

The Role of Rigidity and Flexibility in Adapting to Change

A gale rages. Grasses bend and allow the energy to pass by. A forest of tall trees copes by backing and supporting each other. The lone pine, finally worn by the buffeting, breaks. That is one analogy of the effects of rigidity and flexibility.

Have you noticed you judge some people as rigid and others as flexible? Which one is better? Where are you, if you assessed yourself as rigid or flexible? Why are you like this?

- How does flexibility and rigidity affect your capacity to change?
- How does flexibility and rigidity affect your capacity to change?

While these questions are interesting, I have realised they are too narrow and do not reflect the complex nature of what may constitute rigidity or flexibility. In fact, the question I find myself with is 'What is the right balance of rigidity and flexibility?' A person practising yoga, for instance, if too rigid cannot get into poses, needing greater flexibility, but if too flexible, without the requisite rigidity and they collapse.

Here are some contexts where we might assess people on their degree of rigidity and flexibility:

Principles and Values

People like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Adolf Hitler could be assessed as rigid to their principles and values. Each changed the world in their own way and refused to desist from their courses regardless of pressure. Their own lives were at stake, but they were firm (rigid) to the end.

You can probably think of people who change their principles and values to suit the situation. A victim of such flexibility is trust, any sense that the person has integrity. In 'The Game of Thrones' terminology they are 'Sell-swords', and their allegiance goes to the highest bidder, whatever the currency is for them, and past commitments only matter if it suits them.

Author

[Stephen Harrison](#) BSc (Hons), PMP, FPMINZ

Abstract

Explores different contexts within our experience of other people (and ourselves) for perceptions of rigidity and flexibility, and how these traits contribute to our adaptability to change.

Keywords

Act, assert, attachments, attend / presence, authenticate, change, emotional self, expectations, fabricate, fight, flight, freeze, needs, personal power, spontaneity

First Published

12 April 2016

Copyright

© [Harrison International Ltd](#), 2016. This document may be transmitted & reproduced in its entirety.

Conserved or Spontaneous

In the area of change, conserve relates to our reliance on and application of established beliefs, practices, attitudes and behaviours. Someone bound to the conserve might say "But this is how we have always done it." For example, the Corporate conserve may include formal processes, rewarded behaviours, and cultural folklore of



How does flexibility and rigidity affect your capacity to change?

'how we do things.' The conserve makes us rigid to what has been, how we do it...

Spontaneity is the capacity to act or behave in a new and adequate manner (i.e. is not a perfect response but is suitable and productive), whether it is new or pre-existing situation. Spontaneity builds on what is emerging now, rather than holding on to how it has been, flexibility in action.

Fear or Power

Fear causes contraction. What was flowing and easy becomes stifled, awkward and stiff. It robs us of the capacity to easily respond to what is present, and places us in a reactive state. Instinctual reactions of fight, flight, and higher brain reactions of freeze and fabricate, erode our capacity to take productive action. We might still do so, but it is not as easy as when free of the rigid and binding nature of fear. Many behaviours stem from fear. Examples include controlling behaviour (of self and others), micromanagement, denial, avoidance and biases/prejudices.

Power is our ability to do or affect something strongly. For us to exercise power we must expand, opposite to the effect of fear. Many confuse power with being able to MAKE yourself or others do your bidding. That is aggression, applying force, part of the fight reaction. Opposite to fear, power enables us to assert, attend (stay present), act and authenticate. I speak to these in my book '[Appreciate the Fog](#)'. It enables us to work with what is present now, take positive action, and develop and strengthen relationships. Fear makes us contract, rigid and reactive to what might be, while remaining in our power enables us to expand, be flexible and responsive to what is.

Attachment and Expectation

Attachments are those things we hold on to from the past. Expectations are our hopes, visions, dreams and aspirations of the future. In and of themselves they do not make us flexible or rigid. However, our inability to let them go when circumstances change does create the effect of rigidity as the individual pauses to process and adjust. At about the age of three one of my children threw a massive tantrum because they wanted something different from what was. Clinging to the pole of the clothesline in the middle of the backyard, screaming and crying, there was total refusal to let go of what they wanted. Not rigid in their body at all, they were stuck in place. Once the tantrum was over, their emotions fully expressed, the pole was released. Acceptance, then contentment and movement returned. Minutes later they had forgotten the tantrum. What we hold on to can make us rigid, especially when it is important to let go and move on.

I am very aware of how lightly I may hold on to things I consider safety-making, whether they are beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, or any number of other things, I often hold on beyond their use-by date and rob myself of my power.

Emotion

Many people, men particularly, are emotionally rigid, unable to connect with and express their feelings. Some cannot even discern what they feel. Childhood messaging such as "Boys don't cry" served to teach a generation what previous generations had learned, that quashing the natural flow of emotion is important to control life and actions. Shame, embarrassment and fear are commonly associated with open expression of feeling, especially of grief and fear. Anger, in a man's world, seems acceptable, though its link with violence is frowned on. Emotional rigidity has led to emotional illiteracy.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who are easily overwhelmed by their emotions, caught in a torrent of feeling, with little capacity to rein them in or manage them. That might be considered flexibility in the emotional world.

Healthy emotional expression lies between these extremes, with the capacity to recognise feelings, comprehend their significance, and express the needs that underpin the emotions. As we loosen emotional rigidity and gain access to and expression of our feelings, we gain a fuller, more authentic capacity to be ourselves. We are able to process what is happening to and within us more effectively, and adjust more easily to change. We are attuned to what is happening to us and the meaning we are making.

Conclusion

When it comes to adapting to change, your ability to adjust to the new situation depends on your beliefs,

For more information related to themes in this article, refer to: Harrison, S. G. (2012). [Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

Coaching can support you create the best outcome when working with areas covered by this article.

Follow these links for coaching information:

- [Coaching Overview](#)
- [Individual \(Leadership/Executive\) Coaching](#)
- [Team Coaching](#)
- [Group Coaching](#)
- [Why Sponsor Coaching?](#)
- [Offer: Free Individual Coaching Session](#)
- [Stephen's Profile](#)

values, expectations, attachments, degree of fear, and your authenticity with yourself and others about what matters to you. These are part of what defines your personal power.

What gets in your way? What robs you of your capacity to be powerful? What robs you of fullness in relationships? What impedes you from responding

to what is new and unexpected in a manner that serves you? How have over-rigid aspects of your being undermined your freedom to act? When have you been so flexible in a situation you lose track of what really matters to you? This is not about right or wrong. It is about the continuum of possible ways of being, and whether you are achieving what you want in a way that best serves you and those about you.