The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

Survival of the Swiftest

In conversation with

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Survival of the Swiftest

Agile has been a revolution in information technology. The turn of the new decade has seen Agile spill its principles and practices into industries and functions once thought of as legacy systems that ran slow, but like a well-oiled, Rube-Goldberg machine. Helping people out of functional silos, into customer- and end goal-focussed microservice teams, the Agile approach has truly taken skill several notches higher. But, is this another management buzzword, or does Agile deliver as much as it promises? Six brilliant minds from varying fields brainstorm what it really means to be Agile, and what's the need for this speed.

Words by **Divya Sista**

Agile management has come a long way from its humble goal of "uncovering better ways of developing software".[1] As an extremely successful management methodology, it raises interesting possibilities. The discovery of better ways of doing everything is a universal management need. Soon, Agile spread from software to retail, public sector, manufacturing and even new-age big tech companies that are largely consumer- and user-centric. The underlying concept of Agile is simple — stay nimble, do better.

HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT, BUT RHYMES WITH, ITSELF

Agile enthusiasts believe that it holds the key to unlock immense potential and is the need of

the future. It is undeniable that it requires systemic overhauls, capital, time, energy and so on. So, if Agile is just another methodology with promise, wouldn't sticking to basic principles suffice?

Rajeev Newar, Vice President, DAMAC Properties, describes, "Historically, we have always used past trends to extrapolate future trends despite knowing future isn't the past and is full of uncertainties. We know that we will perish if we do not innovate. What makes these times distinct is the speed at which tech is being created and getting obsolete, and the evolution of the whole regulatory framework like never before. Agility is therefore an urgent need for change."

Being Agile is not new, and the need to be Agile is almost Darwinian in the sense of pivoting towards better practices and principles. What makes Agile special and transformative is the positive chain it sets off, extending benefits to human

resource management, marketing, operations and financial management of the organisation.

"Agile has been a survival technique for animals as well. Agility was always a part of our lives, and it will continue to remain so. It may just take on different forms and change the way we think. We behave, think and simulate agility in all that we do consciously and subconsciously," analyses Debashish Bannerjee, Head, Innovation and Strategy, Novartis.

How does one decide to embark on the Agile journey or is everyone on it already, like it or not, is a vital question. Is it transitional, or sudden?

"Many companies were moving in cruise mode. Covid-19 came, shook them up, forcing them to be Agile. There are also progressive companies which didn't wait for Covid-19 to disrupt them, and they are all placed better than the latter," says Newar.

> *There must be excellence in execution of a project, and more importantly, the attitude of learning from it and scrapping it if does not work"*

Sundar Ram
Modernisations and Innovations Lead, Amazon Internet Services

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE AGILE ENTERPRISE

As a rule of the thumb, Agile is practically ineffective without strong, first basic principles. Principles are constituently more decisive than processes or best practices. In conflict with an organisation's mission statement, or prevailing principles, any process or practice wouldn't serve right, no matter how wonderful or transformational it is.

"The shared vision African philosophy of 'ubuntu' which loosely translates to 'I am because we are' beautifully sums up what Agile stands for. How well an organisation, a team or an individual create better value, generate more revenue and move forward consistently, with everyone else is a conviction that only a shared vision can bring. This shared vision can be driven by engagement and constant alignment. Remember, everyone is open to change, what they are not open to is being changed," Newar adds.

Shared visions, a commitment to be better, and critical success factors (CSFs) identified by an organisation are often a common ground, a focus point that every employee can identify with.

"We have a common purpose for all companies under our federation based on driving change, accepting no limits and alternate thinking. We have been building the Rise philosophy[2] for over a decade, digitally reincarnating ourselves and harmonising ourselves into a single global instance. We have extended this common philosophy to a common software platform that homogenises everything under the umbrella. This helps us handle uncertainties smoothly, have fewer hiccups when disruption hits. We went live across India in under eight hours, ready for the new procedure when GST (Goods & Sales tax) was implemented in 2016," says Richard de Souza, CEO, Mahindra Integrated Business Solutions.

In Agile firms, where the process and methodology of Agile have been incorporated across everything, a widely shared and agreed upon belief is that being Agile reflects three core management laws — the law of the small team, the law of the network and the law of the customer. This forms the 3P framework — People, Process and Purpose — the three pillars of anything that employs the Agile transformation.

"Agile is not a fad, another time-driven necessity or a good-to-have process. The beauty of Agile is that it doesn't have to be a top-driven initiative. Even a small group can drive Agile," opines Annie Mathew, CIO, Mother Dairy.

WHO SAYS ELEPHANTS CAN'T DANCE?

Agile and the idea of innovation are complementary to each other. While innovation includes building and crafting new products and services for customers, it is also a continuous regime of improving business processes that back those products and services on offer.

Improving technologies involved, smarter management and Agile processes are the answer. This includes innovating the methodology of Agile in itself and applying it to industries once thought of as unchartered territory for Agile.

"For instance, the pharma industry's digital journey is imperative. To stay and incorporate Agile, we have a three-pronged approach to our systems — stay curious, inspire and un-boss. Every single action of ours is based on one or more of these three approaches. Our constant aim is to create an ecosystem where you can tap into all verticals of the organisation and bring them together. We operate like and create startups within the organisation," details Bannerjee.

THE RIGHT AGE OF AGILE

Agile, the popular change management tool, has gained a lot of renewed interest and momentum post-Covid-19. Understandably, this is a crippling crisis that has catapulted digital transformation across sectors like no other, turbocharging innovation and sanctioning

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> Executive Vice President, TVS Eurogrip

changes in organisations. Between the world of accustomed bureaucracy, following rules and checklists, and that of innovation, change and transformation, Agile calls for coexistence. Agile, done right, facilitates and empowers dynamic innovation without compromising the efficiency and reliability essential to legacy systems.

What does not fit together, is harmonised and integrated into Agile. The idea of deploying Agile is that streams are not separate, but everything works together like a well-oiled machine, towards a common goal. The key to it is balance. Every organisation has areas that cannot compromise on and must run watertight. Simultaneously, the organisation must innovate.

"In an organisation, each silo works towards a set KRA (key result area). Everyone is doing their job right. But when you add up all those, the question to ask is, are they listening to the consumer? Is it adding value? Amazon is a great example of how they listen to their consumers. This is where Agile steps in. If we don't listen, we put off transformation by waiting for a disruption

like Covid-19. Large organisations are efficient but are they effective?" questions Madhavan P, Executive Vice President, TVS Eurogrip.

Every business has three core obligations to fulfil — reliability and efficiency, speed and effectiveness, and striking a balance between the first two responsibilities. While it might seem that Agile cannot be tailored for larger organisations, giants like Amazon, Apple, IBM and companies back home like Mahindra are testimony to the fact that they can go Agile, with both panache and profitability.

"The Conway's law[3] is relevant in this context, and now more than ever. The culture of an organisation cannot be enforced by putting up a plaque. Good intentions aren't good enough. Mechanisms that constantly reinforce those intentions, with ideas that are evaluated should accompany them. Secondly, we must accept the fact that not every function can operate like a two-pizza team[4]. But where it does, there should be modularisation and microservices. This must be extended to all parts of the organisation. There must be excellence in execution of a

project, and more importantly, the attitude of learning from it and scrapping it if does not work," details Sundar Ram, Modernisation and Innovation Lead, Amazon Internet Services.

CUSTOMER IS THE KING — THE AGILE EMPLOYEE'S MINDSET

People dealing with customers and operations are the forerunners of innovation and often have the best ideas for improvement.

"Agile is also this brilliant communication exercise in organisational ambition. Structures matter, but to fuel innovation, we must strive to let go of them. A good way to design Agile for large organisations is to view and design from the point of customer-centricity," resonates Mathew.

The operation mindset is in many ways the Agile mindset, where the front line in their effort to streamline their jobs seek inputs from customers, constantly looking and collecting ideas for better ways to do the same thing.
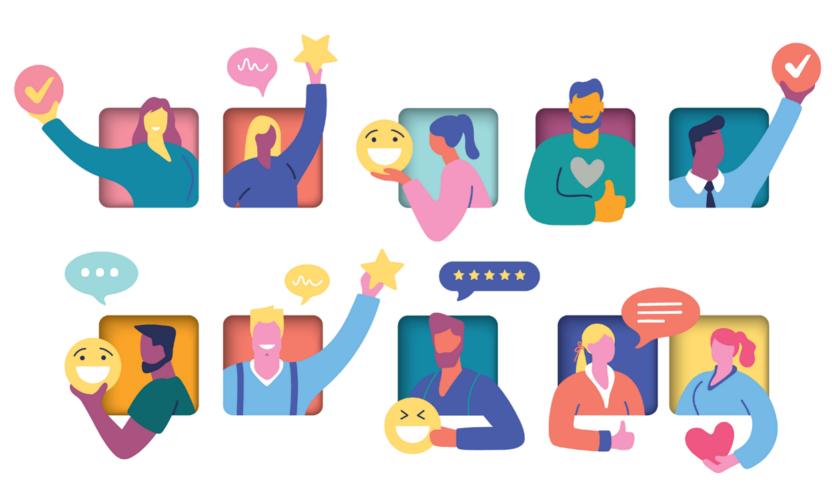
"For anyone embarking on the agility journey, democratising the process and seeing how people can participate is the first step. Allowing everyone the opportunity to execute ideas as and when they come up with them, and making sure that the execution engine is developed in the same spirit as the idea generation engine are two crucial cogs in the agility wheel. Unless you have a mechanism to embed idea generation and execution as a part of their day-to-day work it won't happen. Every team is kind of obsessed with the idea of value-addition to the customer, and constantly works towards it," agrees Ram.

With customers and their needs at the centre, teams old and new working in tandem with constant cycles of innovation, enhanced employee productivity and better deliveries are constant among all of the widely used Agile methodologies. While they are all

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based on the same overarching ideology, characteristics and methods, there are differences in terms of terminology and operational tactics.

"Keeping our customer happy is the most important thing. The doctrine is the bedrock of our organisation. Ultimately, it is the culture that makes you Agile. There is no excuse to not serving your customer today," affirms de Souza.

Organisations not on the Agile quest, but are very customer-centric should seriously consider employing it, suggests Madhavan.

"We have no choice but being there for the customer when he needs it. We knew post opening up there would be very few people on the street, so as an organisation whose product is a grudge buy, we were required to innovate. There is no better time than this, and Covid-19 may well be an opportunity to do and be better through Agile," he says.

AGILE — BECAUSE THE ORGANISATION IS WORTH IT

Agile is touted as a method to do things better, a business philosophy, a means to an end or the goal of an enterprise in itself. But what Agile is, is a means to achieve a higher set of objectives.

Helping customers achieve their goals and employees their full potential, will automatically give rise to a lean, fit, Agile organisation that is both effective and efficient. To survive and thrive in unpredictable conditions, one must adapt. Agile is a way of helping adapt and accomplish goals.

"Agility is going to be a way of life whether you think of it as a buzzword, the hot thing in today's business, or anything else. Like in surfing, when waves come rapidly, you need to be more agile. Adopting an Agile mindset, and adapting to changes is all that we can and should do," surmises Newar.

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CIO, Mother Dairy

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[1] https://Agilemanifesto.org
[2] https://www.mahindrapartners.com/missionrise/
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conway%27s_law
[4] https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/two-pizza-rule

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