

Agility Requires Fragility: Why We Must Embrace Science And Humanity In The Future Of Work

[Sesil Pir](#)



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Every Board room I sit in lately, there is reference to the concept of agility.

“We need to be more agile,” C-Suite members say often, “The business is aiming for agility,” says HR Leaders. When we probe on what the concept of agility means, however, we rarely find consistent answers. Further, in discussions, we find agility is often confused with speed of operation or foregoing of organizational structure.

It is critical we acknowledge the birth place of agility and understand how we can best utilize its purpose.

What is agility and where does it come from anyway?

The [Agile Manifesto](#) was first published in 2001 when a group of programmers [met in Portland](#) to figure out how to speed up their development. That's when the concept took off and caught on.

The original philosophy of agility was discovered in the 1980s and continued to grow into 1990s as technology evolved. The concept was further expanded to help huge teams more effectively develop software. They used it in the years following the 'waterfall' method.

There were three legs to the original concept:

1. Getting closer to customer to learn from feedback,
2. Building code quicker to get the product out for testing,
3. Coordinating projects amongst teams without the overhead of mid management decision making.

In this sense, the concept of agility was to be cherished for its effectiveness in offering smaller teams' nimbleness in support of greater scalability inside the engineering development process. This last part is incredibly important because the way of development in engineering – the way of working (i.e. sitting in front of a pc to code for others) can be vastly different than the way of development in production, in marketing or in human resources.

One cannot take a concept designed for a specific purpose to force-fit it to purpose elsewhere. One can, however, take the design principles to customize the concept to their unique purpose.

I think of agility as having (1) the required flexibility through integration (our way of 'being'), as (2) an enabler of pace setting through inclusion (our way of 'relating') and as having (3) stability in the operation (our way of 'doing') through innovation.

To complement my view, my colleague [Hari Abburi](#) offers three core

elements to consider in reach of agility:

1. Intersections between industries – similar or dissimilar, knowledge or expertise domains and aspects of future of work,
2. Interfaces embedded into daily behaviors of people, augment human functions, enhance analytics and insights,
3. Insights integrating humans, machines, processes data leading to new discoveries and connection of insights.

I also love his proposal because these three elements fundamentally question the traditional structures we hold inside our organizations, recognizes the need for a broader context (in fitting) and embraces the touch points (i.e. networks) in search of larger efficiencies. In other words, I find it very complementary to the pieces around integration, inclusion and innovation.

Why integration, inclusion and innovation?

The science of it all...

When we research into the science and try to dissect the enablers behind agility and underpinnings of that context creation, we discover three realities:

1. **Relationships.** Inside environments, where engineers are able to bring agility to life, they behave more or less authentically and demonstrate behaviors of trust. Now, if consider the mirror neurons we have that play off every context, it is not surprising that over 1,000 research findings like [this one](#) demonstrate positive alliance is best predictor of outcome in performance. In that, to enable agility, **we must allow for empathy inside our organizations.**

2. **Adult Development:** Every human being has 100 billion neurons firing inside their brains and 100 trillion connections. Continuous adjustment of internal and external relations and exposure is key to our

way of 'being', 'relating' and 'doing' over a life time. I often say our bodies will often remember what our minds will forget, and adults are not able to learn new ways of 'being' or 'doing' in [context of aggravation](#). Therefore, to inhibit agility at an individual level, **we must eliminate fear from the social context.**

3. Experimentation. Anytime an organization (either a size of 3, 300 or 3000) has a focus on the end-outcome, it is always to the stakeholder value to try/test, receive feedback and grow through the learning itself. To allow a quick response cycle inside our organizations, **we must embrace learning and genuinely value the [experimentation cycles](#).**

Can HR guide organizations toward agility?

By understanding the core elements – in a broader context and inside [culture transformation](#) and by embracing a few key design principles, HR can not only support but lead the way toward agility.

Below are a few key principles to consider:

People over profit: I often find in professional roles, one's effectiveness is often grounded in keeping a healthy distance and boundary needed between the individual, the teams and the collective. Having said that, as shared owners of our businesses, our stake should always focus on the purpose and centre around people first.

Principle for process: One of the very common roadblocks to establishing stability with appropriate speed inside today's organizations is the process itself. We introduce processes with an end in mind while often forgetting about its core purpose. Inside small, mid-size, large organizations around the globe, people are aching because of manual work hours, disjointed handovers, cross group redundancies and lack of reliable, predictive data. If we are serious about agility, we must question the essence of our doing – not only why but also the how.

Respond to interactions: As culture is the glue that holds individuals and teams together, we share co-ownership over our interactions.

Designing for key values that honor our people, understanding how these values are best demonstrated in behavior and supporting individuals to build the necessary capacity are all key to creating an agile environment.

Agility is not just a hot concept for businesses to embrace, it is an approach to organizing our way of 'being,' 'relating' and 'doing.' A transition into such state will not become a reality without having the right context and culture to support it. That's a great and a unique challenge for 21st century HR professionals – to become not only a curer but also a connector and a cultivator of our collective potential.