

Adapting for the Occasion -- by Danielle Dresden

People often like to claim they're flexible, even if they're not. But how often do you hear people say they're adaptable?

Maybe that's because being flexible usually refers to small adjustments, like agreeing to the lunch place your friend suggests. Being adaptable could lead to bigger changes, but sometimes that's just what it takes to rise to the occasion.

Dr. Tony Alessandra, a consultant, defines being "adaptable" as changing your style to get along and make others comfortable, likening it to walking slowly to accommodate another's speed.

Yet being adaptable goes beyond being considerate or fitting in and it doesn't require abandoning one's principles. When adjustments are based on a realistic evaluation of your environment and your options, they can help you develop effective strategies to get around what's blocking you. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Adaptability is not imitation. It means power of resistance and assimilation."

It also means facing facts and acknowledging that circumstances will not permit your plans to go forward as you thought. Human resource experts use the term "context" to describe factors other than personal efforts which affect outcomes. No matter how hard you're willing to work, you need to take a realistic look at the context in which you're operating.

A Chinese proverb puts it like this, "The wise adapt themselves to circumstances, as water molds itself to the pitcher." For example, if you want to start your own business, but you're still paying off college loans, waiting and adapting your plans to financial reality could help you be more successful in the long run.

Being adaptable also means being aware of changing circumstances. Just as a skiers use different waxes for different snow conditions, adaptable people change their approaches to suit specific situations. Think of how children time requests to their parents.

However, as helpful as it is to be adaptable, sometimes it is important to dig in your heels. George Bernard Shaw said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on unreasonable men."

It's not only gamblers who need to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. We all run into occasions when we could stand our ground, change our position or try something else altogether. Keep all your options in mind and you're more likely to find the right adaptation for any circumstance.