

Do you have Adaptability?

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

What if a person you are trying to influence says: "Hey, let's have breakfast tomorrow morning at 7am," and you usually have trouble getting to work by 9am? If it were important to you, you'd show up, wouldn't you? You would be willing to adapt your behavior a little bit. And what if a person you'd like to influence says: "You know, it looks like you made a mistake in these figures on the cost of getting this project going." You know that you've gone over and over those figures. Would you immediately start arguing that your figures are right? Or would you sit down and review them with this person? You would be more open to correction if it was important enough to you, wouldn't you?

Being willing and able to adapt your behavior increases your ability to communicate and build relationships with other people. The concept of adaptability, as developed by Dr. Michael O'Connor, my co-author of *The Platinum Rule* (Warner Books, August 1996), is a two-part process. It combines flexibility with versatility. Flexibility is your willingness to adapt. It's your attitude. Versatility is your ability to adapt. It's your aptitude.

Referring to our earlier examples--you may be able to meet for breakfast at 7am, but you might not be willing to do it. You are not flexible in this instance. Or you may be willing to sit down with another person to review the figures you slaved over, but you may not be able to do it with an open mind because you don't want to discover that you made a mistake. In this case, you lack versatility, which also limits your adaptability.

People with adaptability are both flexible and versatile. Of course, our level of adaptability can be stronger in some situations than others. For example, we tend to be more adaptable at work with people we know less, and less adaptable at home with people we know better. In addition, research shows that people view themselves as more flexible and versatile than they actually are. That's because we all aspire to those behaviors, and we judge ourselves on how we intend to act as well as on how we do act. But unfortunately, our actions don't always match our intentions. Another reason for the gap between our ideal versus our actual level of adaptability is that it's not easy. That's why it's also important to know the ten characteristics that undermine your ability to adapt--the negative traits that undermine your adaptability. Let's look now at the ten positive characteristics for adaptability. We'll start with flexibility.

The first half of the high adaptability formula--Flexibility.

High flexibility is characterized by these five attributes: Confidence, tolerance, empathy, positiveness, and respect for others. The first attribute, confidence means that you believe in yourself, you trust your own judgement and resourcefulness.

The second high flexibility attribute is tolerance. That means you're open to accepting opinions and practices that are different from your own. We can easily think of people who are intolerant of others because of religious or political beliefs. Those intolerant folks may attract like-minded people, but they don't gain the attention of a diverse audience.

Third, is empathy. The root of the word empathy is pathos, which means "feeling" in Greek. Empathy is a term for deep feeling. It means, "I feel what you feel. I can put myself in your shoes." Another word with the same root, Sympathy, means merely acknowledging someone else's feelings. It results in kindness and pity, and it comes from the head. Empathy results in feeling the pain, or the joy, of the other person. It comes from the heart.

The fourth high flexibility attribute is positiveness. The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, has sold well for over forty years because it contains such a universal truth. A positive attitude leads to positive events in your life.

And the fifth high flexibility characteristic is respect for others. This is the sincere desire to understand and consider other people's choices, commitments and needs in relation to yours.

The other side of the adaptability coin: The negative traits that undermine your adaptability. If you recognize any of these in yourself, try to improve your adaptability by eliminating this negative tendency from your behavior.

Negative flexibility is characterized by:

Rigidity--"It's my way or the highway"

Competition with others:--"I'm smarter, prettier, etc., than you"

Discontent--"No, I don't like it this way. Why can't we..."

Unapproachable--"Don't bother me unless it's worth my time and you agree with me"

Difficulty with Ambiguity--"Let's nail this down right now"

The second half of the high adaptability formula--Versatility.

The five high versatility traits are resilience, vision, attentiveness, competence and self-correction.

Resilience means knowing how to overcome setbacks, barriers and limited resources. Mainly, it has to do with your emotional strength. Remember *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? Larry Kasdan's hugely successful script was turned down dozens of times before someone finally shared his vision. How many cold calls that turn out to be, "No thank you, can you bounce back from? If you keep on going until you succeed, that's resilience.

Vision is the second high versatility trait. I think it's easy to see why someone who has the power to imagine, to be creative, to suggest alternatives, is going to be more influential than someone who can't.

Next, is attentiveness. That means being aware of elements in the environment. It can be as simple as noticing when someone is getting bored, or sensing that now is not the right time to present your ideas. It's knowing when to act and when not to act. It means paying attention to more than your own needs.

The fourth high versatility trait is competence. Competence begins with expertise. And it also involves a problem-solving ability that goes beyond your specialty. If you don't know how to answer a question or fix a problem, you can find someone who does. It means having a can-do attitude and following through on it.

And the fifth high versatility trait is self-correction. That means that once you initiate a project, you ask for feedback and place high priority on problem solving, not on being right. It means you're able to see when you've developed a non-productive pattern in your behavior. It's being able to say: "I think this approach isn't working. I'd better try something different."

Negative versatility is characterized by:

Subjectiveness--"This is the way it looks to ME"

Bluntness--"That's a stupid idea!"

Resistance--"This is the way we've always done it"

Single-mindedness--"It's my goal and nothing else matters"

Unreasonable Risk-taking--"I'm going to jump, won't you come with me?"

Developing your adaptability allows you to understand how different types of people would like to be treated. It does not mean imitating the other person's behavior. It does mean adjusting your behavior to be more in line with the other person's preferences. The effectively adaptable person meets the other person's needs and his own. He knows how to negotiate relationships in a way that allows everyone to win. With adaptability you are practicing the spirit of the Golden Rule, which I call The Platinum Rule, and can treat the other person the way he wants to be treated.

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