

The Adaptability Advantage

Five Skills for Leaders in Sustaining
Momentum During Disruption and Change



A WHITE PAPER FOR
EXECUTIVE DECISION MAKERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disruption is now permanent, not occasional, and it's putting enormous pressure on people and organisations.

Resilience helps leaders and teams endure disruption - whereas adaptability enables them to respond, adjust and move forward.

This paper outlines five skills that underpin the adaptability advantage – meaning an ability to sustain performance, connection and momentum during disruption and change.

Adaptability has become a critical leadership capability that delivers strategic advantages for organisations.

The question for leaders is no longer whether disruption will occur - it's whether they can adapt effectively when it does.





Disruption is the New Normal

For many leaders, disruption once appeared as a periodic challenge - something to navigate before returning to normal.

That assumption no longer holds.

Digital transformation, generative AI, workforce shifts, supply chain instability, geopolitical uncertainty, economic pressures, hybrid work arrangements and rising stakeholder expectations are among many of the forces reshaping how organisations operate and compete.

Change initiatives now overlap and intersect rather than occur sequentially. Teams are often managing competing priorities while attempting to maintain performance standards and engagement levels.

This environment creates tension between the desire for consistency, accountability and results while being responsive, flexible and capable of adjusting.

The result is that many leaders and teams are operating under extreme pressure and must push forward into unfamiliar territory while maintaining operational integrity. When this pressure becomes too much, they may drift into unproductive and reactive behaviours.

The challenge is not simply managing more change. It is building the capability to perform effectively while change continues.



Why Resilience Alone Is No Longer Enough

Resilience remains valuable. It's the ability to recover from setbacks, manage pressure and remain steady when challenged.

However, coping is not the same as adapting.

Many leaders unintentionally place resilience expectations on their people without examining whether the surrounding systems and culture support the adaptation needed to sustain performance.

When resilience is the dominant response to disruption, leaders and organisations can fall into several traps, such as:

- **People work harder to sustain existing approaches rather than adapting them**
- **Pressure becomes normalised and teams absorb increasing workloads until fatigue and disengagement emerge**
- **People become focused on survival rather than learning through experimentation, reflection and adjustment.**

Adaptability offers a different path.

It's not merely the capacity to withstand pressure, it's the capability to interpret changing conditions, make informed adjustments and maintain progress.

This distinction is increasingly linked to strategic advantage.



The Adaptability Advantage

High-performing teams rarely succeed because they avoid uncertainty - they succeed because they embrace it and know how to respond.

They identify opportunities instead of focusing only on fortifying themselves against adversity and risk.

Adaptability combines mindset, culture and leadership practice.

Importantly, adaptability is not a personality trait possessed by a few - it can be developed.

Not only most leaders create cultures of contribution, an adaptability advantage comes from:

- **Building clarity around direction and priorities.**
- **Aligning people and teams with goals.**
- **Making robust and defensible decisions at speed.**
- **Devising learning and feedback loops; and**
- **Sustaining energy and fulfilment levels.**

This serves as a checklist because, together, they enable the adaptability that is needed to sustain performance under the pressure of disruption and change.



Five Skills for Building an Adaptability Advantage

While every organisation faces unique pressures, adaptable teams tend to be strong in these critical areas:

1. Building clarity around direction and priorities

Directional uncertainty allows misguided efforts and poor productivity to flourish. Increased activity does not equal increased effectiveness.

Adaptable teams seek and maintain clarity around what matters most because it becomes both an energising and stabilising force during change.

People will accept shifting conditions more readily when their overall direction remains understandable and purposeful.

Leaders play an important role by helping teams distinguish between what is urgent and what is important.

Key questions include:

1	What matters most right now?
2	What can wait?
3	Are our goals relevant and clear?
4	How do we frame the overall purpose of our work?

Clarity creates confidence, and confidence supports the momentum needed for adaptability.



2. Aligning people and teams with goals

Adaptability requires more than directional clarity - everyone must be pulling in the same direction.

Leaders may have a clear sense of direction, yet teams can become distracted by competing priorities, operational pressures and shifting demands. People work hard, but not always on the things that matter most.

Alignment is not a one-time communication exercise, it is an ongoing process of connecting people, teams and decisions to shared goals and outcomes.

Leaders should ask:

1	Do our people clearly understand our priorities and goals?
2	Can individuals see how their work contributes to broader outcomes?
3	Are teams aligned with one another, or operating in silos?
4	Are we measuring activity or meaningful progress?

Alignment provides stability by preventing unintentional drifting away from important overall goals when conditions continue to change.

3. Making robust and defensible decisions at speed

Many organisations struggle with decision bottlenecks during change and the natural response is to de-centralise decision-making processes.

This increased agility can come at the cost of decision-making quality because the level of critical thinking skills and experience is less developed.

A poor decision can escalate and force senior leaders to step in and spend valuable time cleaning up.

Adaptable teams invest in improving individual and team-based decision-making skills across their workforce.



Leaders should ask:

1	How are decisions currently made?
2	When have they lacked depth?
3	When are team-based decisions required?
4	Are our people well-equipped with decision-making skills?

Improving decision-making quality and speed is a must-have for adaptable leaders, teams and organisations.

4. Devising learning and feedback loops

Adaptability depends on dynamic learning.

In rapidly changing environments, teams cannot rely solely on experience or fixed assumptions - they must adjust as new information emerges.

This makes learning and feedback loops essential.

These can manifest through project reviews, team reflections, stakeholder feedback analysis or structured learning conversations.

When leaders seek feedback openly and show a willingness to adjust, they create permission for others to do the same, strengthening trust and adaptability.

Leaders should ask:

1	How effectively are we learning from experience?
2	Are feedback conversations timely and constructive?
3	What are we noticing - and what adjustments should we make?
4	Are we rewarding learning and improvement, or just headline results?



Adaptability is not built through certainty alone - it grows through curiosity, reflection and the discipline of continuous learning for ongoing adjustments.

5. Sustaining energy and fulfilment levels

Performance may be achievable in short bursts, but less sustainable over longer timeframes. Navigating continuous change is exhausting, so it requires attention to energy.

People are more capable of navigating uncertainty when they experience meaning in their work and a sense of progress.

Purpose, satisfaction and fulfilment drive the level of commitment and discretionary effort that sets adaptable teams apart from those that struggle.

Leaders should reflect:

1	Are we clearly articulating the impacts of our work?
2	Are people experiencing progress and purpose?
3	What else can we do to help out team sustain their energy?

A strong sense of collective achievement based on positive impacts is vital in maintaining the energy required for adaptability.





The Leadership Imperative

Adaptability is now a defining leadership challenge.

The organisations that thrive during disruption are not necessarily the largest, fastest or most resourced - they are the ones most capable of learning and responding effectively.

Leaders influence the environment people work within: they shape priorities, behaviours, expectations and culture.

While uncertainty cannot be eliminated, leaders can determine how people experience and respond to it.

This is where adaptability moves beyond theory and becomes practical leadership work rather than another initiative or slogan.

It's a disciplined commitment to creating conditions where teams continue to move forward together in high-performance mode.

Disruption and change are unlikely to slow. If anything, the pace and complexity of change will continue to accelerate.

The question for leaders is whether they and their teams are equipped to adapt within it? Resilience is about coping whereas adaptability enables people and organisations to respond, adjust and move forward during disruption and change.

The five focus areas outlined here provide a practical starting point - and the final question for leaders becomes:

What area needs your focus and what action is now required?

About Phil

Phil Preston is a keynote speaker and strategic facilitator who helps leaders, teams and organisations sustain performance and momentum during disruption and change.

Drawing on extensive commercial leadership experience and years working with organisations navigating complex challenges, Phil helps audiences cut through noise, build clarity and strengthen their capacity to adapt.

His keynote The Adaptability Advantage challenges conventional thinking about resilience and equips leaders with practical approaches to strengthen culture, alignment, decision-making and sustain performance levels.

To continue the conversation or explore keynote and workshop opportunities, connect with Phil via:

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