

Agility and adaptability in the age of disruption

By **Debbie Craig**

These words are thrown around in talks, books, articles and Ted Talks. They sound very necessary and sensible and the right thing to be in our complex and ever-changing world. The reality and practice of it however is a bit different. We are human beings hard-wired for comfort and certainty, and therefore naturally averse to change that disrupts our carefully crafted equilibrium. Our embedded neural pathways and programs resist with a surprising power to keep things the way they are geared toward reward (comfort) and avoiding threat (discomfort). When we are comfortable and on automatic pilot, we minimise our internal resources required to think, act and survive. This is considered “good” by our brains. We therefore will actively avoid any perceived threat (often assumed if we are facing the uncertain or unknown), and we move into our survival mode of fight, flight or freeze. This shift in focus directs our internal resources accordingly (away from our pre-frontal cortex and into our heart and limbs for quick response).

In our client environments, we see this in many forms. Most businesses we consult to or interact with are undergoing massive change – new owners, business models, structures, leaders, culture, technology - at the same time as the ground beneath their feet is shifting with new competitors and evolving market conditions are impacting sales. Whilst most leaders realise the business impact and risk of change, some are surprised at the extent of change and “loss” felt at a very personal and individual level which impacts energy, attitudes, motivation, engagement and health. When we open the door just a peak, we hear a lot of frustration, anger, sadness, resentment, etc which overpowers the potential excitement, hope and possibility which change can bring and that the leaders are trying to drive. This can result in a natural kick-back to those in charge who are seen as responsible for the change and therefore by association for our feelings of loss, confusion and fear.

If we are truly open to and practicing agility and adaptability, we should be able to quickly and objectively analyse the impact of actual and potential change, assess the risk and options available and then either accept or influence or leave. This is a different approach to staying in victim mode and giving all your power and energy to others over our state of being.

We need to build this muscle and practice “switching” from our reactive brain (limbic system) to our proactive brain (pre-frontal cortex) to build a repertoire of possible responses that are more empowering and expand vs contract our options and opportunities.

Whilst it is the leaders’ role and responsibility to engage people proactively and listen to them and support them during change, we need to meet them halfway.

In my own business, I have noticed how myself and my team can talk a good talk about being “agile” but still struggle emotionally with truly letting go previous expectations, goals and plans. It is also challenging to engage constructively and optimistically when we are faced with new and different business models and approaches that our business requires to survive and thrive in these leaner, faster and more demanding times. It is even more difficult, when our identity, reputation or perceived status may be tied up in our work role or business dreams.

A few daily practices I try to keep to during unsettling change are the following;

Mindfulness check

Spend time every day quietening the mind and become mindful which enables a place of creation rather than reaction

Reality Check

Check in yourself daily which goals or plans are still relevant and make your soul sing versus those that have become a habit through social conditioning or an old dream that you just never changed

Boundaries Check

Keep an eye on your life principles and non-negotiables and keep them fresh and updated. Boundaries are important for our sanity and achieving our dreams. Some of them however, can be too rigid for the times, and need some more flex in them.

Letting go Check

Be willing to work through the question: “What is the worst that can happen If I let go this ideal, dream, plan, person?” Think about the answer from your own and other’s perspective and check in what you are truly responsible for. Sometimes, letting go can be a huge relief as we lighten up the load on our shoulders that was not ours to begin with.

Authenticity Check

Ask the question: “Am I being honest with myself and others in how I am navigating changes in me, the team or the business?”. Differentiate between the need to hold back important messages or feelings out of the need to Protect (paternalistic parent) or Deflect (Irresponsible child) vs an openness to explore options with compassion (authentic adult).

Trust Check

If we keep taking focussed, authentic and heart-felt ACTION ... and hold onto our DREAMS for our future selves ... and how that could FEEL ... there are many surprises or alternatives that we may never have considered as options. We can meet people, explore ideas, connect with opportunities and discover new levels of relating that can positively stretch us to find new meaning in our lives.

Wishing you all the best as you navigate your journey of growth and change to find possibilities that you never imagined!!.

Debbie