

# Adapting to Change or Vice Versa

I am unable to do only one thing at a time. This behavior could be a product of something fancy like multiphasic thinking, it could be the adult form of attention deficit, or it could be some random act of nature that creates mutants with chaotic mental lives. Whatever it is, I tend to do several things at once giving me multiple opportunities to do simultaneous screw-ups.

Now that sounds like a bad thing.

Sometimes, however, this characteristic is a good thing. Recently, for example, while working in my home office, I decided that I needed more stimulation. I looked up and saw a video of Peter Block's presentation called *Stewardship: A Governance Strategy for the Learning Organization*. I popped it in and hit "Play." (On my machine this button should be labeled "Work" so that it is not confused with that form of human activity in which normal humans engage.)

Lesson 1: It is very hard to do other work and pay attention to Peter. It's not like having hockey, football, or CNN on while reading and writing email. About every thirty seconds Peter says something that grabs the viewer's attention.

One such attention-grabber was: "I keep adapting my life so that I don't have to change it."

Why did that statement make such an impression on me?

For one thing, I tend to be a somewhat ambiguous with language. I am a plus-or-minus guy with words. I talk in pencil with a very large eraser so that I can go back and re-write sentences after others react to what they hear. As a result, I often use words interchangeably that to others mean different things. Take, for example, "change" and "adaptation." Throw in "transformation" if you like working in threes.

The difficulty with these words has to do with how they are the same and how they are different. For example, *all adaptation involves some change and some kinds of change may result in adaptation*. But, although all adaptation involves or results in change, change may be adaptive or non-adaptive.

Peter's statement suggests that *change* and *adaptation* represent different phenomena (even if Word's thesaurus suggests that the two can be synonyms). I interpret "adaptation" as a process of adjusting oneself (or an organization) in response to conditions, opportunities, or forces that are require or force something different than what is. In this sense, adaptation is an adjustment. When making an adjustment, you do not have to overhaul the basic framework or the core ("paradigm" for those who like to read in consultant-speak). Adaptation tends to be a result of small adjustments or changes.

What Peter calls "change" would be something that comes about as a result of a shift in the fundamental model that includes the underlying assumptions, philosophy, or values. Something substantive is different than in mere adaptation. Change includes a shift in core beliefs and in behavior that is more radical or significant than in mere adaptation.

On a personal level, about three years ago I said that I wanted to *change my life*. For decades, family, friends, and colleagues regularly pointed out that I had and have no "balance" in my life. That means I tend to work a lot . . . perhaps even more than a lot.

Like the action of a river on a rock, the force of friends eventually began to wear me down. Or something did. So I set about trying to change. The first step was to reduce some of the aspects of my life that tend to gather work. One of these was the consulting business (as opposed to the consulting part of the business). As a result of the plan for change, Harshman & Associates is much smaller today than it was five years ago. In addition, we sold the office building in which we were housed (a very nice place to do all this work, but an additional load to manage) and now occupy a smaller, rented space.

So, did I use all this newfound “time” to create balance? Not hardly.

I immediately filled the vacant time with other work and worklike activities. I started a book over a year ago. This summer a terrific guy named Max and I did some major remodeling in Colorado (not by choice, by the way). I decided to take on a project we now refer to as Lake Harshman (rivaling the falls in the Wisconsin Dells by the time we’re finished). In October, Lisa Summerlot and I put together and launched the Women’s Program, something we had been talking and thinking about for over a year.

After about two years of “changing,” I’m probably just another work-wolf in sheep’s clothing—bringing to mind something about pulling the proverbial wool over one’s own eyes. I still have very little balance. I may be only moving the proverbial deck chairs around on my Titanic life.

So what?

Well, if nothing else I have come to understand better the challenges our clients face in trying to change organizations. My life may be a teaching metaphor for their struggles.

If, as a result of this working in circles, I can better understand why I am the way I am, then I might be better able to understand why, in spite of our best efforts, people and organizations can’t or won’t change.

What am I planning to do about change and my life? Who knows? Probably the lesson in my life that parallels my learning from consulting is that I simply don’t know when to quit—when to walk away and to say either “I’m done, this is as much as I can do,” or that “it can’t be done, let it go.” Resolution of these things gives me something else to work on while doing email, answering the phone, watching Peter Block videos, and trying to book travel on the Internet.

I really must get back to work.

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