



# Keys to Strengthening My Change Agility

Change agility at a personal level refers to an individual's ability to anticipate and adapt to change. To strengthen our agility during times of change we need to stay positive; stay connected; stay focussed and stay organised.

## #1 Stay Positive

Core to remaining effective in challenging times is the ability to make a choice on how you will react. As Viktor Frankl, a surviving Jewish psychiatrist of the Holocaust concentration camps so eloquently put it: *"Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way, to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement."*

To help you stay positive:

- **Reframe your thinking** to broaden your perspective on the challenge. Neuroscientists argue that we can make a conscious choice when faced with a stressful or threatening situation, but that we have limited time in which to make the choice. The brain takes about 0.3 seconds to register a desire to fight, fly or freeze. It then has the following 0.2 seconds of "veto power" to decide consciously to create a new perception or a new story about the situation. Asking yourself whether it is really a life or death situation is the first step. Changing the story away from a stress story into an opportunity story is called a "reappraisal". (Johnson, M.: Leadership in Turbulent Times). When faced with a challenging situation, identify specific ways in which this challenge could present opportunities for you to learn something new or to increase your knowledge, skills or personal growth. Ask yourself - what is the best that can happen in this situation? What is the worst that can happen? Expend your energy on what might work and what the challenge may lead to instead of the problems in the situation.
- **Manage your emotional state.** Key to strengthening your agility in times of change is to ensure that your emotional state or "internal climate" is conducive to success. Research into the emotional state that athletes, law enforcement officers, military personnel, surgeons and corporate executives experience when they are at peak performance shows that they use words such as "calm," "challenged," "engaged," "focussed," "optimistic," and "confident." Just as positive emotions ignite the energy that drives high performance, negative emotions—frustration, impatience, anger, fear, resentment, and sadness—drain energy. Over time, these feelings can literally become toxic, elevating heart rate and blood pressure, increasing muscle tension.
- **Choose your language and actions.** Cultivate **realistic optimism** by keeping in mind the following differences between the language and actions of optimists vs. pessimists

*"The capacity to cope with change demands inordinate things from us. We need the eyes of a chameleon, the legs of an octopus and the speed and adaptability of a dolphin."*

R.Ndala





# Keys to Strengthening My Change Agility

## Stay Positive (continued)

- **Take ownership.** Commit to coming through the change and moving forward in a productive way. Determine to make something positive happen for you and others as a result of the disruption.
- **Identify what you can control or influence:** Know what is in your control and what is not. Spend your time focussed on what you can control. Look for ways to use this control and influence in productive ways to move forward. Avoid using your control to blame, retreat or strike out.
- **Take an inventory of your strengths.** Consider how your core strengths can be leveraged to help you face the challenges inherent in the change.
- **Build confidence in your own ability to be resilient.** Recognise that you are a valuable and capable individual who can rebound from adversity and, in fact, can become stronger and more capable as a result of working through the challenge. Remind yourself of other challenges that you have faced successfully.
- **Look for creative solutions and alternative strategies.** Take a problem solving approach to consider how you can remove or reduce barriers to make the situation less challenging. Think beyond the two answer solution. Look for at least a third option that combines the strengths of the other alternatives. Try seeking out new and different ideas that create break-through thinking. The goal is to get beyond resistance to new possibilities. Ask yourself questions to consider other perspectives and perhaps shift your frame of mind.
- **Identify your “handbrakes” and derailers.** What are the aspirations, fears, personality traits that I have developed that might be holding me back from succeeding, e.g. the fear of failure; fear of losing control; perfectionism; all-or-nothing thinking; need for approval; desire to please everyone; desire to be independent / autonomous; competitive drive, etc.
- **Use failure as an opportunity to learn.** Develop a personal expectation that you will learn from your mistakes. Get in the habit of reviewing your mistakes with an “objective mind” to understand how you can learn and move forward. Practice “after action reviews” as part of your regular work routines. Take time to analyse what worked and why and what did not work and why.
- **Remain flexible, alert and open to new experiences.** Keep your finger on the pulse of what is happening inside and outside of the University and in the broader environment. Remain open and responsive to the next wave of change.
- **Use positive body language and facial expressions** to enhance your mood and effectiveness. Smile more - a number of studies have shown the powerful impact of body language and facial expressions on our mood, feelings and effectiveness. Charles Garfield, the author of “Peak Performance” mentions how a former coach discovered the power of facial expressions when working with the Russian Olympic weight-lifting team. He noticed that when team members lifted to exhaustion they would grimace and decided to conduct an experiment. He encouraged the Russian athletes to smile instead of grimace when they got to the point of exhaustion. Smiling enabled them to add 2-3 more repetitions to their performance. When you grimace you’re sending the following message to your brain: “I can’t do this anymore”. The brain responds to this message by releasing stress chemicals which make the task even more difficult. However, when you smile you send your brain the opposite message: “I’m OK; I can do this”. As a result, your performance improves.

Garfield, C.A., Bennett, H.Z.: *Peak Performance: Mental training techniques of the world's greatest athletes*. Los Angeles, Tarcher, 1984



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## #2 Stay Connected

- **Devote time to your most important relationships** and set clear boundaries between work time and relationship time. Remember that close relationships are perhaps the most powerful means for prompting positive emotions and effective recovery during times of stress.
- **Ask for input and feedback to help you think differently and learn from others.** Take time to learn about how others experience you and see your responses to stressful situations. Asking for feedback may feel risky but often yield helpful results. Listen carefully to their observations and determine what is working and what needs to change.
- **Demonstrate empathy and offer support to those who are finding the change challenging,** but do not be influenced by negative thinking. Stick to your goal and continue to look for ways to find opportunity and growth for yourself and your team.
- **Celebrate every small success and milestone** as you and others work through the change challenge. Give yourself the chance to reflect on your growth; the positive feedback you receive; the new skills and lessons learnt and your ability to continue to achieve results.

## #3 Stay Focussed

Agile and resilient people are able to focus on the right things and put aside those tasks that do not lead them to their goals. They are able to organise themselves for action. They work from intention, not reaction. They are purposeful and focussed.

- **Envision success.** Write your future history: Look two to three years out. Identify accomplishments you are proud of. “Dream backwards” to identify the steps you took to get there.
- **Stay future focussed.** Look beyond the immediate situation. Consider the possibilities after the challenge has passed. Think about your longer-term goal and how to stay focussed on that goal.
- **Take time to reflect on your own values and priorities.** Be clear on your purpose, values and what provides the most meaning in your life. Be aware of what makes you happy; what excites you and what you are passionate about doing. Aligning or balancing work with meaning and purpose helps to provide perspective during times of stress. Keep a clear focus on what is most important. This focus helps to minimise the amount of disruption we experience and helps us to rebound quickly and continue to move forward after set-backs.
- **Use realistic assessment to plan for success.** When you assess the challenges associated with the change, consider your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and risks. Gather the information you need from a variety of sources to gain a balanced view of you in the situation. Use the information to help you formulate a plan to address the risks and threats and to leverage the opportunities. Target SMART actions (Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely) to improve. Create your personal action plan and stick to it. Keep track of your progress
- **Stick to your top priorities.** Those who have a clear focus are better able to see beyond adversity and move forward to accomplish their goals. When faced with a challenge, it is important to continue to make steady progress toward long-term goals. Even if the challenge requires making adjustments, focussed effort on your top goals creates forward movement and reduces the chance of getting stuck in resistance.

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## #4 Stay Organised

- **Take time each week and each day to organise** how you will achieve your most important personal and work-related goals. Commitment to results is important in times of change and having a structured approach can help create order in the midst of disruption and chaos.
- **Tame the clutter.** Make sure your space allows you to think clearly and focus on your highest priorities. Manage your environment (desk, paper, filing, electronic tools) so that you can easily access what you need without additional stress.
- **Maintain a good time management system** and set your top priorities daily. Stick to the top priorities and ensure that these lead toward your goals. Eliminate or minimise secondary or unnecessary tasks. Learn to chunk your work into smaller tasks to make daily and weekly progress.
- **Conduct an activity check-up.** Assess your daily activities and make sure they are not diverting you from your most meaningful work goals. If you find diversions, review your actions and determine what you can do to reduce or avoid them.
- **Step back, look at the big picture** or strategic context and refocus on your end goals and priorities.

Actions that I want to take to strengthen my change agility to stay positive; stay connected; stay

