Super-Flexibility Interview I & II

In Super-Flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans present a crossfunctional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately reinventing knowledge enterprises.

Part I of this interview is focused on the theory behind, and the conceptual foundations of, superflexibility. Part II of the interview focuses on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies and teams can become superflexible.
Super-flexibility Interview
Part I: Theory—What is Super-flexibility?
with Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans

In Super-Flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans provide a “toolkit” to help organizations and teams become “super-flexible” in a dynamic world. They define “super-flexibility” as the capacity to transform by adapting to new realities, underpinned by the ability to withstand turbulence by creating stable anchors. Based on 25 years of field research, advisory work, and professional experience in Silicon Valley, Bahrami and Evans present a cross-functional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately reinventing knowledge enterprises. Part I of this interview will focus on the big picture, or the theory behind, and the conceptual foundations of super-flexibility. Part II of the interview, published in the following issue, will focus on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies or teams can become super-flexible.

1. What does “Super-flexibility” mean and why did you coin the phrase?
Our goal in writing the book, and teaching the concepts in our executive seminars and graduate programs, is to give knowledge workers and business leaders a diagnostic toolkit for succeeding in a dynamic world. In essence, super-flexibility is the capacity to change course, transform, evolve, and reinvent—like a chameleon changing its color. At the same time, super-flexibility is not just about transformation and reinvention; it is also about the capacity to withstand turbulence, to bounce back, and to stay the course, like a camel surviving in desert con-
A super-flexible organization is multi-polar, like a living organism with multiple brains, but these move in the same direction, like a flock of birds or a school of fish.

2. How does "Super-flexibility" differ from other terms like flexibility, agility, versatil- ity, etc.? "Flexibility" is a polymorphous concept. It has different meanings depending on the context, and has been the focus of research in several disciplines. The term "flexibility" is used interchangeably with flexibility in supply chain management and software engineering. In child psychology and ecology, the term "flexibility" describes the principle to the auto industry. In our book, we discuss how recycling and cross-pollination catalyze the process of innovation in Silicon Valley.

3. In your book, you talk about a company or organization becoming super-flexible through a super-flexible ecosystem, strategy, execution, organization, and leadership. Can you talk more about these?

We discuss how a super-flexible ecosystem innovates through a process of "flexible re-cycling." It can recycle talent, ideas, projects, and most importantly of all, "failures" and re-configure these in novel ways, with added ingredients. Recycling is also about cross-pollination, scanning actively, and learning from others. Yet, many business leaders are myopic and don't have peripheral vision; they see the world through the lens of their own established businesses. Henry Ford got the idea of the assembly line by visiting slaughter houses. He saw how carcasses went through their own "assembly lines" and applied the principle to the auto industry. In our book, we discuss how recycling and cross-pollination catalyze the process of innovation in Silicon Valley.

Super-flexible execution is about deploying a scientific approach to getting things done, instead of being bogged down in "analysis paralysis." We argue that dynamic execution requires clear intentions, targeted experimentation, openness to new data, fact-based assessment, and swift revisions. Our "Recalcification Framework" describes a phased approach to execution, and the three stages of experimentation, escalation and integration, as well as action steps along the way. The worst-case scenario is when you ignore factual feedback and adhere to the same recipe because you are intellectually and emotionally "attached" to it. We know several brilliant leaders who failed because they were not open to input that did not fit their own world views. The essence of recalcification is thinking like scientists—develop a hypothesis, gather data, experiment, prototype, iterate, learn, and even fail along the way.

A super-flexible organization is multi-polar, with several core business units to which you are intellectually and emotionally "attached" to it. We know several brilliant leaders who failed because they were not open to input that did not fit their own world views. The essence of recalcification is thinking like scientists—develop a hypothesis, gather data, experiment, prototype, iterate, learn, and even fail along the way.

Super-flexible strategies involve switching between a portfolio of initiatives. Business leaders have to "maneuver" their strategic trajectory, like changing gears in a car.

Developing super-flexible strategies involves shifting between a portfolio of initiatives. Business leaders have to "maneuver" their strategic trajectory, like changing gears in a car.

Instead of thinking about strategy as a single "best" approach, we argue that developing super-flexible strategies involves switching between a portfolio of initiatives. Business leaders have to "maneuver" their strategic trajectory, like changing gears in a car. In our book, we describe four types of maneuvers: pre-emptive, protective, exploitative, and corrective.

4. How is this book different from other books on flexibility/ change?

We present an "integrated" approach, spanning strategy, organization, leadership, execution, and innovation, and explore flexibility from the vantage point of different disciplines. We have also departed from the traditional "market" segmentation of popular business books. Our book is more like a handbook or a reference guide, filled with conversations, case studies, and practical applications. Management teams need a common vocabulary and frame of reference, and a conceptual toolkit that can help them create a shared perception of what's happening. We work with companies that are populated by knowledge workers, with domain expertise. They don't want someone to tell them what to do. They want a "midwife" or a catalyst who can help them give birth to their own ideas. Once the conversation gets started, it's up to them to take it from there. Leaders should view our book more as a toolkit of conceptual frameworks that can help them start cross-functional conversations, diagnose complex situations, interpret their own experiences, and create a shared frame of reference, rather than a menu of best practices.

5. Who is your book and research trying to help or reach? Our book is not only for scholars or for practitioners. We have tried to build a bridge between research and practice, making the book a "hybrid." We hope to reach thoughtful knowledge workers who want to understand the conceptual roots of flexibility and its practical application.

Specifically, we target the individual, whether they are CEOs, C-level executives, general managers, project leaders, or knowledge workers. Our goal is to provide a toolkit to help knowledge workers navigate at different altitudes, from the trenches to the Boardroom. For example, a CEO can use our framework or "super-flexible" organization to assess the entire company, but the same tool can be used by a project leader to diagnose a team's effectiveness.

6. Given the current economic and likely future challenges, how important is it for a company or organization to be super-flexible?

In today's interconnected world, there's a myriad of what we call "revision triggers"—technological, economic, geo-political, social, environmental, and cultural triggers. These triggers bombard companies, and prompt them to deviate from planned courses of action.

It's more critical now than ever. In today's interconnected world, there's a myriad of what we call "revision triggers"—technological, economic, geo-political, social, environmental, and cultural triggers. These triggers bombard companies, and prompt them to deviate from planned courses of action. There is also no slack in terms of time, resources, and bandwidth. Many knowledge workers understand that they need to be flexible, but don't know how. Also, if you look at the new technologies unfolding, the cloud, virtualization, impact of social media and so on, there's a massive shift in the way we do business and companies have to adapt to these developments. Given the multitude of revision triggers, we suggest you to continually reconfigure yourself as an organization, a team, and an individual, to address the unfolding realities.

7. Why do you focus your book and research on "knowledge enterprises" only? Wouldn't all companies benefit from being super-flexible?
It is important to know when and where you need to be super-flexible, and how much is too much.

10. Is there a point where companies are too “super-flexible” and don’t stay on course or focus enough? Said another way, are there situations where companies might not want to be super-flexible? Absolutely. It is important to know when and where you need to be super-flexible, and how much is too much. For example, our research shows that experimentation is critical when you embark on a new initiative, but you can’t keep your options open forever. At some point, you have to escalate your commitment to a particular course of action or pull the plug. Our diagnostic frameworks try to provide a balanced approach, so you assess when you put too many eggs in one basket, or are too flexible in one or another dimension.

In part II of this interview, authors and educators Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans discuss the “how” of super-flexibility; or how companies can put these ideas into practice. Stay tuned for more on this interesting topic in the next issue.

About the authors
Dr. Homa Bahrami is a Senior Lecturer at the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, a Faculty Director at the Haas Center for Executive Education, and on the Board of the Haas Center for Teaching Excellence. She specializes in organizational innovation and enterprise adaptation in dynamic, knowledge-based industries. She has published widely in leading journals, is the co-author of a major textbook (with Harold Leavitt, Stanford University) “Managerial Psychology: Managing behavior in organizations”, published by the University of Chicago Press, and the co-author of “Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises” published by Springer in 2010. She serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and is active in executive education in the US and Europe.

Dr. Stuart Evans is a Distinguished Service Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Silicon Valley, where he teaches Innovation & Entrepreneurship. He is a board member, educator and author, focusing on dynamic high tech ventures. His professional career spans research (SRI International, Stanford Graduate School of Business), consulting (Bain and Company, Menlo Park, California), investing (Sand Hill Venture Group, Menlo Park, California) and executive management (Shugart Corporation, a Xerox subsidiary, Sunnyvale, California). He has published widely on strategic flexibility, serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and mentors high tech entrepreneurs. He is the co-author of “Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises”.

In Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans present a “toolkit” to help organisations and teams become “super-flexible” in a dynamic world. They define “super-flexibility” as the capacity to transform by adapting to new realities, underpinned by the ability to withstand turbulence by creating stable anchors. Based on 25 years of field research, advisory work, and professional experience in Silicon Valley, Bahrami and Evans present a cross-functional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately re-inventing knowledge enterprises. Part I of our interview was focused on the big picture, or the theory related to super-flexibility. Part II of the interview focuses on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies and teams can become super-flexible.

The authors address five inter-related topics: super-flexible innovation, super-flexible strategy, super-flexible execution, super-flexible organization, and super-flexible leadership. In this second interview, we focus on these core topics.

1. In your book, you talk about recycling as a critical aspect of innovation and the development of a super-flexible ecosystem and how Silicon Valley has a culture of failures. Can you talk more about how others can learn from this? Entrepreneurial teams in Silicon Valley re-cyle talent, intellectual property, and failed companies. They often take a failed company and its key team members, incorporate a new company, cherry-pick the best intellectual property, add new ingredients, and restart it from scratch. Companies can learn from these initiatives by having their own venture teams. They can monitor internal projects, blend it with outside capabilities, and re-configure new initiatives, even when...
Developing super-flexible strategies is about having a portfolio of initiatives, spanning pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective moves, monitoring them on a regular basis, and shifting gears between them.

a project has been a "failure". Moreover, business teams should conduct regular lessons-learned, or "post-mortems" in order to create a "recycling" culture. We've been inside a number of established companies, where project leaders are apprehensive to present bad results because they get branded as failures, and as such, may be demoted, stigmatized, or even fired. What if companies instituted regular post-mortems where teams are expected to bring out the good, the bad, and the ugly, as part of their regular reviews? And what if they leverage these sessions as opportunities to create new ideas or products? I don't see many companies that use this simple lesson because our corporate cultures are obsessed with success.

2. In your chapter on Super-Flexible Strategies, you discuss another action principle, "maneuvering", or how a company needs to "harness kaleidoscopic changes to make sudden left turns". Can you explain how?

The maneuvering framework categorizes a company's strategic initiatives in terms of four different types of dynamic action plans or what we call "maneuvers". These are pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective maneuvers. Pre-emptive and protective maneuvers represent offensive and defensive moves anchored in the future (from an offensive viewpoint), if I had a clean sheet, what would I want this business to look like in a few years, and from a defensive standpoint, what is the worst case scenario and how should I guard against it? Exploitive and corrective maneuvers represent offensive and defensive moves anchored in today's world, and now (what are the opportunities I want to leverage today, and what are the mistakes I need to fix or the urgent problems I have to solve). Developing super-flexible strategies is about having a portfolio of initiatives, spanning pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective moves, monitoring them on a regular basis, and more significantly, shifting gears between them.

3. When you discuss super-flexible strategies and "corrective maneuvering", you provide the example of Steve Jobs and how he turned Apple around in the late 1990s, not by embarking on a grand strategy, but by concentrating on bite-sized and rapid rollouts of new products every 90 days—things he could do "harness kaleidoscopic changes to make sudden left turns".

Knowledge workers need clear boundaries, but also a lot of autonomy in terms of making strategy happen. The worst-case scenario is when the top team confuses these two roles.

Effective leaders are also versatile in using their "push-pull" capabilities, when to actively listen and when to direct and tell. They have self-insight and are honest about their skill gaps. They know how to deploy the capabilities of others to fill in their own shortcomings.

6. How might a super-flexible organisation balance stability and flexibility? Don't change your anatomy too often; it can be disruptive and unproductive. Be realistic about what it takes to change your personality or culture, because like human beings, organisational personalities don't change that easily. What you can change is your "circulation", in other words, your interaction patterns—what meetings you put on the calendar, for what purpose, who gets invited, etc. Changes in circulation generate less resistance compared to the daunting task of overhauling anatomy or personality.

7. The last action principle you present in your book is related to super-flexible leadership—aligning knowledge workers through peer-peer practices. Can you talk about this and how a super-flexible organisation would lead and treat knowledge workers?

The critical element of peer-peer leadership is clarity around the "non-negotiables": These may reflect core values, critical priorities, or process norms. Effective leaders are also versatile in using their "push-pull" capabilities, when to actively listen and when to direct and tell. They can change hats and shift gears depending on the context. Most important of all, they have self-insight and are honest about their skill gaps. They know how to deploy the capabilities of others to fill in their own shortcomings.
The European Business Review

January - February 2011

9. Is there a risk of super-flexibility that could potentially lead to chasing current real-time trends?

It is never easy to be behind the curve. In our book, we talk about this when we discuss super-flexible strategies and the action principle of maneuvering. Understanding real-time trends is important but not sufficient. It is like shifting gears when you drive a car. You can't just rely on one gear, or on your cruise control. The challenge is to figure out which gear you need at which point in your business trajectory.

10. Is the book easily adapted to a formal training program or session to be implemented within a company to lead themselves?

We have been executive educators for many years, especially for large, established corporations that want to become flexible, agile, and dynamic. We have organised study tours of Silicon Valley for Boards and executive teams, facilitated alignment sessions for cross-functional teams, and designed learning initiatives for high potentials. During the past year, we have even organised “Boot camps” for scientists and engineers who are first-time managers.

Over the years, we have woven many of these ideas into the fabric of our classes. Our graduate courses leverage the ideas to offer a range of specialized learning experiences; our elective courses include “Organisational Innovation,” “High Tech Venturing,” “Enterprise Innovation,” “Executive Leadership,” and “International Business.” We view the proposed frameworks as a “base platform” that can be leveraged to create targeted learning experiences for different audiences.

11. What are some current and future projects that you are working on?

We are currently working on how to turn these ideas into customized courses and executive seminars. Our goal is to help other firms use them as check-up and diagnostic tools. On the research side, Stuart is working on “Enterprise Resilience.” The goal is to assess how companies can bounce back, after experiencing major crises. Homa’s research is focused on how “virtualization” impacts organizational design. In summary, we want to develop an integrated concept of super-flexibility and dig deeper into how an organization can be stable and transform at the same time.

About the authors

Dr. Homa Bahrami is a Senior Lecturer at the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, a Faculty Director at the Haas Center for Executive Education, and on the Board of the Haas Center for Teaching Excellence. She specializes in organizational innovation and enterprise adaptation in dynamic, knowledge-based industries. She has published widely in leading journals, is the co-author of a major textbook (with Harold Leavitt, Stanford University) “Managerial Psychology: Managing Behaviour in Organisations,” published by the University of Chicago Press, and the co-author of “Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises” published by Springer in 2010. She serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and is active in executive education in the US and Europe.

Dr. Stuart Evans is a Distinguished Service Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Silicon Valley, where he teaches “Innovation & Entrepreneurship.” He is a board member, educator, and author, focusing on dynamic high tech ventures. His professional career spans research (SRI International, Stanford Graduate School of Business), consulting ( Bain and Company, Menlo Park, California), investing (Sand Hill Venture Group, Menlo Park, California) and executive management (Shugart Corporation, a Xerox subsidiary, Sunnyvale, California). He has published widely on strategic flexibility, serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and mentors high tech entrepreneurs. He is the co-author of “Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises”, published by Springer in 2010.

Reprint TEBR1011NDJF