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FlexAbility: A Key Skill for Leadership and Living

What Got You Here Won't Get You There, the title of the book by Marshall Goldsmith, coach and consultant, couldn't be more spot-on. My clients, like Goldsmith's, are a bright group of professionals focused on learning new skills and behaviors. Many of them are interested in changing the behaviors that prevent them from achieving success as they define it. And one of the most crucial behaviors we need today is the ability to be flexible.

From a leadership perspective, several of my clients have risen rapidly through the ranks, based on a one-dimensional set of operating behaviors. But these days, a one-dimensional approach often limits future success.

Take John, a take-charge individual with excellent project-management skills who brings engagements in under budget. He does things "**his**" way. "Why waste time on asking people for new and different ideas? We've always done it this way," he says. In other words, flexibility is not his strength. John's style has worked well in previous, similar engagements, when he was driving the ship. But John is now on a much larger, more complex engagement where collaboration and teamwork are critical. Because the existing team already has a leader, John has been asked to play a different, yet very critical role.

Unfortunately, he's adapted poorly to this new, high-profile opportunity. Because it's not about "**his** way." He is inflexible, intolerant and unwilling to be open to team ideas, and is clearly out of sync with the political environment. All of which is holding him back from succeeding.

Are you a speedboat or a barge?

In my former firm, we asked ourselves this question frequently to check whether we were remaining flexible and open to change at both the individual and firm level. Were we responsive to changes in our environment, in our profession and in the industries we served, like a speed boat? Were we nimble and responsive enough to adapt to the twists and turns we faced daily? Or were we stuck in our comfortable routines,



functioning as a barge, a lumbering ship that is not a driver but instead is pushed or towed?

Flexibility means leadership

Excellent leadership requires an ability to adjust your emotions, thoughts and behaviors to changing conditions. And flexible people can move off their positions, and comfortably change their minds when new evidence suggests that they are mistaken. In other words, flexibility is a critical leadership skill in our current environment.

The skill of flexibility enables leaders to:

- Solve new and different problems they've not faced before
- Shift strategies and priorities when new situations arise
- Empower others, and let them know their ideas and input are valued

Some Strategies for Improving Flexibility

1. A key to flexibility is self-awareness. Look at a period of time, (a day, a week) and jot down situations where flexibility has been a challenge, where you viewed yourself as inflexible. Look for frequent and consistent themes.
2. Actively listen to colleagues and those who work for you even when they disagree with you.
3. Be conscious of your words. "No," "But" and "However" send strong messages that you are uninterested in being open to the ideas of others.
4. Shift to a learning perspective. Let others' good ideas lead you into new territory so that you can learn new approaches.
5. Ask yourself: If I were to change just one thing about myself, what would it be? Be open to the answer and begin the process!

Go ahead. Enhance your "FlexAbility", a key skill for leadership and living. For more information on building your skills in flexibility or other leadership skills, contact me at Mary@WernerCoaching.com.

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