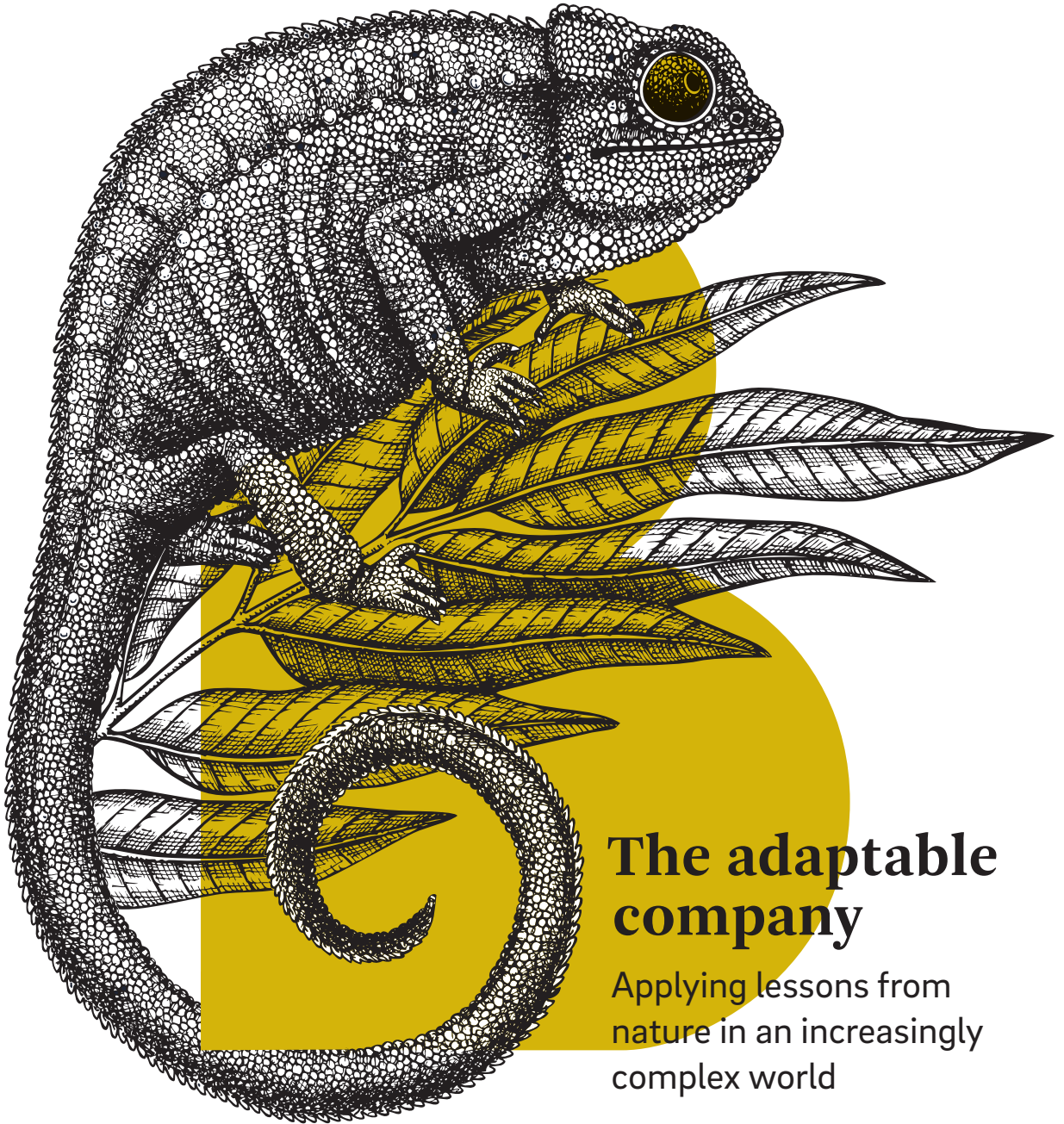


Think:Act

Roland Berger



The adaptable company

Applying lessons from nature in an increasingly complex world

THE BIG 3

Purpose

Define your direction, know what makes you unique and set your guardrails

Process

Develop your offering and operations continuously, challenge established solutions systematically

People

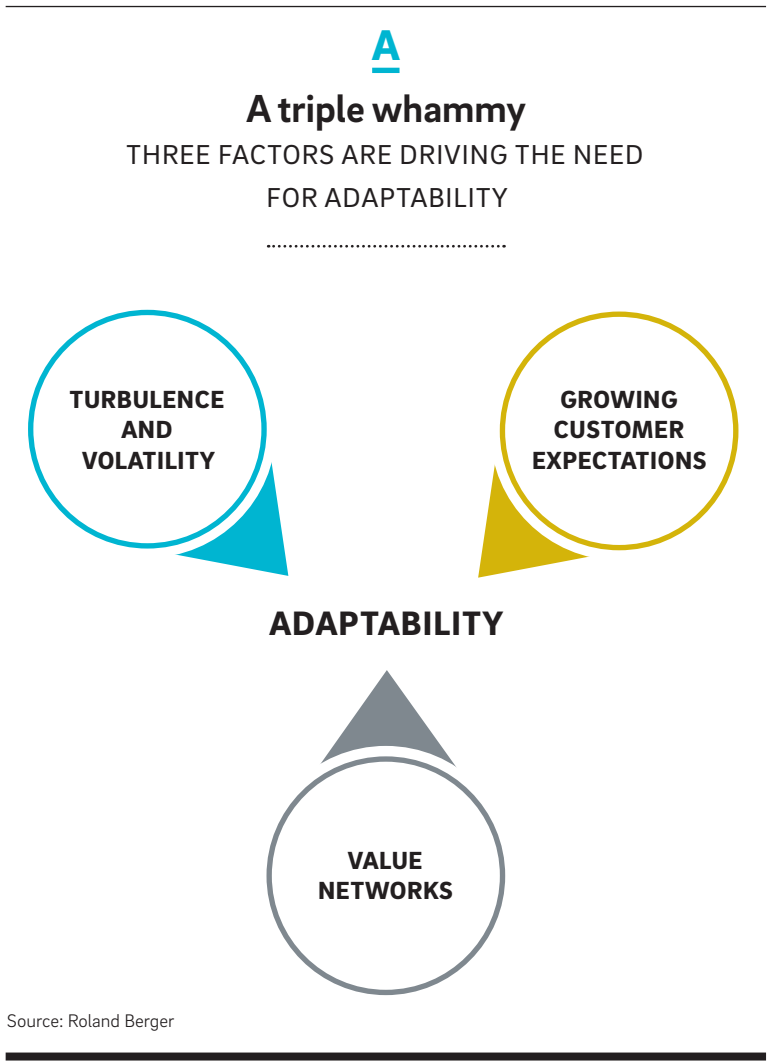
Follow a rule-based approach, translate purpose into benefits for individuals and make changes on the job

1 – PAGE 4 Change is the new normal. Companies must rise to the adaptability challenge. **2 – PAGE 6** Hurdles are par for the course. Companies must learn to jump or, better still, avoid them entirely. **3 – PAGE 9** A framework for adaptability. Purpose, process, people. **PAGE 12** Excursus: Three lessons from nature. **PAGE 14** Conclusion: From singular transformation to adaptability

1 – Change is the new normal. Companies must rise to the adaptability challenge.

WE LIVE IN DIFFICULT TIMES. Turbulence and volatility on the markets, growing customer expectations and the transition from value chains to value networks are placing new demands on business. Digitalization is throwing up fresh challenges in terms of speed, quality and cost. Most recently, the coronavirus has turned our lives upside down and caused major disruptions to the functioning of both local and global business – on a scale that none of us could have imagined possible just a few months ago.

While it remains to be seen what the long-term effects of these and other disturbances will be, one thing is crystal clear: Change is the new normal. At Roland Berger we have discussed different aspects of that change and the consequences for companies in numerous publications in the Think:Act series, including our Think:Act Magazines *Change. Survive. Thrive.*, *Manage the present – own the future* and *Rethinking growth* and our Think:Act Booklets *Detox your business* and *Simple Smarts* for example, we pinpoint the symptoms of underlying upheaval, from a growing rate of innovation and the commoditization of technologies to tumbling entry hurdles and an increase in the number of mergers and acquisitions (M&A). We observe how, across sectors, industry leaders are raising the bar when it comes to customer experience as markets become more transparent and the range of products and services available expands. And we see how the "network economy" is breaking down



traditional barriers between industries and competitors, enabling more players to compete for direct access to customers. → [A](#)

Fueling many of these developments is digitalization. Geoff Poulton gives some examples of this in our Think:Act Magazine *Change. Survive. Thrive*. He describes how for US retail giant Walmart, speed and efficiency were the core of the challenge. Having watched for years as Amazon and other e-commerce specialists muscled in on its territory, Walmart decided to ramp up its expansion of automated e-commerce fulfillment centers to ensure rapid delivery to customers and stores. It also made strategic investments in relevant players, such as e-commerce site Jet.com, India's Flipkart and Japanese e-commerce giant Rakuten. These efforts paid off: In 2018 Walmart overtook Apple to become the third-largest online retailer in the United States.

For Porsche, by contrast, the challenge was quality, writes Poulton. Not the quality of its products, but the quality of its customer management. Porsche has now introduced a wealth of digital services, turning itself into a platform provider as well as a mobility provider. For instance, it assigns each customer a unique ID that can be used in every interaction between the two parties, from showroom visits to Porsche's suite of apps. In turn the company's apps, such as Porsche Connect and the Porsche 360+ lifestyle assistant, solidify the relationship between company and customer and at the same time allow Porsche to build up a comprehensive picture of each of its clients.

Disruption, it appears, is the only constant. But what does this disruption mean for companies? The challenges are multifaceted, we believe. Businesses need to be able to deal with uncertainty, faced as they are with circumstances that are either totally random or almost impossible to predict. Fortunately, companies are not oblivious to the need for change. The case for adaptability is increasingly being made in studies and articles, and top managers are aware of what the broader business community is saying. However, much of the advice handed out is simplistic and superficial, and in some cases it is even contradictory. Business leaders are confused and lack direction when it comes to tackling the specific challenges facing their companies. Everyone is talking about change, but few are talking about how to change.

This echoes the views of Sunil Gupta, Harvard Business School professor and author of *Driving Digital Strategy: A Guide to Reimagining Your Business*. "With digital transformation," Gupta writes, "it's not a question of whether you should change or not. The main question is: how do you

**"The main question is:
how do you change?
The goal is to create
change, not animosity."**

**Sunil Gupta,
Harvard University**

change. The goal is to create change, not animosity." Certain fundamentals, such as knowing where you want to be, facilitate success. Gupta continues: "It sounds simple but having a clear sense of direction is perhaps the hardest thing to master. Understand the issue you're trying to address. Think of the customer. If you don't know where you're going, then you've no idea what can take you there, and you'll be distracted by all manner of diversions along the way."

Where does the key lie? In becoming truly adaptable, we believe. Companies need to achieve a balance, adapting their business model while keeping those parts of it that generate competitive advantages. This requires continuous evaluation by the company of their own performance in order to determine which parts of the business generate such advantages and which should be adapted, transformed, replaced or discarded. At the same time, companies must be sure to adapt at the right pace, not tearing the business apart for internal reasons or overreacting to external "noise". And they must be sure to adapt in the right direction, not just changing for the sake of change. True adaptability means mastering all these different aspects of adaptability.

Ideally, companies need some sort of framework or checklist so that they can tick off what they need to have in place. That is what this study is about. We do not focus here on making the case for change – that case has already been made. We focus instead on how companies can rise to the adaptability challenge. We propose a simple framework, inspired by lessons from science and observations from the natural world, that business leaders can use to navigate the complex challenges. Our "3P" framework focuses on three key areas: purpose, process and people.

Before we move on to the details of our solution, however, it is worth taking a look at certain aspects of the problem facing companies. Why is achieving true adaptability so difficult? What complications do businesses face? And which hurdles do they need to overcome?

2 – Hurdles are par for the course. Companies must learn to jump or, better still, avoid them entirely.

EINSTEIN FAMOUSLY WROTE: "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions." Understanding the sort of difficulties your company may face in achieving change – the hurdles that you need to jump or, better still,

avoid altogether – is a vital part of the journey to true adaptability. Drawing on our experience working with clients across industries around the globe, we identify six common hurdles. → **B**

B

Six hurdles

COMMON PROBLEMS ON THE ROAD TO ADAPTABILITY



FOCUS ON WHY, NOT HOW



STEADY-STATE THINKING

SIMPLISTIC ADVICE



CELEBRATION OF FAILURE



LACK OF REFLECTION



NO SENSE OF DIRECTION

#1

FOCUS ON THE "WHY", NOT THE "HOW"

Perhaps the first and biggest hurdle for companies is the tendency to focus on the "why", not the "how", as we touched on in the previous chapter. The problem is not one of awareness: Companies know that they need to change. A survey of chief strategists conducted by Roland Berger and the University of St. Gallen found that, as early as 2014, some 70 percent of all large European companies were already running transformation programs, and the Gartner 2019 CEO Survey found that the number of transformation programs is still growing. Adapting business models and changing organizations is no longer the exception, it is the new normal. But all too often, writers on business topics and other experts deliver advice focused primarily on why companies need to change, rather than how they can achieve this change in practice.

#2

SIMPLISTIC ADVICE

Continuing on the same theme, much of the high-level advice floating around is too abstract, vague or ambiguous. It focuses on buzzwords rather than real content. Change should not be undertaken just for the sake of it: That creates a huge risk for the functioning of the business and also for personal careers. What is needed are concrete frameworks for change, guidance, parameters for guardrails, checklists – as we discuss in the following section.

#3

LACK OF REFLECTION

Another trap that some companies fall into is insufficient reflection on the meaningfulness of transformation in the first place. Companies generally view transformation as

positive, but that is not necessarily true. In fact, there will likely be parts of the business model that should not be transformed but rather stay just the way they are. After all, the company must continue to meet today's demand while aligning with tomorrow's requirements. Nature shows us that evolution, while inexorable, is gradual and experimental. Jumping headlong into transformation without proper reflection and preparation is never a good idea.

#4

STEADY-STATE THINKING

One problem with the word "transformation" is that it implies a return to a steady state after the change process is complete. As we write in *Detox your business*, companies often ask "When are we done?" The answer? Never. Markets are in flux, customers are changing, industries are volatile and, however painful the process, companies must be prepared to reinvent themselves time and time again. They therefore need to replace the idea of achieving some perfect steady state with the goal of achieving continuous transformation – in other words, adaptability.

#5

CELEBRATION OF FAILURE

A recent trend in business thinking is the idea that companies should celebrate failure. Actively celebrating risk-taking and failure, it is argued, is the key to innovation. While there may be some truth in this, there is a risk that companies over-celebrate failure or see it as an end in itself. Mistakes are only acceptable if they are identified, analyzed and learned from. After all, the ultimate goal of businesses is to succeed, not to fail. Companies in any case have enough to deal with countering the "natural villains" that undermine human decision-making processes, as discussed by Edward D. Hess in his book *Learn or die* – "villains" such as confirmation bias, availability bias, self-interest bias, anchoring biases and the superiority illusion.

Roger Martin, a pioneer of "integrative thinking", believes that most of the best practices in decision-making today are actually more like worst practices. In our latest Think:Act Magazine *Rethinking growth*, he writes that "if you analyze the past, it will convince you that the future will be similar to the past. That's the blind spot that the entire modern business world has." Business leaders need to think differently, he argues: "The data shows that consumers prefer pink to blue. Is that an immutable part of nature? Maybe they prefer pink because the pink products are better than the blue ones. What if we made a high-quality blue product?"

#6

NO SENSE OF DIRECTION

Finally, as pointed out by Sunil Gupta, companies need a clear sense of direction. If you don't know where you're going, you risk being distracted by all manner of diversions along the way. The challenge, of course, is how to maintain a sense of direction in an environment of uncertainty.

The impossibility of knowing for sure what lies ahead has led some companies to jump straight from denial to despair. Instead, they should draw inspiration from nature, which employs an approach based on trial and error and the application of simple rules with clearly defined goals – the way ants make decisions within their colonies, for example. Companies should similarly understand their place in the ecosystem and define clear rules for what they mean by success, translated into operational terms, rather than formulating detailed processes that they must then stick to, as we discuss in our Think:Act Booklet *Simple Smarts*.

"If you analyze the past, it will convince you that the future will be similar to the past. That's the blind spot that the entire modern business world has."

Roger Martin,
University of Toronto

3 – A framework for adaptability. Purpose, process, people.

TO HELP COMPANIES achieve true adaptability, we propose a simple framework inspired by lessons from nature and natural science. The framework focuses on three key areas: purpose, process and people. Companies must act consistently across all three interrelated areas; they can use the framework as a guide or checklist. → [C](#)

PURPOSE

Defining your purpose – in other words, your direction – means setting clear guardrails for your offering, operations and organization. As we discuss in our Think:Act Booklet *Detox your business*, this entails reviewing and continuously improving your value proposition. It also means restricting your business to your core activities and cleansing yourself of everything else. And at the same time, it means creating a structure that focuses on your core and allows you to adapt without changing the structure each time.

This is not about the survival of the fittest (see box feature below). Rather than fighting to be the strongest, companies need to focus on what makes them unique and then work with other players where appropriate. In the past, companies would ask themselves the "make or buy" question: Should they offer a particular product or service themselves, or should they buy it in from a third party. This is a classic "value chain" question. But in today's "value network" world, rather than deciding whether to make or buy, companies must master and partner. In other words, they must focus exclusively on activities within their own sphere of competency – activities that fulfill their value proposition to customers and which they are in a position not just to "make" but to "master". And at the same time, in other areas – areas that also represent part of their value proposition but which fall outside their core area of

competency – they should form partnerships with other members of their value network.

PROCESS

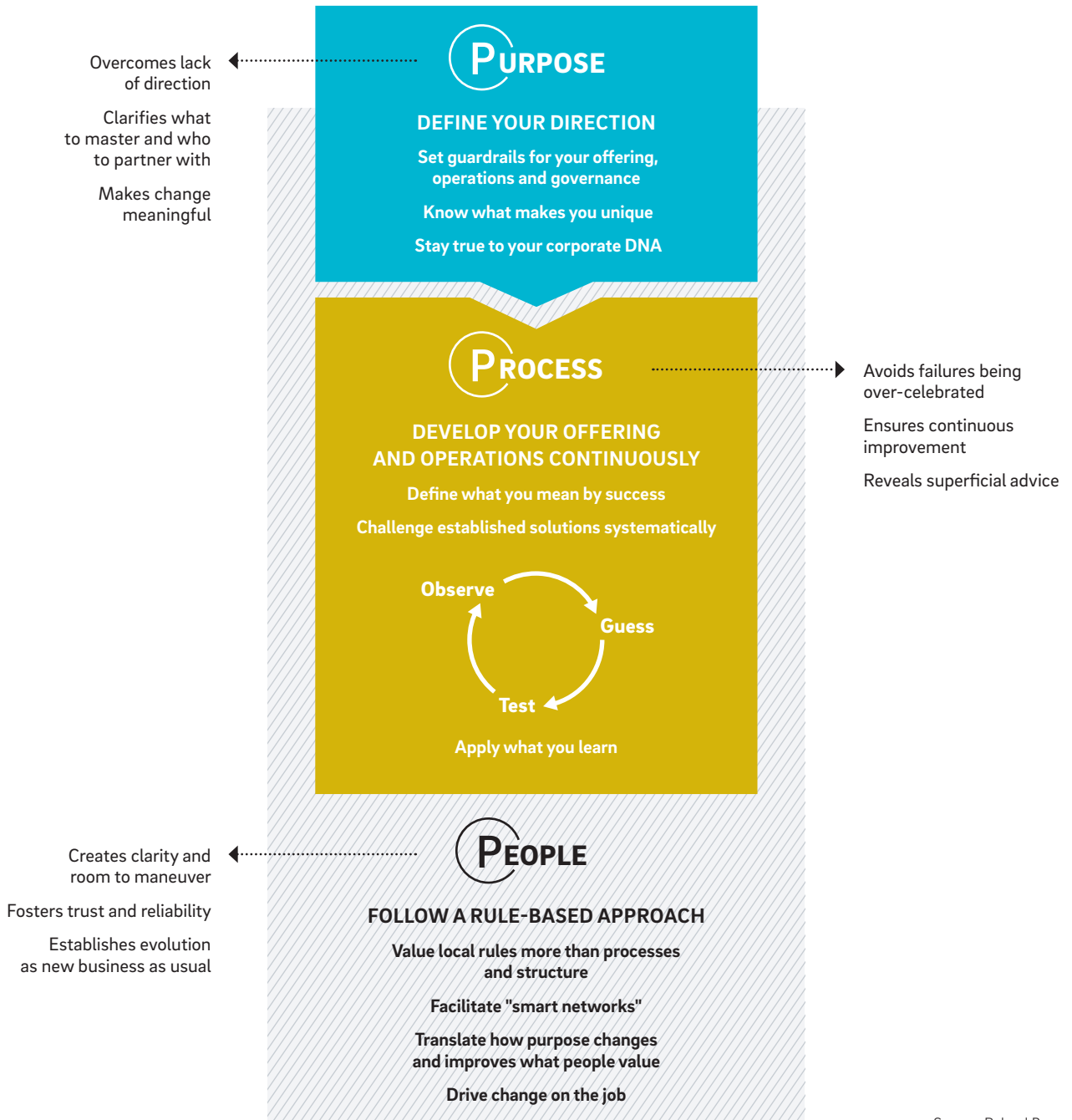
Once the guardrails are firmly in place, you can drive change systematically throughout the organization. You will need to decide whether experiments can be run on a case-by-case basis or not. You will need to make experimenting a continuous approach. And, vitally, you will need to make sure that you apply what you learn from those experiments.

Companies should use the scientific method here (see box feature below), a tried-and-tested approach for navigating unknown terrain and uncertainty. They should divide the business up into different areas and set key parameters for experimentation for each area, such as the number of experiments to be conducted within a given timeframe and the minimum and maximum failure rate aspired to. These parameters will then determine the amount of time and money the company spends on learning, and how daring and radical the experiments are.

When it comes to new technology, it is important not to implement technological "advances" just for the sake of it. We recommend setting up experiments in which you run the new technology in parallel to the existing technology or process. The new technology needs to prove itself superior in order to be chosen for implementation across the company. Travel giant Booking.com, for example, follows what it calls a "customer-first AI" approach that is based on this principle. It runs bots (for chat applications or automated web design) against existing solutions, and only those that outperform the existing solution on predefined success criteria are adopted and implemented. Experiments of this sort are run across the entire customer experience. For each part of the

C

Achieving true adaptability A FRAMEWORK INSPIRED BY NATURE



customer experience, the company specifies the success metric, the minimum number of tests to be carried out and the target failure rate. This makes it absolutely clear what is meant by "success" and to what extent new solutions should be experimented with.

A strict approach is critical for keeping investments in check. If you let unsuccessful ideas linger, the size of your investment and the degree of complexity will grow rapidly, eventually not only eating up money but also stifling the organization. Many of your guesses will be wrong; that is simply a fact of business life. As we discuss in *Change. Survive. Thrive.*, according to the late academic and business consultant Clayton Christensen, 95 percent of new products will fail. Critically for innovations, you need to cultivate the skill of asking the right questions. Christensen, writing in Hal Gregersen's 2018 book *Questions are the answer*, puts it as follows: "Questions are places in your mind where answers fit. If you haven't asked the question, the answer has nowhere to go." In our Think:Act Magazine *Manage the present – own the future*, Christensen suggests focusing your questions more specifically on the "jobs to be done" for customers. Constantly challenging yourself on these questions is crucial for driving innovation and generating "pull", rather than "pushing" what you think the market wants.

Of course, running experiments within a business that is already functioning successfully requires a mixture of solidity and flexibility, as we discuss in *Manage the present – own the future*. Size can play against companies in this respect. Aware of this risk, pharmaceutical giants such as Novartis, Merck and GlaxoSmithKline, for example, leave a growing proportion of their drug development and early-stage testing to smaller companies – another example of the "master and partner" approach.

PEOPLE

Follow a holistic, rule-based approach with regard to people. This means focusing on the "how", not the "why", and valuing rules over structure. It also means involving the entire organization as opposed to just an isolated team of specialists, and ensuring that learning takes place "on the job", as we propose in our recent publication *Results Factory*. You also need to achieve a balance between adaptability and

stability: The organization must be stirred, not shaken.

In our Think:Act Booklet *Simple Smarts* we draw inspiration from the natural world – specifically the behavior of ants, the prototype of a principle-based network organization. Ants are particularly interesting with regard to their pioneering behavior, approach to provision and precaution, colony formation, and use of rescue squads. The way they operate teaches us some guiding principles for organizations, from which we derive concrete actions that organizations can take to immediately put these ideas into practice.

The overall design principle should be that of the "smart network". Smart networks allow companies to tap into the collective potential of their workforce. Traditionally, businesses

structure their organizations in terms of vertical hierarchies, like a pyramid, with one person at the top and more and more people as you move down the pyramid. Building smart networks means replacing that pyramid structure with strong horizontal relationships that connect people across disciplines.

These efforts need to be fueled by leadership. Being a leader in an adaptable company calls for behaviors that may not be part of the classic leadership style. The key task of leaders in the adaptable company is to facilitate rather than dictate. This means explaining to your people how change actually protects and improves what they already have, rather than diminishing it. As a leader, you must be comfortable with being wrong, including when your mistakes are pointed out by others. You must relinquish control, trust people, rules and good science, invest in experimentation, and learn to live with uncertainty. All of which may be considerably outside your current comfort zone. But as Ray Dalio, Founder of Bridgewater Associates, pointed out in an interview with Business Insider: "You have to operate by the rules of the system, and if you don't, if you pull rank, then you lose all your credibility."

It's not enough to simply mandate change from on high: Change must also be anchored locally. Interactions between individuals shape the overall direction in which an organization moves. These interactions are often stronger even than strategy. As management expert and writer Peter Drucker puts it, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast". In practice, many grand design efforts fail because management

"You have to operate by the rules of the system, and if you don't, if you pull rank, then you lose all your credibility."

**Ray Dalio,
Founder of Bridgewater Associates**

tries to impose an overarching central structure on local interactions. Too much structure or too many rules can stifle flexibility. Culture, not structure, is the glue that binds the adaptable company together.

W. L. Gore & Associates, the company behind Gore-Tex fabrics, is a good example of getting culture right. As we discuss in our Think:Act Magazine *Rethinking growth*, a major factor in the success of Gore is the relationship between its employees (or "associates", as the company calls them). This relationship is nurtured via a flat organizational structure. Everybody is accessible to everybody else when it comes to pursuing innovation, and employees are given time to build their networks, choose which projects they work on and even choose who leads them.

As Gore shows, adaptive organizations generally do not operate according to their organizational structure. They operate in flexible, cross-functional teams, staffed on demand. Compared to classical vertical organizations, the lines of communication and the distances between different individuals and skills are much shorter. Building an organization – or perhaps, more accurately, a network – that continues to perform yet is fundamentally adaptable is increasingly becoming a design challenge. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues that the optimal size for such networks is around 150 people, as we discuss in *Rethinking growth*: "The sociology of business shows that the size of the business unit can affect success. In units smaller than 150, more friendships are formed. Above 150, the sense of common purpose weakens."

We believe that the discourse on the adaptable company is just beginning. Real change and the necessary paradigm shift is yet to come. In *Manage the present – own the future*, Bibop Gresta, Chairman of US research company Hyperloop Transportation Technology, talks about how a revolutionary new model is driving innovation within his organization. He foresees a time when the traditional system of hiring, firing and nine-to-five will be something we see as anachronistic. Instead, he says, people will lend their time and brainpower to projects that trigger their passions. They won't be employees; they will be more like partners. The company currently has 420 groups divided between 42 countries, forming the core of the company's R&D activities. An artificial intelligence platform keeps track of all the conversations as the work develops, alongside a giant project management system that the company has developed in-house. The various methodologies create a unique environment that can be completely administered online. "It's not particularly complicated," says Gresta, "and it works well."

Three lessons from nature.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

The theory of evolution offers a powerful lesson for business. However, as award-winning science writer and BBC radio host Kate Arney explains in our Think:Act Magazine *Change. Survive. Thrive.*, it is often misunderstood. Rather than fighting to be the strongest, companies need to focus on what makes them unique instead. "Just as genetic differences drive evolution in the natural world, it's the inherited variations and random mutations that become fuel for adaptation in a rapidly shifting business landscape," she writes. "If everybody looks the same, that's fine in a constant environment as there's no pressure to change. But shake things up and a lack of diversity can become critical."

Now that change is a given, the takeaway from Darwin that companies need is that they should embrace their unique characteristics and exploit emerging niches, Arney says. "Actively mapping out the distinctive traits within your organization could reveal key insights about the best direction in which to pivot in changing circumstances. Evolution is exploitative by positively selecting for characteristics that provide a competitive advantage. It's also ruthless in getting rid of unnecessary traits." When it comes to the "purpose" question for companies, it's not about being the fittest or growing at all costs: It's about celebrating your uniqueness and adapting to thrive.

Questioning the "growth at all costs" obsession is particularly important during the current coronavirus crisis. Many businesses are being forced to reconsider their ideal size and think about how they can partner up more effectively in the value network. In the past, only companies that were growing were seen as attractive. The lesson from natural science is that this is not necessarily true: It may well be about survival of the weirdest, not the biggest.

EXCURSUS

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The scientific method is a powerful tool for companies dealing with the "process question", albeit often underestimated by the business world: It has, after all, been responsible for all technological progress since the seventeenth century at least. Firms that embrace this approach generally outperform their competitors. It is straightforward, but fundamentally challenges common decision-making processes in traditional organizations. This is essential as organizations increasingly have to get their heads around multifaceted uncertainty, manage a growing multitude of ways to reach their customers and stay on their toes as markets evolve.

The scientific method is characterized by specifying problem statements, deriving hypotheses for solutions and running experiments. Its power emerges from stringently sticking to it. In addition, scientific disciplines teach us that new ideas never occur out of nothing. Isaac Newton stressed this when he wrote: "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants".

We know from history that the scientific method has an excellent track record in helping us navigate uncertainty and complexity. It provides hands-on guidance on how to find solutions in complex terrain. It leads to an inherent preference for simplicity as simpler theories are more testable. William of Ockham introduced simplicity as a guide for the development of theoretical models. His problem-solving principle, "Ockham's razor", states that, when presented with competing hypothetical answers to a problem, one should select the answer that makes the fewest assumptions. The scientific method can also be brutal, however. As Richard Feynman puts it, "It does not make any difference how beautiful your guess is [...], who made the guess, or what his name is – if it disagrees with experiment it is wrong."

EMERGENCE

We tend to believe that complex challenges require complex solutions and explanations – some grand design that covers every aspect of the problem. Frequently this leads to over-structuring and unintended consequences, or worse still no consequences at all. However, nature shows that simple rules are the secret to making highly efficient, highly adaptable systems, as demonstrated by the way bees swarm or organize their hives.

In his book *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, American writer and media theorist Steven Johnson talks about the ability of the components of a community or system to organize themselves into a higher-level system based on sophistication and awareness. He describes this concept very succinctly: "The movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication is what we call emergence." We can see this at work in a variety of fields, from the way patterns of land use and infrastructure form in cities as a result of regulatory rules rather than a grand design, to the way our minds learn to recognize faces. Emergence occurs in network structures where entities are connected via various paths, allowing simple interactions to expand in a non-linear fashion. This is what makes networks so powerful.

Despite its power, the concept of "emergence" has not yet received the recognition it merits in the business world. Things are changing, however. People are beginning to realize that organizational structure is overrated: Successful organizations frequently have an organizational structure in place, but ignore it in practice. Similarly, open-source communities demonstrate that frameworks that put people center-stage are far more likely to be successful. How? By creating simple rules between people that help them self-organize by aligning incentives around a shared goal.

Conclusion:

From singular transformation

to adaptability

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE from these arguments and the evidence we have presented from the business world? Making a company adaptable is a serious undertaking: It involves fundamental change in a broad range of areas.

Companies must embrace the depth of the challenge and not settle for gimmickry. Any change must have a clear direction and not simply be change for change's sake. The company's leadership also needs a cohesive view of the changes introduced across the organization and must understand the links between the different areas affected.

Our experience supporting businesses through challenging times shows us that the answer does not lie in standalone, linear transformations from point A to point B. A more nuanced view on adaptation is needed. Companies must engage in a process of continuous transformation. This is what we mean when we talk about companies achieving "true adaptability".

As we have seen, the adaptable company must be able to adapt on various levels. Guardrail decisions set the overall direction or purpose of the business, particularly with regard to value creation and value networks. The leadership shapes the culture and drives change across the company in a process of continuous experimentation, learning all the time from those experiments. Asking the right questions is key. And the entire organization must be involved in the change, facilitated – not dictated to – by the management.

These three levels on which companies must act – purpose, process and people – form the basis of our simple "3P" framework. Companies can use this framework as a guide to orient themselves or a checklist to ensure that they have what is needed firmly in place. Are you ready to rise to the multifaceted challenge? Are you an adaptable company?

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At Roland Berger we have discussed different aspects of change and the consequences for companies in numerous publications in the Think:Act series and beyond.



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