Make Your Business Agile: A Roadmap for Transforming Your Management and Adapting to the 'New Normal' [1]

By Peter Taylor

Professor Julian Birkinshaw,[2] Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at the London Business School has suggested that the world is entering something he calls 'The Age of Agile'.

Organisations throughout history, Birkinshaw said in a speech at the Global Peter Drucker Forum in Vienna Austria, were of three types: bureaucracies, meritocracies, and adhocracies.

The age of bureaucracy was where power was through hierarchy and managed by rules, the age of meritocracy was where power was through knowledge and guided by logical argument, but now we are in the age of adhocracy where it is about action, about getting things done, and done fast. Experimentation and outcome achievement are key.

We are, I believe, in the age of the 'Business Agile'. We are also, without doubt, in the VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

> Note: When the author first submitted the proposal for this book there was a clear need to win the argument that we lived in a VUCA world with many people but based on the world's very immediate experiences of global disruption perhaps this argument is one that no longer is required. We have all lived through one of the most impactful world-wide events in our lifetime and what we have collectively experienced ticks all of the boxes of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Covid-19 is truly a Black Swan event experience.[3]

A Black Swan is an unpredictable event that is beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences.

Black Swan events are characterised by their extreme rarity, severe impact, and the widespread insistence they were obvious in hindsight (this is already happening).

Note: That said, within the business world it is perhaps still relevant to put forward this explanation/argument in order to gain the right attention for a change in attitude, behaviour, and focus and a move towards a 'Business Agile' world.

'Business Agile' is the approach of providing greater flexibility and faster decision-making in the modern business world, a world where organisations that aren't business agile will take longer to

---

[1] How to cite this paper: Taylor, P. (2021). Make Your Business Agile: A Roadmap for Transforming Your Management and Adapting to the 'New Normal, *PM World Journal,* Vol. X, Issue V, May.

[2] Julian Birkinshaw FBA, FAcSS is a British academic. He is Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at the London Business School, where he is the Academic Director of the Deloitte Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. He is the author of four books on management.

[3] We might even argue the world hit an entire flock of black swans such is the global impact.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue V – May 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com   Series Article

Make Your Business Agile
Advances in Project Management
by Peter Taylor

succeed and be less flexible in this modern, demanding business world, and fail at a faster rate potentially.

But that brings about a challenge with regards to supporting this rapidly moving world of change driven through projects.

A world of complexity and criticality with projects ranging across the globe, resources remotely and virtually engaged, and the leaders of change tasked with delivering the best for their organisations whilst those very organisations spin ever faster on their strategic arc.

The answer, it seems, is not to meet complexity with complexity but to meet it with simplicity.

To achieve this 'easy to say yet hard to do' statement I believe that organisations need to look closely at and invest well in the following five key areas.

Collaboration

One way to do this is to harvest the power of the 'Hive Mind'.[4]

By harnessing the collective power, thoughts, experience, knowledge and wisdom of the many, rather than the few, better decisions can be made. And by utilising the many business social technological platforms, these more-inclusive decision-making processes can be faster than the more traditional 'meet/discuss/agree/act' physical meetings of the past.

Change leaders today need to embrace this more social, decentralised and collaborative world in order to succeed in the adhocracy age we are well and truly in, right now.

Teaming

Associated with collaboration is the urgent need for companies to really invest in understanding and developing the teams that work within them. Especially as we progress towards an ever more project-based economy.[5]

With change being ever constant and with the traditional structures of organisations being to break down through this overlay of project activity then it is clear that teams will be less fixed, less static, and more dynamic. As such, such teams need to reach the performing state (as defined by Bruce Tuckman[6]) faster and faster.

---

[4] Hive Mind: a notional entity consisting of a large number of people who share their knowledge or opinions with one another, regarded as producing either uncritical conformity or collective intelligence.

[5] A project-based economy is where organisations deliver value to stakeholders through successful completion of projects, delivery of products, and alignment to value streams. And all of these initiatives deliver financial and societal value.

[6] Bruce Wayne Tuckman was an American Psychological Researcher who carried out his research into the theory of group dynamics. In 1965, he published a theory known as 'Tuckman's stages of group development'. According to this theory, there are four phases of group development: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing.

Agile

Underlying this business agility is the requirement for the project-based economy that they exist in and support to be 'agile' in a project sense.

Agile Project Management[7] is an approach via a series of steps that involves delivering value iteratively and incrementally throughout the project life cycle.

And, at the heart of this is a need for absolute collaboration within project teams. I feel we are beginning to see a pattern here.

Unlearning

'Unlearning is the process of letting go, reframing and moving away from once useful mindsets and acquired behaviours that were effective in the past, but now limit our success. It is not forgetting, removing, or discarding knowledge or experience; it is the conscious act of letting go of outdated information, and actively engaging in taking in new information to inform effective decision making and action.'[8]

So, if our reality changes (and it clearly has in recent times) then we have got to be open and willing to unlearn our old, outdated mindsets and behaviours if we want to ensure we will continue to stay relevant.

Simplicity

And last, but not least, is the overarching and underlying requirement that whatever a business does it aims to apply KISS[9] at every level.[10]

Reduce the processes, adjust the governance, and believe, really believe, in the power of the people to deliver simple success in a time of complex demand.

If we agree with Professor Julian Birkinshaw that we are in the age of adhocracy where it is about action, about getting things done, and done fast through experimentation and outcome achievement, then we need to harness the collective power of the many through collaboration and high performing teams, driven with an agile mindset, free from traditional constraints and operating in a process world of simplicity.

---

[7] Agile project management is an iterative approach to project management which allows you to break large projects down into more manageable tasks tackled in short iterations or sprints. This enables your team to adapt to change quickly and deliver work fast.

[8] As defined in his recent bestselling book: *Unlearn Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results* (2018) by Barry O'Reilly.

[9] KISS, an acronym for 'keep it simple, stupid' or 'keep it stupid simple', is a design principle that was noted by the US Navy in 1960.

[10] I certainly aim to do this in all my presentations and teaching, and in my books. Simplicity conveys understanding and aids learning.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue V – May 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com   Series Article

Make Your Business Agile
Advances in Project Management
by Peter Taylor

Final thoughts

This whole VUCA world and the road to Business Agility can seem quite daunting I realise, but the author hopes that the preceding words of some real experts can give you hope – give you inspiration – give you the realisation that it is possible to succeed and thrive in this 'new normal' existence.

Your organisation needs to make this cultural mindset change today!

About the Author

Peter Taylor

United Kingdom

Speaker, Consultant, Trainer and Coach, Peter Taylor is the author of the number 1 bestselling project management book 'The Lazy Project Manager', along with many other books on Project Management, PMO development, Executive Sponsorship, Transformation Leadership, and Speaking Skills.

He has delivered over 450 lectures around the world in over 25 countries and has been described as 'perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today'; in 2020 he was awarded the PMO Global Alliance 'PMO Influencer of the Year Award'. Learn more at www.thelazyprojectmanager.com

To see Peter's newest book, *Make Your Business Agile: A Roadmap for Transforming Your Management and Adapting to the 'new Normal,* published by Routledge and available through book sellers worldwide, click here.