Cognitive Flexibility Thinking

Idea In Short

Plans fail, customers change, and rules shift in the middle of a project. The people who cope best are not always the smartest or most experienced. They are the ones who can drop a strategy that has stopped working and try another without losing their footing. Psychologists call this ability cognitive flexibility, and they treat it as a core executive function. This article explains what the term means, how researchers measure it, why the definitions still differ, and how leaders can train flexible thinking in themselves and in teams without confusing it with indecision or constant change for its own sake.

A product manager spends six weeks refining a pricing model that assumes customers compare prices carefully. Interviews keep showing that customers barely notice the price and care about onboarding time. She keeps refining the model, because it is the thing she already built. A colleague asks, "What if price is the wrong question?" The room goes quiet, and then the work changes direction.

What the term means

Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to adjust thinking and action when circumstances change. An encyclopedia entry on mental flexibility defines it as the ability to shift a course of thought or action according to the changing demands of a situation, and says that flexibility lets an individual abandon a previous response pattern to generate an alternative better suited to the situation. It adds that flexibility is a hallmark executive function and a key attribute underlying creative thought.1

The definition holds three ideas. First, something changes in the situation. Second, the person notices and drops an old pattern. Third, the person generates a new one that fits better. Any of the three steps can fail.

The manager above failed at the second step. She saw the evidence but kept the old frame,

because switching felt like wasting six weeks of work.

Where it sits in the mind

Researchers class flexibility among the executive functions, the processes that control goal-directed behavior. A review in Nature Reviews Neuroscience notes that cognitive and behavioural flexibility fall under this broader category, and it describes an influential account in which executive functions include three latent variables: mental set-shifting, updating in working memory, and inhibition of prepotent responses.2

This structure explains why flexible thinking draws on several abilities. You need to inhibit the habit of continuing, update your picture of the situation, and shift to a new approach. A person who is strong at one and weak at another may seem flexible in some settings and rigid in others.

For managers, the point is practical. When someone seems stuck, ask which part is hard: noticing the change, letting go of the old approach, or inventing a new one.

Shifting is not the whole story

Many studies use set-shifting tasks as a stand-in for flexibility. In these tasks, people switch rapidly between rules, and researchers measure how much slower or less accurate they become. Ionescu and colleagues tested whether this proxy covers the idea fully. They gave people tasks in language, mathematics, perception, and executive function, and found that shifting does not seem to underlie flexibility in all the domains, so the construct does not exhaust the notion of flexibility.3

The authors call for replication, and the finding fits a broader pattern. Flexibility looks partly domain-specific. A person may switch gracefully between spreadsheet models and still struggle to change a long-held view about people.

This matters for leaders who try to hire or develop for flexibility. A single test will not capture it, and success in one area does not guarantee it in another.

A concept still being defined

A recent review in Frontiers in Human Neuroscience describes cognitive flexibility as dynamic processes that allow adaptation of thinking and behavior in response to changing contextual demands. It also reports that, despite wide agreement about its benefits, the concept is still poorly understood, and that definition and assessment are not unified in the field.4

Leaders should treat claims about training flexibility with some care. Different studies measure different things, and results from a lab task may not carry over to a boardroom. The sensible stance is to use the idea as a practical lens while staying modest about what has been proved.

It is also worth noting that flexibility varies over a lifetime and with conditions. An encyclopedia entry observes that cognitive flexibility changes across the lifespan and that it is a vital component of learning.5

Noticing that it is not working

An explainer from the University of British Columbia describes shifting as the ability to see that what you are doing is not working and to make the appropriate changes. That description puts the first step in the right place, which is noticing.6

Noticing requires a trigger. Without a prompt, people tend to continue with what they have been doing, because effort already spent feels like a reason to continue. Build triggers into work: a checkpoint at the end of each sprint, a rule that asks whether the plan still matches the evidence, or a standing question such as "What would make us change course?"

Define the signals in advance. For a launch, you might say that if sign-ups fall below a number by day ten, the team will review the offer. A rule written in calm conditions is easier to follow when pressure rises.

Practicing flexible thinking

Start with varied practice. People get better at switching when they face problems of different types and must choose their approach. Rotate assignments, pair people across functions, and hold sessions where the same problem is tackled from different angles.

Use deliberate reframing. Take a stuck problem and restate it three ways: as a customer problem, a cost problem, and a timing problem. Each frame suggests different options, and the exercise loosens attachment to the first one.

Reflect afterward. Ask what you assumed, what evidence changed your mind, and how quickly you noticed. Keep short notes, because patterns emerge over months, such as a tendency to cling to plans you wrote yourself.

Flexibility under pressure

Stress narrows attention, and a narrow focus makes switching harder. People under deadline tend to repeat what they know, even when it fails. Leaders can protect flexibility by slowing down at key points, such as setting aside fifteen minutes to ask whether the current approach still fits before committing more resources.

Simple routines help. A short pause, a written list of alternatives, or a call to a colleague from another function can break the grip of a failing plan. These steps cost little, and they are easier to use when the team has practiced them in calmer times.

Leading flexible teams

Teams show flexibility when they treat plans as hypotheses. Leaders can encourage this by praising the person who spots a failing plan early, and by avoiding punishment for changes of course that the evidence supports.

Balance matters. A team that changes direction every week wastes effort and loses trust. Set a rhythm for review, such as every two weeks, and require that a proposed change come with evidence and a clear next test.

Make disagreement safe. Flexible groups hear dissent before commitments harden. Invite the sharpest critic to speak first in a review, and ask others to build on the critique before they defend the plan.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical logistics team that built its routing plan around fuel cost. After a

quarter of poor results, the team lead asks three questions: what problem do customers really have, what would we do if fuel were free, and what would we do if time windows were the only constraint. The second question changes nothing, and the third reveals that missed delivery windows drive complaints.

The team rebuilds the plan around windows, tests it in one city, and cuts complaints within two months. The case is invented, but it shows how a few reframing questions can move a team from a fixed approach to a fitting one.

Cautions

Flexibility is not the same as having no commitments. A person who changes positions with every conversation lacks direction, and others will stop trusting the person's word. Hold firm on goals and values, and flex on methods.

Avoid reading too much into a single test or trait label. Researchers still debate how to measure the idea, so use observation across situations and not a single score.

Finally, remember that switching has a cost. Each change takes attention and time. Switch when the evidence supports it, and give the new approach a fair trial before you judge it.

- 1Mental flexibility, reference work entry
- 2Cognitive and behavioural flexibility review
- 3Is cognitive flexibility equivalent to shifting?
- 4Cognitive flexibility review
- 5Cognitive flexibility
- 6Cognitive shifting definition

Summary

Cognitive flexibility thinking means switching strategies and frames when the situation demands it. Researchers describe it as a set of processes that allow adaptation to changing contextual demands, and they note that the definition and measurement of the concept are still not unified. Leaders can build the skill through varied practice, deliberate reflection, and

checks that ask whether the current approach still fits. Avoid confusing flexibility with drift, since good judgment still needs commitments. This week, pick one stalled problem, write down your current approach, and list two different frames that could work before you decide whether to switch and what evidence would settle it.