



ADEPTION™

EMBRACING EXPERIMENTATION

WHY YOUR BEST EMPLOYEES ARE AFRAID TO TRY
NEW THINGS (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)

**A PAPER ON TRANSFORMATION
IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY**

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Executive Summary

Fortune 500 companies with enviable growth rates are making a critical pivot: shifting from expertise-driven cultures to experimentation-first organizations. But there's a problem. The very employees who made these companies successful—the experts, the high achievers, the consistent deliverers—are the ones most at risk in this transition.

The core challenge is not a lack of innovation capability, but an identity threat created by success systems that reward certainty, expertise, and being right, while experimentation demands visible uncertainty.

This whitepaper explores why the shift to experimentation feels dangerous to your best people, and provides a practical roadmap for making it safe, sustainable, and successful.



The Future Belongs to Learners

Markets are moving faster than expertise can keep up. Customer expectations shift before you can build mastery. Technology disrupts industries overnight. In this environment, the ability to learn quickly matters more than what you already know.

Here's the truth: Your experts and achievers aren't resisting change because they're stubborn or lazy. They're resisting because you've spent years rewarding them for being right, and now you're asking them to be uncertain. That's not a small ask. That's a fundamental identity shift.

The organizations that win this transition will be those that recognize what they're really asking for: not just new behaviors, but new mindsets. Not just innovation initiatives, but genuine developmental growth. Not just permission to fail, but active protection for those who experiment courageously.

This is hard work. It's uncomfortable. It will require you to question your own assumptions about what makes someone valuable, what constitutes success, and what your organization really rewards. The alternative, staying in an expertise-driven model while your competitors learn to experiment, is far more dangerous.

In the end, organizations don't experiment. People do. And people only experiment when they believe it's safe to try, acceptable to fail, and valuable to learn. Make it safe. Make it real. Make it possible.

The future of your organization depends on it.

The Problem: Success as a Trap

For decades, the professional playbook was simple:

1. Develop deep expertise in your field
2. Deliver consistent, perfect results
3. Build your career on being right

This worked beautifully. Until it didn't.

Today's market complexity demands something different: the ability to experiment, learn quickly, and adapt. But here's the catch—asking experts to experiment is like asking a tightrope walker to try juggling mid-performance. The stakes feel life-threatening.

The Identity Crisis Your VP of Marketing built her career on knowing the right answer. Now you're asking her to run tests where half the results will "fail." To her, this doesn't feel like innovation, it feels like professional demise.

The Real Risk This isn't paranoia. When your entire value proposition is "I deliver results," and experimentation means some initiatives won't work, you're genuinely risking your perceived worth. In an era of quarterly earnings and performance reviews, that's alarming.

The "Fail Fast" Fallacy We've been saying "fail fast" for years. It sounds great in a keynote speech. But try telling your boss you just spent \$200K and six months on an experiment that didn't work. Still feel comfortable failing fast?



The Opportunity: What Organizations Actually Need

The companies thriving in today's environment aren't just better at their old playbook. They've changed the game entirely. They're asking:

- **What can we learn?** (not just: Did we succeed?)
- **What should we question?** (not just: How do we optimize?)
- **How do we grow our capabilities?** (not just: How do we hit our numbers?)

Making this shift requires more than a new mission statement. It requires rebuilding the psychological contract between employer and employee.

Cultivating an Experimentation Culture: Four Practical Steps

To overcome the inherent resistance to experimentation, organizations must implement practical, intentional changes to their goals, habits, and mindset.

Redefine Success as Learning

The Old Metric: Did you achieve the target on time and on budget?

The New Metric: What did you learn, how did you learn it, *and* did you achieve a clear outcome of progress toward solving your challenge?

This isn't just semantics. It means:

- Performance reviews that value insights from failed experiments
- Bonuses tied to learning velocity, not just outcome achievement
- Documentation systems that capture "what we discovered" alongside "what we delivered"
- Promotion criteria that include "experiments designed and learning extracted"

In Practice: One Fortune 500 firm now requires every quarterly review to include a "best failure" section: the experiments that didn't work but taught the most valuable lessons.



Create a “Don’t List”

Here's the counterintuitive truth: You can't add experimentation on top of everything else. To create the necessary space to experiment, organizations must stop doing the things that sustained past success and expertise. Trying to force new behavior with a to-do list won't work. Instead, intentionality is required around activities you're actively choosing you won't do. A “don't list.”

- **Identify Old Habits:** Identify the habits, behaviors, and distractions that keep teams in their established ways of working.
- **Conscious Choice:** Align as a team on the things they will consciously choose not to do.
 - What meetings reinforce old patterns?
 - What approval processes assume we already know the answer?
 - What reports measure perfection instead of progress?
 - What habits keep us in our comfort zone?

This deliberate action helps avoid reverting to old ways when experimentation becomes uncomfortable or creates disequilibrium within yourself or your team.

In Practice: A major tech company implemented "Experiment Fridays" where teams explicitly stop doing standard reporting and optimization work. The focus shifts entirely to testing new approaches. But this only works because they stopped requiring five other weekly activities.

Develop a Questioning Framework

People need explicit permission to question things. Without clear guidance, they'll either question nothing (too risky) or question everything (chaos).

Creating a questioning framework and cultivating a heightened sense of self-awareness allows individuals to pause at moments of disequilibrium and ask, "Is this the right thing to be questioning right now?"

This framework becomes a tool for psychological safety. Instead of wondering "Am I allowed to question this?", employees have clear guidance on what productive questioning looks like.

A Possible Framework

Question Timing:

Why do we do this quarterly vs monthly?

Is this schedule based on learning or habit?

Question Process:

How did this become the standard approach?

What alternatives do we never consider?

Question Stakeholders:

Whose need does this serve?

Whose doesn't it?

Who benefits from maintaining status quo?

Question Criteria:

What constitutes success here, and why?

Are we measuring what matters or what's easy to measure?

Define Acceptable Loss

You can't tell people to take risks without telling them what risks are acceptable. This requires brutal honesty about boundaries.

Create Clear Parameters:

- What budget can be "lost" to learning?
- What timeline delays are acceptable for good experiments?
- What customer segments can we test with?
- What's the difference between a smart experiment that failed and reckless decision-making?

This is the hardest part. Your organization must make—and keep—a clear commitment: "You will not lose your job for well-designed experiments that fail." Share visible examples of people who ran failed experiments and got promoted or showcase leaders sharing their own experimental failures.

Think of parameters like Playgrounds and Freeways. On playgrounds you explore, create, or imagine. You cannot play on a freeway, you'll get run over. Playgrounds define what you can do: adjust a layout, experiment with a product feature, or reimagine an AI-assisted workflow. Freeways define what you cannot do: deliver late for a client, lower your delivery standards, or loosen security processes around client data. The boundaries of playgrounds and freeways create new opportunities for experimentation.

In Practice: One financial services company created "innovation budgets" separate from operational budgets. The explicit rule: You must spend this money on experiments, and we expect 40-60% to fail.

The Development Dimension: Why this is harder than it looks

Here's what most organizations miss: You're not just asking for behavior change. You're asking for developmental growth.

Research suggests seven measurable development stages*. Four of these stages help us frame experimentation.

Four Stages of Professional Development

Expert: "I've mastered my domain. I know the right answers."

Achiever: "I deliver results. I hit my targets consistently."

Redefining: "I question assumptions. I explore new frameworks."

Transforming: "I see the whole system. I think in possibilities, not certainties."

Most successful organizations are built on Expert and Achiever mindsets. That's what got you here. But experimentation requires Redefining and Transforming mindsets.

The Gap: You can't mandate someone from Expert to Redefining. That's like asking a penguin to teach flight school. It requires:

- Permission to not have the answer
- Support while navigating uncertainty
- New mental models for what success means

This is why a single "innovation workshop" doesn't work. You're asking people to evolve, and evolution takes time, safety, and practice.

Implementation Roadmap

Create Genuine Safety (Months 1-3)

Leadership Actions:

- Publicly commit to protecting experimenters
- Define acceptable loss parameters in writing
- Share your own experimental failures at all-hands meetings
- Revise performance review templates to include learning metrics

Team Actions:

- Identify one "safe" area to begin experimenting
- Start small—think pilot programs, not company-wide rollouts
- Document what you're learning, not just what you're achieving

Build Experimentation Capacity (Months 3-6)

Leadership Actions:

- Train managers to support teams in discomfort, not rescue them from it
- Create peer learning groups for people running experiments

Team Actions:

- Practice designing experiments with clear hypotheses and learning goals
- Develop self-awareness about when you're reverting to old patterns

Scale and Normalize (Months 6-12)

Leadership Actions:

- Promote visible experimenters, especially those with "productive failures"
- Integrate experimentation into all strategic planning
- Adjust compensation and incentive structures

Team Actions:

- Run multiple experiments in parallel
- Share learnings across the organization
- Mentor others in experimental mindsets

Embed into Culture (Year 2+)

Leadership Actions:

- Make experimentation a natural advantage
- Expand acceptable loss boundaries as confidence grows
- Build innovation into core business processes

Team Actions:

- Experimentation becomes "how we work," not a special initiative
- Teams self-organize around learning opportunities
- The organization develops genuine risk appetite

Committing to Experimentation

The transition to an experimentation-first culture is not merely a strategic option but a necessity for sustained growth in today's dynamic global landscape. While expertise and high achievement have been the bedrock of success for many Fortune 500 organizations, the focus on perfection is now a fundamental impediment to experimentation in a complex world.

The challenge is not simply to accept failure, but to overcome the deeply ingrained fear of job risk and the cognitive bias of moving beyond one's current frontier of knowledge.

Ultimately, embedding experimentation into the organizational DNA requires leadership to actively hold the space for experimentation and define the boundaries of acceptable loss.

By replacing the rigidity of guaranteed success with the flexibility of structured learning, organizations can ensure they not only keep pace with change but actively define the new frontier of their industry. The time for hesitation is over; the commitment to embracing experimentation is the clearest path forward.



About this Research

This whitepaper synthesizes insights from adult development theory, organizational change research, and direct observation of Fortune 500 experimentation initiatives. We've worked with more than 100,000 leaders to embed an experimental approach through leadership development.

Key frameworks include Robert Kegan's stages of adult development, Ron Heifetz's adaptive leadership principles, and Adeption's B3 Methodology.

For more information or to discuss implementation in your organization, contact Adeption at hello@adeption.io.

About the Author

Dan Lake is Global Head of Delivery at Adeption, where he facilitates customized programs supporting leadership development at scale and coaches executives growing through their most adaptive challenges. A New Zealander with significant international experience, Dan has lived in Europe, Asia and the USA, working in all corners of the globe supporting tech, banking, retail, and global NGOs. He holds a master's degree in leadership.

ADEPTION™

Adeption has over ten years of experience delivering leadership development experiences, empowering thousands of leaders to experiment with meaningful and relevant actions.

Embracing experimentation, in partnership with Fortune 500 companies, and over 100K leaders, allows us to analyze nearly 3 million coaching question responses, and build on almost 400K insights (reflections on actions taken). Unlocking these insights enables us to deliver personalized, data-driven experiences to leaders globally at — at a scale that was never possible before.

Our Team joins us from across New Zealand, United States, Australia, India, and the United Kingdom.

Curious to learn more? Let's connect. Reach us at hello@adeption.io

