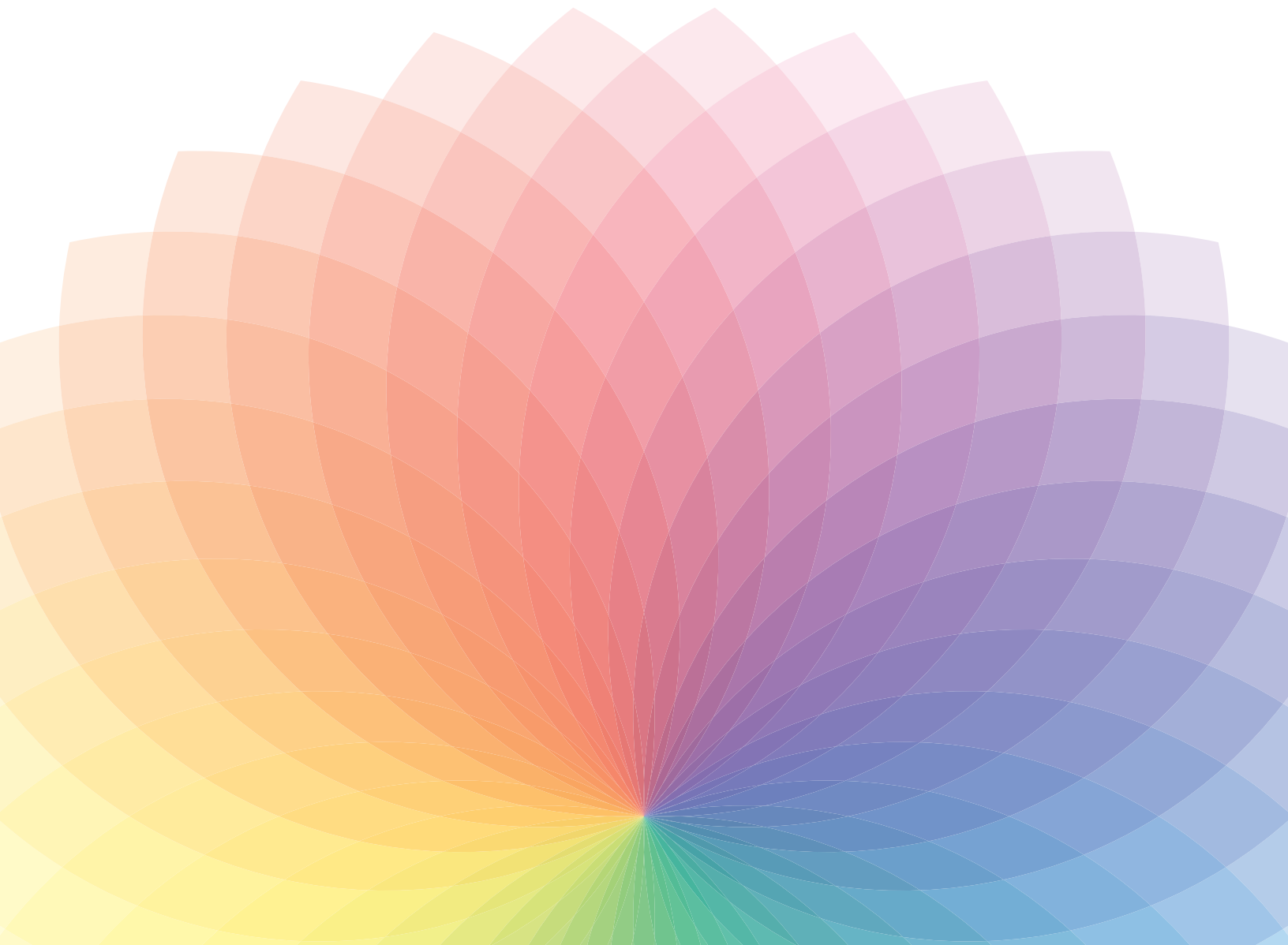


# becoming an agile organization

How a new mindset and new work practices can enhance engagement and effectiveness



**In today's fast-paced, competitive environment, organizations can no longer rely on a single, premeditated strategy or a command-and-control management model. 'More of the same' is no longer an option, as yesterday's way of working is unlikely to achieve results in the unpredictable tomorrow. The best way for organizations to respond to ever-changing circumstances is to constantly adapt and learn. As Bill Gates said: "Success today requires the agility and drive to constantly rethink, reinvigorate, react and reinvent."**

Agility is the capacity that allows an organization to innovate and tailor its approach, products and services rapidly to meet the needs of customers. Partly a state of mind and partly a new way of working for employees at all levels, it is the ability to anticipate new market opportunities and to respond to them quickly, effectively and economically.

Unlike change management, which is a process for implementing and managing individual changes, agility is a continual readiness to change, sometimes radically, what the organization does and how it does it.

This is different to 'flexibility'. A flexible organization plans for probable events and circumstances and, should these occur, is prepared to meet them, without necessarily altering its structure, systems and processes. An agile organization, on the other hand, may have to deal rapidly with turbulent market conditions and unforeseeable circumstances. To achieve this, its structure, systems and processes need to be more fluid. The emphasis is on delivering value and delighting customers, rather than achieving immediate returns for shareholders (although, ultimately, agile organizations will do both). Importantly, the customer is the 'boss' – and that fundamentally changes the role of leaders and managers.

To become agile, organizations must empower employees and develop their desire and ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances. They also need to create an infrastructure and adaptable processes that will enable their employees to take appropriate and effective action. This paper explains how to assess and improve your organization's agility.

## the benefits of becoming agile

The great benefit of agility is that it enables organizations to respond more effectively and more rapidly to the changing challenges, opportunities and emerging trends in the market. It improves competitiveness, increases employee engagement, encourages innovation, creates operational efficiencies and leads to greater customer satisfaction.

Agile processes enable employees to be more proactive, which not only helps them to adapt quickly, it also makes them feel more connected to the organization and more valued. The agile mindset enables them to spot, understand and seize more opportunities.

Because 'managing change' becomes part of everyday practice, agility also helps organizations to implement strategic projects successfully, such as mergers, cultural change initiatives, outsourcing, restructuring, quality/service improvements and new hardware/software installations.

## assessing your agility

Agile organizations differ from traditional bureaucratic companies. For example, roles are more fluidly defined; the overall strategy may be defined but the tactics for achieving it remain loose and flexible; decisions are made more quickly because employees are more empowered; the culture is less about 'judging' people and more about encouraging them to be curious; new customer needs and requirements are more likely to be anticipated; agile companies are less afraid to take risks because 'failing' is acceptable; people and teams bounce back faster from setbacks and multiple solution options can be developed to resolve any problems.

In bureaucratic companies, employees often feel constrained by the internal policies, procedures and processes. Managers become 'enforcers', ensuring that people follow rules, adhere to standards, stick to the task and stay within the budget. Micro-management and silo-based working become the norm within teams, departments and functions. With multiple tiers, it takes longer for decisions to be made. Response rates are therefore slower. Hierarchical structures not only inhibit agility, they encourage 'political behavior', reactivity and 'playing safe'. Initiative gets stifled and employees, particularly those at the lower level of the hierarchy, are left feeling dis-empowered and disengaged.

## analyzing behavior

A useful indicator of the level of agility in your organization is the behavior of your leaders, managers and individual employees. For example, do they:

- Resist change?
- Avoid risks?
- Hold on to information/knowledge and work in silos?
- Take personal credit for successes, rather than praise the contribution of others?
- Become defensive about their mistakes?
- Play office politics?
- Bully or publicly belittle others?
- Procrastinate?

Or do they:

- Take pride in their work?
- Accept and respond rapidly to change?
- Encourage collaboration, autonomy and flexibility?
- Take risks?
- Look for opportunities to increase their own learning?
- Support and encourage the ongoing learning and well-being of others?
- Understand what skills they will need in the future?
- Accept and expect mistakes?
- Welcome and take onboard the feedback they receive?
- Treat others with respect?

The answers to these questions will give you an indication of the challenge that lies ahead for you in developing flexible teams and an agile organization.

## how to achieve agility

L&D teams have an opportunity – and a responsibility – to play an important role in building the capability of agility throughout an organization. This usually starts with gaining both the buy-in of the senior management team and their commitment to create a learning-centered organizational culture. If leaders are unwilling to let go of the command-and-control, top-down model, agility

is not an option. Senior managers should become the catalysts for, and role models of, agile practice.

Training and development interventions can help leaders, managers and individuals to:

- Understand agility: what it is, why it's important and valuable at all levels – and how to incorporate it into their work practices
- Develop an agile mindset
- Continuously improve and cope with ambiguity and constant change
- Question the status quo and look for new opportunities
- Collaborate, partner, facilitate and empower, in order to solve emerging problems
- Adapt quickly and make adjustments when faced with new situations
- Build and manage an adaptive work environment
- Allow flexibility and autonomy in achieving goals
- Free up individuals and teams to be more productive
- Openly discuss the challenges involved in becoming agile

Formal and informal learning opportunities should be created, using an 'agile-inspired' process that role models adaptability. This can involve interactive, creative design meetings and 'next generation' learning environments in which learning, knowledge and experimentation can blend together and where learners can free their imagination.

Digital learning resources can also help L&D teams to up-skill employees quickly and effectively, and support them at the point of need in the workplace. Coaching and face-to-face training can be provided for leaders and managers who struggle to make the necessary behavioral and operational changes.

## four pillars of agility

The following four factors are particularly important for achieving agility. Each of these needs to be addressed if your agility interventions are to succeed.

**Mindset:** An agile mindset is essentially a desire to learn and a willingness to change. It involves being curious about, and open to, new opportunities and new ways to improve. This creates

a behavioral change that stimulates innovation and learning. Individuals in any organization can adopt an agile mindset. This is a personal quality which will help them to accept change, embrace opportunities and adapt better to new circumstances and situations.

**Mission:** The organization's mission must emphasize that adaptability is critical at all levels. When clear and definitive goals are established, new processes and practices can be developed and resources can be assigned to accomplish the goal. The culture will then evolve to support the mission.

**New work practices:** Agile working involves the ability to quickly realign priorities and actions and alter work practices. It's about empowering people, breaking down barriers, collaborating in self-organizing teams, welcoming diverse ideas, encouraging mistakes, proactively making improvements and interpreting customer needs.

**Securing talent:** Agility reinforces the importance of attracting, developing, nurturing, retaining and promoting the right employees. It requires commitment from the organization to encourage and support flexible and adaptive behavior. This may involve redesigning aspects such as job descriptions, recruitment practices (to hire individuals with the desired attributes), reward packages and performance management processes.

Companies which fail to innovate and rely on the 'proven' methods of the past will rapidly fall behind, because they won't be able to adapt, make decisions, solve problems or break down barriers quickly enough to compete. By developing into an agile organization, you'll not only enhance your employer brand and become a great company to work for, you'll profit from significant improvements in productivity, engagement, competitive edge, innovation, efficiency and customer satisfaction.

## the art of the possible

Are you already on the path to agility? Do you need help to develop flexible skills and thinking to flourish? Or do you need advice and support to begin your journey?

At Hemsley Fraser, we help organizations to create a better way of working. If you're interested in how we've helped our clients to achieve agility, increase their flexibility, transform their effectiveness and generate real business improvements, please call us on **888-559-0074**.

## conclusion

Not every organization is dealing with turbulent markets and unpredictable customer needs. However, all companies will benefit by becoming more flexible in their ability to react to changes in their environment.

Agility is particularly important for organizations that want to unleash innovation and free people up to think differently and to respond more effectively to customer needs. Leaders, managers and individuals will all appreciate the positive benefits of agile thinking and agile working.

Achieving agility is an ongoing journey. It demands constant attention to individual and organizational performance, as well as a readiness to meet new customer and market opportunities. In competitive industries, an agile mindset, combined with agile working practices, will improve your ability to anticipate and respond more effectively to the challenge of change.

