb. We need to be team members to demonstrate we work well with others. We need to be EI-fluent to ensure that we are aware of, control, and express our emotions and handle interpersonal relationships well. We need to be creative to help our organization achieve a competitive advantage. We need to be adaptable to future-proof our organizations. And we need influencing skills that help us earn that proverbial seat at the table.

We all need role-specific knowledge and skills to perform our jobs, but those who achieve the most are also proficient in soft skills. You will use these skills every day of your life, in just about every interaction you have with others. Soft skills allow you to demonstrate flexibility, resourcefulness, and resilience—and as a result, enhance your professionalism and ensure career success. And a lack of them may just limit your career potential.

Clearly, soft skills are more critical than once thought and for TD professionals and trainers they are likely to be even more critical. Your participants and customers expect you to be on the leading edge of most topics that you deliver. And they also expect you to model the skills required for a successful career. So, which soft skills do you need to become a *professional* TD professional? Is it clearer communication? Interpersonal savvy? Increased flexibility? Self-management? Professional presence? Resourcefulness?

E.E. Cummings said, “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” I hope that you have the courage to determine which skills you need to improve to be the best trainer you can be—and especially to identify those misnamed soft skills that aren’t soft at all. Then establish standards for yourself that are high enough to keep you on your training toes. The five books in the ATD Soft Skills Series offer you a great place to start.

Elaine Biech, Author

Skills for Career Success: Maximizing Your Potential at Work

Introduction

 On March 16, 2020, I just happened to be working remotely. I took my car to the dealership for servicing that day. While I was working on my laptop in the customer waiting lounge, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer appeared on television to issue an order for the statewide closure of all restaurants and bars due to the spread of the coronavirus. Just three days prior, Michigan had banned gatherings of 250 or more. Then, less than 30 days later, business closures expanded to include nonessential workplaces.

During the course of the week, my thoughts were on my family and their well-being. I wondered if any of my family members had been exposed. I could not help but ponder what they were not telling us, since the situation had escalated to the serious level that required us to stay home for a stated period of time. My secondary focus was on what I'd needed to do to comply with the safety practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other experts. Initially, it was all surreal; I thought that this was something we'd only see in the movies. But no, this was our new reality, and I knew it was no time to panic. There were too many lingering questions. I wanted to know how long this would last and how the way I worked would have to change.

What began as remote work for one day that week turned into working remotely until further notice; stay-at-home orders likewise spread across the country. I had no idea that this was only the beginning of a new normal, to which I and everyone else would need to adapt. I recall thinking back to our last staff meeting in the office, which had happened less than two weeks prior to the lockdown. We were told the number of work-at-home days we would have for the year, and I thought

I might need to request more. Now that we were under the mandate of the lockdown, more would be allotted to every employee. I welcomed the luxury of working from home, but not for the reasons we had to do it. Potential time saved without a necessary commute to work and other business obligations appealed to me. Yet I felt anxious about getting more information from my organization on work expectations. Close friends had been working from home for more than 10 years and often shared what they appreciated about it. Not everyone is suited for working from home, but I believed that I was, and I was ready to put myself to the test.

What a shock the pandemic created for business, education, entertainment, travel, government, community, and daily life. In March, no one knew what to expect. No one knew what changes we would face as a result. We were about to find out what adaptability would demand of us. Our experience with COVID-19 is the perfect example of the importance of adaptability as a foundational skill, particularly at work. But the pandemic did not initiate the need for adaptability in the workplace. How many times before had you faced unanticipated changes requiring you to adjust?

Adaptability Is the New Game Changer

What does adaptability mean to you? What are its characteristics? What visuals come to mind? For me, I imagine a chameleon that's camouflaged perfectly with a tree branch in the midst of a rain forest. While we might strive to emulate the chameleon, it's not easy.

Adaptability means our ability to respond to unanticipated changes or new conditions in our environment. It also means our ability to not just face those changes, but also overcome adversity or modify ourselves for a new purpose. Those who rise to the challenge with the resilience, flexibility, and versatility demanded of them can always be distinguished from others. These individuals answer the call for transformation that challenges them to do the very thing that others say can't be done. Is that you?

In this book, you'll learn more about yourself, as well as why adaptability must be a part of who you are in order to achieve success.

Unanticipated changes provoke emotional reactions in us that influence our ability to adapt. This is one reason adaptability is strongly connected to emotional intelligence and recognized as an essential skill in work behavior. Emotional intelligence (also called emotional quotient, or EQ) is the ability to perceive, assess, and manage both your own and others' emotions. Individuals with a high EQ have a greater ability to adapt to change. Daniel Goleman is known for introducing how we can account for a person's emotional intelligence. Goleman's EQ Model covers four quadrants: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management, and self-management:

- **Self-awareness** addresses the ability to recognize and understand your own emotions.
- **Social awareness** addresses the ability to understand the emotions, needs, and concerns of other people, as well as the ability to pick up on emotional cues and feel comfortable socially.
- **Relationship management** addresses awareness of your own emotions and those of others to build strong relationships. It includes the identification, analysis, and management of relationships with people inside and outside your team, as well as their development through feedback and coaching.
- **Self-management** is the discipline and management of one's internal states, impulses, and resources. It includes resilience, stress management, personal agility, and adapting to change.

In particular, self-management is where adaptability comes into play through the awareness and discipline to control and positively direct one's feelings. How well we handle our emotions when a challenge arises speaks to our ability to adapt. We manage our feelings, thoughts, and actions in flexible ways to get the desired results. Out of self-management, we arrive at the adaptability quotient, AQ, as a completely separate level of intelligence. AQ is the measure of one's ability to adapt.

I have firsthand experience with adaptability personally and professionally. Having held lead roles for managing change efforts in organizations, I have observed the benefits of adaptability at the individual and management levels. As I learned more about AQ in relation to the change management models and theories I had studied and applied at work, I became more captivated by this adaptability quotient. AQ is clearly rising in importance. Further research showed that AQ was not just another “Q” for thought, which we’ll discuss in more detail over the course of the book.

Our Brain and Adaptability

We have to get our head in the game when change comes our way—expected or not. We can learn so much by understanding what happens with the brain when we are presented with unanticipated changes or new conditions. When a threat is reduced, it influences our adaptability level while boosting resilience and capability. This explains why individuals approach work and respond to workplace situations in a certain way. Ongoing research into neuroscience continues to reveal more about how the human brain works and its effect on adaptability.

Our brain is at the center of everything we do. The brain learns to hard-wire repeated behaviors, which makes it resistant to change. Understanding aspects of neuroscience can inform us about adaptability. We know that change is inevitable. However, what happens with our brains when we respond to change is not something we may know. Our brain shifts into protective mode when it encounters change, responding to the stress of the situation. When we experience situations that are difficult or threatening, we feel the mental and physical state of stress. Brain functionality during this time can often dictate our response to changes thrust upon us.

What key brain parts are activated when we face new conditions, unexpected change, or a crisis? Three regions of the brain are involved with our perception and response to threats and stressors. They are the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus.

- **The prefrontal cortex** is home to our executive functioning, and regulates thoughts and emotions. It allows us to do analytical problem solving, abstract thinking, planning, and future forecasting.
- **The amygdala** oversees our emotional responses, such as anxiety, fear, and aggression. It turns on stress hormones and increases the heart rate. The prefrontal cortex helps maintain control and works with the amygdala in how we view stressful events.
- **The hippocampus** is the memory center of the brain. It forms and stores memories and functions as our central area for learning. We retrieve memories from related experiences and store memories for new experiences when the hippocampus is triggered.

Our memories stay with us; they're based on what we have learned and what we have experienced emotionally. Think about the special events you remember, such as your wedding, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, a scary amusement park ride, your first job, your best vacation, your college graduation, or your first promotion. Once a person encounters a stressful situation, it can be easy to revert to past behavior if you recall a similar experience you had. Those who cower under pressure or become emotionally unstable in response to change may have developed this pattern of behavior in response to events in their past. Others who are able to face a crisis or new conditions with an openness to gaining information, considering options, and calmly making a decision may have developed this pattern of doing so instead. We have the ability to train our brains to adapt.

Consider what steps you can take with this knowledge to improve your adaptability. Recognizing your triggers and emotional behaviors in certain instances can assist you with recognizing areas where greater control is needed. Say that you become frustrated when you are challenged. Once you recognize this, you can work on managing yourself by adjusting your perception of another viewpoint, asking clarifying questions to hear

opposing viewpoints, or removing yourself from the situation temporarily to allow yourself time to think. When this is done successfully, we can view it as an increase in adaptability.

How This Book Will Help You

As we become more informed about adaptability, opportunities to exercise adaptability become apparent. Maybe you have not considered it or even realized that your ability to adapt is a big deal. Why, you may ask? Change is constant. Change is inevitable. Change is a part of progress. But responding to change requires skill, along with a certain level of capability and training. More discussion on these will explain how they are distinguished.

Talent development professionals face countless situations that can reveal how much of a tolerance one has for unanticipated change. Relentless change in technology keeps the modalities of learning dynamic. As organizations become more agile and responsive to change, talent development professionals can position themselves strategically to assist in the alignment of training and business goals. The endless search for a competitive advantage places great demands on organizations to build strong learning cultures that cater to current and future job roles. Organizations have instructor-led training (ILT), e-learning, and artificial intelligence, but need guidance in moving strategically from pushing these training options to enabling employees to pull what they need on demand. My work with a few clients has been geared to promoting their learning strategy and how they want to brand it internally before promoting it outside the organization. Clients have shared with me their struggles in creating more experiential leadership development. I have worked with others to design learning for working remotely and prove the value of training to stakeholders. To keep a finger on the pulse of L&D and client needs, I have maintained a mindset that has been open to evolving my role.

When I left the public sector and entered into the private sector, I needed to adapt. I had been working for a city government in Michigan

for 20 years, within a few city departments. One of the biggest adjustments for me was moving from a predominantly African American workforce with thousands of workers to being the only African American worker in an organization of around 20. Although I went into the situation with knowledge of the culture and race differences, I still faced other unanticipated changes and new circumstances that required me to adapt in some ways I did not foresee: the types of customer needs, resources to meet those needs, my approach to consulting on those needs, and a workforce that received a heavy dose of diversity from me joining their all-white organization. We had clients outside the US, which meant being conscious of things I had previously taken for granted while servicing those within the city and those involved in ATD chapter projects. Some client and project needs warranted vendor partnering or seeking a resource in our freelance network when we did not have one internally. I adjusted from being the only resource for my talent development projects to being one of multiple resources for completing a project. I had to adapt to working solely on what was applicable to my role, consulting with the client, and sometimes leading the other third-party resources in completing work on the project. In this experience, I also realized how intertwined diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were with adaptability.

Our adaptability is tested by how we interact with team members, what tools we use to get the work done, and how we respond to ever-changing training needs of a diverse target audience. Think back to your last experience facing unplanned change in the type of training you designed, the way you facilitated training, the selection or implementation of a learning management system (LMS), the way you handled a learning project, or how you consulted with stakeholders in the C-suite on your organization's learning needs. Your skill in adaptability can serve you in whatever role you have, as well as in your leadership capability, career potential, and working relationships. Take note of areas and ways you can better adapt on an individual level as you read this book.

Workplace changes are leading the need to reinvent learning and development for a future-ready workforce with enhanced technology integration. For example, virtual training is now a norm for many organizations, whether they were prepared before the pandemic or not. Recently, one of my clients had me train their staff on best practices in conducting virtual instructor-led training (VILT) because they needed to adapt and switch the launch of their internal leadership curriculum from in-person to online. Companies around the world found themselves in the same predicament—workplace learning had to continue, but had to adapt to the circumstances.

And adaptability holds importance for survival, profitability, and competitiveness, as businesses embark on digitization and transformation. We've seen businesses suffer or close because their operation required or allowed for large groups of people to be in proximity, with direct contact. Some businesses are still recovering, and many are adapting and moving forward with new ways of doing business.

In 2020, I was the past president of ATD Detroit, a local chapter of the Association for Talent Development. Similar to other talent development organizations, we looked at alternative ways to hold events, partner with other organizations, and promote our value proposition while delivering quality services and benefits for our customers. We adapted by teaming up with numerous ATD chapters to increase our reach, reduce expenses, and enhance our service offerings. We also took creative and innovative steps with virtual events. We provided increased special interest groups, lunch chats, and additional resource services to members. Like many organizations, we realized the growth that is possible when the business demonstrates adaptability in response to adverse situations.

Ready to Adapt?

Your journey to developing adaptability will lead you through a growth process that can propel you personally and professionally. We'll start with a deeper exploration into why adaptability is the new game changer in

talent development. You'll follow the story of a small business owner who faced ruin, but rather than give up, turned it around. And you'll read about a surfer who had to overcome extreme circumstances and adapt against the odds.

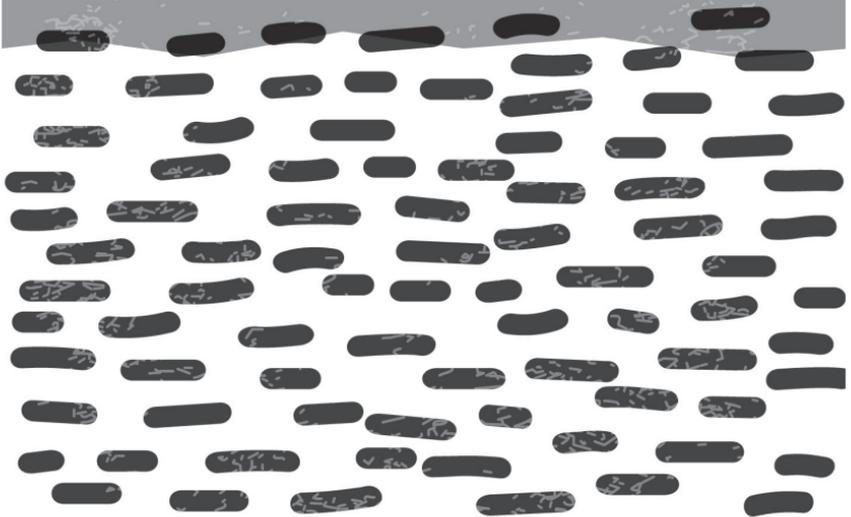
The second part of the book will take you on a thrill ride to learn how and where to put adaptability into practice as a talent development professional whom any organization would value on their team. The close of each chapter will direct you to do some reflection. As you reflect, ask yourself if there is something that resonates with you, what you have learned that can enhance your capability, and where you see opportunity for your own development.

Over the course of the book, you'll encounter various tools and resources, such as the Talent Development Capability Model, an AQ Model, the ADAPT Model, a Cheat Sheet for Adaptability, and the Career Adaptability Checklist. Use the models and tools to reinforce the content, build your confidence, and demonstrate your adaptability in any role you may hold in talent development. Employ the checklists to break down the application steps in certain areas.

Always see potential by looking beyond what's normal in your life, because change is inevitable. Use the knowledge, resources, and tools in this book to guide you in developing an attitude of adaptability that you will put into action. Look for ways to apply the tools to your work and career journey. Some sections will walk you through reflective steps for increased self-awareness that will be valuable to your development and growth. Adaptability is one skill that we may label differently in the future. For example, in the past the push was to build leaders with people skills, which today has the more appropriate label of emotional intelligence. Regardless of what we call it, the need for adaptability will never go away.

PART 1

The Case for Adaptability



CHAPTER 1

The Subtle Art of Adaptability

 A carpenter's passion was the building block of the successful woodworking shop he founded in 1916, producing furniture such as ladders, stools, and ironing boards. Almost 10 years later, his sons started an accidental fire that caused all his dreams and his home to go up in flames. Instead of quitting, he decided to build a larger workshop. Almost 10 years after that, his wife passed away. During this time, he also encountered financial hardship with the business. Because of the loss he experienced, the woodshop owner decided to create inexpensive products such as cheap toys, which led him into bankruptcy. Refusing to give up his passion, he continued with his company and renamed it to reflect its new direction. The new name was taken from *leg godt*, which was Latin for “play well.” The company became known as LEGO, and Ole Kirk Christiansen, the woodshop owner, persevered with adaptability to become an industry giant.

What Does Adaptability Mean?

Adaptability, and its appearance in humans and all other species, has been a topic of discussion for millennia. In fact, Aristotle and Empedocles were two Greek philosophers who introduced us to adaptation. Aristotle posited that an organism's features and characteristics are a result of environmental influences. These influences inform our understanding of adaptability.

As we get into the subtle art of adaptability, let's revisit what adaptability is—the ability to respond to unanticipated changes or new

conditions in our environment. Often, *flexibility* and *versatility* are also thrown around as synonyms. However, for the context of this book, I have come to view them slightly differently. At a basic level, *flexibility* is having the ability to change or be changed easily based on the situation. *Versatility* means having a variety of abilities. I also like the distinction that Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O'Connor make between flexibility and versatility in their book *The Platinum Rule* (1998): They explain flexibility as your attitude or willingness to adapt, while versatility is your ability to adapt.

Based on Alessandra and O'Connor's explanation of flexibility and versatility as two components of adaptability, we can gain greater appreciation for adaptability at work personally and professionally. These components not only contribute to our description of adaptability, but also give us a view of it as something within our power to control. Of course, we know that unanticipated changes cannot be controlled. That leaves our response to those unanticipated changes as the thing within our control.

When I was laid off almost 10 years ago, I encountered a situation for some self-discovery with my flexibility and versatility. During my time with the city government, I received multiple promotions working in the training division for our HR department. We conducted training for more than 14,000 city employees. Then, because of budget cuts, they dissolved the training division. After nearly 15 years, this came as a shock, although I should have seen it coming. They offered me a demotion with a \$30,000 pay cut, which would allow me to keep my benefits and remain on the payroll in a permanent position. I declined and decided to focus on increasing my marketability and putting my job search into overdrive. One week after I declined the demotion, they offered me a contractual role at my previous salary, but with no benefits. I thought it over, prayed about it, and decided to accept this contractual role as an instructional designer for the human resource information system (HRIS) implementation project in the IT department.

In the new role, I used more blended learning approaches and more advanced technology, worked with a multicultural staff at a different location, and focused more on technical training. I viewed this as an opportunity to rise to the challenge, because it was completely outside my area of expertise and comfort zone. I had the versatility. I knew that I could learn whatever I put my mind to, and I was acutely aware of my potential at the time. I did not view this change as the opportunity it eventually turned out to be for my career. Yet, on reflection, it became a testament to my adaptability, flexibility, and versatility. Your adaptability journey will require looking to your past experiences and reactions, because they will inform how you're able to adapt in the future.

It's a Matter of Perception and Perspective

Perception and perspective are two driving factors for adaptability. Perception is the mental grasp you have of something through the use of your senses, while your perspective is your point of view. I held the belief that the lens through which I was viewing the world ultimately shaped my interpretation of that view. However, that is not the case. It is actually your perception that dictates your perspective.

In *The Seven Habits of Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey tells a poignant story that captures perception and perspective. Two battleships are at sea and are experiencing severe weather. A signalman reports to the captain that he sees a light. When the captain inquires, the signalman informs the captain that another ship appears to be on a collision course with them. The captain instructs the signalman to advise the other ship to change course by 20 degrees. The other ship signals back with the same, advising to change course by 20 degrees. The captain tells the signalman, "Send, 'I'm a captain; change course 20 degrees.'" They receive a reply, "I'm a seaman second class, who advises that they change course 20 degrees." In an outrage, the captain instructs the signalman to send the message that they are a battleship, so the other ship should change course. The seaman responds with a flashing light: "I'm a lighthouse." The captain

realized his ship had to change course. Covey shares the story to explain the importance of being open to a paradigm shift. His idea of a paradigm shift requires the willingness to re-evaluate one's perception and adjust your perspective as needed.

My initial experience with ATD created a vivid personal picture of perception and perspective. When I was in the city government position, my manager, Mr. Bridges, encouraged me to join our local ATD chapter. This was just a short time after I'd earned a master's degree in instructional technology. He explained that this would be a great move for my career, my network, and my exposure to what is current in training and development. I took his advice, as I usually did, and decided to attend a chapter meeting. Based on this experience, I joined the chapter, only to find out that my job was discontinuing reimbursements for professional memberships because of budget cuts. That did it for me. I wasn't completely sold on the idea of this added expense, considering my salary at the time.

Some years later, my perception changed when I experienced the layoff mentioned previously. I went from viewing a potential ATD Detroit chapter membership as an expense to viewing it as an essential investment in enhancing my marketability. Instead of walking away, I ran to ATD Detroit with a new perception that affected my perspective. How was I able to do this? It was due to my perception of the situation. The reality I was seeing dictated my point of view.

Reflect on situations you have encountered in your life where your perspective was not too favorable because your perception was negative. Now think about how your perspective might have been different if you'd been able to improve your perception—your adaptability.



Consider This

- How do I define adaptability?
- Where can I see evidence of my ability to adapt?

How We Respond to Uncertainty and Adversity

In his book *No Limits*, John Maxwell (2017) states, “The greatest separator between successful and unsuccessful people is how they deal with and explain their failures, problems, and difficulties.” There is usually a story we tell ourselves regarding what we are experiencing amid adversity or unanticipated changes. Ole Kirk Christiansen could have told himself that his woodworking business was over or that it wasn’t meant to be. But no. The story he told himself was one that had to inspire and drive him to keep going when situations were uncertain and obstacles were frequent. Regardless of how well the story is told, the question centers on what kind of story you are telling yourself. Amid change, we learn about who we are.

Changes create challenges or disruptions that require us to respond. Change is inevitable and it can happen in a variety of ways. At work, it could be a job change, process change, new team member, company merger, new product line, or business closure. In our personal lives, it could be having a child, starting college, getting lost, dealing with a car accident, or losing a loved one. How we respond is usually the result of our past experiences, education, and emotional state.

Adaptability often comes down to how we deal with times of uncertainty. Situations that make us feel unsure of a predictable future and as though we have no control leave us uncomfortable. They might even feel dangerous to us. Dealing with the unknown, or the lack of a clear picture of what is going to happen, forces us to rely on past experience or let our imagination have its way. In these instances, our mental strength is challenged. People may resort to trying to capture some aspect of control over events or other people, or they may revert to shutting down. Letting go is also a type of response. This could be letting go of:

- The need for things to go a certain way
- The idea that things should go as you imagine
- Things you don’t actually control

- People who are not good for you
- A job that no longer makes you happy
- A negative story you may be telling yourself

Think about a time when the root of your problem was refusing to let go of the idea that you have to get everything right or be right all the time. This worked in my favor when I was rejected a second time for a proposal that I believed was very well written and met more than the requirements. I let go of the thought that I would never get the approval or proposals would continue to be rejected because I didn't have what it took. Letting go is a positive course of action, unlike shutting down, which happens when uncertainty causes us to feel overwhelmed. To avoid the worry, frustration, stress, and other feelings that can overwhelm us, we can identify how adaptability skills benefit us in uncertain times.

We can learn more about our individual ability to adapt by closely examining common negative and positive responses when we face adversity or a change. Negative responses or thoughts might include:

- “I knew something would go wrong.”
- “I’m just not cut out for this.”
- “That’s too much to handle.”
- “I don’t see how we can make this work.”
- “It sounded too good to be true.”
- “Well, someone else needs to figure out a way out of this.”

How many times do you recall yourself stating or thinking along these lines when you were dealing with a situation that seemed like it was too much for you to handle? This is not to say that if you’ve ever had these thoughts, you’re lacking in adaptability. But if you have a pattern of this line of responding or thinking, it’s worth exploring. These responses can be observed in behavior—it might be stressing out, getting frustrated, shutting down, or being pessimistic. Booker T. Washington said, “I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed.” Usually, it is easy for

us to recognize patterns of negativity in others. It takes intentionality to reflect on our own behavior to see if there is opportunity for improvement in this area.

On the flip side, positive types of responses that are characteristic of individuals with high adaptability skills include:

- “Things will work out. Let’s rethink this.”
- “I was built for this.”
- “I can figure out a way to handle this.”
- “We can do this. There must be a way to make this work.”
- “I think this is an opportunity to try something different.”
- “Give me some time to think this through and come up with another option.”

Are these your default responses to adversity? As I mentioned, we are talking about a pattern of behavior or line of thinking indicative of someone with high adaptability skills. Such behaviors can include thinking out of the box, stepping out of your comfort zone, being willing to learn something new, or quickly adjusting when transitioning among multiple tasks.

Here’s a situation where I was forced to turn the magnifying glass on my own behavior. I was working on contract with the city for a special project for an HRIS implementation. I was one instructional designer on a team of three, and I enjoyed the role despite the extreme change from my previous role in HR. The project reached a point where a new system was selected for the implementation, and an external consulting company was coming in to manage it for the whole city. Our team was asked to gather all source documents, files, spreadsheets, and custom work we created so they could be provided to the external team, which would take over what we were doing. That was a major change, and I told myself once again that I had stayed with the city too long.

We had our watercooler talks and the feeling was mutual on our team that it was a problem to just package everything nicely for others to walk in and take over. Of course, it felt worse for me, because I was the only

one on our team who had been laid off and was working on contract. At first, I could not bring myself to get on board with this change. But then I realized I had to re-evaluate and reflect on what I was thinking and saying. These things were not happening to me. I had decided to stay with the city and not aggressively pursue other opportunities, because I was working on my doctorate at the time. I accepted the contractual role. I chose what I was going to make happen rather than things happening to me. How often do we fail to acknowledge this?

I ended up taking the lead on gathering everything for handoff. I did it because I believed that regardless of whom it was helping, I had to stick to my principles. I applied empathy along with adaptability because I also thought about how I would feel if I were the vendor coming into the situation. Did I really want to sabotage the project by sitting out? I created a spreadsheet and organized the information, files, links, and much more by category and file type.

What happened next, I honestly did not expect. When I submitted everything to our manager, she asked to see me in her office. I knew I had done a thorough job with the organization and inclusion of necessary resources, so I figured she was going to thank me and give me a date for my contract termination. Surprisingly, she asked me if I was interested in taking the role of change management training lead on the city side to work with the other companies involved. Here was a leadership opportunity to build my skills in an area where I had almost no experience. This story hits at the heart of the importance of self-reflection, with special attention given to our pattern of thinking.

The Adaptability Quotient

So if change is inevitable and varied, where do flexibility, versatility, perspective, and perception lead us on our adaptability journey? We arrive at the adaptability quotient (AQ) as a tool to measure those things and recognize their importance. AQ was originally introduced by Paul Stoltz in 1997. He introduced it as the adversity quotient, but it has come to be

used interchangeably with the adaptability quotient. Similar to IQ and EQ, AQ gauges one's adaptability skills. Think of your AQ as your adaptability score; this book will help you aim high.

Not until recent years have we come to see that adaptability's reach extends beyond the challenges of keeping up with technological change at breakneck speeds. Business and workplace changes, the consequences of COVID-19, and L&D changes have left us in severe states of uncertainty and adverse situations. This has prompted the need for businesses that can thrive in these states. For this to happen, leaders and workers at various levels in an organization must have the adaptability skills to not only survive, but thrive.

EQ skills gained the spotlight when we recognized how important it is to appreciate and respect the human element in work interactions, especially given the increasing use of technology. Now we see prevalence of adaptability skills. What good is my ability to deal with people and myself in different situations if I cannot keep pace and adjust as changes arise that are outside my control? Natalie Fratto explains it: "Adaptability is not just the capacity to absorb new information, but the ability to work out what is relevant, to unlearn obsolete knowledge, to overcome challenges, and to make a conscious effort to change" (Murray 2019). AQ is taking its place alongside EQ.

Adaptability Skills and Traits

To learn how we can improve our adaptability, let's break down adaptability into two buckets: skills and traits. We are born with traits, also known as natural talents, whereas skills are abilities we learn. We develop some adaptability skills as a result of our education, professional development, coaching, and mentoring. Of course, some examples may fall in both areas, such as creativity and flexibility. For example, I have a nephew who has been creative since I started observing him closely at the age of two, so this is a trait of his. I had to learn and develop my creative skills.

What are some of those adaptability skills? Skills in high-AQ individuals include:

- **Curiosity:** strong desire to know or learn something
- **Effective communication:** successful exchange of ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and information via speaking, writing, or another medium
- **Innovation:** introduction or implementation of a new or improved product, process, or service
- **Learning agility:** ability to learn and unlearn from experience and then apply new learning to new situations
- **Motivation:** ability to stimulate interest or willingness to do something
- **Negotiation:** discussion aimed at resolving an issue or reaching an agreement
- **Problem solving:** finding the solution to a problem
- **Resilience:** ability to adapt to change and recover quickly or bounce back
- **Strategic thinking:** analyzing problems from a broad perspective to come up with viable strategies in line with an organization's objectives



Consider This

- What adaptability skills and traits do I demonstrate?
- Where do I have opportunity to improve my adaptability skills?

Adaptability skills are common, and you may not always recognize them as being connected to adaptability. Sure, we all have moments when we tell ourselves something like, “Innovative, motivating, resilient, and versatile; oh yeah, that’s me!” Yet these skills are sometimes missing when you are in the middle of a crisis, or when a new circumstance requires you to rise to the occasion. There are a few reasons for that. One

is that certain skills may appear to be natural tendencies, even though you learned them. Another reason is that we may not have clarity on what adaptability truly is. Finally, many of us have not viewed adaptability as being important enough to have specific skills associated with it—until now.

While skills are learned, traits make us who we are. Traits of adaptability should not be foreign to you. In fact, you may have seen them at work within yourself or others, so let's cover some examples:

- **Creative:** ability to use one's imagination to create something new
- **Enterprising:** one who organizes the business venture and assumes the risk for it
- **Flexible:** ability to change or be changed easily
- **Optimistic:** one who is inclined to be hopeful and expects a favorable outcome
- **Positive:** quality of being encouraging or promising of a successful outcome
- **Resourceful:** ability to cope with difficulties
- **Risk taker:** someone who takes a chance with potential loss or injury in the hope of gain or excitement
- **Self-starter:** a person who begins work or undertakes a project on their own initiative
- **Versatile:** having a variety of abilities

Because traits are a part of us with or without building skills, we need to take them into consideration as we look at how we work toward developing our adaptability skills.

Paul Stoltz went as far as to recognize categories of adaptability skills based on people's pursuit of purpose in life and work. Stoltz references this pursuit as their ascent up a mountain. He identifies the categories as quitters, campers, and climbers:

- **Quitters** are those who abandoned their pursuit of purpose in the midst of a challenge and gave up on reaching their potential.

- **Campers** are those who reached half of their potential because they stopped their pursuit after getting to a certain point. They no longer rise to the challenge when they face adversity.
- **Climbers** are those who consistently rise to the challenge that others flee in fear. Climbers do not accept defeat and are able to use their challenges to learn, adapt, and grow as they proceed to their next mountain.

Many of us can easily recognize climbers as the group that would reflect many adaptability skills and traits. Campers and quitters help us to understand those who once exhibited these skills, but no longer exhibit that drive. These categories are useful in understanding what is demanded of adaptable workers with adaptability skills. We will revisit these categories in part 2, “Putting Adaptability Into Practice.”

Your AQ Moments

Unanticipated change can put a high-AQ person’s creativity and innovation into high gear. In contrast, a low-AQ person may shift to hopelessness, fear, and frustration. When you recognize which one you are, you can then set goals for improvement based on your status. I encourage you to consider the adaptability behaviors you exhibit in various professional and personal situations. Reflect on your flexibility and versatility in those instances. Ask yourself if you need to change your perception as a way of influencing your perspective, which could result in you demonstrating better flexibility and versatility. Your adaptability skills in action will always begin and end with you. I encourage you to pursue new heights as you work to be the mountain climber you were meant to be, because AQ is the new game changer.

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About the Author



Esther Jackson is a project manager, local college instructor, instructional designer, and trainer. She focuses on the evolving learning needs and expectations of today's multigenerational workforce. Esther has a proven track record of equipping people with the skills and knowledge to face challenges in the midst of constant change by addressing the employee experience, work-

force engagement, performance, and professional development.

Esther acquired more than 20 years of combined experience in HR leadership, project management, talent development, and diversity and inclusion. Her dedication and commitment to the development, productivity, and performance success of others has helped propel her in multiple roles in the public and private sectors. She has also taken the stage speaking at multiple national and local conferences, in addition to writing articles on talent development and diversity topics.

Esther serves as a national advisor for chapters with the Association for Talent Development (ATD), and has held various roles with the ATD Detroit Chapter, including president.

Esther has a bachelor's and master's degree in education from Wayne State University. She has a doctoral degree in higher education and adult learning from Walden University. Her doctoral study on technology preferences of multiple generations in the workplace classroom has received nearly 1,000 downloads since its publication three years ago. Esther also holds an AQ Foundations Certification from AQai.