

**The Adaptive Leader's Toolkit:  
Practical Tools and Techniques  
from the Front Lines**

by Nikolay Angelov

# **Introduction: The evolving landscape of engineering leadership**

Twenty years ago, the role of an engineering leader mainly looked the same: guiding teams, delivering products, and running operations in production. Today, the landscape has undergone a dramatic shift. Technology evolves at breakneck speed. Teams are more diverse and distributed than ever before. As I write this, AI is rapidly transforming the way we work. Large language models capable of mimicking human behaviour and automating complex tasks which is transforming how we work. In this environment, the only constant is change. The only way to thrive is to adapt. Leaders must learn quickly and continuously.

## **Does the Engineering Leader Have a Future?**

How important is the role of the engineering leader? It is a vital role, although not everyone recognises its importance. There are many perspectives on the role of engineering leaders. Some individual contributors may not always fully understand the scope of leadership responsibilities, while others may focus on direct, measurable outcomes. These differing viewpoints can sometimes cause misunderstandings about the value that leaders bring to their organisations. In reality, effective engineering leadership is essential for aligning teams, driving innovation, and ensuring long-term organisational success.

However, engineering leaders are always present in every organisation, whether in a formal or informal position.

Sometimes, the leader is the strongest and most respected character on the engineering team. It is often a formal engineering manager, head, or director. The title is not what matters most. What matters is the person who takes care of product development, operations, scalability, goals, people's happiness, and performance. In any group working toward a common goal, it is natural for someone to stand out as a leader. This is the person who is heard more often, whom others follow, sometimes unconsciously. It is the person who takes extra responsibility, even when it is not required, who is proactive in addressing issues, who is ready to help even when their workload is heavy, and who is not afraid to say no or provide constructive feedback at every level.

### **The Title Does Not Matter; the Role Is What Matters**

Many of you might disagree with this statement. People see success differently, but everyone expects some reward for it. The nature of that reward varies depending on people's mindsets and values. Some value only financial benefits. Others insist on title and reputation. Many want a combination of both. But does it matter if you are a CxO of a failing company with no team and no followers? What if you are a "Director," but nothing depends on you, and you have no empowerment to make decisions or support your team? What does the title bring you? Is it just fake appreciation from the outside or a better starting point for your next career move? Experience and achievements matter more than titles. The role and responsibilities bring you value in the long run, not a

"fancy" title that you can keep only as a line on your professional social media or in your CV.

## **Who Is This Book For, and How Can You Use It?**

I wrote this book to provide *you* with new, practical tools for *your* day-to-day leadership or management work. While I hope anyone interested in leadership will find value here, I designed this book primarily for those already in formal leadership positions, especially in the tech industry. The content is based on my own experience and the experiences of other leaders, mainly from the engineering management professional track. In it, *you* will find a combination of theory, my perspective on each tool, and practical examples from the real world.

Think of this book as *your* toolkit - something to return to when *you* face new challenges or want to reflect on *your* leadership approach. Each chapter is designed to be actionable, offering not only ideas but also concrete techniques that *you* can apply immediately. Whether *you* are a seasoned manager or a technical lead stepping up, *you* will find strategies here to help *you* and *your* team adapt, grow, and succeed.

The book is structured to provide a fundamental understanding of how to gain adaptability, why it matters, and what the competitive advantage of this is. Then, follow multiple areas and examples in which adaptability can be a real game-changer. The end of the book will focus on the fuel for adaptability.

Are you ready to lead with adaptability?

# Chapter 1

## **Start with Analysis and Reflection: gain awareness**

Before we understand how to apply adaptability and what it means, we need to be clear on what tools and techniques can foster this skill for us. Although there are various essential tools you can use to increase your adaptability, I will focus on Emotional Intelligence here and revisit it at the end of this book.

Everybody has heard about emotional intelligence (also known as emotional quotient or EQ), in one way or another. However, most people don't understand what stands behind it. Emotional intelligence is critical in every aspect of our lives. There are multiple well-recognised sources of information about Emotional Intelligence, including books, sources or even videos. Many people associate emotional intelligence solely with empathy, the ability to understand and share other people's feelings. Empathy is essential - but it's only one part of the equation. EQ isn't just empathy. It's self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. It is a way to understand yourself and others, and to manage your own emotions and those of the people around you. In this book, we'll focus on the first two.

Both self-awareness and social awareness are key elements in gaining awareness and preparing ourselves to adapt. Here is a simple explanation of both terms:

- Self-awareness - Understand your emotions by reflecting on what triggers them. Emotions often stem more from your inner state than external actions. Regularly question your reactions - ask why you feel a certain way and what triggered those feelings to uncover root causes. Cultivate self-understanding through introspection, even in everyday preferences. Another way to say this is 'self-reflection'.
- Social awareness - Be attuned to others by observing behaviour, listening actively, and practising empathy. Understand people's emotions by putting yourself in their shoes and reading nonverbal cues, always seeking context to grasp their perspective.

Most people believe that what matters to them is the same for the rest of the people around them. This is rarely true. In addition, the information that flows through us every day from social media and networks, although it seems to encompass the entire world, is often a tiny, little universe, just for us. But the information, people's reactions and the fact that no matter where you look, you see a related topic or news, makes us feel that this is the same for everyone else. Each of us lives in a small "informational and emotional bubble" which I call a "micro universe". Or in other words, we all live together in a multiverse with some overlap between different universes, just like Venn diagrams.

Consider the following example, *once shared with me by a coworker, who went to buy a sandwich from a small, local shop. When it was time to pay, she handed the cashier a \$50 bill. The sandwich, however, cost just \$3,99. The problem is that the seller has a limited amount of change, and if he gives it all to her, he will be out of change for hours. It causes him frustration, and it may also cause him panic. At that moment, it must have been hard for him to understand why she hadn't brought change with her! "Don't they know a sandwich costs just ~\$4?!" Well, the seller had no idea that my colleague had been having a busy day, all filled with meetings, and she had only 15 minutes to pass by the ATM and go directly to buy your precious sandwich. Viewed from my colleague's perspective, she wonders why the seller is so frustrated!?* She is bringing money to pay. How difficult is it for the seller to prepare with some advance notice of a change? They are doing business every day! They should be prepared. Maybe she didn't realise that you are the third person in a role who came with \$50 for a ~\$4 sandwich, and the cashier wouldn't have a chance to go out and find change in the next four hours, as they are just an employee and should keep the place running.

## Self-Awareness

To master adaptability, you should first understand yourself and the environment around you. Without this knowledge, it is nearly impossible to adapt to the situation or change. Self-awareness is the first step, as people can manage their emotions and their behaviour when they truly understand themselves. This is not an easy process, but there

are some good techniques which are efficient and straightforward.

- **Self-Reflection** - Take 15 minutes per day to gain a deeper understanding of yourself. We are always busy and in a hurry for something, but we all have 15 minutes per day. Just find what time works for you, but spend it on self-reflection. Reflect on the situation from the past day, and consider your emotions; be fully honest with yourself. What triggered this emotion? Why did I react this way? And don't stop on the first why, ask yourself several times “, but why???”. Also, try to use some critical thinking on your first thoughts - “Is this the real reason? Is there only one way to do things?”. If you like to write, take it one step further and start journaling by writing down your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and reactions. This can provide incredible insights.
- **Identify Your Values** - While reflecting on your day-to-day emotions, consider what truly matters to you. Understand what your values are and what motivates you. This will help you understand your feelings better, and when you know them, you will be better equipped to manage your emotions and reactions, ultimately feeling more at peace with yourself.
- **Seek feedback** - others' perception of you is always helpful. Look for both positive and constructive feedback. Even when you disagree with it, consider why this person views me in a specific situation in such

a light. How do I envision myself in a similar situation? Why is it different? This could not only reveal some blind spots but also help you gain some social awareness.

## The Five-Second Moment of Self-Awareness

*The meeting room was barely big enough for my team. The air was thick with the smell of coffee and the low hum of tired voices. It was our bi-weekly retrospective, and I was already running on fumes from a day packed with meetings and firefighting.*

*We started the usual “glad, sad, mad” routine, sticky notes in hand. I tried to focus, but my mind kept drifting to the next crisis. Then, one of my engineers—a sharp, ambitious junior—spoke up. “I think we’re not as autonomous as we could be. There’s a bottleneck in the team, and honestly, it’s you.”*

*I felt my jaw clench. Others chimed in, gently but firmly, with examples: code reviews waiting on me, decisions stalled, priorities shifting every other day. I could feel my annoyance rising, my defences snapping into place.*

*“So what should we do?” I shot back, my voice sharper than I intended. “Ignore urgent issues because we’re busy with something less important?”*

*He hesitated. “No, but it’s demotivating. We need a better way.”*

*I raised my voice. “No, no, and NO! We’re professionals. We’re paid to handle context switches. That’s just part of the job.”*

*The room went silent. I saw the discomfort in their eyes, the way people looked down or away. Then, the catalyst—our company’s process coach—spoke up. “Wait a second, we’re not in the army here. Do you think the feedback the team gave isn’t valid?”*

*I tried to protest. “Well, no, but—”*

*She cut me off. “Why wouldn’t this feedback be professional? These are real examples of how your actions affect the team. It’s fair feedback.”*

*I stopped. For a moment, I just sat there, replaying the last few months in my head. I thought that I was leading by example, splitting my time between technical work and management. I thought I was helping. But in that quiet, I realised: my actions, no matter how well-intentioned, were holding the team back.*

*“You’re right,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “All of you,” I explained my perspective, but I knew something had shifted.*

*After the meeting, I stayed behind with the catalyst. She asked how I felt. I told her, honestly, that I was grateful she’d*

*stepped in. I asked for her advice, and she offered to coach me. We started regular one-on-ones. I read everything she suggested about leadership styles. I began spending fifteen minutes each day reflecting on my actions.*

*That meeting was a turning point. The team grew stronger, more honest, and more motivated. We built real trust. And I learned that self-awareness isn't just a leadership buzzword—it's the foundation for everything that comes after.*

*No matter how good your intentions, your actions can still hurt the people you care about. That's why self-awareness matters. That's how you grow.*

## Social-Awareness

Understanding the environment may be a more iterative process, as it constantly changes and is usually affected by various factors. Therefore, conduct a thorough analysis to understand the factors that affect the environment, how the environment and other people interact, what drives the motivation of others, and what triggers your emotions. When you build this complete picture, you can think of how I can adapt to this situation or even manage it if necessary. It may sound simple, but it requires a great deal of patience, observation, a thoughtful process, and active listening. Here are some techniques that could help you:

- **Observe Nonverbal Cues** - Notice facial expressions, gestures, posture, and eye contact. These often reveal more about someone's feelings than their words do.

- **Practice Empathy** - Try to put yourself in others' shoes. Ask yourself, "How might they be feeling right now?" or "What might be influencing their behaviour?" This helps you respond with compassion.
- **Do not assume** - Assumptions in these situations are your enemy. Often, assumptions are wrong and might lead you into a pitfall. Just listen and analyse what you're hearing. Consider how dots connect and what drives the information you see and hear. Let's look at an example.

## When Empathy Beat Assumptions

*I was nervously waiting in the meeting room, my head was still dizzy from the drive on the right side of the road from Luton. I always find it hard to overcome this for my brain, considering I am from Bulgaria.*

*My manager walked in, all smiles, but I could barely focus on the small talk. I was here with a mission: figure out why our carefully planned software improvements were falling flat.*

*We'd spent months on this update, every decision backed by usage data. However, not only were users ignoring the new features, but some were also outright complaining. It didn't make sense.*

*So, my colleague and I went straight to the source. For days, we shadowed users, watching them work, asking questions—at first, too many questions. We quickly learned that*

*interrogating people only made them defensive. So we switched gears. We just watched, listened, and asked for their opinions.*

*That's when things changed. People began to open up, sharing their frustrations and ideas. Not every suggestion was practical, but suddenly, we saw the real problems: critical features buried in the interface, screens that didn't fit on their small laptop monitors, essential operations that were nearly impossible to find.*

*At the end of the week, over dinner, my boss asked, "So, did you get any insights?"*

*I couldn't hide my excitement. "Absolutely. We finally understand what people are really trying to do—and why our changes weren't helping."*

*He smiled. "Why did it take us so long to figure this out?"*

*I paused. "We assumed the data told the whole story. But we missed what people actually needed. We need to build real relationships and keep listening if we want to solve the right problems."*

*That was the moment it clicked: understanding people isn't about numbers on a dashboard. It's about trust, empathy, and seeing the world through their eyes.*

## Chapter 2

### Adaptability: The Competitive

#### Advantage

“Change is the only constant in life” This philosophical phrase is attributed to Heraclitus, and I find it to be one of the ultimate truths for every person. Therefore, one of the most crucial skills you can ever gain is adaptability, not only as a leader but also as an individual. The world is constantly changing, and if we want to survive and keep pace, we must develop the ability to adapt. It's not something you're necessarily born with; you can create it and cultivate a mindset for it.

What does it mean to be adaptable for managers?

Especially in middle management, you are always in the middle. You have top-level senior leadership, who are looking after long-term, strategic business goals. On the other hand, you have operationally focused teams in the trenches, who want some clarity and support to get the job done. Additionally, you work with a diverse cross-functional network of peers from various disciplines. You must establish strong collaborative relationships and find common ground to achieve the goals together. Believe it or not, most of the time, you need other teams to achieve the goals. Your agility in stakeholder management or collaboration is crucial for this. Being in the middle is a challenging position to be in, but it

can also be very rewarding if you know how to adapt to different people, situations, and challenges.

“One size does not fit all” is the motto that should guide you through difficulties and changes. And as we already said, they will come. This is valid if you have a new senior stakeholder, a new team member, a completely new team, or a new job role. You should always consider your transferable skills, which can help you adapt; however, remember that what worked in the past may not be effective now.

Transferable skills, what are they? When you handle a situation or do a job, you need a combination of skills. Some of them are very specific, such as certain domain knowledge, technology stack experience, or even working in a certain language. On the other hand, you also need emotional intelligence; you need to pick up new things quickly, learn from them, and communicate effectively to build relationships, among other things. Most people do not master all of these skills from the beginning, but it takes time. However, to navigate different situations where you still need to develop some skills, you can utilise previous experience and other transferable skills to help fill the gaps and adapt. Adaptability is the most important transferable skill you can develop to handle what comes your way.

I am personally someone who always has a longer-term vision and plan in mind, whether it applies to my personal or professional life. I always have an aim and a strategy to achieve it. However, down the road, I face many challenges that I can't predict, and I need to make tactical decisions to

overcome them and keep myself on track with my strategy. For example, professionally, it is beneficial to have a long-term vision and strategy aligned with the company's senior management to follow, but then you need to translate this to your teams or other peers. Meanwhile, various operational and day-to-day challenges arise. These need to be addressed, even if they don't seem directly related to the long-term plan. They require tactical decisions to stay on track. You need to identify what is within your control and what tactical decisions must be made each day to achieve your strategy. This is particularly challenging in the tech world, where live production and a constantly changing business environment create new challenges. Here, adaptability plays a vital role as the most useful transferable skill.

Every time you show adaptability, you are evolving. Every time you face a challenge, remember your previous successes. This will give you confidence, as it takes nothing more than what you did before or just a little bit more.

Here is a personal story which might help you understand how adaptability and transferable skills were key for me.

### Adaptability in action - how transferable skills helped me handle another challenge

*A couple of years ago, I was sitting in a meeting room with my manager and discussing how things are going.*

*“I know your team is challenging”, he started, “But one of your tasks when you joined was to turn things around somehow”.*

*I nodded in agreement, mainly to the point of the expectations for me.*

*“Well, I know some features are still behind the track. How are things going with the team?”.*

*I’ve swallowed slowly. Before I answered, in my head flashed a memory from a couple of months ago.*

*I sat in the office kitchen, the aroma of strong coffee filling the air, my hands wrapped around the warm mug. I stared out the window and thought, How am I going to tackle this new challenge? Am I ready for this? I started this new job about a month ago. This marked a significant turning point in my career.*

*So far, I’ve been involved in software engineering for around 15 years, primarily working on products related to the physical world, including those in industries such as automotive and robotics. I’ve climbed the ladder from intern to senior software engineer, ultimately moving 5 years ago from an individual contributor role to a formal leadership role, where I work with senior managers, lead double-digit engineering teams, and engage in discussions with customers. I’ve had the opportunity to lead multiple teams in different countries, dealing with all aspects of solutions for mobile robots - from fully digital to complete electromechanical solutions. And now, I have decided to change to try something completely different: a SaaS startup. It*

*was a smaller Bulgarian company creating digital solutions—cloud and mobile apps—for managing co-working spaces. I took on a role as the leader of an engineering team, but with fewer responsibilities and less impact than before. I also had doubts about how difficult this step might be for me. Friends and former colleagues kept asking if I was sure this was a smart move. But I felt an intense inner excitement - was this the right step? It was an entirely different technology stack and industry from what I was used to. The role was also more technical than anything I'd done in the past four or five years. Could I deal with it? It was my first Bulgarian company, after working only with Western European and US companies. Would I fit in with their ways of working and culture?*

*These were all different questions that had been on my mind over the last couple of months, before and even after I started the new job. When I joined, I was told the team was full of talented people. But they had changed several managers over the past two years. Most were working individually or in pairs, rather than as a cohesive team. I've heard so many times in the first month that something drastically should change; however, I didn't have the same feeling. The team was indeed full of talented engineers, some of whom were more junior than they should have been, and others were more individual players than they needed to be. The team's results weren't what was required. In a technical leadership role, people trust you when you can “talk their language,” understand their challenges, and truly grasp their work. I was also missing some of the required background*

*information. I was lacking confidence at that point, that I could turn things around.*

*Then I remember all these previous situations where I had difficulties and how I've handled them. I remember the time when I started my first job as a software engineer. How little I knew in practice, and how hard the first couple of months were to learn and adapt. Then I moved with my family to a foreign country, Germany, and started living and working in a place where I didn't even speak the language. I remembered how hard it was to adapt, especially when I had to attend customers' or management meetings, where they preferred pure German rather than the official company language, English. I remembered the time when the company was acquired and layoffs began, and I had to adapt by finding a new job or taking on a different role. Or when we returned to Bulgaria and I transitioned to the engineering manager role, overseeing two teams, each consisting of 14 people. Oh my god, how different that was. Or when I've moved to robotics, a dream field for me, but so different from what I was doing so far. I had to quickly learn to work in a different technology stack or deal with executive management. How many times have I been told that there is no way to build a physical laboratory space for our local team, and so many different approaches I had to take until I succeeded. However, I manage to learn, adapt, and progress through all that. Why wouldn't I succeed this time? All these previous examples gave me some confidence and inner power to keep pushing and try different things.*

*I left the kitchen. The office was empty and quiet. I sat at my desk, I opened my laptop and began typing a list of ideas - anything that might help me turn things around. My fingers hesitated over the keys, but I forced myself to start. I approach it like a personal development plan. I set a longer-term goal and started drawing milestones backwards in periods. Under each milestone, I added notes on how my previous experience and transferable skills could help the team achieve it.*

*Now, a couple of months after that morning's breakthrough, I sat across from my manager in a one-on-one meeting.*

*"I can see real progress in the team," I said, my voice steady. Then I opened the laptop and started showing the evidence of the progress.*

*For the first time, I felt sure we were on the right track. The team was significantly more productive, and team velocity and throughput demonstrate this. Everyone had some meaningful development plans, although some of them were falling short of the required level, but they were trying hard. The team's engagement metrics were boosted, and internal processes were reshaped, most importantly, not solely by me, but in complete alignment with the team.*

*He smiled and nodded. "I agree. The change is obvious."*

## Used literature and references:

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- <sup>1</sup>Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan.
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