



The Adaptive Leader:

Cultivating a Mindset to Handle
a More Complex World

STRATEGY

WORK

PEOPLE

The Adaptive Leader

Organizations are great at developing strategic visions, but project leaders are usually the heroes charged with executing tactical plans and making things happen. Traditionally, the best leaders have been goal-focused, concrete thinkers with a clear understanding of how to most efficiently guide their organizations from A to Z, measure the results, and repeat. It is a model that has resulted in continuous progress through virtually every industry, from healthcare to heavy manufacturing, software development to construction. But the complexity of today's business environment has increased to such a degree that the best leaders now need a new approach to executing strategy, one that effectively adapts to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

Organizations must simultaneously balance the need to achieve strategic goals, while responding to changes in their markets to drive business success. In spite of these changes, execution of strategic goals remains in the hands of skilled project leaders. But just as companies must evolve, so too must project-based managers driving the engine. While the technical skills that have historically propelled projects – skilled observation, analysis, measurement – remain critical, they are no longer enough. To thrive within their organizations today, project leaders must not only possess a strong technical foundation, but also be principally guided by an adaptive mindset.

To thrive within their organizations today, project leaders must not only possess a strong technical foundation, but also be principally guided by an adaptive mindset.

So, what does it mean to have an adaptive mindset?

The Adaptive Mindset

Project leaders with an adaptive mindset can move not only themselves, but also entire teams through projects effectively. They tune into the pulse of their organizations and understand what factors are driving change, demanding attention, and re-casting measures of success. They understand that it's not just about managing projects well, but about choosing the right projects to manage.

All of these high-value relational skills work together in a way that allows project managers to continue doing what they do best: executing strategy on a tactical level. The difference, however, is that adaptive leaders aren't encumbered by process. They rely on relationships, leverage needed resources, and drive change from where they sit. When the business picture morphs due to a market change, adaptive leaders can quickly assess risks and opportunities, and adjust course as needed using the skills in their toolboxes.

As the role of project leader evolves to be more attuned with an organization and outside change agents, it's useful to consider the following framework and the domains that influence and define how work gets done: strategy, work, and people.

The Strategic Execution Leadership Framework, or SELF Model, outlines the dynamics of these domains from the perspective of the leader, putting the individual project leader, or SELF, at the center.

Project leaders integrate the three key domains in their work: the organization's strategy, the work system, and the people. The SELF Model contrasts the former and current business contexts in which the discipline of project-based work operates, as described in the smallest ring around SELF. Strategy has typically been static, work has been clearly defined, and people have worked largely in a directed way.

In today's environment, however, project leaders need to manage closer to the edge—edge of the SELF Model. Strategy is now dynamic and unpredictable, work is both emergent and interdependent, and people are collaborative and interconnected. As project leaders become more adaptive, their focuses become broader and more organizationally comprehensive, and their awareness grows, as does their ability to adapt to change.

Ultimately, project leaders with an adaptive mindset are better positioned to manage uncertainty and volatility because they build into their plans and teams the flexibility that allows them to shift as needed. In order to accomplish its goals, an organization must first focus on equipping individuals with the tools and skills necessary to succeed.

The adaptive leader's skill set includes deep capabilities in areas such as:

- Driving and influencing change
- Leading without authority
- Building effective teams
- Managing critical relationships

Driving and Influencing Change

Driving successful change in an organization requires clear and timely communication, defined roles and responsibilities, robust conflict management skills, and clarity around why the change is sought.



The SELF Model

©2017 Duke Corporate Education
and TwentyEighty Strategy Execution

While change is constant and often inevitable, it's important to ensure those leading and driving change within an organization are prepared to collaborate and understand the concerns, challenges, and opportunities resulting from that change.

To successfully drive and influence change, project leaders must:

- Communicate clearly and frequently with all team members so that fear and uncertainty don't undermine the leader's efforts
- Understand the risks and rewards of major change
- Adopt a nomadic and Agile mindset—pushing for forward progress without insisting that every detail be mapped out
- Avoid rushing to an endpoint, enjoying the exciting, if sometimes uncertain, journey to tangible results

Leading Without Authority

Leading when you're in charge is expected. Leading your peers—or those who outrank you—can be uncomfortable and challenging. Given the pivotal role project leaders play in their organizations, knowing how to successfully manage up, down, and laterally is vital to success in today's business world.

Given the pivotal role project leaders play in their organizations, knowing how to successfully manage up, down, and laterally is vital to success in today's business world.

Leading without authority requires trust. Allowing others to feel involved in a process can make all of the difference when trying to influence their thinking and behaviors. As those individuals become a part of a greater initiative, they develop a sense of ownership they wouldn't otherwise have if they had no say in what is happening.

Leading from the middle often spawns resistance. Here are some practical ways the adaptive-minded leader can counter a negative response:

- Boost awareness through communication up, down, and across the organization
- Return to the purpose of the change and the overall vision that requires the project manager to have a clear understanding of both
- Engage participants in the entire process, building ownership and a shared drive
- Move around roadblocks by acknowledging the past and moving into the future
- Build a change-friendly corporate culture by asking whether your organization is set up to reward or punish change

Building Effective Teams

The adaptive leader knows how to build, coach, and lead diverse and distributed teams that are high performing, resilient, and responsive to complex work and volatile contexts.

The most effective project teams often reflect the core capabilities of their leaders: they have a strong foundation of technical skills, are flexible and open to change, and practice relational skills. Just as leaders must be able to counter the VUCA world, so too must their teams.

The “right” team will vary according to the context and content of the initiative. Ultimately, cross functional teams comprised of people from a variety of disciplines and organizational areas will likely realize greater success.¹

Varied teams represent a range of technical competencies, cultures, experiences, and personalities, which strengthens the team. Strategically diverse teams complement each other; filling skills gaps while increasing the likelihood of innovative thinking and idea generation. But they present a management challenge as well; project leads must clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all team members to avoid conflict.

Foundational ideas for building an effective team include:

- Ensure the team feels invested in the vision and strategy throughout the project
- Be a team player by ensuring all team members feel like equals
- Focus on removing barriers to progress
- Interpret strategy for the team, engaging them in understanding where the organization is going and how it affects them
- Check in with the team frequently
- Celebrate accomplishments and capture key learnings as the project progresses

Managing Critical Relationships

While all of these skill areas interconnect, managing critical relationships, in particular, draws upon and influences the others to a significant degree.

The people project managers work with, for, next to, and even above need to understand where the organization is going, how the leader is going to advance that, how they will be impacted, and how they can contribute productively.

Adaptive leaders will be steeped in the organization’s culture and values, and fully understand the company’s direction and the impact of complexity. They will recognize that communication is essential to maintain critical relationships.

To manage critical relationships, adaptive leaders must:

- Communicate the project/program strategy to the project/program team, customer, and other stakeholders on a continual basis
- Manage stakeholder expectations to maintain portfolio/project/program alignment
- Anticipate the impact of initiatives and prepare the organization for the changes
- Incorporate the interests of superiors and teammates while defending the initiative as needed



Conclusion

The responsibility of adaptive leaders is clear. They must take a more holistic approach to their project work, thinking about where they fit into the organization, and help colleagues across the enterprise make sense out of the VUCA world's impact on strategy and execution.

Winning at the execution game not only requires flexibility and agility, but also it demands specific capabilities and an intentional approach. Starting with critical projects, leaders who possess the skills paired with the right approach to drive project-based work will be counted among an organization's smartest investment.

Innovative Partnership Delivers Solution to its Customers

TwentyEighty Strategy Execution and Duke Corporate Education have partnered to create and deliver the *Adaptive Strategic Execution Program*. Strategy Execution's proven expertise and business techniques combined with Duke Corporate Education's cutting-edge university research and learning methodologies infuse the program with a unique combination of modern theory, practical frameworks and the hands-on practice that leaders need. Research shows that great innovation rarely comes from single eureka ideas, but rather from combining existing ideas in novel ways. This partnership does just that. Together, we've combined the capabilities of two successful companies in a new way that provides innovative solutions for our clients.

The program is available for group delivery on site at company locations as well as on-campus enrollment at Duke University or online for individuals. The program enables leaders to take their individual and team performances to the next level, increasing the odds of project success. Learn more about the *Adaptive Strategic Execution Program* and get started today.

References

¹The Project Management Institute's Talent Triangle™ reinforces the need for a balance of skills in leadership, strategic management as well as traditional technical expertise.