

ADAPTIVE THINKING / REFLECTION

My Journey with Adaptive Thinking

How asking different questions gradually changed the way I look at organizations - and reality

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It Started With a Question

Looking back at my career, many of the situations I found most interesting had one thing in common: they required a decision.

Sometimes financial. Sometimes operational. Sometimes related to systems, people or change.

Like most managers, I naturally focused on how to make those decisions better - better data, better analysis, better tools.

Over time, however, I started wondering whether the decision itself was really the right place to start.

A decision can be perfectly rational based on the information available and still lead to the wrong outcome.

Not because the analysis was poor. But because the way we understood the situation was incomplete.

What if better decisions begin not with more analysis, but with seeing the situation more clearly?

That gradually shifted my attention from the quality of the decision to something that happens earlier: the quality of the thinking that precedes it.

I started asking different questions.

What are we actually trying to solve? What assumptions are we making? What sits outside the boundaries of the problem as we have defined it? And what changes when we look at the same situation from another part of the organization?

There was no framework at that point. I wasn't trying to build one. I was simply becoming increasingly interested in the questions that came before the answer.

I kept coming back to them. Over time, different experiences, observations and conversations began adding new dimensions.

Only much later did I realize that these seemingly separate thoughts were beginning to connect.

Learning Does Not Bring Us Back to the Same Place

We often describe learning as a cycle. We act, observe the result, reflect and try again.

But over time, I began to feel that this description was incomplete.

After a meaningful experience, we do not return to exactly the same starting point. We may face a similar problem, but we notice different things, question different assumptions and define the situation differently.

That is why the image of a spiral gradually became more useful to me than a circle.

Learning does not simply improve the next answer. It changes the point from which we ask the next question.

At that stage, I was still thinking mainly about decisions and organizational learning. I did not yet see where this line of thinking would lead.

When the Pieces Started to Connect

The next step came from a much more practical problem.

Electrification was bringing together areas that had traditionally been managed separately: vehicles, energy, charging infrastructure, financing and data.

Each could be optimized individually. But increasingly, the economics of one depended on decisions made in the others.

From Total Cost of Ownership to Integrated Cost per Kilometre.

And behind it was a broader question:

What changes when we stop optimizing individual components and start looking at the outcome they create together?

That question became the foundation of Energy & Mobility as a Service - EMaaS.

But the most important thing EMaaS gave me was not another mobility model. It was a different way of seeing the problem.

The value was often not in the individual components, but in the relationships between them.

And once I started looking at those relationships, I began seeing them elsewhere.

Perhaps This Was Never Really About Mobility

Some of those examples were not even new.

Years earlier, working across several countries, I had been involved in creating a multi-currency cash pooling structure. At the time, I saw it primarily as a practical treasury solution.

Looking at it again from this new perspective, I saw something broader.

Cash sitting in one company and debt sitting in another were not necessarily two separate problems. At group level, they were parts of the same financial system.

The same logic started appearing elsewhere - in working capital, production, logistics, inventory and even M&A.;

Different problems. Different functions. Sometimes completely different situations.

What if the biggest opportunity is not inside the individual parts, but in the way they connect?

The more examples I found, the harder it became to see them as separate cases.

Businesses were already deeply connected.

The question was whether we actually understood those connections - and whether we were using them deliberately.

That thought eventually led me towards what I began to describe as the Connected Enterprise.

The greatest value may not sit within individual companies, functions or assets. It may sit in the flows that connect them.

But another question soon followed. Being connected is one thing. Knowing what to do with those connections is something else.

Connected Was Not Enough

Connections already existed. Capital, operations, customers, technology, energy and data were influencing one another whether we managed them together or not.

Simply being connected was not an advantage.

The real question was whether an organization could see those connections, understand how they affected one another and adapt the way it operated as conditions changed.

Connected is the reality. Adaptive is the capability.

Instead of asking only how individual parts of the business could perform better, I became increasingly interested in how the system could learn to use its connections better.

Not necessarily through one large transformation. But through observation, experimentation, feedback and continuous adjustment.

And somewhere along the way, I started noticing that this way of thinking was also changing how I approached problems myself.

AI as a Mirror

AI became part of this journey in a way I did not initially expect.

At first, like many people, I treated it mainly as a tool - something that could help me analyse information, structure ideas or work faster.

Over time, however, I noticed that something else was happening.

I was rarely looking for an answer.

An answer would lead to another question. Sometimes I would agree with it. Sometimes my immediate reaction would be: No, that is not quite what I mean.

Trying to understand why would take me somewhere else.

Gradually, I realized that many of these conversations were, in a sense, conversations with myself.

AI had become a kind of intellectual mirror.

It was not giving me the answers. It was helping me hear my own questions more clearly.

The value was not in accepting what came back from the machine, but in reacting to it - questioning it, challenging it, connecting it with experience and deciding what still felt genuinely mine.

Is this still me?

If it is, AI has helped me think. If it isn't, it has probably started thinking in my place.

And that is a boundary I do not want to cross.

Looking Across the Boundaries

I also began to realize that this way of thinking does not naturally belong to any single function.

In one organization it may sit close to finance, in another with strategy, transformation or project management. Sometimes it may simply be part of how the leadership team works.

The title matters less than the responsibility.

Someone needs to look across the boundaries - not to replace the specialists, but to understand how their decisions connect and what they mean for the system as a whole.

Where that responsibility sits may differ. The need for it does not.

Perhaps this is why many of the problems that have interested me most throughout my career have tended to sit somewhere between traditional functions.

Again, the interesting part was somewhere in between.

When Thinking Becomes a Habit

And then, one evening, I watched a movie.

I was not looking for a business case. I was not thinking about Adaptive Thinking. I was simply watching a story.

Yet almost automatically, I started seeing something familiar.

Individual decisions that made perfect sense on their own were creating an outcome that made much less sense as a whole.

What if rational decisions can create an irrational organization?

What interested me afterwards was not only the observation itself. It was how naturally the question had appeared.

I had not consciously applied a framework. I had not gone through a process. I had simply started looking at the situation differently.

Perhaps giving some of these ideas a name had made them easier to recognize. And once I started recognizing them, I began seeing similar patterns almost everywhere.

That was when I realized that Adaptive Thinking had changed something more fundamental than the way I approached business problems.

It had gradually changed the way I looked at reality.

Not by giving me a new set of answers. By changing the questions that came naturally to me.

Looking Back

What strikes me most is that none of this followed a plan.

I did not start with Adaptive Thinking and then look for places where it could be applied. It happened almost the other way around.

A question about better decisions made me think more about what happens before the decision.

Thinking about learning made the image of a spiral more meaningful to me.

A practical problem in mobility made me look beyond individual components and towards the relationships between them.

That perspective made me look differently at experiences from much earlier in my career - and recognize patterns I had not consciously connected before.

Those patterns gradually expanded the question from mobility to the organization itself.

AI became a mirror for the process. And eventually I started noticing the same patterns even when I was not looking for them.

The journey itself resembles the spiral I was trying to describe.

Each observation changed the perspective from which I approached the next question.

New ideas changed how I understood old experiences. Old experiences gave new ideas a different meaning.

There was never really a return to the starting point.

Perhaps That Is the Point

Throughout my career, I often heard the phrase "think outside the box."

I always understood the intention behind it.

But over time, I became less interested in trying to think outside the box and more interested in understanding who defined the box in the first place.

What assumptions created it? Which boundaries are real, and which exist simply because we have become used to them?

Are we looking for a better answer to the problem in front of us? Or should we first ask whether we are asking the right question?

I did not learn to think outside the box. I learned to question why the box was there.

I don't see Adaptive Thinking as a finished methodology. And I hope I never do.

The term itself is not new, and different people use it in different ways. What matters to me is what it has gradually come to mean through my own experience.

Today, I see it less as a framework and more as a way of staying open to the possibility that the way I currently understand a problem may itself be part of the problem.

Looking beyond the obvious boundaries. Looking for relationships before optimizing individual elements. Using technology - including AI - to extend thinking without surrendering judgement.

And allowing experience to change not only the answers, but the questions that come next.

Perhaps the fact that Adaptive Thinking continues to change the way I understand Adaptive Thinking is the best definition I can give it today.

So Far

The publications that emerged along the way capture different moments of this journey.

Some explore how we think. Others look at how organizations behave, how different parts of a business connect, or how those connections can create value.

I don't see them as chapters of a methodology that was designed in advance.

I see them more as snapshots of an evolving perspective - each reflecting what I understood at that particular moment and, usually, opening another question.

This article is simply my attempt to connect those snapshots.

Not to close the story. Quite the opposite.

The rest of the journey is in the work itself. And the next question is probably already changing it.

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Adaptive Thinking