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NAVIGATING THE NEW REALITY

“Everything changes and nothing stands still.” So said Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who often emphasised the reality of change. While we sometimes talk about the ‘new normal’, the only thing that is normal is change. Some changes are, of course, more noticeable and impactful than others, and change occurs differently over time. COVID-19 has made that obvious.

In many ways, operational work is much like it was before. But the contexts of work – the political and the societal, the social and personal, the legal and regulatory, the technological and the informational – are very different. They are characterised by more volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity, with major changes to jobs and industries. This will continue at greater pace.

Whole fields of study, such as ‘resilience engineering’ (related to systems theory and complexity science), have emerged over the decades to address this, but at a practical level these disciplines often aim at designers and decision makers at senior levels. Meanwhile, ‘resilience training’ at an individual level became a focus of some organisations. In some sectors, the term ‘resilience’ has become tarnished because of the implication that staff should simply adapt, without higher-level intervention to improve system resilience. My own view is that the need to adapt and adjust is a reality at all levels – societies, governments, organisations, communities, groups, and individuals. Ultimately, especially as individuals and groups, *we have to*. We can’t count on the cavalry arriving, nor

that it will act in the right way for us if it does arrive.

So how might we navigate the new reality? The following five practices are important in adjusting and adapting, and are supported by research on resilience and growth.

1. Work on Acceptance

The importance of acceptance has become increasingly important in psychology, but there’s nothing new about it. It has been documented since the birth of Buddhism and has long been known to be central to personal change, such as recovery from addiction. This requires that we perceive our situation as accurately as possible, understand what’s going on (including the implications), then distinguish which aspects of our situation are within our power to change, and which aspects are not. Acceptance is not passive resignation, but an active process of noticing, acknowledging, contemplating, feeling, and appreciating. Acceptance is a basis for preparing, then continually adjusting or responding (or not) in a way that will improve the overall situation. In other words, acceptance is a basis for learning from experience.

2. Practise Openness to Experience

‘Openness to experience’ is one of the ‘big five’ personality traits known in psychology. People who score highly on this trait tend to be curious, creative and imaginative, able to see

things differently and from different perspectives. They are also more attentive to feelings, enjoy variety, and are able to tolerate ambiguity. Not surprisingly, then, this trait helps to adapt and thrive in the face of change. This being a personality trait, you may think it is fixed, but it is not. Personality *can* be changed, under three conditions: 1. willingness and intention to change behaviour; 2. a belief that one can make the behavioural adjustments required to support a change in personality; and 3) persistence with behavioural changes until they become habitual (Jarrett, 2021). Note the word *behaviour*. Research suggests that openness to experience can be enhanced by cultural activities, reading different books, learning an instrument, taking up a new hobby, and – perhaps surprisingly – developing a more active lifestyle and paying more attention to the natural and built environment.

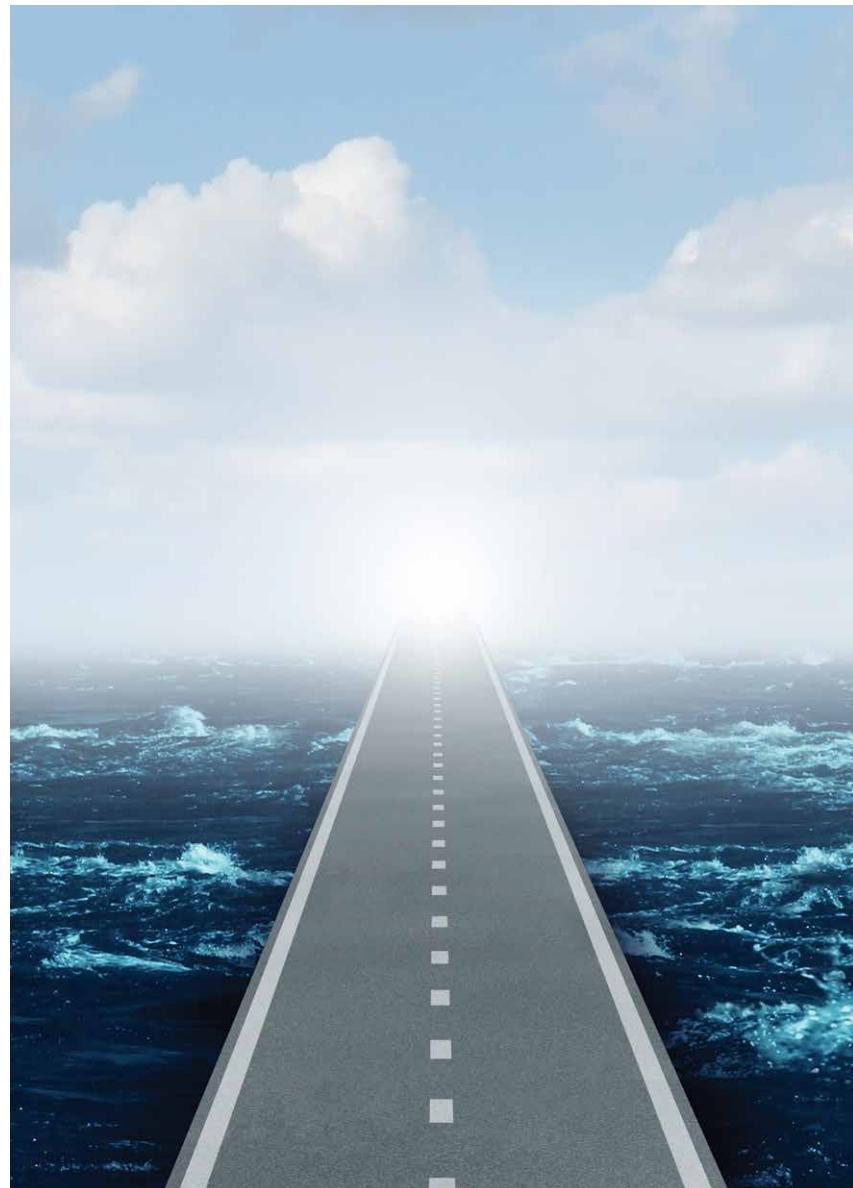
3. Diversify Your Learning

A retired police inspector friend once described to me some typical responses of his officers in personal development reviews. To paraphrase, those who were highly developed in terms of investigation skills wanted to develop further in this same area. Those who were highly developed in a physical capacity wanted to develop further in this area. In professions requiring very technical and procedural knowledge and skills, it is tempting to specialise as much as possible, getting better at what we are already very good at. This brings a feeling of competency and satisfaction...so long as these

competencies are in demand. The problem arises when the context of work changes and you need a different and more diverse skill set. Some people, however, continually develop new skills and areas of knowledge. As Richard Champion de Crespigny, Captain of QF32, remarked in *HindSight* 29, “*We must commit to a lifetime of learning. You must never stop learning.*” I find that this is most noticeable in healthcare, where doctors, nurses, paramedics, and other healthcare staff take time to learn about fields that support their practice, and the system as a whole. It can also be seen in aviation professionals. In a rapidly changing world, this means learning and developing knowledge and skills that can be transferred to different situations and environments, even beyond one’s own industry.

4. Nurture Relationships and Be of Service to Others

The importance of the team is obvious to operational staff. But thinking more broadly about your circle of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, who among them can you count on to help you to adjust to new situations, and to grow? They are probably good listeners, encourage you, offer alternative perspectives on a situation, give practical support, or provide a comforting presence. And who would count you in their circle? It’s easy to put off the behaviours that nurture relationships: the phone calls, the small notes of thanks and appreciation, the acts of service. It turns out that thoughtfully showing and expressing care and gratitude, and going out of our way to help and support others, strengthens the relationship and eases the burdens on both sides. More generally, research shows that resilience is social, not just personal. Navigating the new reality requires a crew. But who? The answer is not ‘like-minded’ individuals, but people with diverse interests, knowledge, skills, and perspectives, connected by trust, mutual support, and a sense of community. Collectively, this increases our capacity to meet novel challenges, and is critical in the face of adversity and trauma.



5. Take Care of Your Whole Self

Each of us is more than our job. This seems obvious until we see how much we invest in our work to the expense of wellbeing and self-care. ‘Self-care’ is a term more common among healthcare professionals than those in other safety-critical industries such as aviation. There are different kinds, some more obvious than others: physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, social, environmental, financial, and spiritual. The trouble is, as my police inspector friend noted, we often ‘specialise’, focusing on one or two while closing one eye to the others. Some time spent reflecting on our self-care blindspots,

and searching for ways to meet these needs, will bring far greater benefits.

To go back to Heraclitus on the theme of change, he is also credited with saying that “*No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.*” The river may seem the same from one day to the next, but the water level, tides and flows, and the relative positions of rocks and branches, will be different. The person may seem the same, but we change over the short and long term, intentionally or otherwise. How we navigate the river certainly needs to change. Navigating the new reality will be easier, and even more fulfilling, if we attend to the practices above. 

Reference

Jarrett, C. (2021). *Be who you want: Unlocking the science of behaviour change.* Little, Brown Book Group.