

“Adaptation isn’t about intelligence — it’s about willingness.”

CHAPTER 30

Adapt vs. Ossify

Adapt

Steps into the unknown.
Experiments with new approaches.
Accepts discomfort.
Assumes learning is required..

Ossify

Clings to proven methods.
Avoids uncertainty.
Protects comfort.
Preserves the appearance of competence.

Adapt is adjusting based on current circumstances and available resources to move forward, even when the path is unclear. It requires accepting that the approach may be temporary, imperfect, and subject to change. In a fast-moving world, nothing is permanent — only current.

Ossify is becoming rigid by relying on familiar methods simply because they are known and proven, even when they no longer fit the situation. What once created success becomes a barrier to navigating what comes next.

In leadership, you are constantly choosing between adapting and ossifying — not as a company, but as a person.

Adaptation requires stepping outside your comfort zone. It means trying approaches that are unproven, incomplete, or uncomfortable. It often means moving forward without certainty that you are right.

Ossification feels safe because it doesn't require you to change.

Most leaders don't resist change because they are stubborn. They resist because change exposes them to uncertainty — and uncertainty feels risky, especially when others are watching.

Charles Darwin's observation about evolution applies just as clearly to leaders as it does to species: survival does not go to the strongest or the smartest, but to those most responsive to change.

Responding to change often requires admitting you don't have all the answers — which can feel uncomfortable when your role implies that you should.

**Adaptation requires admitting you don't have the answer.
Ossification lets you pretend you still do.**

Most leaders don't fear change — they fear looking inexperienced.

While organizations can ossify, the process usually begins with individuals. Companies do not become rigid on their own — people inside them do.

At the individual level, ossification rarely announces itself. It shows up quietly:

- Preferring what you know over what might work better
- Dismissing new ideas too quickly
- Defending past decisions automatically
- Treating feedback as criticism instead of information

Over time, these behaviors harden into identity. “This is how I lead” quietly becomes “This is the only way I know how to lead.”

Individual ossification often hides behind success. When something works, repeating it feels logical. Questioning it can feel unnecessary or even risky.

But effectiveness is not permanent. Context shifts. Skills age.

Competence built yesterday can become resistance today.

What once created advantage can quietly become limitation.

Adaptation requires a mindset of **“currently effective,” not “permanently correct.”**

Ossification is not just resistance to change — it is attraction to what feels safe.

It is easier.

It is familiar.

It worked before.

It does not require learning something new.

It does not risk looking inexperienced.

It also protects something most leaders care about more than they admit: identity.

We often protect our reputation more carefully than we protect our results.

If a new approach is better, then the old approach may not be. And if you championed the old approach, accepting change can feel uncomfortably close to admitting you were wrong.

So the mind reaches for reasonable-sounding explanations:

“This is how we’ve always done it.”

“This worked at my previous company.”

“Our situation is different.”

“People just need to execute better.”

Each statement makes sense on its own. Together, they quietly block progress.

Familiar methods reduce uncertainty. They also reduce growth.

Change requires effort. Staying the same only requires an explanation.

In many cases, ossification isn’t about believing change is wrong. It’s about avoiding the discomfort of acknowledging that change might be necessary.

Or put differently: adapting threatens competence before it improves effectiveness.

Experience teaches you what worked — not whether it still does.

Stepping into unfamiliar territory requires several things leaders are not always encouraged to display:

Humility — acknowledging that previous experience may not be enough

Transparency — admitting what you don't yet know

Courage — acting anyway

Learning — adjusting in real time

In uncharted conditions, confidence alone is insufficient. You cannot rely on a map that doesn't exist.

Familiar methods feel like control, even when they aren't.

Trying something new means risking being seen learning.

Leaders are rarely rewarded for looking uncertain — yet uncertainty is often the price of navigating new terrain.

I once asked a senior leader what was hardest about changing his approach. He didn't say strategy, resources, or resistance from his team. He paused and said, "If I change now, it will look like I should have changed earlier."

That single sentence explains why adaptation can feel so risky. It isn't just about learning something new. It's about rewriting the story of past decisions — sometimes publicly.

Comfort protects your ego long after it stops protecting your results.

I encountered this dynamic in my own work.

Early in my career, I delivered leadership programs using the standard model: multi-day retreats, thick binders, role-play exercises, personality assessments, and plenty of theory. The format was familiar, credible, and comfortable. Clients expected it. I knew how to do it well.

And it worked — at least in the short term.

But over time I noticed something unsettling. Despite strong engagement during the programs, most leaders returned to old behaviors within weeks. The experience had been positive, but not transformative.

Adapting meant doing something uncomfortable: abandoning a proven model without certainty that the alternative would succeed.

No workbooks.

No retreat.

No role play.

No theory.

No behavioral assessments.

No motivation without mechanism.

What leaders said they needed instead was something far simpler:

Simple.

Scalable.

Sustainable.

Adapt principles? No. Adapt practices? Yes.

The shift toward **agreements, accountability, and alignment — A³** — wasn't risky because it was complex. It was risky because it was different. There was no established template to follow.

At times, I had to explain the approach while still refining it. That requires transparency many leaders avoid. Saying, "Here's what we believe will work," feels very different from saying, "Here's what has always worked."

But the results proved durable. Leaders changed behavior, not just

perspective. Execution improved over time, not just immediately after a session.

Had I stayed with the original model, I would have remained comfortable — and less effective.

Very professional.

Very polished.

Quietly outdated.

Adaptation is not about abandoning principles. It is about applying them in ways that fit current conditions.

Ossification often looks like discipline. In reality, it is frequently avoidance of discomfort.

Change without direction is reckless. But refusing to change when conditions demand it is equally dangerous.

Adaptation asks, “What does this situation require, even if it’s uncomfortable?”

Ossification asks, “What feels safe and familiar?”

Adaptation tests new approaches.

Ossification repeats old ones.

Adaptation accepts uncertainty.

Ossification seeks control.

Adaptation risks visible mistakes.

Ossification avoids them — until circumstances force them.

Comfort is a poor indicator that you’re right — only that you’re used to it.

Leadership is revealed in the choices you make when comfort and effectiveness diverge.

Before responding to uncertainty, ask yourself one simple question:

Am I choosing what is effective, or what is comfortable?

If growth requires discomfort, adaptation is the path forward.

If comfort becomes the priority, ossification begins.

Over time, leaders who adapt remain capable of navigating new conditions.

Uncertainty reveals leadership more than stability ever will.

Those who ossify may continue performing familiar actions even as the environment changes around them.

Here are 5 common missteps leaders can avoid by choosing adaptation over ossification

- 1. Waiting for certainty before acting:** In fast-changing conditions, certainty often arrives after the window for effective action has closed.
- 2. Defaulting to what worked before:** Past success can become a shortcut for decision-making — even when the context has changed completely.
- 3. Protecting reputation instead of results:** Concern about appearing wrong or inexperienced can delay necessary adjustments.
- 4. Confusing activity with progress:** Repeating familiar actions feels productive, even when those actions no longer move outcomes forward.
- 5. Treating discomfort as a signal to stop:** Discomfort often indicates learning and adaptation, not failure.

Add to your
leadership playbook+

1. Ask what the situation requires now: Not what worked before, not what feels comfortable — what will be effective given current conditions and resources.

2. Normalize learning in public: Demonstrate that adjusting course is not weakness but responsiveness.

3. Separate identity from approach: Changing methods does not invalidate past success; it reflects present awareness.

“Survival belongs not to the strongest or the smartest, but to those most responsive to change.”



How comfortable are you acting without complete certainty?

*Very uncomfortable • Uncomfortable • Unsure • Comfortable •
Very comfortable*



How willing are you to try approaches that have not been proven before?

*Not willing • Slightly willing • Moderately willing • Very willing •
Extremely willing*



To what extent do you openly acknowledge uncertainty when leading others?

Not at all • Slightly • Moderately • Very much • Consistently



How often do you choose growth over comfort when the situation demands it?

Never • Almost never • Sometimes • Very often • Always

NOTES

KEY POINTS

NOTES

TO DO LIST
