

The Age of Agility Team Agility

In today's business environment, it's not just a matter of adapting to change but changing to be able to adapt again and again. Here are four steps that will get teams dancing the agility tango.

By **Judith Haupt**

"We live in an age of continuous revolution," says Gus Silber. The South African media maven and culture commentator was speaking on a podcast – the new radio. That appeared on YouTube – a new television. Talking about Twitter – which Silber tells us has replaced the newspaper. All these platforms barely existed ten years ago.

In the last 20 years, businesses have had to learn how to survive in a much more complex and interconnected economy. The most successful companies are those that react quickly to change. Processes, hierarchies and compliance are out. Agility is the latest byword in organisational lore, with a focus on small teams, a deep commitment to communication and an obsession with customer orientation.

At CONTRACT we work with a wide spectrum of companies, people and industries but here are four steps to agility that you can start working on today, to prepare for what is to come.

Step 1: Accept the new normal

Change and speed – welcome to your new normal. It's not about putting out any particular fire and waiting for things to go back to the way they were. There will be no deceleration and things will never be the same again. Coming to terms with this is the all-important first step to thriving in this new world order.

People and teams that accept this can begin to focus on the path ahead. And that path is paved with a culture that reacts quickly and smoothly to a rapidly changing environment.

Managers often ask me: "How do I deal with the change when I'm worried about it myself." It's a great question because it is honest and brave: two traits that make great leaders, incidentally! We encourage leaders to adopt the following attitude: "I also don't know where exactly we're going with this, but what I do know is that we have to give it our all – so let's give this our best shot. It is about how we deal with this that matters the most."

Which brings us to the second step...

Step 2: Know thyself

Almost all companies are concerned with improvement. They want to create better products or services in order to gain market share and improve their bottom lines. But agile teams should also be concerned with self-improvement – not just getting better at *what* they are doing but *how* they are doing it.



All teams have meetings to discuss their work; not enough teams make time to discuss themselves. It's important for teams to consciously reflect growth, curiosity and wanting to be better. To ask: "How did I approach my work today? What could I do better? How did I relate to my teammates?"

It's really about adopting and practicing a new level of self-awareness. It is about instilling a culture where the courage to ask questions and suggest improvements is encouraged. Because that is the root of all learning, and agile teams are always learning.

Continuous development means working on the business, not just in the business. Which brings us to step three...

Step 3: Get flat

Throughout history humans have organised themselves into hierarchies. Tribes, settlements, societies and civilisations were led by decision makers who ruled by decree. And for a while it worked. Humans prospered. But as our societies have become increasingly interconnected, our systems needed to evolve. Where before one person had all the answers, today progress and truth are found in the space between – through collaboration and communication. In teams.

My colleague Phil often wryly observes that the frequent restructuring of organisations that we are seeing every day is both a symptom and a cause of the complex economic environment that almost all companies find themselves in today. The most successful restructures tend towards a flattening of hierarchies and the creation of small, agile teams.

Start-ups find this easy because their teams are already small. But larger companies require a magic ingredient to make it work. Bringing us to the final but arguably most important step

Step 4: Communicate to create transparency

Trust is the glue that holds everything together. And it needs to flow in many directions at once. Team mates need to be able to trust each other's judgement because in a complex environment it is nigh impossible for one person to know all the answers all of the time. Leaders need to trust their team members to empower them with the autonomy I have spoken about above. And employees need to trust their managers enough to not be paralysed by the fear of failure.

Communication is the cornerstone of transparency, and transparency creates trust. I often have to remind people in workshops and coaching sessions that with all the hype about technology we sometimes forget that while it will replace a lot and optimise much, technology can never replace one of the fundamental drivers of life and work – the interaction of one human being with another.

And the type of communication is also vital. At CONTRACT, we always refer to our vision: Inspiring a humane economy. The word humane is our guiding principle. Being kind to each other is not often considered a business principle but it is actually the most important one of all. Because if culture eats strategy for breakfast then a happy, motivated workforce is the cherry on top of a decadent dessert.



So, as we navigate the river rapids that constitute today's modern economy, these four steps will serve as a boat, a paddle, a helmet and a life vest. Have fun, and don't go over the falls!

CONTRACT is South Africa's premier organisational and leadership development company. Contact us at www.contract-sa.co.za

Here are practical measures that you can implement for each step towards agility.

Step 1: Accept the new normal

1. Talk to each other about speed and change. Acknowledge that it is the new normal. Emphasise the importance of *how* teams deal with it. A lot of it has to do with attitude!
2. Work on resilience. Talk about how you can strengthen yourselves and each other in order to navigate change.
3. Create a purpose for change. And if you struggle to find it, see it as an experiment to learn new behaviours and tools!

Step 2: Know thyself

1. Have team chats about how everyone wants to develop further and challenge each other to achieve those goals.
2. Create reflection sessions on how things have gone. Make time to celebrate your growth and achievements!
3. Teach each other how to think like an intrapreneur: to seek out and create opportunities. And empower each other to do so.

Step 3: Get flat

1. Be courageous and ask for more responsibility to stretch yourself – and get support where needed.
2. As a leader, let go of your ego (you cannot know it all any more), trust a bit more than you feel comfortable – and coach people to do their part.
3. Practice adult-to-adult, eye-to-eye communication, no matter what level people are.

Step 4: Communicate to create transparency

1. Realise communication is a push and a pull: managers need to communicate a lot, and team members must ask if they want to know more.
2. Bring things onto the table, be courageous and address things that are not going well.
3. If someone speaks to you about someone else, encourage them to go back and address it – and follow up on it!

