



'PLAN B TO Z' THINKING

The best-laid plans can be derailed by retrenchment, a relationship breakdown or other changes. By developing flexible 'Plan B to Z' thinking you'll be able to power ahead *anyway*. By Glynis Horning

Your greatest asset in uncertain times is not your flat or car (which can be repossessed or break down), your investments (which can depreciate) or even your man (who can dump you or be distracted by difficulties of his own). It's being able to think flexibly. 'Flexible thinking is the ability to look outside the box, and see the bigger picture and different possibilities,' says Johannesburg transformational coach Steve Wright Krummeck, owner of The Right Coaching Company and author of *The Game Of Life And Success* (Kima Global Publishers). 'This "Plan B to Z" thinking allows you not only to ride out change, but also to see it as an opportunity and enjoy the ride!'

Inflexible people struggle when required to change, says Durban industrial psychologist and corporate-change specialist Robyn Sandy, MD of Interchange International SA. Their battle is caused more by ignorance than inability, she says. 'Everyone is capable of being flexible to some degree. Typically, one of three things holds you back: you don't recognise that you are inflexible, you don't know how to be more flexible or you aren't prepared to make the effort required to be flexible. It's like Tom Sawyer says: "Sometimes I just have to take out my brain and jump on it 'cos it gets all caked up.'"

Most people don't choose to be inflexible, says Sandy. 'It happens at a subconscious level in the brain. The phrase "neurons that fire together wire together" says it all. The more time you spend thinking about a certain idea or course of action, the more time the brain has to lay down pathways to process information on it. Your brain simply gets "wired" to work with an idea, and then it's much easier to stick with that idea or follow the same course of action again and again.'

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Being flexible and entertaining new ideas means having to create new pathways or neuronetworks in the brain. This takes time and effort, and the pathways are not always effective at first, says Sandy – they develop and lead to complex thinking over time.

'People don't understand this brain activity – all they know is that it feels much better to stick with what they know, which robs them of the chance to explore new ideas and ways of doing things. They don't even think about it consciously – they respond subconsciously and sometimes miss out on the very best alternatives in life.'

Flexible people become *more* flexible over time, because they know how to change gears mentally. And the more they do it the easier it becomes, she says. Similarly, inflexible people become more rigid over time. 'They never learn to make that mind shift, so they get left behind more and more as the world changes around them.'

It's essential to strive for greater levels of flexibility, she says, because the changes will get faster, bigger and less predictable. Our survival will depend on our ability to be flexible. As Charles Darwin said, 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.'

GET FLEXIBLE

Develop your 'Plan B to Z' thinking with 12 steps:

1 MAKE MINI CHANGES. Start by doing things differently in small ways, advises Krummeck. Try getting up 10 minutes earlier and reading something inspirational (see '7 books to boost "Plan B to Z" thinking'), take a new route to work or order a different sandwich. When you meet obstacles, rather than resisting them rigidly like a rock, try working with and around them, like water. As Wayne Dyer, author of *Change Your Thoughts – Change Your Life* (Hay House), says, nothing is softer or more flexible than water but nothing can resist it – it can carve a way through the hardest rock. Think Blyde River Canyon!

2 SAY YES. You don't have to go as far as *Yes Man* Jim Carrey, but if you always say no to things you haven't tried you could be robbing yourself of a great experience or opportunity to grow. When tycoon Donald Trump was asked to sing on stage dressed in overalls and a straw hat, holding a pitchfork, it was out of his realm but he agreed. 'I was flexible enough to accept a singing assignment even though singing is not my forte,' he writes on www.trumpuniversity.com. 'I ended up winning the talent category and everyone had a good time. Don't let opportunities pass you by because of your inflexibility.'

3 LET GO. When something stops working for you, whether it's a relationship, a job or a gym routine, it's easy to keep on with it out of habit, laziness or the fear of exploring other options. But, as William Dettmer, author of *Strategic Navigation* (ASQ), says, that's like trying to keep riding a dead horse.

4 TAKE TIME OUT. Depending on the size of crisis or change you encounter, a brief break at the water cooler, a cathartic cry in the loo, a good night's sleep or a weekend retreat can help you calm your nerves, and find energy and a new perspective for a fresh approach. Don't be rushed by panic into something you regret, says Krummeck. 'Take the opportunity to reappraise your life, goals and values, and perhaps take a new direction!' ▶

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5 ASK EMPOWERING QUESTIONS. Ask yourself what you want most in life, advises Krummeck. How best can you get it? What transferable skills do you have that can help you? How can you polish them – with studying, reading, mentoring? What's realistic? What can you now put in your Plan B as firm goals going forwards: take a second job to support a study year, perhaps? Or do charity work to give your life meaning while you look for something more fulfilling?

6 PRACTISE PROBLEM-SOLVING. To problem-solve effectively you need to brainstorm different solutions, polish your communication skills, practise assertiveness (take a course if necessary) and establish where to get help. 'When faced with change or a crisis, the easiest way to tackle it is to list all possible alternatives, then jot down the pros and cons of each, and weight them rationally,' says Krummeck. Depending on the extent of the problem, do this with trusted and well-informed friends or a professional life coach.

7 COMPROMISE. What you resist persists, so instead of resisting what doesn't work for you, compromise. Compromise is about sacrificing something to gain something else, says Krummeck. 'You often need to take a step back and compromise for a time in order to take a big

step forward. You may need to take a pay cut or downsize the car while you study or do a fill-in job while you find what you really want. But set boundaries – give yourself a time limit and keep reminding yourself of your core values and goals.'

8 REACH FOR RESILIENCE. Change can feel frightening, causing you to freeze or be swept passively along by forces you feel powerless to fight. But as the T-shirt says, 'Only dead fish go with the flow'. Use your time out (see step 4) to reconnect with the inner strength that is always there if you dig (it's part of your survival mechanism), and unburden yourself to supportive friends. Resilience is about shifting your focus from what happened and your immediate fears to what to do next, says US life coach Susan Fee, author of *My Roommate's Driving Me Crazy!* (Adams Media). It's also about having confidence and a sense of preparedness, says Cape Town executive coach Shirleen Titus. Tell yourself, 'Come hell or high water, I'm going to make it!'

9 LOOK OUTSIDE THE BOX. When you come across an obstacle in life, look over or around it and ask yourself, 'How can I make it work for me?' says Krummeck. 'Think laterally, be creative. Let go of preconceptions, relax into the moment and let your thoughts run free – you'll be amazed what opportunities will reveal themselves when you open yourself.' He suggests writing questions for the challenge you face. 'Then wait for the answers to come later, when you may be driving, walking the dogs or lying in the bath,' he says.

10 USE COMMON SENSE. This is simply sound judgment that can stop you acting rashly and fuelling a crisis rather than taking

an alternative path past it. Exercise your common sense by challenging limiting ideas ('I can't handle this; this is too much for me!'), says Krummeck, and get balanced information to help you make informed decisions on the available alternatives. Then use common sense again to negotiate the most appropriate one, calmly and carefully.

11 KEEP UPBEAT. Monitor your self-talk so it becomes positive, says Krummeck. 'Scientists say we have some 60 000 thoughts a day, many of them habitual, and for the average person 80% are negative. Negative self-talk can keep you stuck in what's become a dysfunctional relationship or unsatisfying job because you simply don't believe you deserve better.' Cultivate optimism, which is liberating and energising. 'It's a powerful driver in moving you forwards,' he says, 'and, because it draws other people to you, it eases your way.'

12 BE CUNNING! Finally, don't underestimate the native intelligence you're wired with. Use your smarts to rattle networks, jam your foot in potentially useful doors, grip promising straws, and climb or charm your way upwards, even if it's only a centimetre at a time. Cunning is an underestimated life skill. It's part of the survival instinct that powered mankind to the top of the food chain – at least for now. □

7 books to boost 'Plan B to Z' thinking

 <p>A Whack On The Side Of The Head by Roger von Oech (Business Plus)</p>	 <p>Goals! How To Get Everything You Want - Faster Than You Ever Thought Possible by Brian Tracy (Berrett-Koehler)</p>	 <p>Ready Or Not, Here Life Comes by Mel Levine (Simon & Schuster)</p>	 <p>Creative Leadership by Gerard Puccio, Mary Murdock and Marie Mance (Sage)</p>	 <p>Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid edited by Robert Sternberg (Yale University Press)</p>	 <p>Where Do I Go From Here? An Inspirational Guide To Making Authentic Career & Life Choices by Kenneth Ruge (McGraw-Hill)</p>	 <p>The Rules Of Life by Richard Templar (Prentice Hall)</p>
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7 EXERCISES TO S-T-R-E-T-C-H YOUR FLEXIBILITY:

- 1. **Listen to people you disagree with** – try to follow their logic and see things from their perspective.
- 2. **Examine opposing arguments for points of agreement** – there will almost always be some when you get to the heart of the matter.
- 3. **Consider uncommon or controversial ideas.** Don't be afraid to try them out – you may find that you like one.
- 4. **Question yourself regularly.** Ask yourself why you are doing what you're doing – whether it's because of your thinking or a habit, and whether there could be another approach. You might also decide there's no need to do anything at all.
- 5. **Weigh every argument.** Don't accept things at face value – challenge people and even statistics. (Who says so – and what's their authority?)
- 6. **Use your right brain as well as your left** – test things with your intuition as well as your intellect and use different information sources (books, reputable websites, other people).
- 7. **Look for the laugh.** Open yourself to the humour that's in most situations and lighten up – it gives rise to some of the freshest solutions.

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