

Shelley, A. (2021). *Becoming Adaptable. Creative facilitation to develop yourself and transform cultures*. Intelligent Answers.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2022.5.1.17>

Arthur Shelley is a well-known Australian knowledge management guru. Shelley has a wealth of industry and adult education and training experience: for instance, he was the Global Knowledge Director of Cadbury Schweppes and he has collaborated with organisations as diverse as NASA, Cirque Du Soleil, governments, universities and start-ups. *Becoming Adaptable* is Shelley's fourth book and it builds on his previous ones: *The organizational zoo: A survival guide to workplace behavior* (2007), *Being a successful knowledge leader: What knowledge leaders need to know to make a difference* (2009) and *KNOWledge SUCCESSION: Sustained performance and capability growth through strategic knowledge projects* (2017). *Becoming adaptable* is relevant not only to adult educators and learning facilitators, but also for (higher education) teachers and students, leaders, coaches, and mentors – in fact, for anybody who sees the need to become more adaptable in our VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. In other words, the book is of general interest. The “ability to adapt to change” is also how Stephen Hawking defines intelligence (cited in p. 58).

At the outset of his latest book, Shelley asks how we can remain adaptable over time, both in our professional and personal lives. Practicing adaptability is rather useful as it may help us in expanding our comfort zone, building resilience, accelerating our performance and reducing our anxiety. Shelley argues that adaptability must not be perceived as merely remedial and reactive, but it is best used as a proactive preparation for change. Change can be a well-disguised opportunity that we can leverage and create value from.

For the reader who is new to Shelley's work, it is useful to briefly introduce Shelley's concept of the organizational zoo that he has been refining for the past two decades. This is an entertaining, and at the same time, very thoughtful 'zoology'. The 'zoo' mostly referring to the workplace, but also to our home, clubs and associations. An organization's culture is dependent on the balance of the behaviours typically associated with various characters. A positive zoo is welcoming, friendly diverse, open, inspiring, playful,

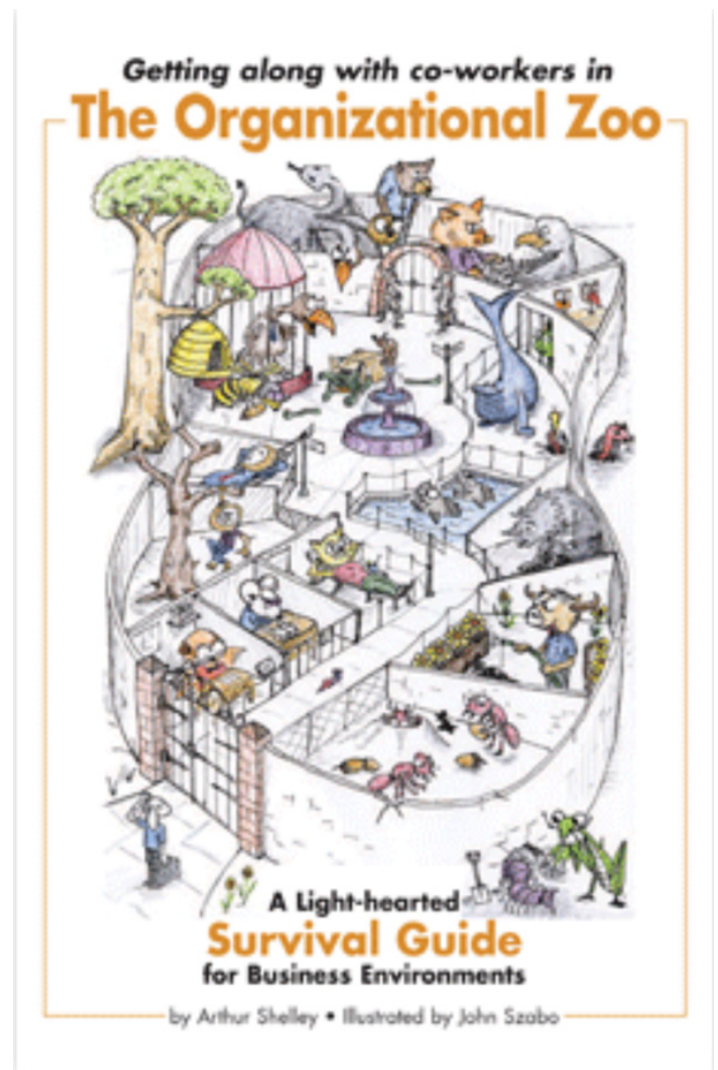


Figure 1: Shelley (2007).

pleasant, productive, respected, balanced, social, stimulating. In contrast, a negative zoo is political, negative, territorial, backward, divisive, frustrating, change-averse, manipulative, nasty, procrastinating, dangerous, draining.

Cleverly, there are characters for all letters of the English alphabet. It is not a bestiary in the strict sense of the word, as a plant (*Quercus robur*), as well as extinct (triceratops) and imaginary creatures (unicorn and xbreed) are included. It comprises ants, bees, chameleons, dogs, eagles, felines, gibbons, hyenas, insects (two types: pestiferous and beneficial), jackals, kids, lions, mice, nematodes (elongated, cylindrical worms that helps distribute bacteria and fungi – in Shelley's words: lazy parasites), owls, piranhas, *Quercus robur* (oak trees, described by Shelley as endangered philanthropic chairpersons), rattlesnakes, triceratops (a large quadrupedal herbivorous dinosaur, who in Shelley's words, is battle-scare), unicorns, vultures, whales, xbreeds (multi-talented hybrids in Shelley's terminology) and yaks. Z is reserved for zoo. There are organizational zoo cards (see below) where each character is described by strong, easily observable features and words that are not typical for it. To give an example, the lion is described as an aggressive leader that rules the pride through fear. In Shelley's conceptualization, the lion is aggressive, controlling, powerful, self-interested, strong, territorial and not cautious, dedicated, hardworking, patient, shy and tolerant.

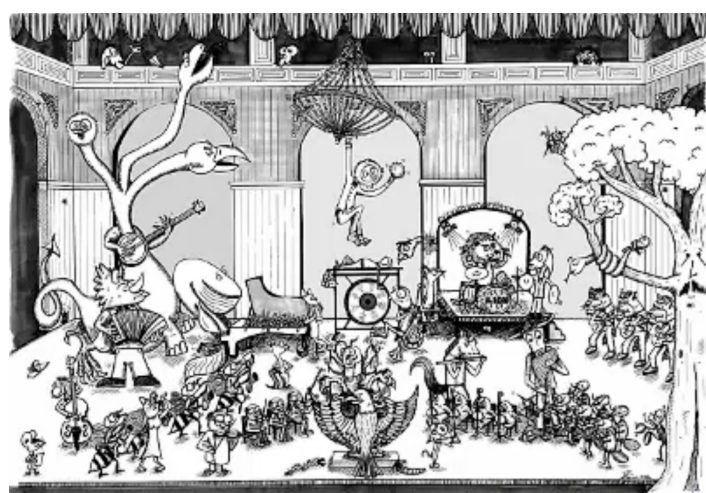


Figure 2: A depiction of an organizational zoo. Source: partial screenshot from Shelley (2020b).

The author cautions that to pose the question "Which character am I?" would be misinformed. Instead we should ask: "Which is best to be here and now?" (p. 104). Moreover, the character cards do not represent people, they are metaphors for behaviours. Shelley's intention for creating the organizational zoo set of metaphorical characters is to represent recognizable behavioural characteristics in humans that help us to further develop our understanding of human interactions and relationships, amongst other intended learning outcomes. *Becoming Adaptable* further develops the metaphorical realm first created in *The Organizational Zoo* (2007) into a series of advanced behavioural development activities that can be facilitated to build trust and strengthen relationships. In addition to his books, the author has created character cards that can be used as a resource for gamification in workshops for personal and professional development and also for mentoring, coaching and self-development. Intended learning outcomes include: an improved understanding of colleagues' behaviours, the reduction of conflict, an improvement of an organisational

climate and an injection of humour in an organisational culture. Hereby, Shelley highlights the benefits of diversity and recommends to build teams with a productive mix of behaviours.

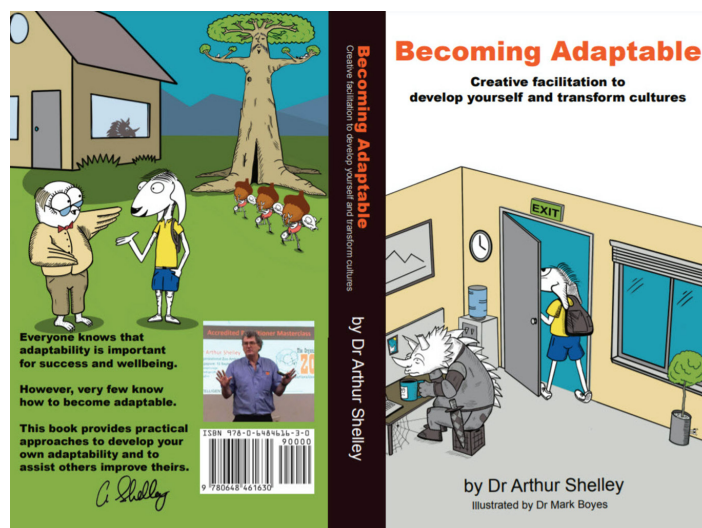


Figure 3: Front and back cover of *Becoming adaptable*.

Becoming adaptable is around 300 pages long and contains illustrations by Mark Boyes. The book is divided into four main parts: (A) "Understanding the power of adaptability", (B) "How to start becoming adaptable", (C) "Theories and philosophies behind this approach", and (D) "Start becoming adaptable for YOU". The four parts are split into a total of 14 chapters and there is a useful appendix with 70 concepts deemed useful to facilitators. The book also includes pre-publication praise, acknowledgements and references. Moreover, there are 12 case studies, termed "success stories", that share applications of Shelley's approach in a wide variety of different contexts. Members of Shelley's Organizational Zoo Ambassadors Network (OZAN) contribute examples from diverse countries such as Thailand, Hong Kong and Switzerland. They include diversity workshops with participants from different countries, different organisational examples (from banks to universities) and perhaps most touchingly, the example of an autistic boy (pp. 249-251).

The five chapters of Part A ask the following key questions: Why is behavioural adaptability important? Who becomes adaptable? What is achieved by being adaptable? When should we facilitate adaptability development? And: "Where does behavioural adaptability apply to success?" (p. 73). Shelley believes that it is precisely these "questions – why, who, what, when and where – [that] will guide you towards success in almost any endeavour" (p. 61). There is an optimal order of these questions in designing initiatives and they are linked to tools, process, people, value and desired outcomes. Strong themes throughout Shelley's book are that "everything in life is a learning process" (p. 63) and "the importance of creating an engaging environment for people to interact with each other in a constructive manner" (p. 55). Shelley himself highlights that the latter is consistent with other approaches such as "Agile, design thinking, student-centred learning, complex problem-solving, cocreation, and distributed leadership" (p. 55).

Part B of the book is about how to start becoming (more) adaptable. This part is divided in chapters about the facilitation of interactions with positive impact (chapter 6), many diverse examples of facilitation activities (chapter 7) and tools for efficiency and effectiveness (chapter 8). Shelley advocates an interactive approach to facilitation, education and training. Such an approach is quite common these days, especially in facilitation and training, and increasingly also in education. Although relatively method-agnostic, Shelley has developed a particular method which he calls "Conversations That Matter". This method has five key elements:

1. "Purpose: what am I trying to achieve?"
2. Outputs: tangible artefacts and results generated.
3. Outcomes: intangible impacts generated.
4. Benefits: value created by the interactions, outputs and outcomes.
5. Beneficiaries: who receives these benefits?" (p. 111)"

A mere transfer of knowledge is insufficient, the most powerful facilitation leads to the further development of participants' metacognitive and social abilities. Helpfully, Shelley's Organizational Zoo website (<http://www.organizationalzoo.com/zootube/>) provides some short video guides to some of his techniques.

A highlight of chapter 6 is the discussion of the Reverse Bloom Learning Framework that the author had already discussed in an earlier work (Shelley, 2020a). Many readers would be familiar with Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives or a variation (such as the one by Anderson) of it. These taxonomies are supposed to be part of the basic knowledge of K-12 and higher education teachers and they can be linked to teaching and learning activities as well as assessments. The Reverse Bloom Learning Framework is hence immediately counter-intuitive, though I do not think that it is Shelley's intention to prove Bloom and followers wrong. His approach is to start with the co-creation of insights through inclusive conversations that leads to the synthesis of options that can be prioritised for action and eventually applied, generating new knowledge. It is creative and counter-intuitive ideas like this that question gospel truths that make Shelley's book a very worthwhile read.

Part C is entitled "Theories and philosophies behind this approach". There are chapters on The Organizational Zoo (chapter 9), theories embedded in the organizational zoo (chapter 10) and "MindFLEX – the complexity of parallel perspective facilitation" (chapter 11). In chapter 9, Shelley shares the impressive applications of the organizational zoo concepts in some 20 countries through a small international community, called OrgZoo Ambassador Network (OZAN). In chapter 11, "mindFLEX" is differentiated from "mindSET" (p. 219). It describes a facilitator's "ability to hold multiple perspectives in mind in parallel" (p. 220) and enables them to more richly engage participants in activities.

The final main part of the book is entitled "Start becoming adaptable for YOU". It is divided into three chapters: behaviour can be an asset or a liability (chapter 12), your journey of becoming (chapter 13) and lifestyle learning and value generation for others (chapter 14). In conclusion, Shelley proposes to challenge ourselves and consider taking up leadership roles.

I like Arthur Shelley's humility. Already the first sentence of the preface is: "We are all on a journey of becoming" (p. 12). This stance of a highly experienced and accomplished expert is, for instance, also present in the titles of two books by Stephen Brookfield: *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2017) and *Becoming a white anti-racist* (2021). Also, Shelley's metaphorical language of the organizational zoo is attractive to me. It reminds me of George Orwell's advice to never use "metaphors... that you are used to seeing in print" (1945, p. 19). Orwell also warned that "there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves" (p. 5). In inventing a whole new microcosm, Shelley has taken the trouble to come up with fresh and new metaphors while studiously avoiding the use of overly technical language.

Shelley also shows much cultural awareness and sensitivity. The parallel publication of a second edition of his *The organizational zoo* (2007) in 2021 is to be welcomed, as it provides a useful companion volume to *Becoming Adaptable*. The tone of the book is decidedly conversational and less academic. Although there are very useful references, an academically-inclined reader may have asked for more of them.

I have had the great pleasure to experience Arthur Shelley's excellent facilitation skills first-hand both face-to-face and online on two occasions over the last couple of years. Although I was familiar with some of his work (Shelley & Goodwin, 2018; Shelley, 2020a), reading *Becoming Adaptable* made me even more interested in his thoughts and practice. I highly recommend reading *Becoming adaptable* in conjunction with *The organisational zoo* and the web resources available at *The Organizational Zoo* website.

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