

LEADERSHIP Excellence



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Beauty and Beast

We assume that leadership can be taught, without agreeing exactly how, or who should be the learner. Great leadership literature has a common thread: that people can, and sometime do, change.

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Lead with Agility

Learn to flex, pivot, and adapt.



by Kevin Cashman

THE WORLD OF LEADERSHIP belongs to the most agile. While distinguishing our organizations through our legacy products, service and culture is crucial in today's competitive climate, our core competencies to flex, pivot and innovatively adapt to the ever-emerging future may be our greatest differentiator. *Managers flex their muscles to exert control; leaders stretch their muscles to foster flexibility.*

The *survival of the fittest* mentality is becoming outmoded; new leadership models are needed to face challenges of new proportions. A more fitting definition might be survival of the most aware or survival of the most flexible—mentally, emotionally, and strategically. The emerging paradigm for success will convert the concept of dominant exertion to one of internal and external agility. *Survival of the most aware and most adaptable* is becoming the foundation for sustainable effectiveness. Are we gaining inside-out resilience to withstand the tumult of high-impact change, or are we reacting and bracing ourselves against every change that comes our way?

Ken Brousseau, founder of Decision Dynamics, shows that as we go up the executive ladder, we need to become increasingly comfortable with uncertainty and sudden change. As leaders, we require the *integrative ability* to weave together and make sense of apparently disjointed pieces, crafting novel and innovative solutions. At the same time, we need the self-confidence to make decisions on the spot, even in the absence of compelling, complete data. The qualities needed at the top—openness, integrative thinking, adaptability—also indicate that leaders need to embrace the *grayness* that comes from multiple, diverse viewpoints. We must master our adaptability mentally, emotionally, strategically and interpersonally.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) identified *Dealing with complex challenges* as the *number one* issue facing senior leaders today. And Lominger

International's research concludes that *the most important competency in shortest supply today is dealing with ambiguity*. Be open and agile to the potential learning contained in change and complexity.

Learning Agility has four dimensions—Mental Agility, People Agility, Results Agility and Change Agility. It's the key to unlocking *change proficiency*. In fact, studies by CCL, Mike Lombardo of Lominger, and Robert Sternberg at Yale point to *learning agility as more predictive of long-term potential than raw IQ*.

Learning agility is a complex set of skills that allows us to *learn something in one situation and apply it in a different situation*. It is about gathering patterns from one context and using them in another so that we can make sense out of something we have never seen or



done before. In short, *learning agility is change mastery—the ability to learn, adapt and apply ourselves in constantly changing, first-time conditions*.

Positive change requires letting go of old patterns and taking a fresh approach. It demands going beyond *preconceived ideas*. We can gain insight only if we are open to change. But change challenges our current reality by forcing a new reality to rush in. If we're open to it, new possibilities flow into our lives. If we're not open to change, we respond to it like an enemy we have to fend off.

Why do we fear change? Change involves both *creation and destruction*. As something new is created, something old is destroyed. At the junction of those realities, most of us retreat. Usually only after we have extracted the learning inherent in change, do we accept it and realize that our leadership *muscles* are stronger and more supple.

Even though we can only handle change in the present, most of us live

our lives in the past or the future. We need to become *now-focused* like a professional athlete with single-minded devotion to a task in the midst of very dynamic circumstances. As we focus in the present, we gain confidence that we can handle the endless chain of present moments in our lives. *Leading with agility* is about developing an unshakable confidence that *we can handle and can learn from whatever comes our way*. It's an inner confidence, a sense of self-trust, that *we can deal with real change*—unexpected change—not just anticipated change. As Bill Weldon, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, notes: "Sometimes a leader must endure chaos and appreciate it in order to discover the right thing to do."

Change is usually seen as something happening out there—products change, competition changes, systems change, technology changes. While I was coaching a CEO on a major change initiative, he said to me, "You mean to say that I'm going to have to change?" *All significant change begins with self change*.

Moving our concept of change from an *outside-in* paradigm to an *inside-out* paradigm has profound implications. We see change as an internal dynamic. Change is perceived as something to be mastered from within versus something only going on outside of us. Ultimately, people resist, adapt or learn from it. In this regard, *all change fundamentally takes place within the person*. Yet, many leaders, despite great competencies and skills, don't make the connection between *their growth and transformation and that of their organizations*. Transformation is not an *event* but an ongoing *process* of knowing who we are, maintaining a clear vision of what we want to create, and then going for it.

If our fear of loss exceeds our personal coping strategies, we'll be overwhelmed, ineffective in dealing with change, and unable to access the *learning agility* within us. Imagine how bold and wonderful our lives would be if our purpose, vision and resilience were so strong that fear had no hold over us. Franklin D. Roosevelt words—*We have nothing to fear but fear itself*—come from a place of *true character*—unshakable inner conviction, strength, awareness, and agility. Imagine your life free of fear. You'd harbor no financial fear, no fear of failure, and no fear of change. If *innovation is the new leadership*, the future belongs to leaders *most free* of the fear of failure and *most full* of learning agility. LE

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ACTION: *Demonstrate your learning agility.*