



Adaptability

The Art of Winning in an Age of Uncertainty

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Adaptability is the key human trait. The ability to adapt faster and smarter than the situation is what makes the powerful difference between adapting to cope and adapting to win.

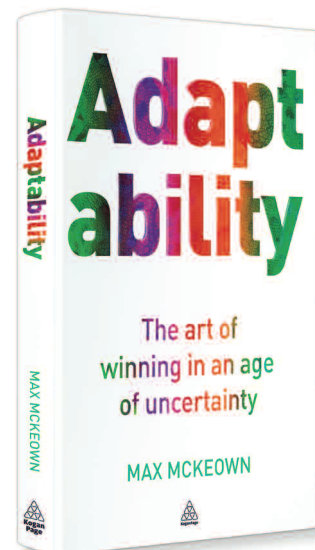
Our history is a story of adaptation and change. In this time of brutal competition and economic uncertainty, it has never been more important to understand how to adapt successfully.

In a series of powerful rules, Max McKeown explores how to increase the adaptability of you and your organization to create winning positions. Fascinating real-world examples from business, government, the military and sports bring the rules of adaptability to life — from the world's most innovative corporations to street-level creativity emerging from the slums.

Adaptability is about how people adapt. It's also about winning. Not just winning by playing the same rules, but by playing better. It is a powerful, practical and inspirational guide to success in uncertain times.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why some groups adapt better to uncertainty.
- How to be inspired by stories of successful adaptation.
- How to transcend the constraints of your situation.
- Why “adapt or die” is not the only choice.
- What the rules of adaptability are.



by Max McKeown

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: ADAPTABILITY

by Max McKeown

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Adaptability: The Art of Winning in an Age of Uncertainty by Max McKeown. Copyright © 2012 by Max McKeown. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Kogan Page Limited. 228 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 978-0-7494-6524-7.

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Introduction: In Search of Adaptability

Adaptability is more than flexibility; it's more than merely coping with a miserable set of choices in an unhappy game. Adaptations may be deliberate or non-deliberate. They may also be successful or unsuccessful.

How do some people start from a losing position and end up winning? How do others follow the reverse path, starting from a winning position and end up losing? Why do individuals, groups, markets and nations end up in situations that are mutually destructive? In short, what are the rules of adaptability?

There are three steps that have to be followed if there is to be deliberate adaptation that works.

- **Step 1: Recognize the need for adaptation.** If no one recognizes a need or opportunity to adapt there can be no deliberate attempt to adapt.
- **Step 2: Understand the adaptation required.** There are many people, and whole nations, that recognize problems without knowing what to do about them.
- **Step 3: Do what is necessary to adapt.** It's fairly common for people to know what is necessary and still not do what it takes.

The outcomes of adaptation, or lack of adaptation, may be collapse, survival, thriving or transcendence. There is overlap between them. They will also change.

You can improve every day of every year and still fail. Or you can be part of the group that adapts faster and smarter than the situation changes. You can think your way to a better future. ●

PART I: RECOGNIZE THE NEED TO ADAPT

“We didn't adapt fast enough” is a common enough explanation for the poor performance and disastrous leadership of many organizations.

“We got it wrong” is less popular but just as relevant. People can move rapidly but in the wrong direction.

The most successful adapters are curious. They understand that stability is a dangerous illusion and they reach beyond the limits of what is, to what may be, both good and bad. They reach out beyond the obvious questions to non-obvious answers and are willing to embrace unacceptable wisdom as a way of increasing the options available.

Rule 1: Play Your Own Game

The Ancient Greek poets described the monstrous Hydra with more heads than the vase-painters could paint. Worse, for attackers, for each head cut off, the Hydra grew back two more.

The U.S. military doctrine known as “shock and awe” faced an example of the Hydra problem. The idea was that dropping enough precision bombs would destroy the chain of command and demoralize Iraqi forces, who would then surrender.

Yet, resistance did not stop, it simply adapted to the impossibility of winning the war by U.S. rules. The traditional stand-and-fight army melted away and became something better adapted to the situation. There were 139 American deaths between the start of the invasion



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Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 500 Old Forge Lane, Suite 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2012 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®.

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and President Bush declaring “mission accomplished” and more than 4,335 after.

The adaptation of strategy to U.S. forces was very rapid. In contrast, adaptation of the U.S. strategy was dangerously slow.

This is the gap between the situation changing and an organization adapting to those changes. Changes must be recognized, the nature of change understood, and the changes made in time to engineer a winning scenario.

This disconnection, or gap, between what is happening and what prompts the organization to adapt, creates a reality distortion field that slows any attempt at action. And while you're failing to adapt, for reasons of tradition, ignorance or self-interest, your opponent's adaptation, whether in war, business or politics, will continue to succeed. ●

Rule 2: All Failure Is Failure to Adapt

If you find a system that is failing, then you have also found a system that is failing to adapt. You need to discover, first, what adaptations are needed for the system to succeed. Second, you should understand what has stopped the system from adapting successfully. And third, you should find out how to free the people in the system to make the necessary adaptations.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the government invited Ford Motor Company to consider a government bailout. Despite losses that year of \$14.6 billion, Ford insisted that it did not need the funds.

It stopped producing unprofitable and inefficient vehicles, brought production lines together, closed down 14 factories and more than 30,000 jobs.

Ford had recognized the necessity of deep adaptation before its Detroit competitors. In 2006, it had set up \$23.5 billion credit before the financial crash. Ford's CEO, Alan Mulally, explained that he had taken the original restructuring plan to more than 40 banks to get the financing. He asked for much more bank credit than anyone expected to use. By reacting as soon as possible to patterns of change, he was able to make changes on a timescale that suited Ford and invest in R&D to accelerate the development of new technologies. This is also pre-emptive adaptation.

In 2010, Ford earned its biggest profit in 10 years. Sales were up 16 percent primarily because of strong demand for more fuel-efficient vehicles.

Shift in perception, particularly at the top, allows an organization to move more rapidly and adapt situations more effectively into winning games. ●

Rule 3: Embrace Unacceptable Wisdom

Reversing the obvious adaptation opens up possibilities. Even just speaking the opposite of the prevailing wisdom out loud can create opportunities.

Levi Strauss & Co. reversed normal operations strategy when they decided to work with environmental groups to move into water reclamation, water efficiency and reuse even in factories owned by the suppliers of suppliers. In 2007, they started to look at a full life-cycle assessment of a single pair of 501 jeans. They figured out that more than 3,000 liters of water were used from the production of cotton through the manufacturing process to keeping the jeans clean.

The obvious adaptation would be to hide the facts from their customers or at least not go looking for inconvenient truths. The less obvious adaptation to customer and environmental concerns was to find out how much water was used and then advertise that information. The obvious adaptation would make the customer responsible, through a public information campaign, for the water used in the care of the jeans, and then stop. But the less obvious adaptation would be to accept responsibility for water wastage in the production process and then try to do something about it.

Carl Chiara, director of brand concepts and special projects, wasn't happy with the three to 10 times each pair of jeans was washed. The company proceeded to invent stonewashes without stones and find a way of rinsing with resin instead of water. As a result of all the changes made, the water used in the most efficient production processes went down by 96 percent.

Many innovative solutions come from creating a problem instead of waiting for one. Embracing unacceptable wisdom allows us to benefit from better ways of adapting our situations. Non-obvious suggestions can provoke more ideas that lead to improvements beyond expectations. Looking to the past, to the future and outside the day-to-day limits of your village, city, profession, corporation or country will increase adaptive options. ●

Rule 4: F*** with the Rules

Knowing the rules is valuable; knowing when to break them is critical to successful adaptability. If you don't know the rules, they can't help you with shortcuts to what is already known. Rules are made of experience and much of experience is useful. Yet rules may also include prejudice or mistaken beliefs. Behaviors learned

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in one set of circumstances may be ill-suited to new challenges.

Time-based adaptation is hugely important to the art of winning. You should make it a priority to consider your own efforts over time. How can you get people ready, able and willing to adapt in the very short term? How can an individual pull in colleagues and resources in flexible ways to deal with short- or medium-term threats? And what can you start, or stop, doing that will put you in a better position to win in the longer term?

Everyone needs the responsibility and power to change what is necessary to win according to the game you have agreed to play.

The front-line colleague needs to know when and how to bend the rules to help out a customer. The contract negotiator needs to know how to adapt the deal to what is on the table without exposing the organization to damaging agreements.

Just as important is how you adapt the wider organization in response to short-term adaptations that have succeeded or failed, and how you consider longer-term changes that can take advantage of what is learned in any pattern of threats. This is what the most adaptive organizations do better than the rest. They continually notice what is happening, they actively seek to adapt ahead of the curve and also ahead of trouble, and they figure out ways to treat events not as exceptions, but as triggers to develop new, enhanced capabilities.

If you are the weaker player, you should understand the rules and deliberately, creatively figure out how to benefit from them. ●

Rule 5: Stability Is a Dangerous Illusion

Historically, people have put up with remarkably awful circumstances. Or, more accurately, people have ended up stuck in remarkably unhappy situations. Despite efforts to improve the way things are, things stay the same, or even get worse.

The area of science that looks most closely at problems of this kind is game theory. It views all relationships and transactions between individuals and groups as a form of game. It's not a game that is played for fun, but a relationship that involves moves, or actions, by all players. And, it's a game that leads to outcomes and varying levels of victory and defeat.

Thomas Schelling, an American academic, won his Nobel prize for pointing out over many years, that there

can be common interest in cooperating even in games that start non-cooperatively.

Winning is not just about defeating the enemy by killing him or destroying his weapons. Winning is not just about being the last person standing. Winning can be a game of adaptation; a bargaining process through which all sides may shape a better future.

There are a number of difficulties with real-world games. There is seldom perfect information about the choices everyone will make, so each person must guess what may happen. They may be wrong about those choices, making inaccurate assumptions about actions and motives. Equally, the ability to make choices that actually deliver the best possible outcome may be constrained by prejudice, habit or hatred.

Even where a situation is miserable for all involved, one or all groups may not recognize the possibility of a better situation. Despite recognizing the opportunity for something better, one group may be unwilling to act because they do not trust or want to help other groups. The rest of the groups may be unable to understand what would be necessary to shape a better future or simply unable to break the destructive patterns of behavior.

Game theory can be as irrational, destructive or limited as any other way of reaching a decision. Starting with the assumption that peace is impossible, for example, introduces prejudice that disallows certain actions. An attempt is made to perpetuate the status quo out of fear of a future that is worse. Yet that fear prevents moves that could make the future better. ●

Rule 6: Stupid Survives Until Smart Succeeds

It's hard to say you're wrong. The challenge is to realize what's wrong before it's too late to put it right, and before the unintended consequences of a wrong decision become unwelcome and unmanageable.

In 1958, Pedro Bach-y-Rita suffered a severe stroke and collapsed. At age 65, he was a professor of Spanish at the City University of New York. After his stroke, he was hardly able to speak or move; his face was paralysed along with half of his body.

The prognosis was hopeless. His sons, Paul, a doctor, and George, still at medical school, were told that there was nothing that could be done for their father. The damage to his brain could not be repaired and would not heal.

George brought his father back home and decided that there was still progress to be made. Basing his approach on how babies learn, George decided to teach his father to crawl. He explained to his father how they would start from the beginning again.

Gradually Bach-y-Rita improved. He learned how to sit down and eat with his son. He moved from crawling to shuffling on his knees. He learned to stand again and walk unaided. After three months of practice, his speech began to return. In a few more months, he could type.

Within 12 months, the professor was back teaching full-time at City College. His brain had found a way of adapting. It had reorganized itself to change the function of healthy parts to replace the functionality of damaged parts. The constant work with George had given his brain the prompts to use existing tissue in new ways, demonstrating that parts of the brain that usually do one thing can be retrained to do something else entirely.

This story is also about the adaptability of science, of human knowledge. It is a demonstration of how science seeks to disprove its own theories in search of more and more useful theory. Over the long term, theory adapts to discovery, to evidence. But it can only do so if someone challenges existing limitations. For as long as any constraint is accepted, there can be no new knowledge that goes beyond it.

The challenge is to stay open to new paradigm shifts without becoming obsessed with the newest thing at the expense of progress. The new way of looking at situations isn't necessarily better than the old way, but to avoid new thinking is to reduce the effectiveness of adaptation.

Unhelpful, unworkable, illogical, even false ideas can survive simply because people are not ready to listen to a smarter alternative. A lesson that is useful to any adaptive effort is: Be open to the absurd and insignificant. ●

PART 2: UNDERSTAND NECESSARY ADAPTATION

Recognizing you need to adapt is a good start, but it's not enough. You may see that there is a problem, but that won't necessarily lead to a solution. Without understanding what adaptation is necessary, the wrong actions become more likely.

Moving directly from recognition to action is tempting. The second step is often skipped because of impatience to get on with doing something. Yet to jump straight into action can be a mistake.

Rule 7: Learning Fast Better Than Failing Fast

To be allowed to experiment and learn from those experiments is valuable. To learn to stop delivering success is potentially disastrous. Just as dangerous is learning to live with varying levels of failure without doing anything to improve the situation.

The point is not to learn *to* fail, but to learn what works *from* failure. Learning fast involves moving from knowing change is necessary to figuring out what to do differently and doing what is necessary. It is the complete movement from insight to action that is relevant to adaptability. You may not notice. You might not react. You may react too little, too late. You may under-react or even overreact.

Making the same mistakes for the same reasons is a failure to learn. Even making new mistakes for the same reasons is a failure to learn. The most effective adaptation happens when thought is given to the reasons for failure so that they can be avoided and new lessons can be learned. Why did it happen last time? What were the assumptions?

Adaptation is a game within a game within a game. There are rules to be changed or broken or ignored and there are turns to be taken. Each action contributes to other games in an infinite, occasionally vicious, regress. Winning positions may be lost by your bad move or by a move by any other player.

Under Steve Job's leadership, Apple Inc. began to learn fast in a number of ways. One way is when Apple does fail, it seeks to rapidly recognize and respond to the problem, including pulling the product from sale, dropping the price or making immediate improvements. If public reception to a product is negative, Apple notices and acts.

In 2008, when an online service called MobileMe received mainly critical reviews, the CEO summoned the team responsible to a meeting. He asked them what the product was "supposed to do." Someone answered and Jobs reportedly shot back, "Then why the f*** doesn't it do that?"

Jobs then sent an email to employees accepting the product was "not up to Apple's standards." Apple offered free extensions to subscribers and announced a replacement service called iCloud.

Hating to fail in public doesn't have to be about avoiding learning. Instead of playing safe, you can just play to win. You can refuse to waste valuable lessons by not trying again. The smartest, most adaptive organiza-

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tions identify something worth doing and keep on learning until they get it right. ●

Rule 8: Plan B Matters Most

Adaptability doesn't always kick in automatically; it must often be prompted. It's easy enough for adaptation to be screwed up if the need to adapt is not recognized, if the nature of the adaptation is not understood or if the action to adapt is not taken. At any of these points, effective adaptation is stopped.

The Easter Islanders became the poster children of self-inflicted environmental destruction. In their two giant canoes, the Easter Islanders landed on one of the most fragile environments in the Pacific Islands. They did not know that the domestic rats they brought with them would eat and destroy the roots of the palm trees. They cut down trees for wood and to clear land for crops. Increasingly elaborate rituals used wood to transport huge statues.

Scientists tend to agree that the deforestation happened over a period of 200 years. It is generally accepted that the islanders had a food economy based on hunter-gathering in the forest and fishing.

Shortage of food and the realization of the consequences of their failure to adapt, contributed to internal conflict. Weapons were made and violence grew between different groups. It isn't clear to what extent they fought before the deforestation, but the population dwindles from around 15,000 to fewer than 3,000 in about a century. Twenty-one species of trees and all species of land birds were extinct.

As a result of fighting over resources and the loss of population, the Easter Islanders went through a process of adaptation. They appear to have avoided final failure for their society by deliberately adapting. They turned to farming for food production and may have fertilized their soil because by the time the Dutch arrived in 1722, the soil was rich and under cultivation.

Path dependency is not deterministic. There is room to move outside the most obvious direction of a path. Even a path that is well worn can be evaded. Successful adaptation depends not so much on what has happened before, but on what can be imagined next. ●

Rule 9: Free Radicals

During the last week of August 2005, the president of Facebook, Sean Parker, was arrested for possession of cocaine. This arrest was used as an excuse to push him out of the company by investors concerned about his influence with founder Mark Zuckerberg. In Sept. 2011,

Parker stood alongside Zuckerberg to announce changes that could transform the music industry.

The radical had returned triumphant although, in truth, he had never really left. He was one of the key reasons for the relentless, restless adaptation that has characterized Facebook. Parker never settles for safe. He never accepts traditional obvious.

Adaptation benefits from a healthy mix of convergent and divergent approaches. Once a solution is found that pretty much works, it requires stability for it to work over and over again. Those who inherit knowledge are able to use it until those who create knowledge replace their legacy. The knowledge creators, the radicals and the rebels permit adaptation. ●

Rule 10: Think Better Together

Human adaptation can be genetic, technological or behavioral, but attempts to adapt culture or social behavior require collective support to be successful. This collective does not need to start with majority support; it often starts with an individual who finds a small core of supporters who then improve the arguments and methods necessary to move a majority to action.

Peter Hedström, one of the founders of analytical sociology, investigated the process of convincing a majority to alter collective behavior. Hedström created computer models that looked at what is necessary for a large social group, a corporation, or even a society, to change direction. His models suggest that the majority does not need to be convinced for them or an organization to take actions in a particular direction. There need only be a majority at the highest level to convince a majority in most groups.

Improving collective ability to think is helpful to effective adaptation. This often involves challenging the dominant thinking that has led to an undesirable situation.

It's not always easy to understand the exact kind of adaptation required to move to a winning position. Start by looking at how people think. Explore the way they reach decisions, examine where information comes from and how they share their opinions. If you investigate how people think together, you can find creative ways to improve how they think together. ●

Rule 11: Get a Kick-Ass Partner

The Nazi Zombie game published by Activision came about by accident. One developer, Jesse Snyder, and the lead level designer, Jason McCord, were working on Call of Duty: World at War.

Snyder came up with the idea of developing some kind of “Tower Defense” game in which players would seek to survive each wave of attacks and then use points to buy weapons.

Snyder rushed to one of the producers to pitch his fantastic idea. The producer wasn't impressed. Fortunately for Activision, Snyder continued to share it with other people on the team. It got to the point where it was fully functional but full of bugs, too slow and unbalanced. The two men at the core of this hobby development were exhausted and overscheduled on the main game release. A genius games designer, Mike Danny, was assigned to fix the flaws and turn it into the polished, awesome game it became on release.

It is a significant part of the \$1.8 billion online revenue the company generates.

Adaptation is helped by having a kick-ass partner. Having a close working relationship between people with diverse skills and talents increases adaptation effectiveness. ●

PART 3: ADAPT AS NECESSARY

After recognizing the need to adapt, and figuring out what kind of adaptation is needed, the next step is actually making the changes necessary.

Adaptability is intelligence. It can be the ability to adapt rapidly and gracefully to small changes in structure or process at the workplace. It can be the ability to gain insight from anywhere and respond by enhancing the state of the art in anything.

Rule 12: Never Grow Up

Organizations get old. They grow up. Most corporations lose the edge that led to their eventual success. The original entrepreneurs are replaced with professional managers who are given the responsibility to sort out the mess left behind by the amateurs who gave the company life.

The most successful adaptive companies are those that never grow up. Instead of buying into the notion that they must become old and boring like their competitors, they stay forever young. Some remain fun-loving, curiosity-driven rock stars long after their peer group has gained gray hairs. ●

Rule 13: Hierarchy Is Fossil Fuel

Traditional hierarchy has problems at multiple levels. Traditional we-all-know-our-place hierarchy never knows whose job it is, but always whose job it's not. It's the dominant form of organization despite its problems, costs, frictions and inefficiencies. As a structure, it resists learning and institutionalizes self-interested behavior.

Sony struggled with exactly this kind of adaptive challenge. In 2011, a relatively small number of U.S. executives among their 168,000 employees decided to file a lawsuit against one individual — George Hotz, a 21-year-old American from New Jersey. The company was unhappy that Hotz — voted one of the top overachievers in the world — had outwitted them. He had publicly published his method of getting past the security of the Sony games console: the PlayStation 3 (PS3).

The security had been set in place to stop people from using the games console in ways that Sony did not directly approve.

When Hotz was threatened, Anonymous, a leaderless movement that uses internet attacks to support its views concerning freedom on the web and elsewhere, also attacked Sony's PS3 network. The attacks by Anonymous demonstrated security vulnerabilities in Sony's network. They gave someone the opportunity to copy 77 million user names, which forced Sony to stop service to gamers for two months.

Before Sony managed to bring its network back online, it settled out-of-court with Hotz. And the boy-genius is working for Facebook, a company that — so far — understands the limitation of hierarchy and the enhanced adaptability of alternatives. ●

Rule 14: Keep the Ball

The University of Oregon's Oregon Ducks had a pitiful record in college football. In 1996, the founder of Nike, Phil Knight, offered his help. The coach asked for somewhere to practice indoors, so Knight paid for a space to be designed, built and maintained.

Originality attracts attention. Attention provokes action. Knight asked his designers, “How can we help attract better students and better student-athletes?” Their answer included making them look cool.

The uniform changes the game because teenagers considering where to play football are more likely to want to look cool while they're doing it. The style of the uniforms creates a buzz that attracts talent to the team.

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Talent helps the team to win. The Oregon Ducks became the No. 1 ranked team.

Nike's use of style changed the traditional balance of power in U.S. college football because it redirected the flow of talent. Power is produced by a system that works in a particular way. If you change the flow of any system, you can change the outcomes of that system.

Deep adaptation may appear to produce rapid success but only because it only gains wider acknowledgement after it proves to be successful. ●

Rule 15: Swerve and Swarm

Efforts to increase recognition of the need or possibility for adaptation are valuable. The value of protest can be in dragging eyes towards a particular situation. Some campaigns attract willpower to do something if only people knew what. The most valuable protests increase the brainpower applied to understanding the nature of the adaptation required. They encourage better thinking together: emergent thinking.

Back on July 13, 2011, one of the creative minds at Adbusters, a campaigning organization based in Canada, proposed a peaceful protest on Wall Street. Their creative minds include 90,000 people who take part in an online community of global brainstorming.

Thousands of people took part in New York — and then Detroit and Oakland — and Paris and London. They deliberately adapted from the techniques of swerving attacks to one of swarming to occupy a symbolically important place.

Only when people swarm can they overwhelm the limits of an existing system, for good or bad. Only when they swerve past an obvious objective can they move resources to overwhelming those existing limits. ●

Rule 16: Get Your Ambition On

Ambition is not equally distributed, nor is the kind of ambition we have equal in its nature. There are different kinds of ambition. Blind ambition is much criticized, while much endured. Narcissistic ambition can be unattractive to those who deal with the self-obsessed. Low ambitions may keep people in self-limiting situations while ambition to overcome constraints can be an active imagination that changes the world.

Think back to Bill Gates wanting a computer on every desk. In 1981, this was an ambitious statement. In 1981, this seemed excessive because the personal computer was only just emerging from the hobbyist's workbench and inventor's garage. Ambition is a way of see-

ing the future. The way we see different futures shapes our actions in the present. We can only change anything in time going forward; ambition is what gets us started.

Getting your ambition on requires a certain letting go of old limitations, forgetting of old constraints, going over the line and towards new worlds. ●

Rule 17: Always the Beginning

In adaptive terms, if you are still in the game, then it's always the beginning. There are many advantages of adapting first, or adapting best over a long period of time. Yet, not winning first, or often, or ever does not stop adapting more successfully in the future.

Weaknesses may turn out to be strengths as the situation changes. The features of a winning strategy may become exaggerated over time. Excessive resources may encourage recklessness, waste or complacency. Successful patterns of behavior can become locked in, so that people mindlessly or unimaginatively repeat actions. They forget how to adapt.

Most organizations do not renew themselves more than they think is necessary. Part of this is efficient; they seek to avoid wasting time and resources on change if what they have is already working.

Knowledge and skill are valuable yet a key feature of adaptation effectiveness is the willingness of people to relentlessly, even joyously, throw themselves back into the never-ending work of perfect ideas and better futures. ●

Final Words

Your deliberate efforts to provoke adaptation that leads to a winning position should focus on the smallest possible change to create the biggest possible long-term impact. Once a better system is established, the various parts of that system will naturally compete to keep it that way. There really has never been a more important skill than understanding the art of winning amid uncertainty. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Adaptability*, you'll also like:

1. ***What Matters Now* by Gary Hamel.** What are the make-or-break issues that will determine if your organization thrives or dives in the years ahead? The answer is in values, innovation, adaptability, passion and ideology.
2. ***The Reinventors* by Jason Jennings.** Business success is fleeting. There are only two real choices: stick with the status quo until things decline, or continuously change to stay vital. Jennings shares his "reinvention rules."
3. ***Change the Culture, Change the Game* by Roger Connors and Tom Smith.** Learn how to transform your entire organization through each level of the Results Pyramid: Experiences, Beliefs, Actions and Results.