

# Developing an Adaptability Training Strategy

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*Waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan and confronting the broader threat of terrorism worldwide has presented challenges to the U.S. military that are much different than those of the Cold War era. Adaptation is critical to success.*

## Introduction

DoD asked IDA to help develop a training and exercise environment that would prepare U.S. forces to respond to the asymmetric threats that characterize the current operational environment.

The resulting study identified unpredictability as the principal characteristic of the operational environment and adaptability as the key skill that individuals, units, and teams of commanders and leaders need to learn in order to conduct successful operations. Because there was no empirical evidence that adaptability can be trained, DoD next asked IDA to help develop a proof-of-concept adaptability training experiment and an adaptability training strategy. Though senior military leaders regularly call for the development of adaptive leaders, there is no agreed definition of adaptability within DoD and no consensus on how to improve adaptability in individuals and unit.

## IDA's Model of Adaptability

The basis for training adaptability is a model

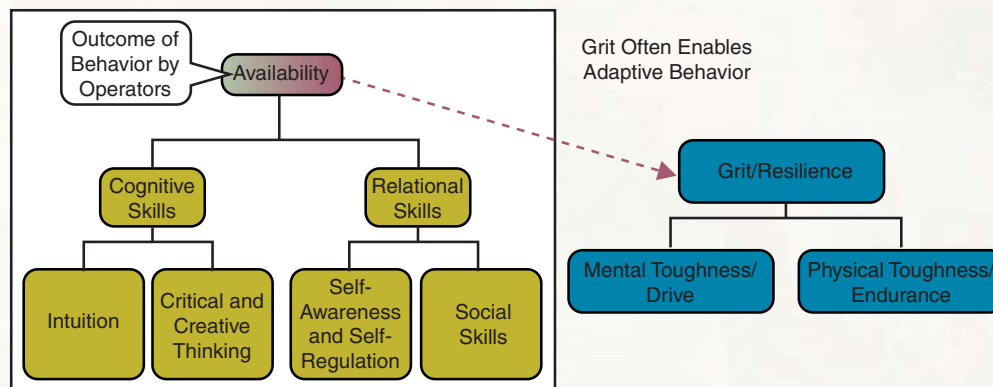


Figure 1: IDA Model of Adaptability.

of adaptability built on the work of numerous scholars and researchers. Adaptability, as defined in the IDA study,<sup>1</sup> is a metaskill: The operable capacity to bring about an effective response to an altered situation. An IDA model of adaptability, depicted in Figure 1, included the cognitive skills of intuition and critical and creative thinking and the relational skills of self-awareness, self-regulation, and a variety of social skills, is depicted in the figure below. In follow-up work, our researchers added grit or resilience to the model, recognizing that these attributes are frequently necessary to allow individuals or teams to cope with the high emotional loads often associated with adaptive situations.<sup>2</sup>

## Is the Military Already Training Adaptability?

To answer this question and identify best-of-breed concepts, DoD convened a two-day adaptability symposium at IDA. In addition to representatives of all the Services, members of academia and of research organizations interested in the subject participated. Surprisingly, while presenters identified training that contributes to developing components of adaptability, the only purpose-designed adaptability training introduced was the Army's Special Warfare Center and School's Adaptive Thinking and Leadership (ATL) program. While anecdotal evidence endorsed the effectiveness of this training, there were no metrics to provide a scientific basis for drawing conclusions about the course's real effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> *Learning to Adapt to Asymmetric Threats*, IDA Document D-3114, August 2005, John C. F. Tillson, et al.

<sup>2</sup> *Developing an Adaptability Training Strategy and Policy for the DoD: Interim Report*, IDA Paper P-4358, October 2008, William R. Burns, & Waldo D. Freeman.

## **Validating the Concept that Adaptability can be Trained**

IDA researchers concluded that an experiment to show that adaptability can be trained would necessarily seek to improve performance in all four of the key skill areas identified initially: intuition, critical and creative thinking, self-awareness and self-regulation, and social skills, including cross-cultural awareness, social awareness, and influence skills. Because adaptability is domain specific, the experiment would need to be tailored to the trainees' job-related adaptability needs. Recent brain function research has shown that effective learning is a function of emotional involvement in the learning process; therefore, the experiment must engage the participants fully. Finally, the experiment would need to vary the training challenge in ways that require those being trained to demonstrate the ability to adapt. Therefore, the study concluded that an experiment should be based around multiple simulated "crucible experience" scenarios requiring behavioral response. Essential to the experiment would be reliable and valid metrics.

## **Proof-of-Concept Experiment**

To carry out an experiment, or concept validation, as described here, DoD—with help from an industrial and organizational psychology consulting firm—designed an experiment conforming to IDA's specifications and vetted it with Service representatives and academic experts. Two iterations of the experiment were conducted. The first involved Army personnel who were members of the Military Transition Training (MiTT) Teams undergoing pre-deployment training at Ft. Riley. A second experiment was conducted with students at the Marine Corps Officer Basic Course at Quantico.

## **Adaptability—More Than Just Training**

While both experiments provided evidence that purpose-designed training can improve adaptability, the relevant literature clearly indicates that adaptability depends on much more than training.<sup>3</sup> Adaptability is a function of individual personality, cognitive ability, and experience. It requires a foundation of domain-

specific skills, the development of the adaptability skills reflected in the IDA model, and the proper motivation and attitude. Enhancing individual and organizational adaptability depends on a commitment to continuing education and to developing learning organizations. Adaptability is also greatly influenced by organizational culture. Rules, norms, resource allocation, and rewards and other consequences of adaptive performance all contribute to facilitating or inhibiting adaptive performance.

DoD's current initiative is directed toward enhancing the adaptability of general purpose forces—individuals, units, teams. The hypothesis is that all people are adaptable to some degree, but they can become more adaptable and, hence, more effective as the result of specific interventions. What interventions are likely to have the greatest effect?

While interventions in training offer promise, research has indicated that interventions in education and those affecting one's overarching life experience are likely to influence adaptability more. While a small portion of anyone's life is spent in training, 12 to 16 years of most people's early life is spent in education, with the opportunity to continue that education in one form or another throughout life. Two areas for possible intervention stand out. A main goal, if not the principal goal, of education is to develop critical thinking skills, one of the four principal component skills of adaptability. Thus, interventions in military education—at the academies, in ROTC, in postgraduate school, or in Professional Military Education—could potentially contribute to enhancing leaders' critical thinking skills. Similarly, interventions in education could affect the development of adaptability-related communication skills, the lack of which in today's college graduates has been identified as a particular weakness by both senior business and senior military leaders.

Interventions to enhance the experiential contribution to the development of adaptability might focus on career assignments.

Finally, there exists the potential for interventions that would modify elements of organizational culture to support the development of adaptable individuals and, in turn, adaptable institutions. Promotion policies, attitudes towards risk, how failure is treated, and the manner in which inspections are conducted

<sup>3</sup> PDRI succinctly summarized and illustrated many of the relevant factors in its Proof of Concept Validation Plan. Proof of Concept Research For Developing Adaptive Performance: Task 2 Report, Validation Plan. Prepared by Rose A. Mueller-Hanson, Johnathan K. Nelson, and Erin Swartout, July 2009, PDRI, Arlington, VA.

are several examples of organizational practices where initiatives and interventions might influence the development of adaptability.

### **Conclusion**

The adaptability training initiative has so far provided instructive insights, and it has also served as an excellent catalyst to address the larger issue: How does the military develop more adaptive individuals and organizations in order to deal with the uncertainty,

unpredictability, complexity, thinking and adapting enemies, and increasingly rapid change of the operational environment? Research to date suggests that the task of developing an adaptability training strategy should serve as the forerunner of the larger task of creating an overall strategy for developing more adaptable individuals and institutions throughout the military.