



CHANGE MASTER ✦ Why Adapting is the Most Crucial Skill You'll Ever Learn ✦ MJ Ryan

Think the current business climate is temporary, and that things will eventually get back to normal?

Well, you ain't seen nothing yet! The death of whole industries, global pandemics, the actions by one individual that affect the whole (think one terrorist with a small nuke in New York), the effects of global warming—these are just some of the issues experts say we'll be facing, and these are only guesses. Speaking at the 2006 TED conference, creativity expert Sir Kenneth Robinson stated that “We have no idea of what's going to happen in the future. No one has a clue about what the world will be like in even five years.” And that's as specific and accurate a statement as we can make.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, says that we have previously lived in a country he calls Mediocristan, where cause and effect were closely connected because life was simpler and the range of possible events was small. Now, the global community lives in a place he has named Extremistan, in which we are both more interdependent, and at the mercy of “the singular, the accidental, the unseen and the unpredicted.” The only thing any of us can know for certain is that life will continue to change at a rapid pace. Organizational consultant Peter Vail calls this “permanent whitewater,” referring to a time of ongoing uncertainty and turbulence.

No one is exempt. In my work as a thinking partner, I spend a lot of time speaking to people in all walks of life, from the CEO of a joint venture in Saudi Arabia to a stay-at-home mom who now needs to enter the workforce. Whether they're searching for a job, looking for funding for a startup, trying to stay relevant at age 60 in a large corporation, dealing with lost savings, coping with a big new job that has 100 direct reports, struggling to get donations for a nonprofit, or unemployed and afraid of losing their house, people of all ages and walks of life are scrambling to deal with the vast changes happening today—in every part of the world.

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For most of us, this uncertainty isn't fun. Do you know of the "life stress" list that rates changes such as moving, death of a spouse, getting married, etc.? The folks who created that list in the sixties estimate that life is 44% more stressful now than it was 50 years ago, and they came up with that estimate—I admit I have no idea how—*before* the 2008 global meltdown. I'm not sure we even want to know the new number!

So what are we to do? Keep on doing what's worked in the past and hope for the best? Scare ourselves into immobility with doom-and-gloom scenarios? Become Pollyannas with our heads in the sand hoping for the best?

As a person who spends her days helping people cope with life, I've become convinced that the best thing—perhaps the only thing—we can do to prepare ourselves for life in the future is to learn how to change. To learn to adapt to whatever circumstances come our way, because we can't predict what they will be.

In other words, we need to become expert kayakers. Since we're in permanent whitewater, we can't see exactly where the river will take us or where the submerged rocks are, yet when we're tossed out of the boat, we want to make sure to swim, not sink. Experienced rafters are prepared to get bounced out and recover swiftly. They expect the whitewater. They've learned to relate to it—and so should we.

Why do I place such emphasis here? Because the ability to adapt is, as far as I can tell, the key indicator of success in these turbulent times. It's the capacity to be flexible and resourceful in the face of ever-changing conditions. To respond in a resilient and productive manner when change is required. Another name for it is agility. In a recent McKinsey survey, 89% of the more than 1500 executives surveyed worldwide ranked agility as very or extremely important to their business success. And 91% said it has become more important over the past five years.

According to *Webster's*, agile means "the ability to move with an easy grace; having a quick, resourceful and adaptable character." *Webster's* has it a bit wrong, I'd say. I don't think it has anything to do with character. It's just that some of us already know how to adapt easily. The rest of us need to learn—quickly. Otherwise we'll end up spinning our wheels, complaining, or contracting in fear when faced with change.

Aikido masters say that to be successful in life, three kinds of mastery are required: mastery with self, which means understanding our feelings and thoughts and how to regulate and direct them; mastery with others, which means being able to create shared understanding and shared action, and; mastery with change, which means having the capacity to adapt easily without losing our center—our values, talents, and sense of purpose. I'm talking here about the third.

Do you know how to change easily? I think it's a very rare capacity, because most of us don't understand the science of it or how to work with the way our brains are structured, to make it as painless as possible. Who among us took a class on "How to Cope with Change," or had parents

who said, “Now I’m going to teach you how to not just survive in life, but thrive no matter what happens?” In the past, changes happened more slowly, and our need to adapt was much, much less. Here’s just one example of the acceleration of change: Starting at 1 AD, it took 1500 years for the amount of information in the world to double. It’s now doubling at the rate of once every two years. No wonder we’re scrambling to keep up!

What’s fascinating about this absence of training in AdaptAbility is that companies all know that their employees’ capacity to change is one of the key factors in business success. According to the Strategic Management Research Center, for instance, the failure rate of mergers and acquisitions is as much as 60-70%. Why? Not because it’s not a good idea to bring two organizations together to create efficiencies and synergies, but because the people in them fail to adapt to the changed circumstances. I was just speaking yesterday to a woman in a huge oil company who had been part of an effort to create a standardized process for gathering information across departments. She’d left to work on another project and discovered that—two years and millions of dollars later—the effort had failed. Why? Because employees kept using the old system they knew, rather than learn the new one.

Examples of the lack of ability to change don’t have to be that expensive or dramatic, though. They happen every single day right where you live and work. I would say at least half of the folks I coach on a weekly basis are looking for help adapting to new positions or circumstances where they must drive results in a different way than they have before. The behaviors that have gotten them where they are today are simply not working. And these are all folks who have jobs—those without work need even more support in learning new skills and attitudes.

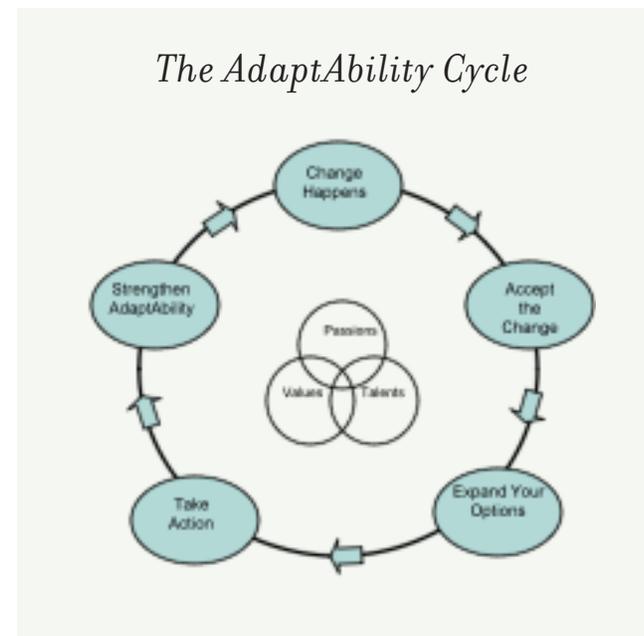
Resisting change wears down our bodies, taxes our minds and deflates our spirits. We keep doing the things that have always worked before with depressingly diminishing results. We expend precious energy looking around for someone to blame—ourselves, another person, or the world. We worry obsessively. We get stuck in the past, lost in bitterness or anger. Or we fall into denial—*everything’s fine, I don’t have to do anything different*. Or magical thinking—*something or someone will come*

along to rescue me from having to change. We don't want to leave the cozy comfort of the known and familiar for the scary wilderness of that which we've never experienced. And so we rail against it and stay stuck.

When the environment changes and we must therefore too, it's appropriate to complain—to take, in the words of my friend Dr. Pamela Peeke, the BMW (Bitch, Moan and Whine) out for a little spin. But soon it's time to put it back in the driveway and get down to business. And that means developing AdaptAbility.

Experts in mind-body medicine have shown that people who are master adapters live longer and healthier lives than others. How come? Because they counterbalance the stress hormones that wear down our bodies with positive attitudes and behaviors that release feel-good hormones which restore balance to our cells, organs, and tissue. That's why many health experts define health itself as AdaptAbility.

It begins with understanding the process:



We complete this process naturally when a change is small. Say you're planning to go out to dinner tonight with a friend and she calls at the last minute and cancels. You think to yourself, well that's out (accept), what else could I do this evening (expand)? Then you go do it (take action). And you make those choices in the context of your passions, values, and talents.

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It's when changes are big, painful, confusing, and/or disruptive of your hopes and dreams that it's hard to see there is a process at work. Being aware of the process can help us avoid getting stuck along the way, suffering needlessly, and using up precious time. For we're not just being asked to adapt these days, but to do it speedily. What differentiates the Change Masters I know from other folks is how quickly they can go through the process—ok, that's over, now what? They expect to bounce back and are able to see the opportunities that change presents. Fortunately, once you become conscious of how the process of adaptation works, you too can face future changes with greater confidence and swiftness—rather than getting hung up on the rocks of denial, anger, or helplessness.

Unfortunately, without our awareness, our brains are structured to work against doing this well and painlessly. The brain is an amazing organ, with incredible social, emotional, conceptual, and linguistic abilities. It can learn from experiences and grow new cells and pathways until you draw your last breath. Neuroscientists are just beginning to understand a fraction of what it can do and how. But not all of what it does is helpful when it comes to responding well to change. Two things in particular stand out.

First, the brain has a tremendous tendency to habituate, meaning to do the same thing over and over. Which is great when you don't want to have to think about how to brush your teeth. But not so good when you need to think creatively about how to cope with a situation you've never been in before. That's why we so often tend to keep doing what we've already done—whether we get good results or not—and are so slow to give some behavior up.

To add to the problem, part of its habituation is to look for patterns, to match current experience with the past—*oh, this is just like that thing that happened before*. The average brain generalizes from an example of one, which any good scientist would tell you is not a big enough data pool from which to be drawing useful conclusions.

There's an adaptive reason for this habituation. The brain is always on and consumes a disproportionate part of the body's energy. It's only 3% of the body's weight, yet uses around 20% of its oxygen and glucose. It takes less work to be on automatic pilot, so it makes sense from an efficiency standpoint.

When the environment is stable, this autopilot serves us well. But during change, we have to fight against our brain's tendency to look at the situation and see the same old thing. When it's actually encountering something new, the patterns just aren't there to fall back on. We don't know what the stock market is going to do, for instance, despite all the past ups and downs, because we're in a situation that has never occurred before.

The other thing to understand about the brain is that we share many of its structures with all mammals (and even reptiles) and therefore it's hardwired to act in ways that were useful when we were being chased by animals in the wilderness, but are not well suited to the complex challenges we face today. This part of our brains, called the amygdala, is constantly scanning for danger but gives you inaccurate information, sounding the alarm unnecessarily. It is looking for situations that might be painful or dangerous, and if it perceives the change in that light, it sends you into the fight or flight response, which is its reaction to fear. That has us railing against change (fighting), getting stuck

in denial or avoidance (flee) or becoming paralyzed (freeze). These may have been good choices back when we were running from tigers, but none are useful responses to today's challenges. Fear shrinks our world and limits our brain's ability to think creatively about our choices. It also causes us to isolate from others who could potentially help, and to over generalize from this one situation and feel that the sky is falling.

Developing the ability to adapt keeps us out of these detrimental habits of the brain and in touch with all our mind's resources.

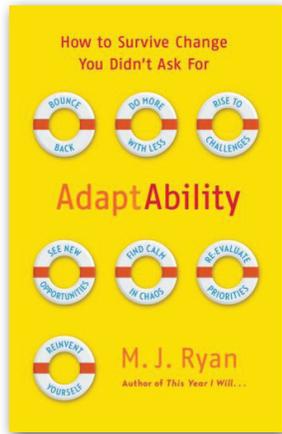
TOP TEN CHANGE SINKHOLES

1. Getting stuck in denial.
2. Becoming paralyzed by fear and/or shame.
3. Spending a lot of time and energy on blame and/or regret.
4. Believing there is nothing you can do.
5. Focusing on the problem, rather than the solution.
6. Using only solutions that have worked in the past to solve new problems.
7. "Yes, but"ing all options.
8. Not getting in touch with what gives you meaning and purpose.
9. Going it alone.
10. Resisting or refusing to learn new things because it takes extra effort.

In a very real way, what is being asked of us now is no more or less than to become consciously aligned with what life has always required on this planet. In 1956, the father of stress research Hans Selye, wrote in his seminal work, *The Stress of Life*, that “Life is largely a process of adaptation to the circumstances in which we exist. A perennial give and take has been going on between living matter and its inanimate surroundings, between one living being and another, ever since the dawn of life in the prehistoric oceans. The secret of health and happiness lies in successful adjustment to the ever-changing conditions on this globe; the penalties for failure in this great process of adaptation are disease and unhappiness.”

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In order to not only merely survive, but to thrive during the greatest period of transformation humans have ever experienced, we are all being called on to stretch mentally, emotionally, and spiritually into the future. It's my hope that this manifesto offers you both comfort and practical support as you take on this challenge and become a Master of Change. 📖



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Get more details or buy a copy of MJ Ryan's [AdaptAbility](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of Professional Thinking Partners who is recognized as a leading expert in change, M.J. Ryan specializes in coaching high performance executives, entrepreneurs, individuals, and leadership teams around the world to maximize performance and fulfillment. Her clients include Microsoft, Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, Hewitt Associates, and Frito Lay. Her work is based on a combination of positive psychology, strengths-based coaching, the wisdom traditions, and cutting edge brain research. Her new book, titled *AdaptAbility: How to Survive Change You Didn't Ask For*, was recently released published by Random House's Broadway Books. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and daughter.

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