



# rEvolution

## How to Thrive in Crazy Times



"Not just a book, but a generous compendium of practical ideas; so generous in fact that you'll surely thrive on just a fraction of the suggestions Bill Lucas offers up in this compelling book."

**Dr Peter Honey, Author and Expert on Learning**

# Bill Lucas

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# *rEvolution*

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# *Introduction*

It's not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent but the ones most responsive to change.

Charles Darwin

We have reached a turning point in our development as a species.

Our past is catching up with us with respect to climate change. We continue to reduce our stock of biodiversity in ways that we do not understand. The population of the planet is expanding so fast that we may not have enough food or water to go round. Whether through religious extremism or shortage of resources the chance of violence and even war is increasing. So serious is the challenge facing *Homo sapiens* that eminent Professor Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society in the UK, considers that we have only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving this century.

At the same time we continue to get smarter. In the last decade alone just three inventions illustrate our creativity. We have discovered the three billion DNA letters of our own human code – the human genome, invented a hybrid car that runs on petrol and electricity and, in YouTube, found an almost instant means of sharing moving images across the globe. Technological advances involving the Internet, computers and affordable air travel proceed at an astonishing pace so that pretty much wherever we are on the planet, we can be in touch with each other. We are consequently no longer subject to the old rules of time and place. And as the World Wide Web grows exponentially, we are surrounded by so much data that even an educated person could only ever presume to know a tiny fraction of what there is to know.

A century and a half ago Charles Darwin published his brilliant account of the process of evolution, *On the Origin of Species*. His theory of natural selection focused on the way modifications (changes) in species take place over long periods of time. Although he speculated about human beings and their development, his main interest was in the evolution of non-sentient organisms and on the ways in which improvements are passed down the generations so that the species which are most responsive thrive.

Fast forward to today. Evolution is taking place at such a speed that where natural selection took place over millions of years, it is conceivable that human beings may evolve into something else in a matter of a few centuries or less. The essence of Darwin's theory – his emphasis on adaptability as the best strategy for success – holds good. But it does not go far enough in explaining what we might actually do to stay sane and thrive in a period of accelerated evolution.

Homo sapiens has upset the old order by his capacity to turn ideas into actions so rapidly. For precisely because we can think and use language, our evolution is likely to be charted through the quality of our mindware or, as I will refer to it from time to time, our "adaptive intelligence".

In this book I want to explore what this means for the way we learn in the real world. Our ancestors developed physical tools – axes, fire, wheels, buildings, printing presses and so on. We need to develop a correspondingly helpful set of mental tools or mindware to ensure that we cope with the new circumstances in which we find ourselves. Faced with virtually no time to process new challenges and new ways of doing things, how best should we react? To thrive in the first part of the twenty-first century requires some new rules (as well as a fresh look at some old ones).

We are, I will argue, in the middle of a revolution with a small "r". A *rEvolution* if you like. Some of the traditional ways of approaching things still work well, while others

need to be turned on their head. And in some cases we simply need fresh ways of looking at what is happening around us.

## *Adaptive intelligence*

Developing adaptive expertise involves some fundamental rethinking about intelligence. This will express itself in two ways; in the habits of mind<sup>1</sup> we cultivate in our daily lives and in the patterns of social interaction we choose with other human beings.

Where once smart people knew a lot of stuff and were confident that their way of doing things was the most enlightened, we may need to get better at unlearning things and at managing short-term relationships.

If it was a safe bet to do more of the same or simply try harder, it may be more helpful to understand the processes of habit and change the ways in which we can harness the energy of those around us to help us stick to any new resolve.

Where in the past we spent our time in forensic analysis and problem-solving we may prefer to shift our attention to appreciative inquiry and to the formation of richly rewarding reciprocal relationships with other like-minded people.

And, while the lessons of history will continue to be valuable, we may become more suspicious of traditional “experience” as we go into uncharted waters and look as well for the capacity to imagine futures, to reframe situations and to conduct, with others, a series of ongoing experiments into the way we live our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book I use the phrase “habits of mind” (as used by Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick in an educational context – [www.habits-of-mind.net](http://www.habits-of-mind.net)) to describe the kinds of adaptive dispositions I am suggesting.

Whether ideas like these seem like revolution or evolution will probably depend on your state of mind and personal knowledge and experience. *rEvolution: How to Thrive in Crazy Times* is not a traditional self-help guide. Rather it is aimed at anyone who is curious enough to pull it down from the bookshelf hoping for a more eclectic and wider-ranging selection of ideas than is traditional in many of these kinds of books. Some of the suggestions will be familiar to readers. But in the blending of the known and the unknown I hope you will find useful prompts to action or at least be stirred to find out more about something that has reawakened your interest. If you are working in organisations you may find yourself part of a “change programme” and be grateful for the orientation a book like this can give you. And in your role as citizen of a changing world I hope that something I have written may gently nudge you into further reading, contemplation or action.

### *A brief history of change*

Let me go back in time for a moment to put Darwin and other evolutionary thinking in context.

For a few billion years there were just single-celled organisms on earth. Then our immediate ape-like ancestors emerged from the swamp. And, somewhere between a hundred thousand and a million years ago, *Homo sapiens* “arrived”. These are the slow and fascinating processes of natural selection described by Charles Darwin.

Then, as an intelligent species, we invented tools, fire, language, farming and civilised living. A few centuries ago we started to get clever with machines, harnessing the power of water, steam, gas, oil and electricity. We learned how to communicate in print, how to travel around the globe at speed and, only decades ago, we invented the computer

## *Crazy times*

God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Nothing stays the same for long. The sun goes in. We get sick. Children grow up. Our hips fall apart. Winter comes. We fall in love. We fall out of love. We buy a new car. We find faith. A cherished belief is challenged. We go to the moon. We discover the human genome. Computers get smarter. Seeds become plants, bloom, die and return to the earth.

We know all this stuff. We're experts. We've been dealing with this kind of change ever since we were born. That's why we are still alive. It's why human beings rule the planet.

But hold on. Are we so confident? Or is there something different going on right now?

Some forty years ago Alvin Toffler warned us that something strange was happening. He called it future shock, "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time". In these crazy times the tempo of life has become so rapid that we no longer have time to process our responses to what is going on around us.

For many people this means feeling constantly on the back foot, warding off some new attack. At home, parents struggle to comprehend their children's online social networking activities and grandparents find themselves suddenly called upon to be child minders just when they had hoped to have some time for themselves. Businesses uproot

aspects of their work to other parts of the globe at the drop of a corporate hat. And ubiquitous hand-held devices mean that some people are never alone, constantly carrying on multiple conversations with work colleagues and family members even as they purport to be attending to other activities around them. Change is 24/7. Change is remorseless. As a consequence of this many people feel fearful, bewildered and stressed out.

Until quite recently it was a reasonable assumption to make that change takes time and is fundamentally a gradual process. Even Moore's Law, the technological one about the speed of computers doubling every eighteen months, while scary, seems somehow manageable. Eighteen months is a long time, we think to ourselves. I'll be a whole year older. Nothing to panic about. But if this law continues to hold fast (which some doubt), in just fifteen years computers will be a thousand times faster than now and capable of doing things which most of us have not even begun to dream about.

The first rule of *rEvolution* is this: change is changing. And some change is so fast that, if we want to survive, we need to evolve a different way of dealing with change, understanding more about whether it is good or bad, radical or minor, personal or social, desirable or not, and so on.

### *Inside the human mind*

Driving our evolution is, of course, the human mind. And here there is an interesting tension – for our very survival has depended on two forces which lead us to react to change in very different ways. On the one hand our minds are wonderfully curious, endlessly seeking out new experiences. We want to see if the world really is flat or if it is possible to land on Mars or crash small particles together to understand more about how the universe began. We enjoy visiting new places, meeting new friends, taking on new challenges. We

# *Adaptive intelligence*

Every time I learn something it pushes some old stuff out of my brain.

Homer Simpson

One hundred and fifty years ago, as the quotation from Charles Darwin which begins *rEvolution* makes clear, a compelling case was made for responsiveness to change (rather than, say, cleverness or strength) being the critical success factor in natural selection. Of course, as Darwin was not looking at the evolution of human beings he does not explore what people who thrive in today's changing ecosystem actually *do* that is different.

What habits of mind and patterns of social interaction characterise what I am calling adaptive intelligence? This question will be at the heart of this Rule just as Rule 5 – that we can all learn how to change more effectively – is at the core of the argument of this book. Of course, while we can all learn how to adapt more effectively, some will learn this more effectively than others. That's natural selection. But my supposition is that, if we really want to adapt, then there are some practical things that we can all do which will help most of us.

In this Rule we will explore some of the elements of responsiveness – what happens when action and reflection combine so that you act differently as a consequence. Many people are either strong on action or on reflection but not on both. But to be responsive we need both these capabilities along with a determination to learn from experience and do things differently.

It was psychologist Jean Piaget who first suggested that learning is really a process of adaptation. He talked of two processes at work, “accommodation” and “assimilation”. We notice something, adjust our thinking and, as a consequence, adapt the way we act. In practice, we either fit our theory to our experience, accommodation, or fit our experience to any theory we have already formed in our head, assimilation.

So, if your theory of children is that they are always naughty and you meet a child who is well behaved, you would accommodate your views by adjusting your theory. From then on children would become capable of good or bad behaviour. If you chose to assimilate this data, then your view of children would remain the same and your mind would explain away your experience by thinking of the nice child as an odd exception to the rule.

Of the two kinds of adaptation described by Piaget, accommodation is the more challenging for it requires us to rethink the way we view the world. Assimilation occurs when we are able to fit our experience to a theory we have developed. So, for example, as we grow up we discover the force of gravity. As a baby we push our milk bottle off the high chair and it falls to the floor. The same happens for bits of fruit. Then we play with a hose and see the water arching downwards. Footballs, glass, even human beings all gradually get assimilated into our initially sketchy sense of the force of gravity.

Intelligent learners, according to Piaget, know when to accommodate and when to assimilate. They know “what to do when they don’t know what to do”!

Of course, to begin the process of adaptation at all you have to notice what is going on in the first place. And it turns out that the brain has evolved to be surprisingly lazy at noticing. Here’s a simplified version of an entertaining

card trick by Andy Bauch which makes the point. Try it out for yourself.

Look at these cards and choose one card. Concentrate on it very hard so you will be sure to remember it. Amazingly I know just which card you have chosen and I am going to remove it. Turn to the end of this Rule to see just how I will do this.



Just for a fleeting second most people are fooled; I certainly was the first time I tried it!

The brain is surprisingly selective in what it thinks it has seen. Even a simple instruction – “Concentrate on it very hard” – can be “misheard” to mean “Don’t bother about the other cards”. Our minds tend to overestimate what they can take in with a single look.

There are many other experiments that make this point. Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris at Harvard created a classic experiment involving a film of a handful of people playing basketball. Subjects are asked to count the passes made by one of the teams as they watch. But unbeknown to them a woman dressed in a gorilla suit walks across the screen, at one stage even turning to the camera and thumping her chest. About half of the watchers failed to spot a woman dressed in a gorilla suit even though she has walked slowly across the scene for nine seconds. The gorilla experiment is a classic example of another kind of inattentive blindness.

"A practical survival guide to the volatile and discontinuous change which is a characteristic of the modern world. It's an accumulation of wisdom that explores how humans can flourish in accelerating change, distilled into an engaging and easy to use book."

**Simon Walker, Co-founder, talentsmoothie**

We have reached a turning point in our development as a species. In the coming decades we face hugely significant global challenges. For many of us these seem like crazy times to be living in, with the speed of change accelerating faster than ever. 150 years after Charles Darwin invented the concept of natural selection, Bill Lucas argues that the rules of evolution are changing. To thrive in our current crazy world we need a new kind of "mind-ware". Specifically we need to develop our adaptive intelligence. *rEvolution* describes some of the steps you can take – the new rules of change - at home, at school and at work to survive and thrive.

"The focus on adaptive intelligence – and the need for managers and leaders to let go – is crucial to surviving this recession. I commend Bill Lucas for another thought-provoking book. A must have for anyone who is rethinking their approach to business."

**Ruth Spellman, Chief Executive, Chartered Management Institute**

"There are few people that I would trust to hold up an umbrella and lead people to their varying destinations, but Bill Lucas can do this even for people, perhaps especially for people, who don't know where they're headed and where they might end up. But armed with an insatiable curiosity about people, life and learning, Bill gives us new clues, provides us with helpful constructs and tells us some charming stories, all of which become our aids and friends as we battle to make sense of the crazy world around us and build our own futures."

**Jeffrey Defries, Chief Executive CRAC and creator of icould**

"A deeply compelling argument for a mind-ware revolution with the potential to equip individuals and organisations with vital capabilities for navigating and adapting to the uncharted waters into which we're all sailing."

**Professor Eugene Sadler-Smith, School of Management, University of Surrey**

"A treasury of invaluable ideas and advice on living and learning more effectively with the reality of change in the 21st century. Its variety, energy and expansiveness is a delight. I thoroughly recommend it."

**Lynne Sedgmore, Executive Director, 157 Group**

**Professor Bill Lucas** is Chairman of the UK's Talent Foundation, Co-Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester and a bestselling author.

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