


Flexibility by Tim Sparrow and Jo Maddocks

Our 8th scale of the 'ie'  - is Flexibility; 'the degree to which we feel free to adapt our thinking and our behaviour to match the changing situations in life'. This scale follows on from goal directedness as it provides necessary balance. As with all our linear scales, one can not have too much flexibility; where the apparently over-flexible may in fact be disordered is in lacking sufficient goal directedness. An individual who has a high capacity to flex but lacks goal directedness is likely to change direction constantly and not see things through. Contrariwise, a person who is highly goal directed but lacks flexibility is unlikely to shift their approach or position regardless of how futile it may prove to be.

Some people are surprised that flexibility is a linear, "more is better", scale, rather than a bipolar, "you can have too much of a good thing", scale. The crucial point in this respect is the definition: 'flexibility' here refers not to the degree to which we adapt, but to the degree to which we *feel free* to adapt. So that we can easily adapt when necessary and appropriate, but also can stick to our guns when that is what is needed. Having the capacity to flex is not the same as doing it. Some people, for example, are rigidly flexible, in that they insist on always doing things differently and avoid all repetition or routine. In effect this is actually being inflexible, as true flexibility involves adapting appropriately to our circumstances, rather than insisting on change when change is not required. In order to adapt appropriately we need to be aware of ourselves and of others. If I begin to realise through my increased self awareness that I constantly change the way I behave because I don't want people to get to know the real me, then I will begin to understand that my behaviour is likely to be maladaptive and ineffective because it is determined by my own internal needs, rather than by the external needs of the situation.

It can be helpful to understanding the idea of flexibility to consider its opposite: rigidity. People who are rigid, who stick to the same patterns of behaviour, or of thinking or of feeling, whether or not they are appropriate and adaptive, usually do this out of fear. They tend to stick with what they know, because they fear the unknown. Adapting our behaviour appropriately often requires moving outside of our comfort zones. If we have low self regard then we may resist trying out new behaviours as they may expose us to failure and humiliation. This is very apparent between adults and children in learning a new sport such as skiing. Adults will typically want to study and understand 'how to ski' so as to avoid falling over, while the child will usually learn far more rapidly by 'doing it' having a go and learning from trial and error. An important attitude in helping to develop flexibility is that 'failure is only feedback'. Of course, if we have low self esteem we may turn a failure of our doing into 'I am a failure' i.e. an unconditional put down, so we therefore try to avoid failure. Someone with higher self regard, on the other hand, will tend to build fewer boundaries around their behaviour because they have a more stable inner core. This allows them to experience failure as useful learning and conditional feedback i.e. about their behaviour than about their whole being. Consequently they will be far more willing to experiment, try new things out, trial and error and so on.

It is not just Self Regard which has an influence on our level of flexibility, so too does our Regard for Others (scale 2). Having low regard for others is likely to reduce our willingness to flex and adapt ourselves to the needs of others. If I assume that I am right and others are wrong then I may be less aware of the needs of others and less reasonable and flexible in compromising or cooperating with their wants.

1. Self Regard
2. Regard for Others
3. Self Awareness
4. Awareness of Others
5. Emotional Resilience
6. Personal Power
7. Goal Directedness
8. Flexibility
9. Personal Openness
10. Trustworthiness
11. Trust
12. Balanced Outlook
13. Emotional Expression & Control
14. Conflict Handling
15. Interdependence
16. Self Assessed EI

Another scale that should be considered in relation to flexibility is Invitation to Trust. If I lack inner principles I may be unpredictable and inconsistent in my behaviour. Again, this may appear flexible, which may be used as a justification by people tend to behave like this. However, this flexing is inappropriate and maladaptive.

One way to develop our Flexibility is through changing our habits of behaviour. Habits are unconscious and automatic responses we apply to a given situation, so by definition imply inflexibility. Habit change first requires becoming aware of our automatic behaviours and questioning whether these are still helpful to us. In order to change the habit we will need to rehearse and repeat the new behaviour over a period of time so that this becomes our new default response.

Before we leave Flexibility, it is worth spending some time considering why it is so important. First let us consider the relationship between flexibility and leadership. Different situations require different leaderships styles. And so do different people. To be flexible is therefore an absolute requirement for the effective leader.

More generally, flexibility is a key predictor of individual responses to change interventions of all kinds. For example, the higher an alcoholic or drug addict's flexibility, the more likely they are to respond positively to a detox programme. And since EI development involves people changing and developing themselves, the higher a person's flexibility, the more likely they are to change rapidly and significantly, in other words the more their EI is likely to grow.

Our habitual responses to the world and patterns of behaviour are predicated on our beliefs and values. The key Principle of Emotional Intelligence insofar as flexibility is concerned is No.7: "Change is possible, including change of ourselves". This is by way of being a self-fulfilling prophecy: if we believe that change is possible, then we shall find it relatively easy to change and grow. But if we don't believe it, then we shall find change difficult in practice too.

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