

ADAPTIVE BRAIN

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Leadership is currently facing some of the biggest challenges in history; a world with rapidly changing environments, cultures and technologies – people under extreme pressure and scrutiny, and our personal and professional information laid bare. Tensions are high, and the expectations of business leadership have never been greater.

This volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world means that we need to adapt our methods, our cultures and our inner voice quickly to keep up with the challenges we face, and the needs of the people we are leading – but this kind of adaptive behaviour, changing the way that we think and act, can be difficult.

Some people believe that ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ – but science would indicate

otherwise; in actuality, adaptivity is one of the most fascinating aspects of neurology.

As part of their Human Trends research, Deloitte published an article in 2017 entitled [“Leadership Disrupted: Pushing the Boundaries”](#).

The article explored the challenges for leading in the 21st century – and the core of their research was what they refer to as ‘Cognitive Transformation’ – or, put simply, thinking differently.

Leaders need to think, act and react differently to make their organisations succeed in a digital world.

COGNITIVE TRANSFORMATION (THINK differently)	BEHAVIOURAL TRANSFORMATION (ACT differently)	EMOTIONAL TRANSFORMATION (REACT differently)
Conceptualising possibilities in a virtual world	Adapting to constantly shifting power and influence	Tolerating an environment of risk and ambiguity
Handling ever-increasing cognitive complexity	Collaborating with ease across many different teams	Showing resilience in the face of constant change
Thinking divergently about new ways of doing things	Valuing the contribution of new work partners and different interest groups	Being brave in challenging how things are being done
Making decisions quickly without all of the information	Investing huge amounts of energy into getting things right; try, fail, try again	Having the confidence to take the lead in driving change

Figure 2. Leadership capabilities needed to succeed in a digital world
Deloitte University Press

Additionally, Simon Heywood’s book “The Agile Leader” explores the notion of leadership agility, and the behaviours and traits which benefit leadership: Heywood talks about the agility

paradox, which is the expectation that agile leaders need to be both enablers and disrupters, simultaneously.

The table below, from Heywood’s book, lists the key characteristics for these:

ENABLER	DISRUPTER
Learning agility	Thoughtfully decisive
Clarify of direction	Digitally literate
Empathy and trust	Questioning the status quo
Empowering	Creating new ways of thinking
Working together	Close to customer trends

What does this mean? Well – it means that, for the first time in our existence, how we use our brains has become critical in how we lead.

HOW DOES THIS IMPACT THE FUTURE LEADERSHIP OF YOUR ORGANISATION?

It is estimated that in 10 years’ time, 70% of the companies which exist today will no longer be trading.

What is it that the 30% of surviving businesses will do better than the doomed 70%?

The answer is that they will *learn* better - and apply that learning to their organisational culture: they will demonstrate better *learning agility*. “Learning agility” – or agile cognitive function - can be defined as a mindset and corresponding collection of practices which allow leaders to continually develop, grow and utilise new strategies which better equip them for the increasingly complex problems faced within their organisations, and in their industries on a global scale.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY LEARNING?

Learning actually *creates structural changes* in your brain – changes which help you build on what you already know, and to respond to the new learning by changing your behaviours, applying the learning to your existing routines and habits.

Picture your brain as a roadmap. Each road leads to certain destinations – or ideas – and the route to them is laid in concrete, inflexible – and this is how some people believe their opinions and ideas ought to remain. However, we know that learning can re-route your mental journey – either finding quicker, more efficient and effective routes to your final destination, or setting new destinations into your journey altogether.

These roads are synaptic connections; physical connections, mapped and examined for many years by neuroscience. New learning is the creation of new synaptic connections. Quite literally, learning reshapes your brain.

As children our brain is constantly changing and developing, physically growing larger as we process and retain information, often without any conscious effort to do so. As adults, with these synaptic road maps already engraved into our behaviours and reactions, we find ourselves automatically repeating behaviours, responding to stimulus in the same ways time and again – because this is how we have learned to behave and react.

This can make *re-learning* difficult – and can make changing our automatic behaviours challenging – but it is very possible, if we are willing to work on embedding that learning.

THE ADAPTIVE BRAIN, AND THINKING DIFFERENTLY AS LEADERS IN THE MODERN WORLD.

As mentioned earlier our cognitive function has become key to leadership and organisational survival. However, a significant amount of the Managers and Leaders we work with are finding having to change *the way they learn* very difficult.

The good news is that our brains are incredibly complex organs: as Stella Collins puts it: "*If the brain were so simple we could understand it, we would be so simple we couldn't*".

The human brain's plasticity enables us to adapt and to learn. The programmes for leadership development which ASK have developed utilise our understanding of neuroscience and psychoanalysis, with adaptive brain and innate human behaviours key aspects of every programme.

We know that simply describing new behaviours won't lead to significant changes in your leaders and managers long-term, or in the culture of your organisation as a whole.

These changes are significant – and that means that the process of change needs to also be significant – so our programmes go further than other practitioners.

MOTIVATION AND LEARNING

The key to all learning is *intrinsic motivation* – the fundamental driver for learning motivation is curiosity.

When we are curious, the neurotransmitter dopamine is released – which boosts our motivation. Therefore, it is important to constantly be curious work, as it will keep motivation high and enable continuous learning.

Our programmes begin with an assessment of your current status and behaviour, peer reviews and analysis of the learners. This helps us to understand your motivation for seeking development, and tailor our approach to meet that need.

The programme then engages the learner, building interest and personal connection with *why* the learning is important, and creating a personal connection with the organisation's motivation. Once the learner is engaged in why the learning matters and *what will be learned*, the learning itself begins with a formal and experiential learning programme.

This is the point that most L&D practitioners step away – the learning is complete, their role is fulfilled, and the learner returns to the workplace with new information.

Applying this learning without guidance or support, these new synaptic connections – the new roads sketched on their roadmap – quickly fade, because the well-travelled routes of their original behaviours are so well embedded – meaning that the new learning quickly slides from their awareness, and nothing really changes.

Which is why we follow all of our learning programmes with our *Transfer* phase; we support the learner far beyond the final moments of classroom learning, and continue our assessment and review once the learner has returned to their daily routines, allowing them to transfer their learning into their role, to practice and repeat the new behaviours, and to create new habits.

If you are looking for off-the-shelf training, you can find it anywhere; if, however, you are looking for truly impactful learning, for true evolution and change within your organisation, and for leaders and managers who inspire creativity, growth and a dynamic and responsive culture, remember the importance of adaptive brains, and learning programmes which factor in this adaptivity.

If you want to know more about how our programmes can help you too, just ASK; call 01234 757575 or email me on liaquat.lal@askeurope.com

Just ASK!