

## **Cognitive Complexity and Adaptability**

**Ken Petress**

1. Cognitive complexity refers to a person having at one's disposal behavioral or cognitive options. We all know of people who act in a static, linear way even when that method has proven unsuccessful in the past. They do not have many alternative choices to choose from.

Going into situations with little or no alternatives with which to work with can be daunting, depressing, and scary. One method of acquiring options is to anticipate various ways scenarios might unfold and what options you might have to cope with these situations. It is far more effective entering situations armed with pre thought out reactions or actions than to be surprised all the time due to a lack of planning or anticipation. While not all situations can be anticipated, many of life's circumstances can be wholly or partially anticipated if we take the time and effort to think them through.

2. Choices are learned from role modeling, observation, experience, trial and error, and study. Just because you intellectually know of alternatives, it does not necessarily translate into action when real life situations arise. Alternatives must be able to be put into action to be useful.

3. Not all options need to be exercised; in fact, many of life's options may well never be put into practice.

The fact that we have options is a comfort to us; we know that we are unlikely to be cornered with only one course of action or thought; this is liberating.

When others know or suspect that you have alternative ways to act or think, they will be less likely to predict what you will do and thus you will not likely be trapped by others' predictions of your actions. When we become less predictable by others, we retain greater autonomy.

4. Having action or thought alternatives makes us more flexible. Flexibility in our actions and thoughts typically sends out signals of strength, intelligence, power, commend, legitimacy, control, autonomy, awareness, and experience to others around us. While all these traits are not in actuality connected to our flexibility, they nevertheless are assumed by many and therefore, we benefit from those perceptions – but only if we first exhibit some observable level of genuine flexibility.

There is a saying that “perception becomes reality.” While this is not literally true, it is effectively the case in many instances; perceptions are sufficiently believed and trusted as if they were true.

5. Not all alternatives need to be exercised. If others believe or know you have some options available to you, this may cause certain utterances or actions to not be made thus saving us from having to exercise these options. Such inactive deterrence can be very helpful.
6. People who lack cognitive complexity often find themselves trapped into limited action paths, often repeating failed past attempts and frequently and predictably failing again. This leads to significant frustration and anxiety and sometimes contributes to people avoiding situations due to their relative incompetence, their self fulfilling prophecies of failure, and their lack of confidence in being able to cope.
7. Adaptability is commonly associated with leadership. A leader is most competent when followers feel confident that the leader can and will be able to adapt to new or changing circumstances. Another trait associated with leadership is vision; vision entails anticipation of future events. Awareness of alternatives allows leaders more effective promise.