

Why running a business is survival of the Fittest

Andrew May [C-Suite Lifestyle](#) [November 26, 2020](#)



Running a small business, there are many times when we are challenged and required to dig deep. Right now, it's COVID-19, at other times it could be bushfires, drought, flooding, an economic downturn or challenges from competitors. Small business owners need to be resilient and at times like this, it is worth remembering that humans were made to adapt.

COVID-19 has required plenty of adaptation. We have needed to change the structure of our day, we have upended the way we motivate and organise ourselves at work and changed the way we delineate those lines between work and home. We have been forced to adapt to new social and cultural norms in record time. And we've done all of it amidst an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and worry.

You might be wondering just how it's possible to not only cope with this much change and upheaval, but to be capable of thriving in your career and in your personal life too. I'm here to tell you that it's not only possible, but you're actually built to do just that.

Evolution in action

In one of our recent corporate programs, neuropsychologist Dr Nicola Gates, told a senior leadership team about visiting Okavango National Park in Mozambique, Africa. Dr Gates observed how, despite thousands of years growing tusks which was an integral part of an elephant's social behaviour and DNA, almost 1/3 of young female elephants had now adapted to no longer growing tusks.

Why? Because this speedy evolution is nature's way of limiting the elephant's chances of being poached.

While research is ongoing on the exact genetics that allow for 'tusklessness' in some elephants, it's clear that poaching plays a large part. Elephants with large tusks are regularly killed for their valuable ivory. Those without tusks are then left to breed, passing on the trait to their offspring.

"It's not natural selection that is causing elephants to evolve without tusks," said Ryan Long, an elephant researcher, in an [interview with CBS news](#). "It's an artificial selection, caused by decades of poaching."

Natural or artificial, it may eventually spell the end of ivory poaching, simply because there will be nothing left to poach – and the fittest elephants will be the survivors.

Brain science and change

Dr Gates explains that humans, like the elephants, are hardwired to cope with change and adapt.

In his book *Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin stated that, "in the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment."

Survival of the fittest is not about being the strongest or the fastest. As Darwin said, the 'fittest' actually means those who are flexible and can make adjustments to match their environment and circumstances. Those are the skills that make you a survivor.

Neuroplasticity, which is the concept explaining how the brain changes in response to stimulation, has evolved specifically to help us learn how to best cope with change.

Routine and habitual behaviours do not take much energy – that's why we naturally fall into routine behaviour as we instinctively seek to expend less energy on minor, everyday tasks. Without routine and habits, every day would be an exhausting marathon of decisions and analysis.

Managing and responding to change requires significant effort and can make us feel overwhelmed or stressed. But there are good and bad ways to deal with that – and you can learn to lean into your natural responses, using them to your advantage.

For example, a little boost of stress in times of change can be ideal because it actually *improves* your ability to cope and make necessary adjustments. The cortisol of stress improves memory formation in the brain's hippocampus- structures necessary for learning and memory. This helps us learn so we can adapt to what needs to be done to survive and remember that coping strategy for the next time we're up against a challenge.

But hang on – stress is a bad thing, isn't it? Problems occur when the stress response is turned on too high, or for too long. This narrows our view and leaves us distracted with poor attention and poor decision-making potential. A little bit of stress may help, but too much stress over an extended period of time inhibits our ability to adapt and adjust to changes.

If you find major changes challenging or intimidating, there are a number of things you can do to reduce your stress load. For now, try these three quick steps:

- 1. Take the focus off the new.** Reduce the feeling that changes are huge, intimidating and stacking up fast by reminding yourself what has remained the same. Often, you'll find that what has remained the same are the top priority things in life like health, home, relationships and your long-term goals.
- 2. Tackle changes one-by-one.** It's easy to be overwhelmed when many things are changing all at once. Combat the stress by focusing on only one or two changes at a time. This gives you time to make new behaviours habit, lightening the mental load as you take on the next challenge.
- 3. Breathe.** Relaxed, deep diaphragmatic breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and helps relax an over active brain.