

Managing for adaptability instead of productivity

Steven T. Hunt, Ph.D.

Click to follow my posts: www.linkedin.com/in/steventhunt

About 2500 years ago, the Greek philosopher [Heraclitus](#) observed that the only constant is change. This statement is not totally true in the modern digitalized, interconnected world. Now the only constant is an *ever-accelerating rate* of change. The implication this has for organizations is simple: **whatever a company is doing now is probably the wrong thing to be doing three years from now.**

Regardless of a company's industry or geography, changes are bound to occur months that will require it to significantly rethink its strategic direction or operational approach. These could be a result of economics, technology, regulations, labor markets, consumer preferences or other factors. Companies may be unable to forecast when these changes will happen or understand their impact until after they occur. But once they start, companies must quickly adapt. And a critical part of adaptation is getting employees to do things in the future that are significantly different from what they did in the past.

Managing for adaptability instead of productivity

Someone recently asked me how can companies can train employees to be adaptable? My response was this is the wrong question. People are born adaptable. The competitive niche of humans as a species is our ability to adapt to changing environments. It is called learning. The question is not how to teach people to adapt, but how to manage people in a way that unleashes our innate adaptive abilities.

Historically companies focused on staffing jobs and managing people to maximize their productivity. People are most productive when they are doing things they already know how to do. Management methods built around productivity emphasize efficiency and performance. The focus on providing people with clear job direction, educating them with targeted learning activities, and motivating them through tangible rewards. These methods work when the goal is to maximize productivity doing repetitive tasks in familiar work environments. But they fall short when the goal is to maximize people's ability to adapt to new environments and master constantly changing activities.

People do not fear change, they fear poorly managed change

Managing for adaptability requires understanding the psychological factors that influence how people respond to change. This starts with dispelling the belief that people fear change. People do not fear change. What they fear is poorly managed change. They fear losing valuable resources or being forced to do things they do not want to do. But change in the right conditions is exhilarating. It is the feeling of developing new capabilities, overcoming challenges, and achieving meaningful goals. If you hear a leader blame a failed strategy on employees' supposed fear of change, what you are really hearing is a leader admitting they do not know how to inspire employees to change.

People react in two ways when faced with significant change. One is to adopt a survival mindset. Employees with this mindset become skeptical, cautious and protective. They see change in terms of potential loss and work to resist it or minimize its impact. The other way is to adopt a growth mindset. Employees with a growth mindset approach change with a sense of commitment, engagement and confidence. They may acknowledge risks associated with the change, but view the change primarily based on the opportunities it provides to achieve new things and develop new capabilities.

Whether employees adopt a survival vs growth mindset is influenced by whether their jobs meet three very basic, innate [psychological needs](#) reflecting the need for achievement, affiliation and security.

Need for Achievement: People are born with a desire to accomplish meaningful goals. This is reflected in things as basic as an infant's desire to crawl across the floor. Why do babies work so hard to learn to move on their own? Because it feels good to accomplish something meaningful. When people are unable to fulfill this primal need for achievement, they become depressed and talk about their lives being "meaningless". Achievement gives us a sense of purpose. This in turn gives us energy to persist in the face of challenge. When work taps into our need for achievement, we are more committed to finding ways to be successful in the face of change.

To feel a sense of achievement in work, employees must have ownership over activities that they perceive as making a difference in something they care about. For most people, this is about doing work that has [social meaning](#) (e.g. helping others) or doing work that enables them to achieve goals that align with their own sense of self-identity and [mastery orientation](#) (e.g., fulfilling career goals). A key part of managing for adaptability is ensuring employees see a connection between their work and something that matters to them beyond simply punching a clock and getting a paycheck.

Need for Affiliation. Humans are social animals. We do not do well if we feel isolated, excluded or alone. This is particularly true when people are under pressure to adapt to situations where there is a risk of failure. It is important that [employees feel a sense of belonging to groups at work that value their contributions](#). And an important part of managing for adaptability is creating connections and supportive relationships between employees who are facing similar challenges.

Need for Security. Increasing levels of change create greater levels of uncertainty, uncertainty creates a sense of insecurity, and insecurity creates stress. Stressed out employees are unhealthy employees, and unhealthy employees are not fully effective employees ([Moreau et al., 2004](#)). And the less effective employees are, the more stressed they become leading to a viciously declining cycle. Part of managing for adaptability is helping employees manage and control the stress inherent in a rapidly changing world. This starts with creating a [supportive work environment](#) where managers and leaders display a sense of empathy and understanding toward the work and non-work challenges employees are facing as they strive to adapt to new job challenges. It also includes providing employees with knowledge and resources to help them manage stress in a healthy manner.

Creating environments where employees thrive on change

How people react to change depends on whether they feel motivated, supported, and safe. History is filled with examples of people overcoming incredible challenges when they have a clear sense of purpose, feel part of a highly committed team, and know that people around them care for their health and well-being. Companies cannot control the rate of change facing their organization or their employees. But they can control how they manage employees. And they must manage employees differently if they are to succeed in a world of accelerating change. This requires focusing on fundamental psychological needs that unlock people's uniquely innate human capacity to adapt to changing environments.