



# ASSESSMENT CENTER GLOBAL VILLAGE

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## White Paper

### Adaptability: Definition, Assessment, Development

Assessment Center Global Villagers  
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Anna Baczynska<sup>1</sup>, Poland  
Hendrik Bronkhorst, South Africa  
Pieter Bronkhorst<sup>1</sup>, South Africa  
Gary Chen, Taiwan,  
Irving Huang, Taiwan  
Martin Kleinmann,<sup>1,2,3</sup> Switzerland  
Martin Lanik,<sup>2</sup> USA  
Sari Lehkonen, Belgium EU  
Vina Pendit, Indonesia  
Sandra Schlebusch,<sup>2,3</sup> South Africa, [sandra@lemasa.co.za](mailto:sandra@lemasa.co.za)  
Svetlana Simonenko,<sup>1,2,3</sup> Russia  
George Thornton,<sup>a 1,2,3</sup> USA, [George.thornton@colostate.edu](mailto:George.thornton@colostate.edu)

<sup>a</sup> Corresponding member for White Paper  
Numbers in superscripts indicate Villagers who contributed to the white paper.

<sup>1</sup>Definition, <sup>2</sup> Assessment, <sup>3</sup>Development



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# White Paper

## Adaptability: Definition, Assessment, Development

### 1. Introduction

**Adaptability** is an important competency for leaders, managers, technical specialists, and staff at all organizational levels. It has been on lists of assessment center dimensions, leadership competencies, and managerial attributes for decades. Its importance became heightened with globalization in business affairs. And now in 2020 **Adaptability** is even more critical in the crises created by the Covid19 pandemic.

The acronym VUCA succinctly and aptly describes the environment, society, and business we increasingly face:

- Volatile: frequent changes
- Uncertain: difficult to understand and predict
- Chaotic: multiple and complex causes and effects
- Ambiguous: unclear signs.

**Adaptability** in dealing with our world is critical.

Human resource managers and consultants have new challenges and opportunities to help organizations clarify the meaning of **Adaptability**, develop methods to assess **Adaptability**, and implement procedures to develop competencies essential for **Adaptability**.

The purpose of this white paper is to consolidate insights about **Adaptability** from a world-wide group of talent management experts experienced in the Assessment Center method, and in behavioral assessment and development more generally. Over an eight-month period the group exchanged ideas through several rounds of emails and virtual interactions. The result is this concise report covering three topics:

- **Definitions of Adaptability**, focusing on its behavioral components, and also including other personal characteristics.
- **Behavioral Assessment of Adaptability**, and also other techniques.
- **Developing Adaptable Behaviors**, and other competencies related to Adaptability.



## 2. Definitions of Adaptability

### 2.1 Consolidated Definition

*Recognizes* that challenges have changed in the volatile, uncertain, chaotic, or ambiguous (VUCA) environment; *modifies* own reactive and active behaviors to initiate actions that have positive effects; *encourages and prepares* organizations, employees, and others to make behavioral changes.

### 2.2 Various Definitions of Adaptability

Adaptability is understood as coping with a changing reality and preparing organizations and employees for ongoing changes, including coping with resistance to change (Baczynska).

Adaptability is understood as coping with a changing reality and preparing organizations and employees for ongoing changes, including coping with resistance to change (Bronkhorst).

Adaptive behavior means to recognize that cognitive and behavioral challenges in the situation have changed and are able to respond with varying behaviors to the respective situation, including active behavior in which people initiate actions that have a positive effect on a changing environment, and reactive behavior - changing or modifying oneself to better suit the new environment. The definition may also include self-reports about perceived behaviors (Kleinmann).

Modifies his/her style and methods of work in accordance with changes. Helps others adapt to change (Simonenko).

Remains effective by modifying behavior style to adjust to new tasks, responsibilities, values, attitudes, people, or environments that are volatile, uncertain, chaotic, or ambiguous (VUCA); shows resilience in the face of constraints, frustrations, or adversity (Thornton).



The following Venn diagram depicts the idea that **Adaptability** is a cluster of behaviors that have something in common that is different from other behaviors.

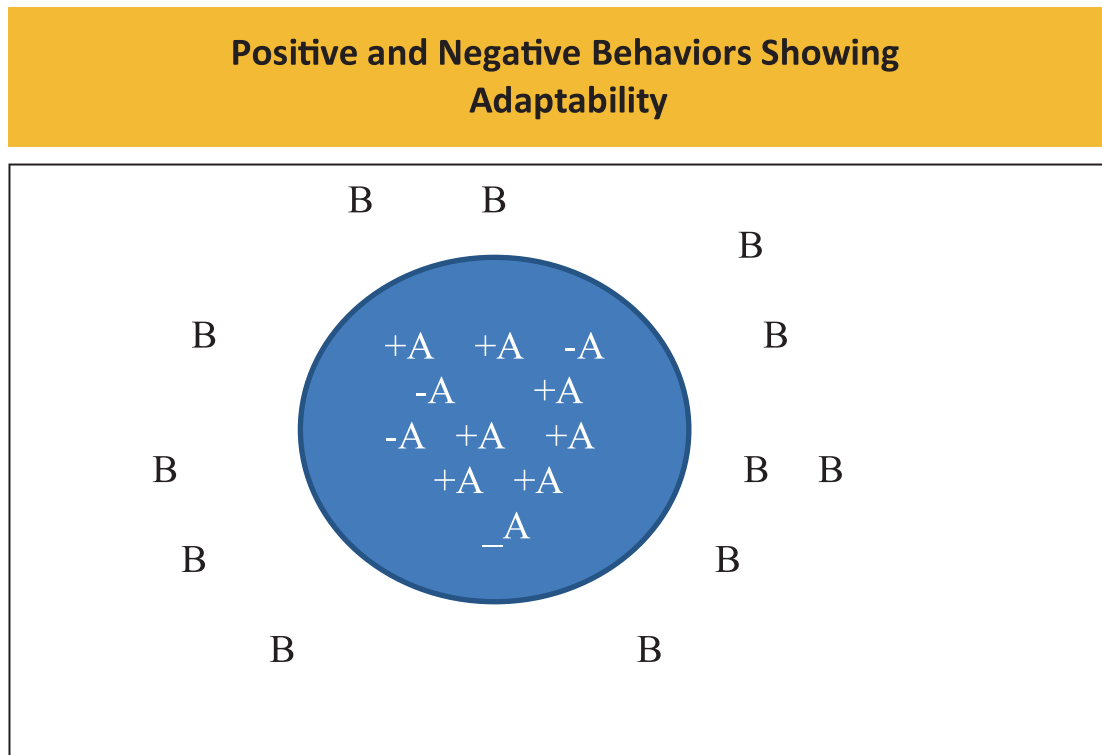


Figure 1: Cluster of Behaviors (A) collectively called Adaptability





## 2.3 Various Conceptions of Adaptability

We use a behavioral conception of **Adaptability** for this white paper. That is, we focus on overt, observable behaviors which demonstrate the competency to deal effectively with change. Other conceptions say a person is adaptable if he/she has:

- Certain background and experience, for example, has been successful when faced with many diverse challenges.
- Certain personality characteristics, for example, possesses several positive characteristics (such as openness to experience), and does *not* have several negative characteristics (such as rigidity, conservatism.)
- Motivation, for example, energy, fear, or stated behavioral intentions to change behavior.

Additional information on adaptive behaviors, including lists of positive and negative behaviors and adaptive cognitions can be found in Appendix A.

Adaptability

The word "Adaptability" is written in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. The second letter 'a' is highlighted in yellow and has a small globe icon above it. Dotted lines with arrowheads at the end connect the top of the yellow 'a' to the top of the second 'a', and then from the second 'a' to the top of the 'i'.



### 3. Behavioral Assessment of Adaptability

Two or more sequential behavioral assessments are needed to evaluate the competency **Adaptability** to make behavioral changes to a changing environment. Two types of comparisons of an individual's behavior provide an assessment of **Adaptability**.

In the first comparison, depicted in Figure 2, the individual's behavior in two different situations is compared. For example, adaptability can be inferred if effective leadership is observed:

- in *both* individual and group settings (example 1);
- with *more than one type* of individual, for examples, subordinate, peer, and even non-colleagues (example 2); and / or
- with different sizes and types of audiences (example 3).

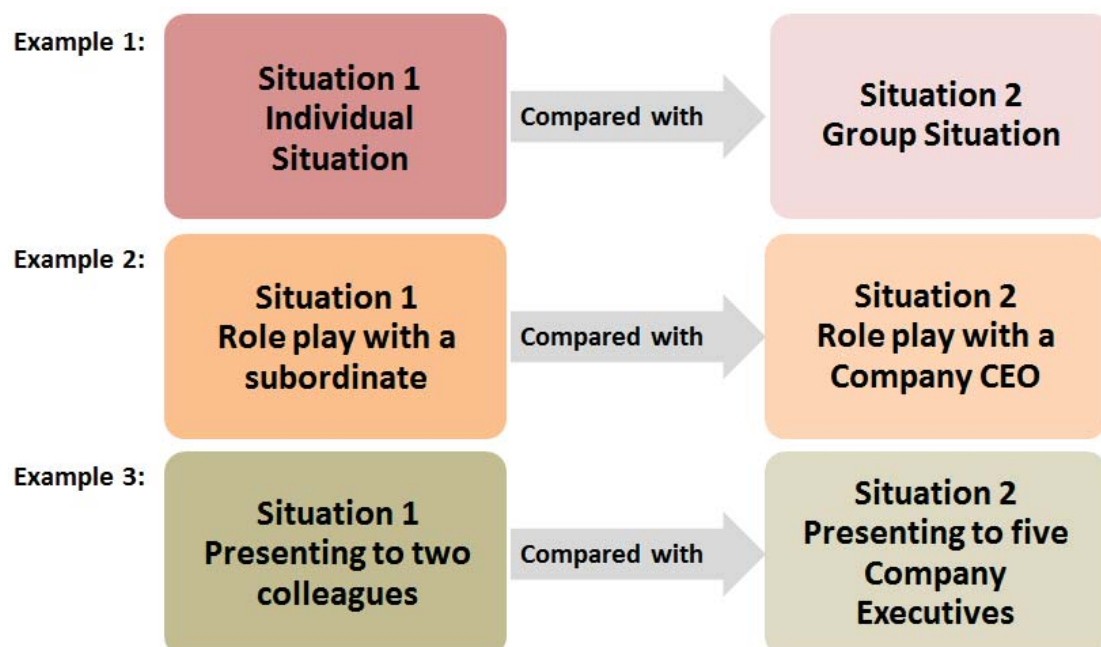
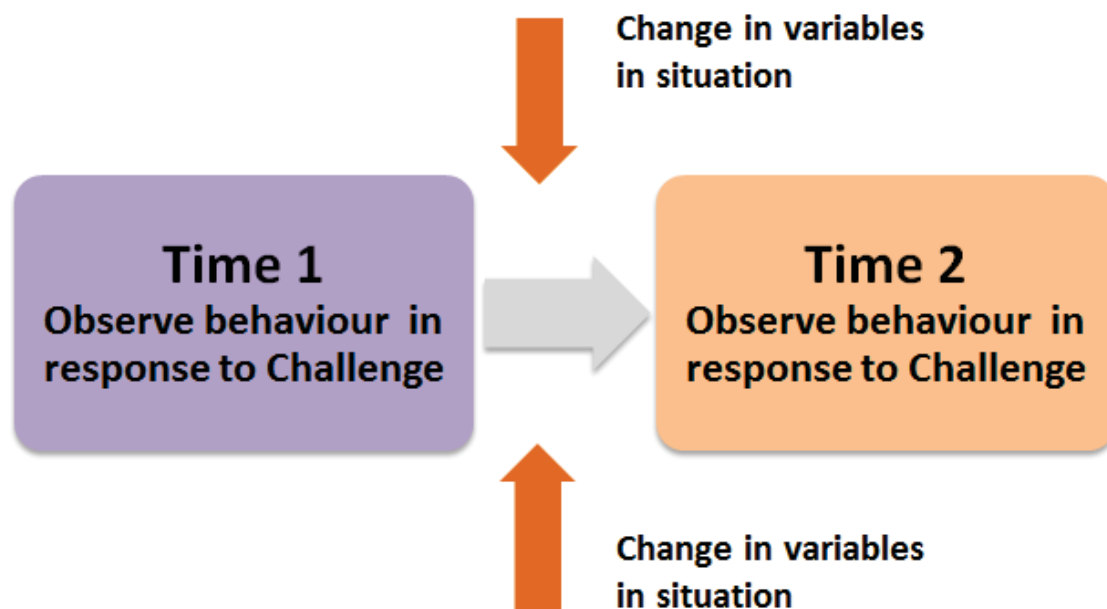


Figure 2: First Comparison of the Behavioral Assessment of Adaptability



In the second comparison which provides an opportunity to assess **Adaptability**, depicted in Figure 3, the individual's behavior is observed in two successive similar challenges with some intervening change in the situation. The comparison involves observation of behavior at time one, then a change in the situation, followed by observation at time two. We can infer the person is adaptable if the person's behavior remains effective across these situations.



*Figure 3: Second Comparison of the Behavioral Assessment of Adaptability*





### 3.1 A Sample of Ways to Use Behavioral Assessment Methods to Assess Adaptability

To observe behavioral changes related to **Adaptability**, changes in the situation can be made within a simulation exercise in a single day or across days. Examples of changes include changes in instructions, revision of procedures for the organization's operations, new government regulations, new and different organizational strategies and goals announced by CEO, changes in personnel, disruptions in power for displays in a presentation, last minute change in audience.

#### 3.1.1 Role Plays (One-on-one Interview Simulations)

Have the assessee participate in two role-plays, first with a lethargic uncooperative employee, and the second with an over-zealous and bumbling employee (recall Buddy and Kip in the OSS screening – *Office of Strategic Services Assessment Staff, 1948*).

#### 3.1.2 In-basket / box

Purposefully include conflicting information in items coming from different sources. Partway through the items, inject "live action" items that change the time demands, for example, a due date is moved up from next week to the end of a 2-hour simulation.

#### 3.1.3 Leaderless Group Discussions (LGD)

Observe the individual in both a cooperative (non-assigned role LGD) and a competitive (assigned-role LGD) situation.

#### 3.1.4 Case Study Exercise

Purposely build in conflicting information in the background information. For example, in an exercise to propose a marketing plan, include source material with different report dates, different regions, different customer preferences, different agendas being pushed by different divisions in the company.



## 3.2 Companion Assessment Methods

Considering the multiple components of **Adaptability**, it is helpful to have:

- assessment of *other* behavioral competencies (such as problem solving, breadth of knowledge, interpersonal effectiveness) and
- different *types of methods* beyond behavioral assessment (such as self-report personality questionnaires, interest inventories, background interview, situational judgment interview). A review of these techniques is beyond the scope of this white paper.

### 3.2.1 Multiple Methods

**Adaptability** can be assessed most directly by demonstrations of effective behavior in multiple simulation exercises as observed by multiple trained assessors, for example, the traditional assessment center method. Other methods include self-reports of behavior in diverse past challenges, one or more personality traits, behavioral intentions. Thus, assessments with different methods by different sources may be helpful. Sources of evaluation of aspects of **Adaptability** may include self-reports, reports by others, and observations of overt behavior by assessors.

The cells of the table below suggest some specific techniques to assess some aspects of this complex construct. Each of these techniques can provide valuable information about an individual. Contrasts of assessments of the individual across different methods can provide diagnostic insights.





Table 1: Multiple Methods to Assess Different Concepts of Adaptability

Constructs underlying Adaptability	Sources of evaluation		
	Self-report	Others, e.g. Supervisor Peer	Assessors
Past experience	*Interview		
Personality traits	*Personality questionnaires		
Behavioral intentions	*Situational judgment interview and /or *Situational judgment test (SJT)		
Behaviors	*360 Multi-rater *ATIC scores in assessment center	360 Multi-rater	Assessment center simulation exercises

Additional information on assessing adaptability with simulations of adaptive behaviors and other methods can be found in Appendix B.

#### 4. Developing Adaptive Behaviors

The Developmental Assessment Center (DAC) method provides a model for promoting change in behaviors demonstrating **Adaptability**. A similar method is called the Coaching Development Center (CDC). An orientation provides the individual a cognitive understanding of the competencies being developed, as example **Adaptability**. The individual demonstrates behavior, receives feedback and coaching, and then demonstrates behavior a second time with the same or similar challenge. The process is depicted in Figure 4.

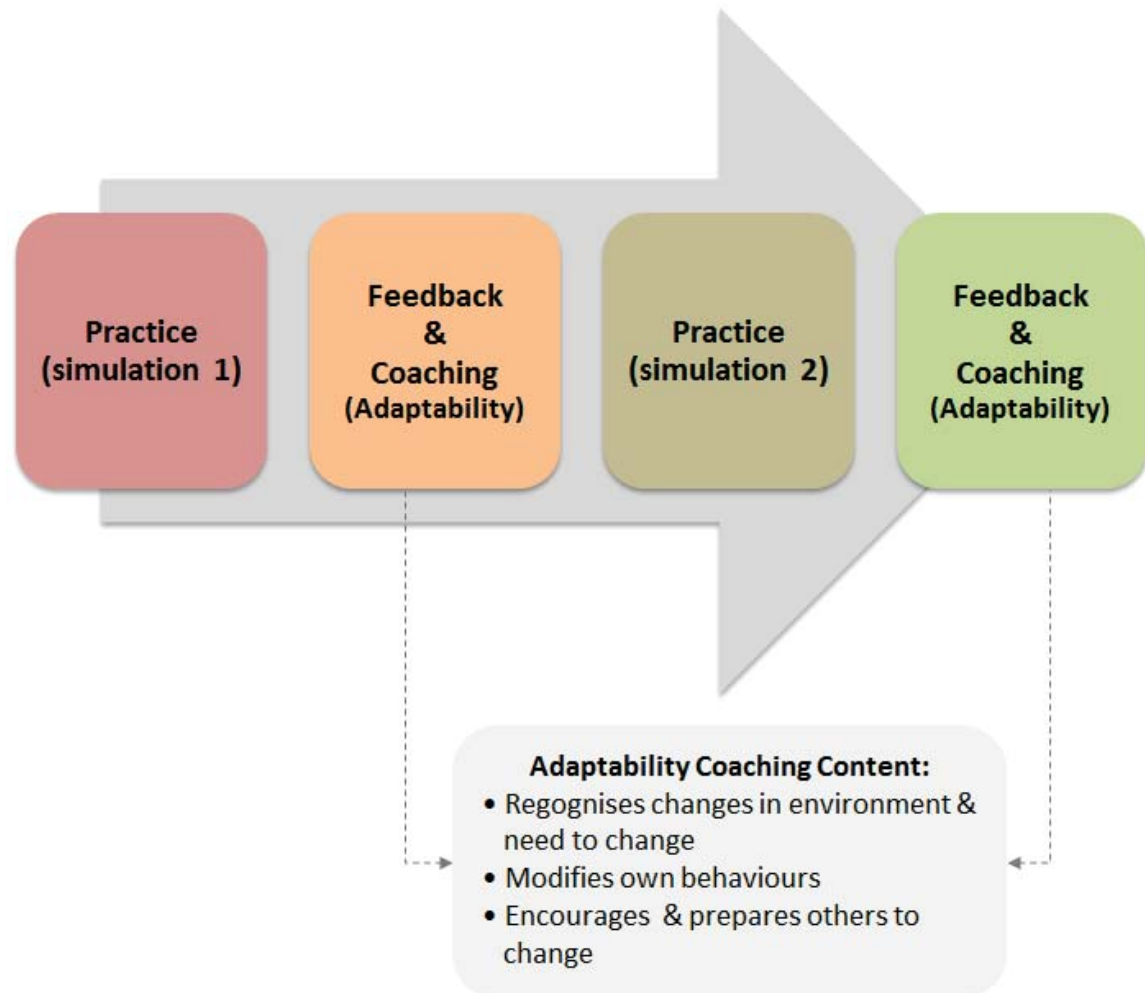


Figure 4: Practice, Feedback / Coaching, Practice Sequence during a CDC

This method requires that the observer/coach is both:

- a good assessor, that is, skilled at objectively observing specific behaviors;
- and also a good coach, that is, skilled at providing supportive feedback and also guiding effective changes in specific behaviors.

#### 4.1 Other Training Methods for Adaptability

Assessment and feedback of personality questionnaires, tests of personal values and interests, and situational judgment interviews or questionnaires can also be helpful for the individual to understand and enhance his/her **Adaptability**. Interpretation of test results in these areas requires the coach to have specific training in behavioral science such as psychology or education.



#### 4.1.1 Reality Test

Based on their extensive assessment and development experience, the Assessment Center Global Villagers are keenly aware that change in a complex competency such as **Adaptability** is not easy. Sceptics may even express stronger reservations about the amount of change possible in mature adults, especially in the short run. On the other hand, based on the Villagers' experience in training leadership, management, and other competencies, who are confident adults can make changes in overt behaviors. While deep-seated core personality traits may remain relatively stable, adults can learn to display new behaviors demonstrating various aspects of sensing needs for change, exploring options for action, initiating changes, and encouraging others to explore and demonstrate change.

Appendix C provides more details on methods to develop **Adaptability**.





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## Appendix A: Behaviors and Other Comments Related to the Definition of Adaptability

### Baczynska

#### Negative behaviors:

- Does not initiate changes. Does not communicate that changes are necessary.
- He/she is not ready to change his/her habits / tasks.
- He/she doesn't change his/her behavior under the influence of new information.
- Does not use the language of benefits / persuasive language.
- He/she is critical of new challenges.
- He/she won't adapt to the new situation.
- He/ she doesn't care about other's needs.
- He/she does not continue his/her work when the task suddenly changes.

#### Positive behaviors:

- Each time initiates changes. Communicates that changes are necessary.
- He/she is ready to change his/her habits / tasks.
- He/she changes his/her behavior under the influence of new information.
- When communicating the change, he/she uses the language of benefits / persuasive language.
- Adjusts the form and complexity of information to the recipient.
- He/she is positive about new challenges.
- He/she adapts to the new situation, takes into account and communicates his/her needs / identity.
- He/she continues his/her work when the task suddenly changes.





## Kleinmann

This is a very interesting topic. Currently, Pia Ingold, Anna Baczynska and I are working on a research project about adaptability of leaders. Conceptually, we define adaptability as leaders' behavior who are able to respond with varying behaviors to the respective situation (DeRue, 2011; Dinh et al., 2014). Additionally, and in line with established literature, we divided adaptive behavior in (a) active behavior; adaptive behavior in which people initiate actions that have a positive effect on a changing environment; (b) reactive behavior - changing or modifying oneself to better suit the new environment.

## Simonenko

Table 2: Positive and Negative Behavior Associated with Adaptability

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Modifies his/her behavior in accordance with the changing situation	Does not correct his/her behavior in response to circumstances
Successfully resolves conflicts and comes up with compromise solutions	Does not assist in resolving conflicts and does not compromise
Quickly switches from one task to another while continuing to perform effectively	When switching from one task to another, the level of performance decreases
Abandons tried-and-tested approaches in favor of new ones if he/she determines them to be more effective	Is reluctant to accept new approaches and methods
Sets a good example of adaptation to changes	Does not set a good example of adaptation to changes
Provides others with recommendations on how to adapt effectively to a new situation	Takes no action to help others adapt to change





## Thornton

My efforts are directed to writing specific behaviors that show adaptability to different types of challenges in the VUCA environment: Volatility, Uncertainty, Chaos, and Ambiguity. And also specify overt positive, overt negative, and lack of behavior. So, here is my road map for writing behaviors, and a few examples.

*Table 3: Overt Positive, Negative and Lack of Behavior in response to a VUCA Environment*

Environment feature	Effective/positive behaviors	Ineffective/negative behaviors	Missed opportunity / lack of behavior
<b>Volatile</b>	Changes approaches to solving problems over time	Insists the established ways are adequate	Ignores obvious signs that circumstances have changed and does not act
<b>Uncertain</b>	Draws upon past experiences in comparable situations. Lays out alternative paths for action	Insists there is "one best way" forward	"Freezes up" and cannot offer any alternative solutions
<b>Chaotic</b>	Clarifies and parses out what is clear and can be changed vs what is still not understood	Expresses frustration and dismay with confusion in the workplace	When asked to suggest one facet of the problem, does not make any suggestion
<b>Ambiguous</b>	Asks several questions in different format to introduce clarity	Insists the picture is clear and simple	Does not seek new information to clarify the situation



## Appendix B: Assessment of Adaptability

### Lanik

We can assess behavioral skills (i.e., task-, relations-, and change-oriented leadership behavior or other distinct skills) that are relevant to leadership (behavior) in multiple ways with observations (i.e., trained raters evaluate the behaviors that participants demonstrate). For observations, we can assess leadership behaviors in simulated leadership situations (i.e., in assessment center exercises, namely, role-play exercises). In each role-play exercise, participants can act as leaders and they will engage in an interaction with a role-player who will act as subordinate. Based upon interactionist research on role-play exercises (e.g., Lievens, Schollaert, & Keen, 2015), each role-play can contain situational cues that trigger one leadership behavior (e.g., statements on personal career issues from subordinates in role-plays that trigger relations-oriented behavior) allowing for the assessment of the respective behavior. Each of the three leadership behaviors can be assessed in several role-play exercises and each role-play exercise should have a different combination of leadership behaviors, so that each role-play places a different set of situational demands on participants. Thus, the assessed leadership behaviors capture the extent to which participants possess behavioral skills on situationally-appropriate (leadership) behaviors (i.e., the higher the score, the higher the adaptability of behavior to different situations). This idea is similar to the cooperative vs. competitive behavior idea but a bit more elaborated.

In parallel to the assessment of behavioral skills, we can assess adaptive skills that refer to cognitions (i.e., trained raters evaluate the cognitions that participants verbalize). We will employ ATIC as an established measure (Jansen et al., 2013; Kleinmann et al., 2011) that allows for conclusions on the accuracy of situational cognitions. ATIC will be assessed for each role-play exercise that participants conduct. Specifically, participants will note their assumptions concerning what is the most effective behavior after they will have encountered each situation. Afterwards, another pair of raters (i.e., not the raters that will rate participants' leadership behavior in role-play exercises) will rate the degree of the appropriateness of the assumptions for each leadership situation to determine how situationally-appropriate participants' cognitions were. Given that each role-play will be designed to target a different set of situational demands, the assessed cognitions will capture the extent to which participants recognize diverse situational demands across different situations (i.e., the higher the score, the higher the adaptability of leadership cognitions to different situations). Adaptability would be measured by different behaviors (cognitions) between situations.

We can design longer exercises in a similar way (as Sandra Schlebusch suggested) within situations. The requirements in the first part should be clearly defined. In the second part of the exercise additional cues should change the demands of the situation. Adaptability can be observed, similarly.



## Schlebusch

1. Maybe we must also think about changing some physical resource, as example:
  - a. The participant prepares a presentation with Power Point, or some other internet supported resources. Just before the start of the presentation, or perhaps during the presentation, the electricity goes out / no internet connectivity, and the person needs to adapt to the new situation
2. The participant prepares for a presentation / interaction with a certain individual / group (e.g., the finance director) and more / different people show up (e.g., the Board Chairman, CEO) – the participant has to change the message / approach to suit the new audience
3. Instruct participants to develop various scenarios from a given set of data, as example – the black swan scenario, the ideal scenario, the worst scenario, etc. and identify strategies for the organization to deal with the various scenarios

## Simonenko

Frankly, it is very difficult to assess adaptability in assessment centers as simulations allow us to observe behavior during very short periods of time. So, we say that we assess it indirectly and partly. And as it relates to personality features, we use the personality questionnaire. The ways how we assess adaptability are as follows:

- **Personality questionnaire DEEP** – high flexibility (find it easy to switch to other work, ability to multitask), low conservatism (is keen to adhere to tradition and use tried and tested work methods).
- **Role play** – we give a case with organizational changes and look if the candidate explains these changes in a positive way and looks how to solve the problems together with a role player.
- **Fact finding** – how the candidate accepts the new information and includes it in his / her decision.
- **Analytical presentation** – during the question-and-answer part of the simulation we look at how the candidate reacts on comments of the role player, especially when he/ she points out candidate mistakes and missed information. We look at whether the candidate accepts the feedback and modifies his / her decision.
- **During all simulations** – how the candidate changes his / her interpersonal approach in difficult situations.
- **Competency Based interview** – question(s) about how the candidate adapted to new situations (organizational changes, relocation, etc.).



## Appendix C: Development of Adaptability

### Kleinmann

Our main project idea is that training the adaptability of leaders means training situationally appropriate cognitions (ATIC), training behavioral skills, or a combination of both.

Adaptability means to recognize in changing environments that the cognitive and behavioral challenges of the situation have changed. (1) People have to identify relevant cues to decide which behavior is appropriate. They have to adapt their cognitions to the changed environment. (2), they have to adapt their behavior. The idea is that both, adequate cognitions and adequate perceptions are important for adaptability. This should be the case for selection and for training purposes.

How to train **cognitive adaptability**? Participants of a cognitive intervention should receive a short introduction to different leadership behaviors (i.e., task-, relations-, and change-oriented leadership behavior) or other relevant skills in demanding situations. Afterwards, the training should focus on teaching participants how to read these situations (i.e., to recognize situational cues). Specifically, participants should be provided with learning points that list situational cues relevant to task-, relations-, and change-oriented leadership or to other relevant skills. In role-plays, participants then should practise recognizing the situational cues that they are presented with by role-players. Trainers should provide them with feedback on whether they correctly recognized the respective cues. The idea is that participants should learn to be more flexible to different situational relevant cues.

How to train **behavioral adaptability**? Participants of a behavioral intervention should receive a short introduction to different leadership behaviors. Participants will be provided with learning points that list different behavioral examples of task-, relations-, and change-oriented leadership or other relevant skills in demanding situations. In role-plays, participants then will practise each of these different leadership behaviors (i.e., they will be told which leadership behavior / skill they should demonstrate in the beginning of each role-play). Trainers will provide them with feedback on how well they exhibited the respective leadership behaviors. In following exercises, changes in skill development compared to the starting point could be evaluated. To allow for assumptions about a pure behavioral training in comparison to a training of cognitions (i.e., situation perception), the behavioral intervention group should not contain cognitive intervention components (e.g., analyzing leadership situations and role-players' cues that signal the need for one leadership behavior).



## Schlebusch

I agree with the principle of using a DAC format in this instance. I would go further and use a Coaching Development Centre (CDC) format (Schlebusch & Roodt, 2020). With this format the participant works with the observer-coach to classify his/her behavior and receives immediate coaching (following a co-active coaching approach) before preparing for the next simulation. This approach allows participants to learn at a surface level (e.g., what behaviors are linked to a competency), but also at a deeper structure level, impacting personally held schemas.

The CDC process is: Thorough orientation session with all participants about the whole process and focal constructs at the start of the CDC - simulation 1 - attends debrief session with other participants (sharing of experience; various approaches) – attends session with coach-observer – next simulation – attends debrief session with other participants - attends session with coach-observer coach, etc.

The critical aspect is the competence of the observer-coach and the de-brief facilitator. They must be fully competent observers, and fully competent coaches. The newly learned behaviors must also be supported in the workplace by a development plan with regular follow-up discussions, support by an App, etc.

## Simonenko

We can develop our adaptivity not in general but in certain circumstances and particular situations such as the lockdown or virtual education or new culture. The way to adapt lies through self-awareness and understanding the situation: analysis of its possible pluses (and focusing on them), own strengths and development needs.

Here is a copy of my previous email to you about the development of adaptability.

I have been thinking about your question on how to develop adaptability and could not find another answer as “know-how”. To be honest I believe this is an individual characteristic that derived from very deep, archaic psychological mechanism which is similar to what animals have. But I just remembered Nigel Povah’s competency model **LIVED** for surviving in the VUCA world: *Learning* (learning agility and open-mindedness), *Intellect* (analyzing complex information and taking decisions in uncertainty), *Values* (following corporate values), *Emotions* (emotional intelligence), *Drive* (taking the organization forward with passion). There is a training program on these 5 modules with 360 assessment prior to the training. Learning is at the center in this model. As Nigel sold the company he also sold all rights to this model. But the idea about learning and self-development as a key competency that helps people to adapt to rapid changes and keep productivity is not novel. The approach to develop adaptability through developing ability to learn seems something that can work from my perspective.



## Thornton

I have had two projects in the past few years where the organization wanted to help supervisors be more competent in dealing with the VUCA environment. In addition to Adaptability, the competencies included Creativity in dealing with task-like changes and Interpersonal Flexibility in dealing with person-like changes. We used the Developmental Assessment Center (DAC) method in which we started with lecture/discussion of what Adaptability is in behavioral terms. And then we did two cycles of practice/assess/feedback/goal setting. These were one week apart. In each cycle the assessment included exercises which changed something mid-way through the simulations. We did not do any personality testing. It quickly became apparent we needed to address more fully personality tendencies such as openness, flexibility, resistance to change. If I get another project like this, I will have participants take a personality questionnaire before the behavioral workshop.



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