

## **LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER (NATURE): "ADAPT"**

BY

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A crisis is a bad time to experiment... unless of course you have no other choice.

And, if

For years I've been advising clients that the optimal method of transformation is evolution. BCE (Before Covid Era), the logical value of persistent dripping, relatively small change was measured in organizational—let alone personal—readiness, acceptance, willingness, and skill at adapting. Adaptation proves fitness for a changing environment. Especially as it relates to digital transformation, once an analogue organization leaps into the new digital environment, these are abilities are essential assets.

It's a good story with the added benefit of being true.

The value of adaptation is not a consultant's patter; not management science or social psychology. It is not something 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup>-century. The case for adaptation is hundreds of millions of years old. We and most everything around us are a testament to it. Charles Darwin brought it to our attention in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

My story avoided one enormous plot gap because I have been focused on preparing organizations to successfully change without the trigger and trauma of forced

transformation. Some had already gone through that pain. Others would have to but could perhaps prepare for it. Either way this line of coaching wasn't about actively making the change, it was about live-fire rehearsal.

My story was sort of about inoculating the organization from the sickness of big pathological change by having it force itself through repeat ongoing smaller change. In a sense, the parallel might be that the approach I was touting was like a vaccine for the major transformation. Again, the added benefit was that even without a major transformation, adaptation raise the odds of fitness as the environment shifted.

This is a marvelous segue to the current predicament. In the CE (Covid Era), we have all undergone a sudden, plate-shifting change to our personal and organizational lives. At the organizational level, some business models may have to be wholly re-evaluated. But in any case, all businesses have to adapt to the changed social environment that Mother Nature has bestowed upon us. Social distancing is a reality going forward, as are other protections and the second order effects of accommodating those impacts. Digital and digitization may or may not be of primary import.

There is no doubt nobody prepared for what could happen if an airborne viral plague affected every aspect of our social environment. That said, there should also be no doubt that the organizations that will thrive best in the CE are of two sorts. The first are those that, by luck really, were ideally positioned to take advantage of the changes: Amazon and Zoom come to mind. The second are those that are most ready, accepting, willing, and skilled at adapting to the new reality. Retail and restaurant curbside pick-up are one example; work-from-home (digitally able) is another.

But the months and years ahead will test individual and organizational imagination. Executives that were once skeptical of worker productivity if they always worked at home are now sold. Employees tend to be as or more productive. And, so many of the

headaches and costs of office space can be made to disappear. Like having to work out schedules to get hundreds or thousands to the 17<sup>th</sup> floor in elevators two at a time. That's an adaptation. (It's questionable whether it is the right or final adaptation.) But wait. On the other side, employees that liked the idea of WFH a day or two a week are not nearly as thrilled about the dining room table being a full-time office. Social aspects of work go away. And, who's going to pay for the bandwidth and paper/ink I'm using for my job?

I don't know the answers. I'm sure I don't even know all the questions. That's the nature of an environmental shift. What was once stable is no longer. We have in some ways crossed a threshold where the punctuated equilibrium we enjoyed is no longer. Until the movement stops—maybe with a vaccine or herd immunity—there is no point in holding on to what worked BCE nor, for that matter, what works right at this moment. It may or it may not last.

Which brings me back to my original narrative and guidance to clients over the past several years. It has never been more important to learn and be adaptable to whatever comes next. In many martial arts the analogy is to water. The shape of water shifts to become whatever constrains it for the time being. So must the successful organization. And, while we're at it, the successful careerist.

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