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THE ROAD TO SUCCESSFUL AGILE TRANSFORMATION

Imposing Agile with Coherence, Constraints and Curiosity

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The Road to Agile Transformation: Learn, Adapt, Improve

People are the heart of your digital product or service organisation. Are they working on the right goals at the pace you need to compete? Full Agile adoption helps people focus on what matters while working smarter. But understanding Agile practices—and adapting to the change—requires more than training. This whitepaper helps you get to grips with understanding the Agile transformation journey and crucially adapt faster.

The Agile Journey

Agile is becoming more and more mainstream; no longer something used by innovative start-ups and early adopters to create competitive advantage, but an essential part of any business just to stay in the game. As a result, business leaders and managers are increasingly deciding to establish Agile Transformations to adopt new ways of working.

Unfortunately, this can sometimes be like purchasing and installing a new operating system, albeit one where the installation fails, tries to recover, and ends up with the dreaded 'Blue Screen of Death'. This is what happens when we simply copy what can be easily observed from others' success stories and ignore those aspects which are not visible to us such as the people or culture.

A prevalence of this method copying has led to a reaction against the imposition of Agile methods and practices. Treating Agile methods as ready-made solutions is like putting a new patch on an old garment - a superficial fix which will not last and probably make things worse.

The preferred alternative is for leaders and managers to be using Engagement Models, through which people can be aligned and allowed to discover for themselves what changes need to be made.

Engagement Models thus enable a situationally appropriate operating system to be designed, and organisational improvement becomes outcome-oriented, continuous and fully participatory.

However, choosing to use an Engagement Model with people can still be considered as an imposition of it on them. This begs the question as to how to lead an Agile Transformation in a healthy way that focusses on outcomes and invites participation. In other words, what makes imposition good rather than bad. This paper explores three aspects; coherence, constraints and curiosity.

Coherence

Coherence is the quality of forming a unified whole. It is people doing the right things for the right reasons. Coherence is created when people have the autonomy to make their own decisions and take actions which are logical and consistent with helping the organisation move in the right direction, aligned through a clarity of intent. The prevailing wisdom is often that alignment and autonomy are at opposite ends of a spectrum.

You can have high alignment by giving detailed instructions, and hence low autonomy. Or you can have high autonomy by giving people complete freedom, and hence low alignment.

Stephen Bungay builds on this idea with his model of Directed Opportunism (Figure 2) in his book the The Art of Action[1]. He suggests that any initiative has three primary elements; the Plan, the Actions taken, and the resultant Outcomes.

Problems occur because of the gaps between these three, and the general tendency is to close these gaps by going into more detail with more research, more instruction and more controls. Instead, Bungay proposes that we should close the gaps by providing less detail through clarity of intent, delegation and feedback, and freedom to adjust.

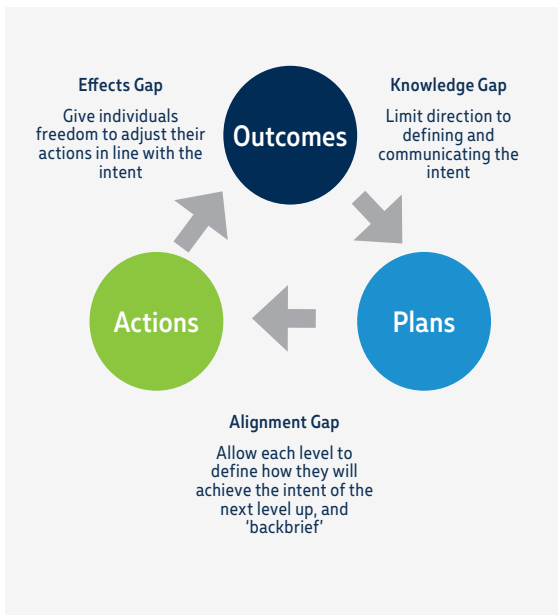*Figure 1 : Helmuth von Moltke's Alignment and Autonomy*
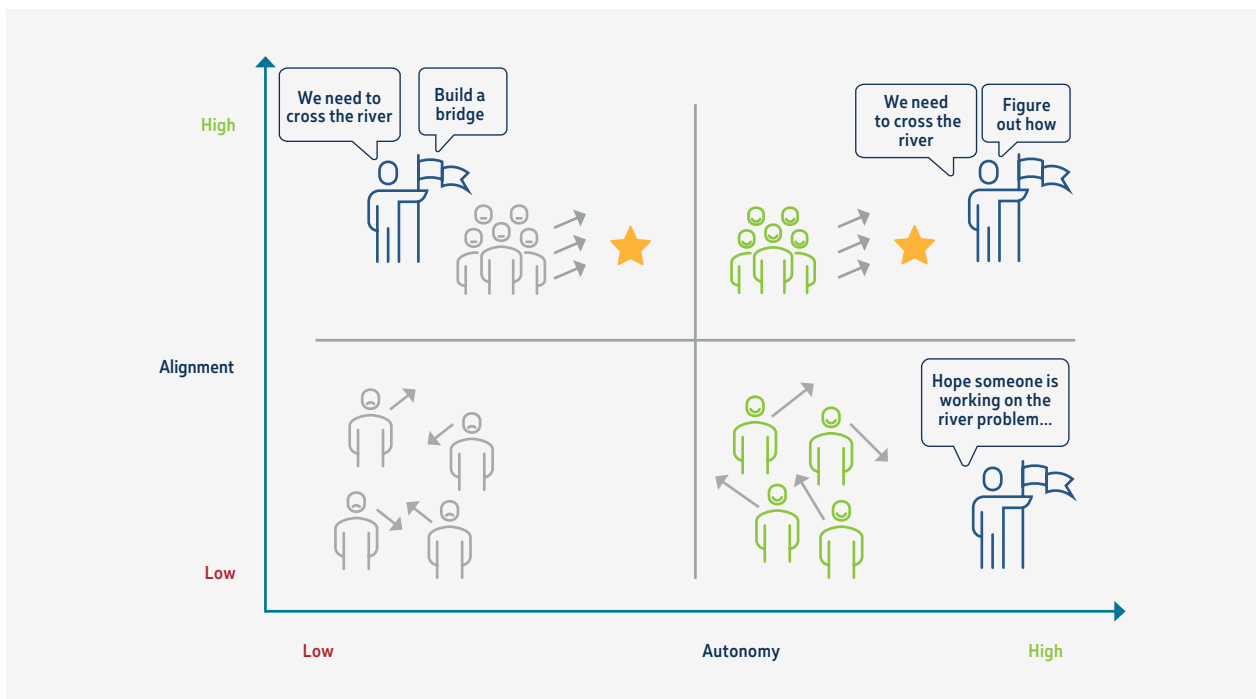
However, as far back as the late 19th Century Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of Staff of the Prussian Army, proposed that the two are not a spectrum but are independent dimensions. Henrik Kniberg has described this with the metaphor of crossing a river (Figure 1).

As such, you can have high alignment by giving clarity of intent and have high autonomy by giving freedom of action to meet that intent.

An Agile Transformation has coherence when leaders provide clarity of intent by explicitly communicating their True North and Aspirations. A True North is the orientation which informs what people should do by guiding them in the right direction. It is a vision of a perfect yet unattainable future that is always just over the horizon.

Figure 2: Stephen Bungay's Directed Opportunism

By preferring enabling constraints, we are leveraging the skills, experience and potential of people to make their own decisions on what they should do, rather than reducing their contribution to simply following instructions.

In describing enabling constraints in terms of decision making, they can also be considered as a way of setting strategy. As Henry Mintzberg wrote in Patterns of Strategy Formation[2], strategy is a pattern in a stream of enacted decisions.

Similarly, using Richard Rumelt's Strategy Kernel (Figure 3) from his book Good Strategy/Bad Strategy[3], the enabling constraints are Guiding Policies, adopted as a result of Diagnosis, within which people can make their own decisions on how to take Coherent Action.

Aspirations are the results that will represent significant achievements. They are indications of the ambitions which will demonstrate success, and the size of those ambitions.

Constraints

Constraints are a limit or restriction. They provide boundaries which can either help or hinder people with their work. Constraints are managed by choosing or moving boundaries which guide people in how to approach their work.

Looser constraints create a space for innovation and creativity, while tighter constraints define specific paths to be followed or avoided. For wicked problems we want constraints which give people the freedom and safety to think for themselves, take their own action and focus on generating measurable outcomes which will indicate success.

We can consider two basic types of constraints: enabling constraints which open up possibilities in unique contexts, and governing constraints which shut down possibilities and apply in all contexts (i.e. they ignore context). Enabling constraints allow people to use their skills and experience to solve problems, whereas governing constraints force people to mindlessly comply with rules.

Figure 3: Richard Rumelt's Strategy Kernel

One way of articulating these policies is with a technique known as Even Over Statements which specify a choice to focus on "Positive Outcome A even over Positive Outcome B".

Thus, they make explicit the trade-offs we would like people to take when choosing between two potential outcomes, both of which could be desirable.

Figure 4 : Larry Maccherone's ODIM
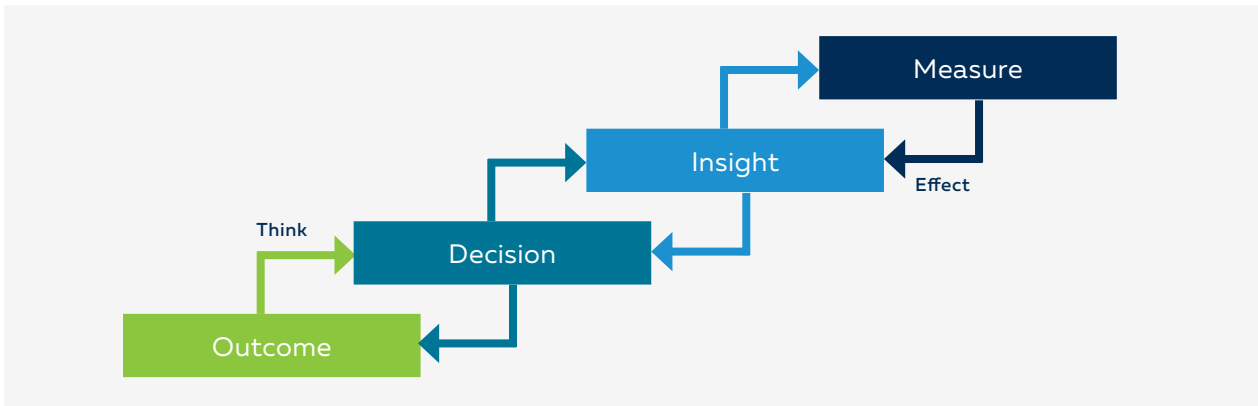
Another approach is to identify outcome focussed measures which will indicate progress towards meeting the intent. Larry Maccherone's ODIM[4] framework (Figure 4) proposes first identifying the Outcome, then the Decisions which are needed to achieve that outcome, then the Insights which will enable those decisions, and finally the Measures which will generate the insights.

In this way, the measures are the enabling constraints which allow people the freedom to decide what action to take to move the needle.

An Agile Transformation is establishing enabling constraints when leaders clearly communicate the Strategies that are being supported and the Evidence that will indicate progress. Strategies are the guiding policies that enable a choice of action by describing the difficult trade-offs and decisions that people may have to take. Evidence provides the signs of winning and being able to meet the Aspirations.

Curiosity

Curiosity is a strong desire to learn something. It is what helps organizations continuously improve by assuming that they don't know all the answers, and that they need to discover new things, and that they will inevitably make mistakes in the process. Curiosity occurs when it is safe for people to experiment, testing their hypotheses, focussing on learning, and generating new information and useful insights.

In 1960, English psychologist Peter Cathcart Wason wrote a paper "On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task" in which he used a simple exercise to demonstrate

confirmation bias; our preference for evidence which confirms our views, rather than contradicts them. In the exercise, Wason gave people a sequence of three number (2, 4, 6) and asked them to guess the rule to which the

sequence obeyed by testing new sequences of numbers against their theory of what the rule is. Most people come up with a theory very quickly, and then only select sequences which will confirm their theory. To discover the actual rule (which is that the number simply increase in magnitude) it is necessary to select sequences which contradict their theory.

In other words, we don't like to be wrong, and often don't even allow the possibility to be wrong. However, Information Theory suggests that we generate the most information when there is a 50% probability of failure. Thus, we need to befriend failure, be aware of our biases and run experiments to both prove and disprove our hypotheses about what we think will or won't work. Further, it is more than simply befriending failure. We need to be intentional about experiments and cognizant of what information we are generating and what we are hoping to learn.

By exploring other alternative and contradictory options like this we are effectively climbing down what Christopher Argyris called the Ladder of Inference (Figure 5) by enquiring of other views as well as advocating for our own. Instead of jumping straight to action, we should learn more about differing beliefs, conclusions, assumptions, interpretations and experiences, and in remaining curious as to

Figure 5: Chris Argyris's Ladder of Inference
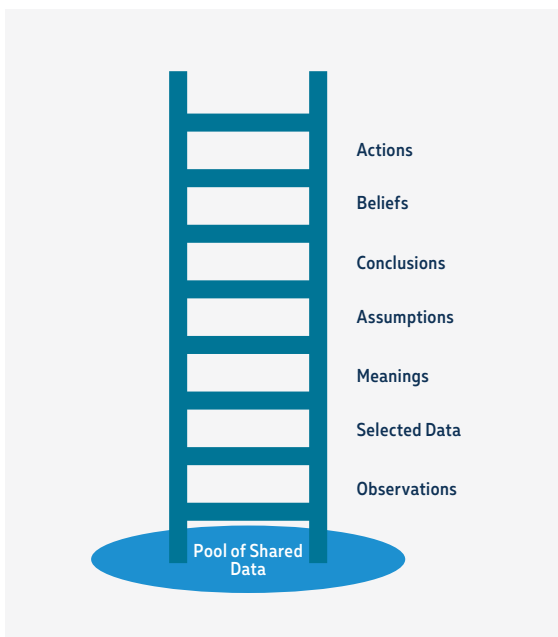
what those differences are, we can identify new possibilities which are worth exploring.

An Agile Transformation invites curiosity when leaders allow people to explore their own Tactics. Tactics are the coherent actions that people take; the hypotheses that they want to test and the experiments that they want to run in order to learn.

Conclusion

This paper has described three aspects of Coherence, Constraints and Curiosity, and introduced five key elements for a healthy Agile Transformation; True North, Aspirations, Strategies, Tactics and Evidence. The five work together as an Engagement Model called TASTE. The True North is an over-arching objective, which is achieved through Aspirations, which are enabled by Strategies, which are implemented with Tactics, which generate Evidence of achieving the Aspirations.

This framework can be visualised on a single sheet of paper (typically A3) with a format called the X-Matrix (Figure 6).

Figure 6: X-Matrix
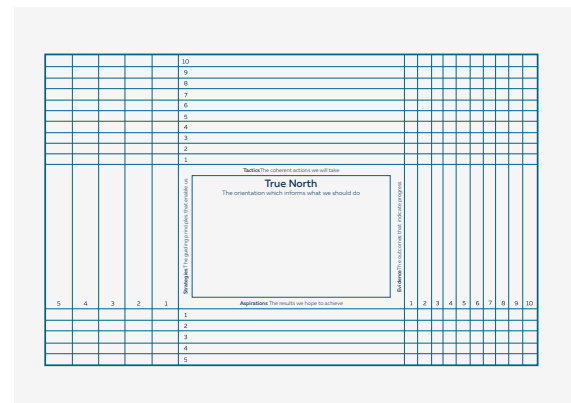
As well as communicating the True North, Aspirations, Strategies, Tactics and Evidence, it also shows how each of those elements correlate and contribute to each other in the four corner matrices which give the format its name.

In this way, the X-Matrix reinforces Coherence, sets up enabling Constraints and provides a foundation for ongoing Curiosity.

It is important to emphasise, however, that the X-Matrix is not just another document to hand down as a set of instructions. The X-Matrix, with its visualisation of the elements of the TASTE Engagement Model (Figure 7), is the result of collaboration and conversations between people populating the framework.

Figure 7: TASTE Engagement Model

Like a holiday photograph that is merely a snapshot reminder of family event, the X-Matrix is a document where, as Thomas L. Jackson describes in Hoshin Kanri for the Lean Enterprise[5], "it's the memory of what was said and felt that creates alignment, and not the piece of paper".

Disclaimer

This paper is intended to give the reader a general overview of what Agile Transformation may involve for an organisation, rather than providing a step-by-step guidebook. The information included may not be sufficient enough to build a fully vetted Agile Transformation methodology. It's recommended that you consult subject matter experts to construct the processes required.

Sources

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About the Author

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With over 20 years as an advocate and practitioner of Lean and Agile approaches to helping business achieve their desired business outcomes, Karl has worked with companies including the BBC, Yahoo!, EMC Consulting, Rally Software, Cisco and Legal & General. During this time, he has pioneered the use of Kanban Systems and Strategy Deployment for product development, and is a founding member of both the Lean Systems Society and Limited WIP Society. In 2013 Karl was awarded the honorary Brickell Key Community Contribution Award at the 2013 Lean Kanban North America conference. In 2018, Karl co-founded Lean Agile Brighton conference in a bid to bring together those in the south east of the UK interested in learning and enhancing their knowledge of Agile. Karl is a regular speaker at Agile conferences and events. Currently Karl heads the Agile Transformation Services Practice for TEKsystems in EMEA.

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