



# BE AGILE

Nowadays, it seems as if everyone should pay attention to everything at the same time and respond immediately. Agility in the workplace might therefore help to calm down hot tempers and reduce anxiety, says **Jaco Leuvenink**.

## **Move from a competitive advantage to an agility advantage**

Today's increasingly complex, fast-changing, competitive and globalised knowledge economy no doubt elevated demands in the workplace. Previously attractive attributes for employees and businesses alike – such as the ability to adapt, persevere, be steadfast and show resilience – are now described by a more comprehensive term: agility.

Workplace agility is described by Dr Salomé van Coller-Peter, head of the University of Stellenbosch Business School's MPhil in Management Coaching, as being willing and able to give up (or adapt) old habits, beliefs and perceptions, to consistently embrace new ones and to keep on learning.

“Be ready to face and learn from increasing change. The trick is not to lose sight of one's acquired abilities and values but to find ways to continuously learn how to communicate and display one's own beliefs in different ways. Know that when you want to play in the big league, you are going to be very exposed, through social media and all that, and to be okay with that.

“You need to be quick about what you do and don't agree with, and to support that with your words and actions. Yet, keep a very open mind because you may discover soon, in the face of new knowledge, that you were wrong.”

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Dr Salomé van Coller-Peter, head of USB's MPhil in Management Coaching, Kerry Sandison, programme head of USB's Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership Development and Elsa Simpson, director of Transmind SA.

Dr Van Coller-Peter quotes Forrester Research's chief analyst Craig le Clair: "Companies must break away from the assumption of sustainable, competitive advantage and embrace adaptable differentiation, i.e. develop an agility advantage. Forrester defines this agility advantage or business agility as the quality to embrace market, operational, technological, cultural, leadership, political or any other changes as a matter of routine."

For the individual it would mean moving from an established expertise to constantly acquiring cross-functional skills.

### Try again

Kerry Sandison, programme head of USB's Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership Development, prefers to look at the need for agility from the perspective of anxiety levels in the workplace, which she says has definitely increased over the past two decades. People feel perpetually uncertain and overwhelmed by the various roles they have to play and the demands on which they have to deliver.

"Most people's natural reaction is to protect themselves – not to reach out. That way they become more isolated and lonely, underperforming."

Surely, some people have natural personality traits like resilience, a love of new challenges and maybe a thick skin, elevated ego or the gift of the gab. However, Sandison does not think that one necessarily has to be a thick-skinned, fast-talking egoist to succeed.

She says everybody can and should learn to manage natural anxiety, interact more, accommodate diverse opinions and be comfortable with this diversity of opinions in the interest of obtaining a proper solution. She stresses acquiring two skills:

- The art of conversation: Open up diversity and talk things through properly to get the best results. Do not go for a quick fix to sidestep an uncomfortable situation.
- Personal resilience: Learn not to collapse under pressure, not to take no for an answer or to shy away from confrontation. Develop the courage and belief in yourself to get up again after falling down.

Instead of being a victim of burnout, you can decide to be a perpetual tryer with a balanced life not spent entirely in the office or worrying about what is happening there. To achieve that, you have to do things that make you feel good, because the better you feel about yourself, the more resilient and agile you will be.

Sandison says the days of the "hero-leader or solo soldier" are gone, and "we need each other desperately" to achieve and manage anything. Today's leaders need knowledge and expertise, but must also be prepared to show vulnerability, to talk and make anxiety part of the conversation, to ask for help and burden-sharing, and to legitimise that as their organisations' norm and culture.

Agility is needed in just about every job today – from the engineer who is sent to work on a project in an area culturally different from his own through to the lawyer who is asked to maintain a robust social media presence.

**'The more conscious you are of the need to react in a shifting environment, the more agile you are.'**

### Train your brain

Elsa Simpson, director of Transmind SA, confirms that this is especially true in the IT industry: "Shorter delivery timelines, changing needs and simultaneous work on different projects with different frameworks are now the norm."

She uses a tool called the Organic Scorecard to assess the consciousness of managers and professionals in the IT industry. This assessment tool shows how people are using their conscious as well as unconscious brain energy. One of the domains in the graph tests agility, i.e. how one reacts towards change in the outside world.

"The more conscious you are of the need to react in a shifting environment, the more agile you are." According to Simpson, one can react in four different ways:

- Firstly, from your brain stem in a passionate, fast and creative way (like an

energetic explorer) or in a survival fight-or-flight mode

- Secondly, from the limbic system by trying to stabilise the movement by mapping out different 'moves' (like a strategic chess player) or by rigidly blocking the change
- Thirdly, from the neocortex by accepting the change and go with the flow (like an intuitive magician) or by detaching in denial
- Fourthly, by spending no energy in the direction of change and by continuing as if nothing has happened.

"Knowing the range of brain activity available to you gets you out of a knee-jerk reaction to change. This makes you open to new and creative responses. Experience in the IT industry shows that successful people spend a lot of awareness on agility. The most successful ones use passionate, creative energy as well as stabilising energy when thinking about how to react to an ever-changing market place.

"That means they are very sensitive and aware of change happening around them. They then have an instant impulse to explore possibilities and new challenges. But they also spend energy on how to stabilise the new-found challenges into solutions or viable options. They use neocortex awareness to accept the things they cannot transform and work within the new set of limitations."

Simpson quotes Marc Grond, inventor of the Organic Scorecard, as saying, "Agility is about my brain's capacity to react".

### Think on your feet

An article on the Huffington Post webpage puts it this way: "Those who are learning agile know what to do *when they don't know what to do.*"

Maybe agility is simply a modern term for the innovative adaptability and creativity that man needed to survive ever since he freed himself from the law of the jungle to move into civilisation. The pace is just more hectic today, with increasing emphasis on emotional and spiritual wellbeing rather than yesteryear's physical survival – at least for those with a job! 