

The Adaptive Paradox: Drive Transformation Through Routines

Thought Leadership

Organizations and their people face a constant stream of shifts, disruptions, and transformations. In fact, a recent survey found that most workers experienced some change in their company in the past year, with over a quarter describing it as “significant” or “transformative.” Looking ahead, 43% expect major shifts in the year to come.

These changes, however, are not isolated incidents. They’re ongoing, overlapping, and in many cases, unexpected. This relentless pace can be both exciting and exhausting, demanding new levels of adaptability from people, teams, and organizations.

Routines are often dismissed as sources of complacency and inertia in a world that demands flexibility. But despite this conventional wisdom, routines aren’t the enemy of change. Instead, when intentionally shaped, they can cultivate adaptability and resilience. And far from holding us back, the right routines help us pivot, grow, and thrive amid constant transformation.

THE HUMAN DRIVE FOR ROUTINES

Human beings, by nature, crave structures and patterns. From the moment we wake up to the way we approach our work, our routines guide much of what we do.

A routine is a sequence of actions or behaviors that are regularly followed, often in a fixed order. Routines can be personal or collective; for example,



a personal routine might involve checking emails at the start of the workday, while a collective routine could be a weekly meeting where team members share updates and address blockers. Routines are not accidental but rather learned behaviors designed to serve specific goals. They’re essential to how we function.

When a firm takes action for the first time, there’s no established routine to guide it. Over time, successful activities are repeated. And with each repetition, these efforts become codified and eventually entrenched as best practices. In this way, routines emerge as proven patterns that replace deliberate planning and decision-making.

Organizations cannot survive without routines. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by their daily operations. Routines help conserve energy, cut decision fatigue, and keep a steady pace throughout the day. They are the silent engine behind our ability to do things with efficiency and reliability.

ENERGY MATTERS FOR CREATIVITY AND ADAPTABILITY

While upskilling and reskilling help us adapt to change, we also need the mental bandwidth to respond creatively and flexibly. When our energy is depleted, it becomes much harder to innovate, solve problems, or even handle everyday challenges.

Ongoing change can take a toll on workers' well-being. A recent American Psychological Association survey showed that 54% of employees said job insecurity significantly increases stress levels at work. What's more, workers who experienced unexpected changes were much more likely to report the negative impact on their mental health—52% compared to 17% who did not.

Ambiguity worsens this effect. Among employees experiencing workplace uncertainty, 59% say it harms their mental health, compared to just 18% in stable environments.

This dynamic creates the adaptive paradox. Constant change demands that we evolve our practices and approaches, yet the effort to continually adapt drains our energy and leads to exhaustion.

Energy and well-being form the foundation for creativity and adaptability. But constant, unpredictable change erodes our mental and emotional reserves, leaving us less able to respond constructively. By streamlining daily actions—and conserving our energy—routines keep us resilient and ready to pivot, even when the world around us feels turbulent.

FROM RIGID RITUALS TO ADAPTIVE ROUTINES

Routines are often seen as a source of stagnation—scripted behaviors that keep us complacent. They're cast as obstacles to change that make us resistant to new ideas or ways of working.

But this perspective overlooks the bigger picture: routines, when intentionally shaped, can be powerful allies amidst disruption. The key is to move from rigid rituals to adaptive routines—structured sequences of actions designed to support development and expansion, followed regularly by people or teams. They function as routinized learning activities that provide stability while allowing employees to experiment and adjust to changing conditions.

3 BENEFITS TO ROUTINIZING ACTIVITIES

1. They create efficiency.

Routines help us perform everyday tasks quickly and with minimal effort. Imagine having to think through every activity just to finish your workday and get ready for bed. Life would feel exhausting and slow.

2. They make way for creativity.

By following structured, repeatable workflows, we free up our mental bandwidth. We can focus our attention and mental power on more complex problems and new challenges.

3. They provide agency.

Routines give us a sense of order amidst uncertainty. They help us feel more grounded and in control, even when everything else is changing.

Put another way: adaptive routines are repetitive or patterned behaviors directed at change.

So, what makes a routine “adaptive”?

- **Intentional Design:** Adaptive routines are thoughtfully crafted to include moments of learning and adjustment.
- **Situational Awareness:** Rather than locking us into old patterns, adaptive routines encourage us to stay alert to changes and respond effectively.
- **Built-in Reflection:** Regular check-ins are a core feature. They fuel growth and expand our ability to respond by asking what's working, what needs to change, and how we can improve.

While the environment shifts, adaptive routines keep us grounded. They help us stay productive and efficient by encouraging continuous learning, so we're always ready for what comes next.

And they provide a sense of control, reducing stress amid uncertainty. By embracing adaptive routines, we transform repeated actions from rigid habits into engines of growth.

4 WAYS TO MAKE ADAPTIVE ROUTINES STICK

Change is inevitable, but adaptability is a choice. Organizations that thrive in uncertainty embed flexibility into their operations. Adaptive routines make this possible—they provide structure without rigidity, creating stability while leaving room for renewal. When these routines are authentic, visible, and reinforced, they become part of the culture and turn adaptability into a core capability.

Below, we offer four ways to make adaptive routines stick in your organization:

1. Make it multi-level

Adaptive routines are most powerful when they're enacted at every layer of an organization. When people, teams, and the business all embrace adaptive routines, they reinforce one another and create a culture where adaptability is supported and flexibility is second nature.

Action Steps:

- **Individuals:** Encourage employees to design personal routines that include regular reflection, openness to feedback, and small experiments with new approaches.
- **Teams:** Embed adaptive routines into team practices—like starting meetings with a quick “pulse check,” holding regular “huddles” to reflect and adjust, and debriefing after key projects.
- **Organizations:** Integrate adaptive routines into organizational processes and rituals. This might include company-wide learning forums, cross-functional retrospectives, or leadership “town halls” focused on lessons and future pivots.

Case Illustration

Kobe Bryant's relentless routine

A powerful illustration of adaptive routines comes from basketball legend Kobe Bryant. Known for his relentless work ethic, Kobe maintained a famously rigorous practice routine throughout his career. But his routine wasn't just about repeating the same drills day after day. Instead, it helped him adapt, improve, and stay at the top of his game.

- **Intentional design:** Kobe's daily routine included core drills and exercises that he regularly reviewed to identify areas for improvement and set new goals for himself.
- **Situational awareness:** When Kobe faced new challenges—like an injury or evolving team dynamics—he adjusted his routine. He would add new drills, modify his training focus, or experiment with techniques to stay ahead.
- **Built-in reflection:** After games and practices, Kobe reflected on what worked and what didn't. This ongoing self-assessment allowed him to fine-tune his approach so that his routine supported continuous growth rather than stagnation.

Kobe Bryant's adaptive practice routine enabled him to continually refine his skills, stay ahead of challenges, and maintain peak performance throughout his career.

2. Make it fun and culturally relevant

Adaptive routines don't have to be dry or mechanical. They're more likely to stick when they're engaging and resonate with your team's unique culture. Injecting a sense of fun and familiarity can transform routines from chores into energizing rituals. And when routines are fun and culturally relevant, they fuel engagement, learning, and adaptability across the organization.

Action Steps:

- Give routines playful, memorable names. Call your team check-ins “power-ups,” “pulse checks,” “Friday flight check,” or something that fits your group’s personality. A catchy name can spark curiosity and boost participation.
- Incorporate inside jokes, traditions, or symbols. Use language or themes that reflect your organization’s values and sense of humor. This makes routines feel authentic and promotes a sense of belonging.
- Gamify participation. Introduce point systems or badges for engagement. Create friendly challenges, like “Idea of the Week” or “Quick Win Bingo,” to transform routine activities from “must-do” tasks into enjoyable initiatives.

3. Make it visible and recognized

Adaptive routines are most effective when they’re visible and celebrated. Don’t let good practices hide in the shadows—make them a visible part of your team or organization’s identity. When adaptive routines are visible and valued, people are more likely to embrace and sustain them.

Action Steps:

- Normalize and destigmatize routines. Emphasize that following structured practices is a strength.
- Celebrate people and teams who maintain their routines and adapt them for better results. Well-designed routines are the foundation of great performance, creativity, and resilience.
- Make routines visible and recognized. Share examples openly and highlight successes to send a clear message: good routines are something to be proud of and essential for thriving in a changing world.

4. Make it aligned and consistent

Adaptive routines have the greatest impact when they are coordinated and mutually reinforced across individuals, teams, and the organization. When aligned and consistent, routines at every level work toward the same goals, creating synergy rather than confusion. The entire organization moves forward together—amplifying adaptability, building momentum, and achieving results that no single level could accomplish alone.

Case Illustration**The team huddle**

In hospitals and surgical centers, medical-surgical teams operate in high-stakes, fast-changing environments that depend on communication and adaptability. One adaptive routine that has gained wide adoption is the “team huddle,” a brief, focused meeting where the entire care team gathers to reflect, share information, and plan for improvement.

- **Intentional design:** Typically, huddles are no more than 15 minutes and include all care team members—surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, and support staff. The agenda is structured to address routine matters and unexpected issues that arise.
- **Situational awareness:** By discussing recent events and anticipating future needs, the team stays alert to changes in patient status, staffing, or available resources.
- **Built-in reflection:** Each huddle incorporates a reflective component, encouraging team members to share insights, voice concerns, and suggest improvements.

Through these huddles, teams can integrate lessons learned from one operation immediately into their approach to the next. [Research](#) shows that regular team huddles improve communication, strengthen teamwork, and lead to better patient outcomes.

Action Steps:

- Clearly communicate the vision and priorities. Show how their routines connect to organizational goals and desired outcomes.
- Create line of sight. Help individuals and teams see how their daily practices contribute to broader success, supporting purpose and alignment.
- Model and reinforce adaptive routines. Leaders should demonstrate and support these behaviors through regular communication, resources, and recognition.

BUILDING CHANGE-CAPABLE ORGANIZATIONS

In times of constant flux, organizations need a sustainable change capability, not just change management. Capability means delivering consistent, reliable outcomes rather than ad hoc fixes. And it's the ability to repeatedly execute activities that achieve desired goals. A lucky break or one-off success doesn't qualify as a capability.

Routines have earned a bad reputation in a world that prizes flexibility. Yet, science tells us they exist for good reasons. Our [supply of personal energy](#)—crucial for creativity and adaptability—is not infinite. We need to optimize—not maximize—the use of this precious resource.

Instead of seeing routines as barriers to progress, we can turn them into tools for efficiency and flexibility. Adaptive routines show us that repetition does not mean rigidity. With thoughtful design, regular reflection, and situational awareness, routines can help us conserve energy, reduce stress, and spark creativity. Routine-based practices guarantee reliable outcomes. Organizations that channel employee energy toward purposeful routines can achieve transformative results through ordinary activities.

Ultimately, we all manage a portfolio of routines—some keep us efficient, while others empower us to adapt and grow. When we strike the right balance, we build routines that provide both stability and the capacity for change.

Organizations thrive when they embed adaptive routines, reward effective practices, and embrace intentional change. Success in a dynamic environment is not about erasing structured behaviors—it's about continuously evolving routines to meet new challenges and opportunities, again and again.

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Case Illustration

The power of self-reflection

In Japan's auto industry, teams would hold what's called a Hansei-Kai—or self-reflection meeting—after each major project milestone (e.g., product launch, sprint completion, or client delivery). During these focused sessions, teams would engage in honest self-reflection and collective learning in service of growth.

- **Intentional design:** The Hansei-Kai is a structured approach that goes far beyond typical project reviews. The practice is not about blame, but about honest self-assessment, responsibility, and commitment to actionable improvement.
- **Situational awareness:** Teams use the Hansei Huddle to stay aware of changes in their environment, such as new client feedback, emerging technologies, or internal process bottlenecks.
- **Built-in reflection:** Each session ends with a roundtable where members voice concerns, share insights, and suggest improvements. Teams document and immediately integrate lessons learned into their approach for the next project cycle.

Hansei-Kai is credited as a key driver of the “learning organization.” [Review articles](#) show that organizations using Hansei-Kai see improved employee self-esteem, fewer mistakes, better problem-solving, and more effective action planning.

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