

**BEFORE WE GET  
THERE**

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# **STORIES OF ADAPTATION**

**Lessons from Six Real Lives  
on Navigating Change**

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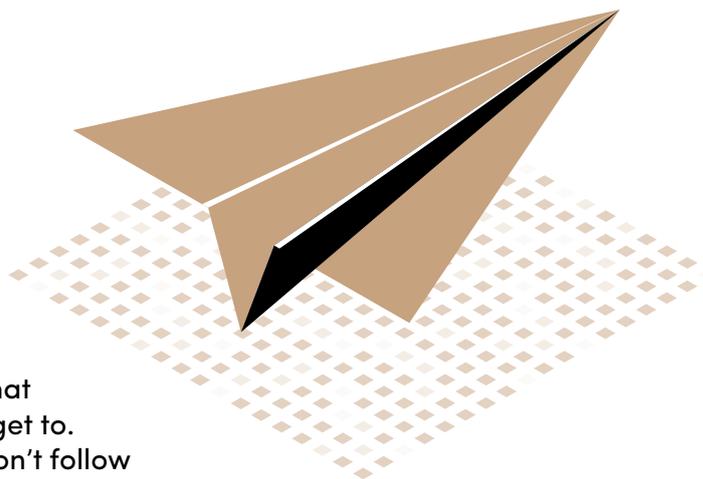
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# INTRODUCTION

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Over the past year, I've interviewed 30 guests from Singapore and beyond on their life journeys. We dug into the choices they've made, what drives them, what keeps them going, and where they want to get to. I'm naturally drawn to people whose lives don't follow the standard path; they're building a life for themselves that is right for them, not what society tells them. Because of this, many of my guests have been artists, creatives, athletes, and other people doing things their own way. As I started to reflect on these conversations and the lessons that could be learned from them, one theme became clear: **adaptation is key for us to move forward in life and become better versions of ourselves.** And so I started my mission to understand what it takes to improve our adaptability, the skill that allows us to make changes both internally and externally to navigate our lives. I want to explore how to build this skill, become more adaptable, and make the right adaptations in our lives.

I built this resource to share some of the most powerful examples of adaptations my podcast guests have made and how you can learn from their stories. As we'll see through these examples, we often view adaptations as something that comes from external circumstances like losing a job, moving to a new place, or starting a new phase of our lives. Being adaptable in those situations is important; we often don't have any choice but to adapt, and so the skill and speed at which we are able to adapt are key. But another time we need to be adaptable is when we proactively make changes in our lives to progress towards being in alignment with what we are feeling inside. I call this internal adaptability, and it often leads to the greatest changes and times of growth. But, it isn't easy. It is simpler to just keep doing what we always have, to push that voice down inside of ourselves that is calling us to grow and adapt to the next level in our lives. That's why I want to share these examples, to show how my guests made adaptations and help you reflect on how you can incorporate their lessons into your life.

# WHAT IS ADAPTATION, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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There's a ton of information, talks, and more about areas like resilience and growth mindset in the self-improvement space. But when people talk about adaptation and adaptability, it is usually in the context of business: how organizations can adapt to market changes, how leaders can guide the process of adaptation, and how individuals can remain adaptable as technology changes. I believe that the power of adaptability extends far beyond the workplace, and for most of us, is much more relevant and needed in our personal lives than we usually think about. First of all, let's start with some definitions:

Adaptability is the skill or capacity to make or get used to changes.  
(**American Psychological Association**)

Adaptations are the specific changes made to improve a situation.  
(**Ployhart & Bliese, 2006**)

Basically, we need to grow our adaptability so we are skilled enough to make adaptations when we need to.

The interesting thing about adaptations is that in many cases, we all have to do them; we don't have a choice. But there is a degree of how well and how quickly we adapt that can be the difference between being happy or miserable. But in other cases, whether we adapt or not is completely up to us; we can keep doing the same things we've always done, or we can adapt and grow. I think this versatile nature of adaptation is why it isn't often thought of as a skill or trait like intelligence, resourcefulness, or empathy. But once we start understanding it as a skill, we realize it can be trained and improved like anything else.

Through the stories of six guests on *Before We Get There*, I want to share 3 themes of adaptation, what it looked like for my guests, how they navigated the changes, what drove them, and where it led them.

# IDENTITY



These two guests went through some of the biggest outwardly visible adaptations, but the drives behind the changes were deeply internal and personal. The adaptations were outwardly drastic, but without a strong set of internal reflection and understanding of their own identity, they wouldn't have been able to make these changes, or they would have felt fake and inauthentic. Not everyone will need to adapt their identity, but these examples show that adapting your life path to align with your true self isn't something you just do once and be done with. It is a process. Another important lesson from these two guests is timing. There isn't a right or wrong time; it isn't useful after we've made an adaptation to wish we had made it sooner. The circumstances in our lives that lead us to the point that we want to change aren't set in stone.

Identity-driven adaptation is unusual. But when the change starts from within instead of from external drivers, it's deeper and often more disruptive. These are the kinds of adaptations that ask us to rebuild not just what we do, but who we are. The key for identity adaptations is authenticity. To be in touch with our true selves enough to know that an adaptation is needed, and to understand what changes those are.



## Nuray Istiqbal

*Former adult film star turned practicing Muslim. Adapted her life to align with a new faith and sense of self.*

Nuray was a highly successful adult film star. She'd blown up after she started appearing in films and gotten to the point in her career that she could choose which projects she wanted to work on and how often she worked. Although this career path might not seem "successful" to everyone, objectively, she had success. She was happy with what she was doing, and even now says she has no regrets. She wasn't seeking a way out or looking for a higher purpose, but on a trip to Southeast Asia, something found her. She was introduced to Islam and became interested in how the religion could affect her life and her path. After six months of intense study, she converted and is now a practicing Muslim. She not only adapted to the religious requirements of Islam, like Ramadan, eating Halal, and daily prayer, but she also gave up her career and is adapting to a new path. Nuray shared specifically that she wasn't feeling lost or looking for something missing in her life, but when it found her, it felt right. And she made the adaptations needed to make the change in her life.

**I became Muslim because I thought I can be a better person by practicing it.**





## Opera Tang

*Corporate professional turned drag artist. Redefining authenticity through self-expression.*

Opera Tang went from a corporate office worker to being a full-time drag artist and doing collabs with brands like Netflix and Heineken. Her identity shift wasn't just her outward appearance, it was an adaptation to be true to herself and live authentically. She not only adapted her identity through drag, but also got more in touch with her ancestral roots through incorporating traditional Chinese elements in her stage name, costumes, and performances. The catalyst for her adaptation was external, being laid off from her job. But if she hadn't already been exploring her identity and laying the groundwork for a life-changing adaptation, she wouldn't have been ready to make the shift. Opportunities often come by chance or fate, but we have to be ready for them when they come.

**I didn't look up to anybody. I couldn't look up to anybody growing up in Singapore that was doing the things that I wanted to do. Being themselves unapologetically.**



Carl Jung wrote that the privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are. He believed that most people move through life with parts of themselves they never fully acknowledge. Sides they hide or suppress to meet expectations. Individuation, as he described it, is the process of bringing those parts into awareness and allowing the self to evolve into something whole. It isn't a single realization or a moment of clarity. It's a long process of reflection, honesty, and the willingness to change. Sometimes that means shedding an old identity completely and creating a new one that feels more truthful. That's what makes identity adaptation so rare. It takes both self-knowledge and courage to step away from the version of yourself that feels familiar and toward the one that feels real.

Not everyone will change their name, career, or appearance, but we all face moments where we have to ask if we're living in line with who we really are. Sometimes that means smaller identity adaptations, like the way we see ourselves as parents, partners, or leaders. Other times, it means letting go of an old version of ourselves that no longer fits. The process is the same either way.

What these stories remind me of is that adapting your identity isn't about becoming someone new. It's about allowing the truest parts of yourself to take up more space, even when that means stepping into the unknown.



# CHALLENGE



For challenge to be a driver for adaptation, you have to be ready to take risks. Of course, when you set out on a risky path, there's many adaptations that happen along the way. But that first step of taking the path of risk is the biggest adaptation you can make. And that's what makes these examples so powerful: we have to take risks before we know we are ready. If you wait until you feel you are ready, your progress will slow to a crawl, or you may never grow at all. Challenge can be forced on us, or we can seek it out; either way, pressure is one of the fastest ways to grow through adaptation.

Psychological research on stress and adaptation supports this idea. The concept of hormesis describes how small, manageable doses of stress strengthen our ability to handle future challenges. It applies as much to the mind as to the body. When we train under pressure, our systems learn to recover, adjust, and respond more efficiently. That's why discomfort is so important to growth. It isn't pleasant, but it's productive. Over time, the people who consistently face challenges don't become immune to stress; they become more adapted to it.



## **Davis Ng**

*Chef, restaurateur, and boxer.  
Lives out adaptation through  
constant challenge in the ring  
and the kitchen.*

Davis is a chef, restaurateur, and championship boxer - he punches challenge in the face, literally. But he isn't just a thrill seeker putting himself in risky situations; the challenges he puts himself in and adaptations he makes to get through them help him grow and succeed. As a Brazilian Jiu-jitsu practitioner myself, I can tell you firsthand that combat sports are one of the quickest ways to test your adaptability. You get immediate and powerful feedback, and you need to instantly adapt to your opponent or they will just keep beating you the same way. The challenge of fighting or sparring can be almost addictive, like a puzzle you will never be able to solve, but you want to try just one more time. What Davis didn't know is that starting a food business and then a restaurant would be at least as challenging, if not more so, than getting in the ring. From logistical challenges like hauling around kilos of smoked bacon, to business challenges like a failed try at a cloud kitchen, to culinary challenges like figuring out how to present traditional American BBQ for local Singaporean customers, he's had to make adaptations every step of the way.

**End of the day, it's just moving forward.  
Keeping your head up and then  
focusing on the main goal.**





## **Rob Lilwall**

*Nat Geo Explorer and author.  
From Siberia to Singapore,  
turning risk into resilience.*

One of Rob's many job titles, "Nat Geo Explorer" oozes challenge. But he didn't start off with a plan to become a professional adventurer, motivational speaker, and author; he started with a challenge and adapted along the way. Rob had been teaching for a couple of years in the UK when his friend invited him on a trip that seemed way out of his league (or almost anyone's), cycling from Siberia back to London. It was far from the obvious path to take. After just starting his career, taking a year off and attempting a trip that had no professional benefits or guarantee of success seemed the wrong move to his friends and family. But Rob took the leap, seeking challenge, and kept seeking it throughout his trip, pushing himself beyond his original plan into what turned into a three-year journey across frozen wastelands, through the backroads of rural China, around Australia with no one around for hundreds of miles, and even into dangerous places like Afghanistan. The adaptations he made along the way changed the course of his life and allowed him to get to where he is today.

**And I think I've always found challenge,  
what draws me to challenge. Is the hope  
of transformation.**



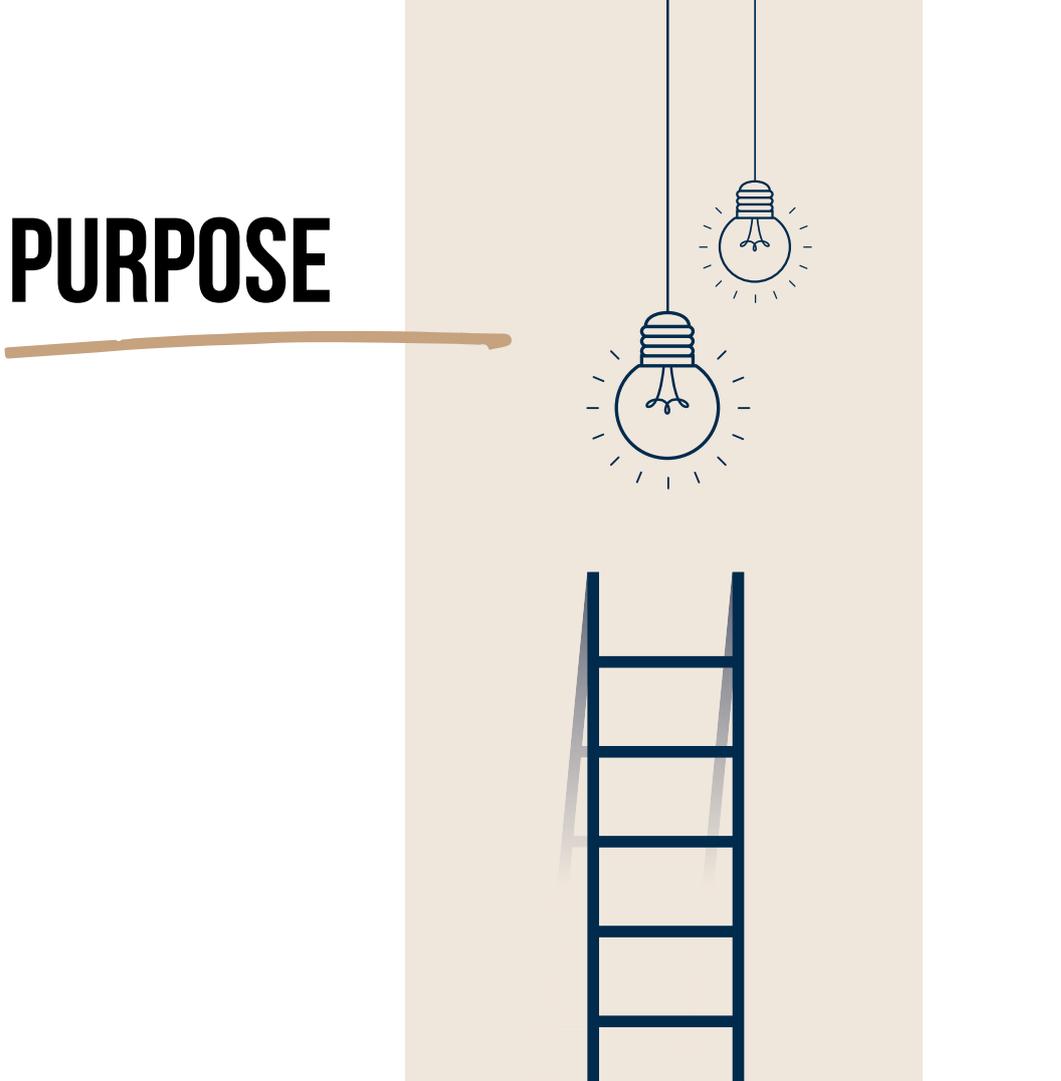
Joseph Campbell wrote that every hero's journey begins with a call to adventure, a moment that invites you out of the familiar and into the unknown. At first, that call feels disruptive. It rarely comes at a convenient time, and it almost never makes logical sense. But it's the point where growth starts. The hero can either refuse the call and stay safe or accept it and step into uncertainty. Once they do, everything changes. New tests appear, mentors show up, and unexpected obstacles force them to adapt again and again until they become someone new. The journey isn't really about the destination; it's about the transformation that happens along the way. Both Davis and Rob lived out their own versions of that arc. They didn't take the safe route. They stepped forward, accepted the discomfort, and allowed each challenge to shape them into who they are now. The challenge was never just the fight or the expedition; it was the internal process of answering that call and becoming the person capable of completing it.

Challenge-driven adaptation shows us that growth doesn't happen in comfort. It happens in motion, in risk, and in uncertainty. We don't need to seek danger, but we do need to keep stepping into what stretches us. The point isn't to conquer the challenge, it's to become someone capable of facing the next one.



**CHALLENGE**

# PURPOSE



Not all of us are able to articulate what our purpose is in life, much less adapt our lives to align with it. In fact, there are thousands of books, articles, and videos on just how to find your purpose. But even if we are able to define it, we need to be ready and willing to make the changes to follow it. Most people would agree that we have different purposes in our lives in various seasons of our life, but when we first recognize a new purpose, we are often too slow or fearful to adapt our path to it. That's what makes adapting to purpose so courageous; our purpose is something invisible and internal, and it could shift or change at any time. But these two guests are amazing examples of taking the challenging route, following what their inner self is telling them, and aligning with their purpose.

Purpose-driven adaptation is different from adapting to identity or challenge. Identity asks who we are, challenge tests what we can do, but purpose asks why we do what we do. It's the thread that ties our actions together and gives them meaning, even when the path isn't clear. When we start to feel that pull, we can either ignore it and stay safe or adapt our lives around it and see where it leads. The risk is that purpose can't always be proven in advance. We only know it's right when we're already walking in it.



## Laurence Chinery

*Stay-at-home dad and creative professional. Redefined success through family and presence.*

Laurence and his wife were living an adventurous life in Hong Kong, far from their origins in the UK, when they started their family. After having their second kid, they decided they wanted to move closer to family, but it's not easy to move halfway around the world. Especially with two careers and kids to manage at the same time. That's when a new purpose surfaced in Laurence's mind: what if his purpose in this season wasn't his career or bringing in income, what if it was to ease the transition back to Europe and spend more time with his boys? And so he adapted his plans and path to be a stay-at-home dad while his wife took a new job in the Netherlands. This made the logistics of moving much simpler, no worry about both of them finding a job at the same time, and no need to find childcare before the move happened. But it wouldn't have been the first adaptation that came to many people's minds. Even in 2025, the man staying home and the woman going to work isn't common. It was a courageous decision that Laurence could only make once he realized he could pursue a new purpose and adapt his path to follow it.

**You don't just provide finances for your kids. You provide a safe, healthy environment for them to grow. You provide emotional stability for them. There are so many different things that you can do to be a provider that isn't necessarily just a case of making money.**

**PURPOSE**





## Ruby Tan

*Outdoor adventure guide. Pursuing purpose across borders and landscapes.*

Ruby has worked to pursue a career that is surprising to ever run across in Singapore, an outdoor adventure guide. It's a purpose she found after an overseas trip, and she's made multiple huge adaptations, regularly working in far-off countries and sacrificing time with family to make it happen. Out of all my guests, Ruby's purpose was one of the clearest; she knew she wanted, even needed - to work outdoors. But being from Singapore, realizing that purpose took huge adaptation, not just applying for a new job or taking a course, but to find the kind of outdoors that called her, she needed to figure out a way to work in a completely different country. Over the years, she's constantly had to adapt, from being separated from her husband, to taking jobs in new countries like Korea, to navigating being stuck back in Singapore during COVID. But through it all, she's kept her purpose at the center and made the decisions needed to pursue it.

**The very first thing I wrote down was I have to be outdoors. I don't know what job it was going to be, but I got to be outdoors.**

**PURPOSE**



The Japanese concept of ikigai means purpose for living. It's the meeting point between passion and responsibility, a purpose that feels both personal and useful. Finding your ikigai can lead to a more fulfilling and joyful life, and it is associated with happiness and longevity. Laurence and Ruby both found their ikigai in very different forms. For Laurence, it meant prioritizing family and contribution over career. For Ruby, it meant finding a way to align her skills and passion with the natural world, even when that meant living far from home. Both show that purpose isn't discovered in theory; it's built through the values we act on every day.

Purpose-driven adaptation shows us that fulfillment doesn't come from finding a single mission that lasts a lifetime. It comes from staying sensitive to the changing seasons of our lives and being willing to move when a new direction feels right. Purpose isn't a destination; it's a compass. It points us toward what we value, but we still have to keep walking to live in it.

The practice of following your ikigai means being willing to let go of what no longer serves you, even when it once did. It means recognizing that the purpose that sustained you through one chapter might not be the same purpose that carries you into the next. This isn't failure or inconsistency. It's growth. When we understand purpose as something we actively cultivate rather than passively find, we give ourselves permission to evolve. We can honor what brought us here while remaining open to where we're being called next.



# PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

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After hearing so many different stories of adaptation, a few patterns stand out. Not abstract ideas, but things we can actually practice in daily life.

We'll all have to adapt many times in our lives, likely for many different reasons. Often, the biggest periods of growth or most important adaptations may not even be obvious when they happen. But being open to adapting, remaining in touch with your inner self, and being flexible enough to push through challenges will put us in the best position to be successful and happy.

## 1. Build moments of self-awareness.

We can't adapt what we don't notice. Check in with yourself regularly through journaling, reflection, or even short pauses during the week, and ask, Is what I'm doing still right for me? Identity adaptations start with small realizations that something's changed inside us.

## 2. Move before you feel ready.

When facing challenge, waiting for perfect timing is the same as standing still. Try taking one small, imperfect action when something feels uncomfortable or uncertain. You'll rarely feel ready first; readiness comes from movement.

## 3. Revisit your values often.

Our sense of purpose isn't fixed. What mattered most five years ago might not matter today. When you feel stuck or unmotivated, ask what's shifted in your values. Realigning your actions to what feels meaningful now is one of the simplest ways to regain direction.

## 4. Use discomfort as data.

The moments that frustrate or unsettle you are often clues about where growth is trying to happen. Instead of trying to avoid or fix them immediately, pause and ask what they're showing you. Challenge becomes useful when we treat it as feedback.

## 5. Practice flexibility in low-stakes situations.

Adaptability isn't built only during crises. Try small experiments like taking a different route to work, learning a new skill, or changing a routine, and notice how you respond. Those small moments train your brain to stay open and less resistant when bigger changes come.

# CONCLUSION

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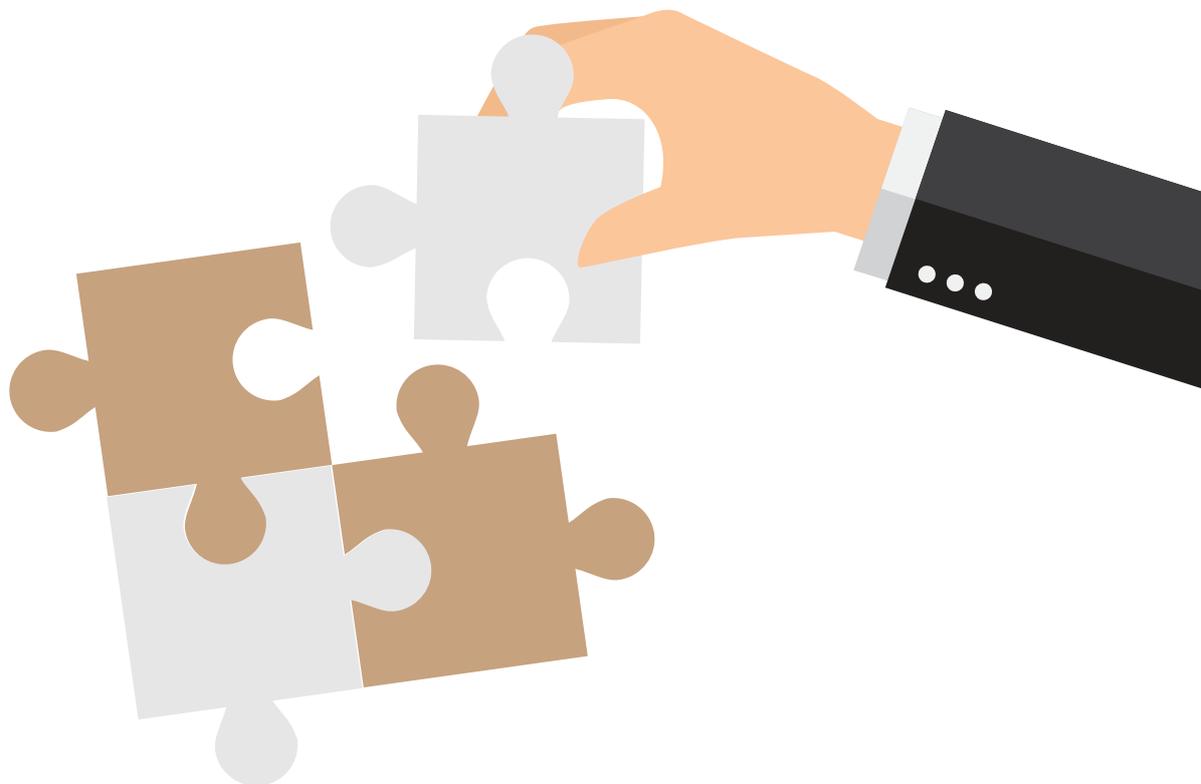
Across all these stories, one thing has become clear to me: adaptation can look different for everyone, but it's always at the heart of how we grow, succeed, and find happiness. Whether it comes from a moment of awareness, an unexpected challenge, or a shift in what we care about most, adaptation begins when we recognize that staying the same is no longer enough.

Adaptation doesn't always look dramatic. Sometimes it's a career shift or a new city, sometimes it's an internal change that no one else can see. What matters isn't how visible the change is, but whether it brings us closer to living with honesty and intention.

The guests I've spoken to have taught me that adapting well isn't about being fearless or having it all figured out. It's about being willing to move, even when things are uncertain. To listen, to adjust, and to keep learning what kind of life feels right.

We're all somewhere along that path, before we get there. And maybe getting there isn't about reaching a final version of ourselves, but learning how to keep adapting as we go.

If you've connected with any of these stories, I'd love for you to keep following along. You can listen to these full conversations on the **[Before We Get There podcast](#)**, or join my LinkedIn newsletter, **[The Weekend Wind-Down](#)**, where I share reflections and insights on adaptation, self-growth, career development, and more each week. However you tune in, I hope these stories remind you to keep moving, keep questioning, and keep adapting.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm Nicholas Braman, a marketer, creator, and host of *Before We Get There*, a podcast about how people change, grow, and find their way forward.

Originally from Seattle, I've spent nearly 15 years living in Asia and now call Singapore home. I'm a B2B marketer by profession, and outside of work I've built a creative life around curiosity - cooking, training jiu-jitsu, traveling, and making things that help people think differently.

On *Before We Get There*, I talk with chefs, artists, athletes, and entrepreneurs from across Asia about how they navigate change and build lives that reflect who they are. Those conversations, along with my own experiences moving countries, careers, and chapters of life, have made me fascinated by adaptability: the skill that helps us keep evolving in work and in life. Through the podcast and my writing, I'm exploring what it really means to adapt well, stay curious, and keep growing, one choice at a time.