

Future-proof now

The pandemic has reminded us that organisations need to be ready for challenges – and not simply react to them, however quickly and competently. This means leaders need to future-proof their organisations and people in anticipation of change and crises. McKinsey's recent [Future proof: Solving the 'adaptability paradox' for the long term](#) article explains why and how.

There's one tool that helps leaders be prepared for and meet the next big challenge: adaptability. McKinsey explains that 'adaptability is the ability to learn flexibly and efficiently and to apply that knowledge across situations'. Being adaptable means being aware of and open to change *now*, so you **maintain control over uncertainty and volatility** – before the pressure reaches a point where changing course is difficult, even futile. Being adaptable assists learning, performance, confidence and creativity – and is essential to personal wellbeing.

How to future-proof

Here are five ways you can become future-proof and be more adaptable.

1. Practice wellbeing as a foundational skill. As a leader, the best way to handle demanding situations is to invest your own wellbeing first. You need to be psychologically and physically fit to face whatever comes your way and support others for however long it takes. It's not selfish; it's your responsibility. You are the leader and a role model for others. Whether it's cat-napping, taking holiday breaks, meditating or your favourite form of exercise, it's part of your job.

2. Make purpose your 'North Star'. While learning is normally uplifting, it can be daunting during challenging times. We often fall into the trap of attending to the urgent rather than what is the most important. This is where a sense of purpose comes in: it offers a framework that makes hard work worthwhile and expands tolerance for change. When people feel that their purpose is aligned with that of their organisation, the benefits include stronger engagement, productivity and heightened loyalty.

3. See the world through an adaptability lens.

Status quo mindsets	Adaptable learning mindsets	
Fixed – "A challenge is a test that I pass or fail, based on my inherent abilities. If I am not good at something, I will not do well."	Growth – "I can learn to do anything I want. Challenges and mistakes are opportunities for learning and development."	Your status quo mindset may protect you in the moment. But ultimately, it will probably hinder your ability to adapt and respond in ways that a new situation demands. The table provides seven examples.
Expert – "I should already know the answer. I should perform during a challenge by having the answers."	Curious – "I am going to ask a lot of questions, explore, and discover. I can learn a lot from trying something new."	
Reactive – "I need to identify the problem and what is causing it so I can apply tested, well-practiced solutions to bring the situation under control."	Creative – "I need to lead with purpose. I will empower myself and others to explore new possibilities and experiment our way to an innovative solution."	
Victim – "There are many factors beyond my control that affect my ability to thrive, grow, and get things done."	Agent – "Within reason, I believe in my ability to learn new things, overcome challenges, and accomplish just about anything I put my mind to."	
Scarcity – "A challenge typically involves limited resources, hard choices, and trade-offs that must be made."	Abundance – "A challenge is typically a potential win-win situation looking to be discovered."	While a status quo mindsets is perfectly reasonable in some routine or low-stress situations, they are progressively less useful as circumstances become more complex and we're under more pressure.
Certainty – "I would rather things go according to plan than take a detour that may end up better."	Exploration – "I do not know what the future holds, so the best way to succeed is to plan ahead but be flexible and curious as I go."	What becomes optimal then is for leaders and organisations to shift into adaptable learning mindsets.
Protection – "I need to prevent something bad from happening."	Opportunity – "I could make something great happen."	

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For leaders, one enemy of the adaptive mindset is a belief that it's their job to have the 'right answers' rather than knowing when to ask the right questions. It's essentially the same trap that Zen Buddhism warns against falling into, thus urging practitioners to adopt what it calls the beginner's mind, or shoshin. 'In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities', according to this concept. 'In the expert's mind, there are few.'

4. Build deeper, more diverse networks. Strong interpersonal relationships foster adaptability; people need meaningful connections to survive and thrive. Not paying attention to our relationships is actually counterproductive to our wellbeing and productivity at work.

Deep and diverse connections that provide social support are fundamental elements and feed our wellbeing and learning, especially during periods of uncertainty and heightened stress. These are actions you can take to foster deeper connections:

- *Pay full attention to the person in front of you.* Full attention requires tuning our awareness toward the other person and listening deeply, without judgment. When people feel heard, they can also hear you.
- *Allow yourself to be vulnerable.* While it may feel risky, show your authentic self and be willing to share your fears, concerns, and imperfections.
- *Show empathy, but don't stop there.* Empathy alone is not enough. Leaders can learn to channel the right kind of empathy by considering the other person's perspective. Once you understand this, you become aware of the best course of action.
- *Meet others with compassion.* If you've noticed someone else's pain — physical, mental, or social — demonstrate your intent to take supportive action.

5. Make it safe to learn. Healthy team dynamics foster adaptability. Working in teams influences the extent to which we prioritise learning, especially from setbacks and failures. Teams can have cultures in which setbacks and failures go unacknowledged or they can have cultures that grasp setbacks as opportunities from which to learn and grow.

Leaders can have a unique influence on which team culture is adopted depending on the degree to which they foster psychological safety. This is a shared belief held by team members that interpersonal risk taking is safe — that ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes will be welcomed and valued. Here are four practices to foster psychological safety:

- *Reframe "failures."* Leaders can help frame failure as a way to learn from missteps and build future successes. This emphasis helps reinforce an adaptable environment in which people feel comfortable being honest and vulnerable; it also invites curious, open, and growth mindsets.
- *Encourage team voice.* A diversity of perspectives pushes us to be innovative and elevates our performance. Leaders can strive to invite team input into decision making and use more dialogue to encourage discussion.
- *Appreciate others.* To drive full participation, team members need to feel valued for their contributions. Leaders can avoid generic congratulations or only recognizing results. Instead, they can reward members' efforts, making recognition for their contributions part of the team's language.
- *Coach team members to support one another.* As a contributor to psychological safety, team climate is more than twice as important as leadership style. Coaching, role modelling, mentoring and setting up structures are critical to creating an environment that feels safe.

Conclusion

We don't just "bounce back" from difficult situations—we "bounce forward" into new realms, learning to be more adaptable as our circumstances evolve and change.