Teaching an elephant to dance: The being and doing of agility

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Background

In reflecting on what the themes and topics of the 2016-2017 series of articles should be, we were of the opinion that the current (and expected future) economic, political and social challenges are important issues to engage with, as they create a context that will test the resilience and endurance of most organisations.

As in the past, we will again utilise the Business Value Model™ to discuss these themes and topics from different business perspectives.
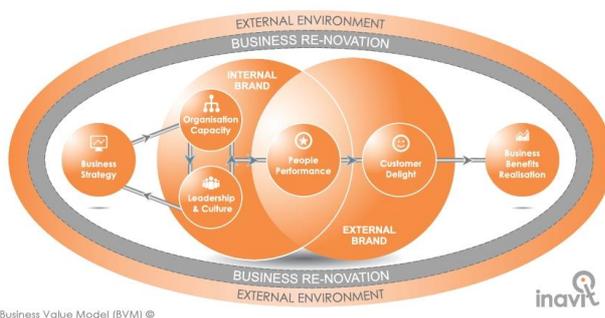

Business Value Model (BVM) ©

Figure 1: Business Value Model™

The BVM utilises the following logic:
- The realisation of specific business benefits (such as operating profit, top-line revenue and market share),
- are dependent on the creation of customer delight (loyal and satisfied customers),

The Idea in Brief

In the first article in this year's series of articles, the various authors explored what it means to future-proof your organisation. They shared some perspectives on what senior and executive leadership regard as the characteristics of a "future proof" organisation. In following articles this concept of future-proofing was further unpacked by defining how to build an agile culture and how to create agile talent.

Given this perspective on organisation, leadership, culture and talent needing to be more agile, the authors ask how I, as individual, make myself a meaningful part of this agile world. Therefore, the focus is inward, from a personal perspective, rather than what onus is on the company to ensure an agile workforce.

- which is a direct result of the delivery of value added products / services
- by high performing people
- who work in an fit-for-purpose work environment (organisation capacity with respect to business process, organisation structure, human capital, information flow and technology),
- who are led and managed by capable, competent and credible leadership
- towards a common goal and strategy
- that address the dynamics of the competitive landscape in an innovate

manner that builds the business brand and reputation.

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Given this perspective on organisation, leadership, culture and talent needing to be more agile, we want to focus on People Performance, in asking ourselves the question, how I make myself a meaningful part of this agile world. Therefore, the focus is inward, from a personal perspective, rather than on the onus on the company to ensure an agile workforce. In this article we will attempt to teach an "elephant to dance."

Introduction

"It isn't a question of whether elephants can prevail over ants. It's a question of whether a particular elephant can dance. If it can, the ants must leave the dance floor."
— Louis V. Gerstner Jr., *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?*

The book mentioned above is an account of IBM's historic turnaround as told by Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., the chairman and CEO of IBM from April 1993 until March 2002. Lou Gerstner led IBM from the brink of bankruptcy and mainframe obscurity back to the forefront of the technology business. Here he referred to a big organisation as an elephant – probably a metaphor still relevant today. And maybe even relevant to people in this day and age who feel constrained by organisational bureaucracy and an overwhelming sense of being required to do

double the work, in half the time, with half the resources.

In this article, the "being" of agile and the "doing" of agile will be unpacked. The difference is more than mere semantics. According to Hanoulle,[1] it is the distinction between "why" you are doing agile, rather than "how". Agile, for example, is more about how you approach problem solving and less about the tools used to support that approach. Agile is really a mindset, followed by the doing of agile.

The "being" of agile

In this section we will firstly unpack the "being" or mindset of agile. Getting an elephant to dance starts with the elephant thinking s/he can dance, and then ingraining this into the

actual "being" of the elephant. Agile people have a propensity to seek improvements, are more willing to consider information that is at odds with preconceived notions, and are more willing to be different and take risks – according to David Alberts[2]. We believe the following defines some of the characteristics of the being of agile people:

- Inquisitive
- Resilient
- Able to let go
- Willing to embrace the unknown

Inquisitive

"The important thing is to never stop questioning." -A. Einstein.

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[1] https://www.agileconnection.com/article/what-does-it-mean-have-agile-mindset?

[2] http://itsadeliverything.com/what-is-an-agile-person

Agile people are inquisitive people – they are what we call "professional question askers". Toddlers are constantly asking "why?" and "why not?" We live in a world that has become so intent on finding a specific answer that we constantly ask the wrong question. Agile people ask new questions. Agile people are able to let go of their own pre-conceived ideas.

Resilient

Writers of all kinds have commented, in many different ways, on the fact that human life is characterised by constant challenges to individuals, groups and communities. Some of these challenges are merely hassles, while others are of a more serious nature. Fact remains that one cannot experience life without at least some pain, and sometimes a great deal of it.

According to Borenstein,[3] *"Resilient people quickly zero in on challenges and devise strategies for dealing with them, whether it is asking for help … seeking out resources … learning new skills … or striking out on novel paths. They call on their inner strength and recruit outside resources to keep moving forward, and they tweak their future expectations to fit their new reality, be it the loss of a loved one, a life-changing diagnosis, or a devastating financial blow".*

Agile people have the ability to bounce back from setbacks.

Letting go

"Leadership skill: let go. You can only lose what you cling to" – Buddha.

In their article "Quarterbacking Real and Rapid Organizational Improvement,"[4] the authors emphasised how important it is to make adjustments: *"It is imperative to make adjustments quickly when things are not working as planned. One of the most important findings about successful leaders of change is the simple fact that they tend to be very timely in making decisions, solving problems, removing roadblocks, and fighting the tyranny of the urgent."*

It appears that agile people are able to let go. It is probably very hard to let go of something that worked in the past, in which a lot of time and energy has been invested. To let go is not to try and change or blame another or a situation; it's to make the most of yourself. To let go is not to be the saviour every time someone makes a mistake. To let go is not to deny reality, but to accept that what cannot be changed. To let go is not to regret the past, but to adjust to the here and now. To let go is not to give up and admit defeat.

Embrace the unknown

In this VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world, we yearn for simplicity and closure. As previously stated, we live in a world that places more value on finding answers than on asking questions. Despite understanding that business is multifaceted, there is a need for us to simplify. Einstein said "Everything should be made as *simple as possible*, but *not simpler."* It seems that we want to be able to predict outcomes and tightly control the path to achieving these outcomes.

Agile people, though, make a conscious effort to steer away from the trusted and known, to embrace the unknown. Embracing the

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[3] Borenstein, D.B. 2002. How do we bounce back from adversity? *Psychology Today*, 35(1):12.

[4] https://www.utoledo.edu/business/ESSPS/ESSPSDocs/Quarterbacking%20Real%20and%20Rapid%20Organizational%20Improvement.pdf

unknown, however, is not the modern proclivity of jumping at each new management fad without the slightest idea as to whether it will actually improve a business.

It seems to us that our rapidly changing business context is like a treadmill that compels people to be constantly curious, willing to give up on familiar approaches and to embrace the unknown. Easily said – but how does one do it?

The doing of agile

Having explored the characteristics of "being" agile, the question is, what gets in the way of "doing" agile? How do you improve your agility? You commit to doing something differently – the elephant starts to dance.

Below is a video clip that demonstrates how our individual beliefs – along with the collective mindset in our organisations – combine to create a natural but powerful immunity to change.

(Click on icon to play video)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFYnVmGu9ZI
An Evening with Robert Kegan and Immunity to Change

So, at least from our perspective, the doing of agility starts with how we think.

The doing of agile requires a systems-based approach. It takes far more than willingness, open-mindedness and flexibility. It is important to pay attention to the whole system and

simultaneously improve the agility of direction, focus, speed, quality, and sustainability.

In the next section we will explore a couple of perspectives of "doing" more agile, namely:
- Becoming more resilient
- Develop a systems thinking approach
- Asking questions
- The art of letting go

How to become more resilient

Research has shown us that resilience usually consists of three primary categories:
- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Living a purposeful life

All of these categories are interlinked, but none of them can be ignored if long-term resilience is to be developed.

Physical wellbeing

Those with a good physical wellbeing simply have more energy to deal with the challenges of modern life. This category is one we often understand and yet give limited attention to.

Keys to physical wellbeing – decide today to pay more attention to your physical wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing

It is essential to stay in touch with what is really happening now, instead of limiting ourselves by adhering to beliefs and assumptions from the past that may no longer be relevant. The mental perspective of resilience is based on our attitudes, beliefs and assumptions, rather than knowledge.

Keys to mental resilience: Question assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs, and actively manage your thinking consistently.

Living a purposeful life

Having a strong sense of life purpose and aligning your professional world with that purpose creates a strong foundation for wellbeing.

Keys to Purpose: Have a clear life purpose, develop skills in self-management, and appreciate and work with your emotions regularly.

In their article "Building Agility, Resilience and Performance in Turbulent Environments", the authors[5] emphasised the importance of a systemic approach to building organisational agility:

"We are struck by how the agility and resilience literatures focus on individuals, team, and organisations, but rarely two or more of these at the same time. Emphasizing agility-building interventions such as systems thinking or creative problem-solving workshops at an individual or team level may be helpful, but if efforts to build agility across the organization are weak, then individual and team-level efforts ultimately fail."

In the next section we will focus on the concept of systems thinking – a useful framework for people wanting to make sense of a more complex world.

How to develop a system thinking approach

Peter Senge made the concept of systems thinking popular. In his work he focuses on the problems that are most difficult to solve and the mental models today's leaders need in order to build a smarter planet. According to him, leaders today need to be able and prepared to reassess their strategies, work across multiple groups to find solutions and have the vision to

work through high leverage solutions over time. To us this also implies a deep commitment to learning: i.e. they must be prepared to be wrong, to challenge their mental models, to triangulate and collaborate to see collectively and know that it may require time to address the problem.

Working smarter means working in ways that are collective and are based on collective intelligence across cities and supply chains to produce social, ecological and economic well-being.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOPfVVMCwYg

Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline, Senior lecturer at MIT and founder of the Society for Organizational Learning shares his perspectives on leadership and systems thinking with IBM.

Systems thinking involves both a mindset that focuses on how the parts of a whole are interrelated and a set of tools that helps organisations examine complexity. Some of these tools that you might like to explore include:

- Systemic enquiry;
- OODA Loop;
- Critical chain project management; and
- Rich pictures.

In the next section we will provide some insight on how to ask more open-ended questions.

How to ask more questions

"I've learned that asking questions isn't a sign of weakness; rather, it demonstrates curiosity, engagement and intelligence." April Underwood.

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http://agilityconsulting.com/resources/Strategic%20Agility%20Institute/HRPS-BuildingAgility.pdf

Agility is a way of working that enables us to comfortably question and explore alternatives. The good news is that we are born agile and that your mind-set is not fixed, therefore we can encourage each other to become more agile. The purpose of the questioning, listening and reflecting is to look ahead and take action by finding direction, planning, and setting goals without focusing on preconceived ideas.

The Centre for Action Learning devised the following questions that can help to get you started on the journey of asking more questions:

Head question - Thinking – ideas, facts, theories, assumptions. Traditionally thought of as associated with the head, and is termed *cognitive* by psychologists
- Whose help do you need?   - Whom have you spoken to so far?   - Who has specialist knowledge?   - How do you interpret all that data?   - Can you see a pattern emerging?   - What sense are you making from the feedback you are receiving?
Heart questions - Feeling – feelings, emotions, moods. Traditionally associated with the heart, termed *affective* by psychologists.
- Why is this problem/challenge so important to you?   - How did you feel when you heard that?   - Would you be surprised if others felt the same/differently?
Hand questions - Doing – will, intentions, movement, action. Traditionally thought of as limbs particularly hands and is termed *conative* by psychologists
- What alternatives are there?   - What will you do next?   - If your plan is accepted, how will you tell the team?

In the final section we will conclude by providing a framework for how to let go.

The art of letting go

Letting go is probably so difficult because it feels like failure to us. Most people can probably relate to a business example of a time when a project or idea met all the outcomes, was on time, within budget, but just didn't deliver the envisaged value. How does one let go of this?

So how does one let go?
- It starts with the decision to let it go – accept that you have a choice.
- Admit how you feel – get it out of your system. Sometimes it's about accepting things for what they are.
- Define your identity in your life purpose – not what you have accomplished in the past. It will then be easier to let go of things.
- Don't play the victim or blame others.
- Move on.

Close

The "being" and "doing" of agile is an opportunity and challenge and a way we can have an impact on every aspect of the business. Agility is a systems-based capacity, not a singular trait or characteristic of a person – it is about the "being" and "doing" of agile. Agile professionals bring together people, processes, and systems to realise the organisational strategies (and letting go of the ones that no longer work).