: How does one become agile?

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Learn, do, reflect, and internalize. Agile is not a binary concept, rather each of us, our teams, and our organizations act and behave on a continuum that descriptively ranges from awkward, brittle, bureaucratic, rigid, and fixed to graceful, nimble, lively, quick-moving, vigorous, and extremely agile. Agile and other related terms describe how we work with others, how we interact, and how we think about others and our World. Some of us are extremely agile in our interactions, while others among us are slower to change and adapt, even awkward in our interactions. With software projects, agile is often more likely to result in success than more structured life cycle approaches (Chaos Report, 2011). Agile is a learned state of mind and a way of thinking. To become more agile we must learn and practice Agile thinking, understand the process, and then master the process. Agile is a way of thinking.

What does it mean to be agile? According to Scott Ambler, "agility is more of an attitude than a skillset". He cites four common characteristics of agile software developers. Those characteristics apply generally and include: "1) open-minded and therefore willing to learn new techniques; 2) responsible and therefore willing to seek the help of the right person(s) for the task at hand; 3) willing to work closely with others; and 4) willing to work iteratively and incrementally." Agility is a Mindset.

What is Agile software delivery? Agile is a time-boxed, iterative approach to software delivery that builds software incrementally from the start of the project, instead of trying to deliver it all at once near the end, cf.,
www.agilenutshell.com. Also, agile is the ability to create and respond to change. It is a way of dealing with, and ultimately succeeding in, an uncertain and turbulent environment.

Smith (2012) argues "Once you understand what agile really is, you need to assess how agile can help you with your business problems". ... "Once you correlate your needs to the areas that agile helps in, you are ready to determine the level of agile you can digest effectively." ... "Your approach to becoming agile is as important as learning agile practices. Use a practical approach to minimize risk to your organization as you increase agility. Involve employees from all areas of the company to increase buy-in and ownership. " Fit with needs, the right approach, and buy-in are important to becoming agile.

Next Mitchell (2019) and others suggest that becoming agile means that people, especially key decision-makers, should adopt and practice evidence-based decision making. Senior managers who seek a more agile organization must learn to be agile and must find and use evidence in decision

making. Mitchell suggests the "alternative is bleak. If they don't do so, then the illusion of control -- which comes from managing circumstantial outputs -- will persist until reality bites them." Evidence-Based Management advocates prescribe four key value areas that decision makers can and must focus upon. These key areas are the current value of anything, the unrealized value in a situation, the time to market, and the ability to innovate.

Evidence-based management is defined as "making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources by: **Asking answerable questions**: Translating a practical issue or problem into an answerable question; **Acquiring evidence**: Systematically searching and retrieving the evidence; **Appraising evidence**: Critically judging the trustworthiness and relevance of evidence; **Aggregating data and evidence**:Weighing and summarizing evidence; **Applying evidence** in the decision-making process; and finally, **Assessing and evaluating** the outcome(s) of a decision … to increase the likelihood of a favorable outcome." Check https://www.cebma.org/a-definition-of-evidence-based-management/

Two approaches to change seem especially relevant to becoming more agile: 1) Lewin/Schein's Change Theory and 2) the Shu Ha Ri Agile adoption pattern. Lewin/Schein specifies 3 steps: 1) Unfreeze, 2) Change, and 3) Refreeze. Shu Ha Ri (Cockburn, 2001; Fowler, 2014) refers to three steps of mastery: 1) Learn, 2) Detach, and 3) Transcend. Combining the approaches, one should take the following steps to become more agile:

1. Assessing, Evaluating, and Unfreezing

Determine how you act and respond in situations. Figure out your areas of strength and areas for improvement. Realize you can change.

2. Reading, Researching, Learning, and Training

Learn about the Agile Manifesto and the agile philosophy, read about various methods and frameworks, watch video lectures, and attend training sessions.

3. Practicing, Changing, and Transitioning

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Work on a variety of agile teams. Find an experienced Scrum Master or Agile coach to learn from about the process and rituals.

4. Getting and Giving Feedback, Reflecting, Detaching, Listening, and Questioning

Feedback and reflection are an important part of learning. Feedback should be part of a continuous process of conversation, questions, and reflection. Agile implies a self-reinforcing learning and communicating cycle. At the "ha" stage, one reflects upon and questions why agile works and when and how agile strategies are best applied.

5. Transcending, Sharing, and Refreezing

Shuhari, "to keep, to detach/fall, to break away and transcend", is a process of growth and change visualized as concentric circles of development, with Shu, traditional wisdom, within Ha, and both Shu and Ha are within or must be mastered for Ri.

Agile processes are about delivering value. Individuals, teams and an entire organization must focus on results and value, cf., Ray, 2019. Scrum and agile are about much more than process knowledge. People who "volunteer" as Scrum Masters serve a special role. Dalmijn (2019) cautions that "Your ability to help others is grounded in soft skills: communication, situational and servant leadership. Often new Scrum Masters get selected more based on knowledge than soft skills. Soft skills are equally important and should be considered when selecting Scrum Masters." At the "ri" stage a person should seek to extend and improve upon agile techniques and share what you have learned with others. Agile behavior must become habitual. An agile management style "requires a leader to be flexible, adaptable and fast in their decision-making (Forbes Coaches Council, 2018)".

Becoming agile is an ongoing quest for an individual, for teams, and for organizations. Becoming agile is a process of acquiring knowledge, changing behavior, and adjusting one's thinking. Becoming means undergoing change, transforming or developing new attitudes or behaviors. An agile mindset means one is resourceful and adapts to a changing situation as needed. Start the quest and find new behaviors that help you cope with change, deliver results, create value, and communicate better with others. Routinely ask "how can we change the process so that our team is more productive, while also improving quality?" According to Cockburn (2001), the answer to that question is learning to play the "game" or from my perspective learning "to do the agile dance". Some easy steps to start the Agile journey based upon Johnson (2015) include adding stand up task-oriented meetings for team projects and regularly looking back on recently completed project work with formal retrospective sessions.

Resisting change is a serious problem and it is not a new problem. Despite concerns about this ongoing problem, it is wise for managers and agile coaches to be empathetic with those who see implementing agile as simply another fad or as more busy work. Engage employees, involve them, listen to them. Communicating change effectively is our responsibility. Many people need support and understanding to cope with significant behavior and process changes. Developing an adaptive mindset is usually challenging. A person with an adaptive or agile mindset assesses the facts and circumstances of the current situation and the environment, and then makes appropriate adjustments and adaptions required to thrive in the situation. Developing this skill and mindset requires new learning, reflection, and practice.

Becoming agile is a worthwhile quest. Actually implementing Agile is sometimes likened to teaching an elephant to dance (Shiner, 2017). Implementing Agile can be challenging. Dancing often involves learning new steps, and although elephants, organizations, and teams are sometimes "big", no one is definitely nor necessarily clumsy. If elephants can learn to dance, so can each of us. Many elephants can learn a few basic dance steps. Gerstner in *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* discusses IBM's historic turnaround. Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., was the chairman and CEO of IBM from April 1993 until March 2002. Gerstner led IBM from the brink of bankruptcy and mainframe obscurity back into the forefront of computing services and technology. IBM changed its culture and became more agile.

Some use the term agilist for a person who has become and is agile, cf., Bjarnson (2018). He explains "An Agilist is a person that understands, applies, and is a proponent of agile principles to solve problems". The suffix -ist added to agile means the person practices agile and is an expert in agile principles, practices, and methods. The term seems contrived and made up, and it is. I would rather that you become a realist, a conversationalist, and an agile artist.

Organizations must respond rapidly to changing needs and circumstances. Some problems can be anticipated others are unexpected. In general the longer the duration of a planned project, the higher the risk associated with it. Today managers want to develop transformative applications quickly and that requires rapid experimentation, frequent iteration, and close collaboration between business stakeholders and project teams. Managers who prioritize speed of delivery and agility in execution, can increase productivity and improve project outcomes. As Johnson (2015) concludes "Agile is all about valuing the importance of time, planning projects and learning from each iteration before moving forward.

Promoting and increasing agility involves changes in leadership skills and style, creating an adaptive culture, flattening the business organization, and enhancing the digital architecture and digital infrastructure. Becoming an agile organization requires digital and managerial transformation.

Can the proverbial "old dog" learn new tricks? Yes, it is never too late to teach people new tricks. In organizations, middle managers who were **not** taught bureaucratic development and planning approaches may learn and develop an agile mindset and skills faster than those trained in a more rigid, fixed-mindset approach to decision making and projects. Each of us can and must keep learning and adapting. We must learn new dances. An agile dance is a medley of tunes, when the tune changes, then we must know how to change the dance.

Duke Leto Atreides in the film DUNE (1964) reminds us that a person will miss things they like about the status quo, "... but, a person needs new experiences. They jar something deep inside, allowing him to grow. Without change something sleeps inside us, and seldom awakens. The sleeper must awaken." By becoming agile that something, that sleeper, awakens for a person and an organization. We do Agile. We are agile. We strive to become agile. Agile should not become a buzz word.

Become agile! Develop an agile mindset! Know deep in your soul that there is no lasting failure, only feedback. With an agile mindset, one approaches everything as a lesson, adjusting actions based upon feedback, and proceeding toward desired outcomes, and hence continually improving. Join the quest to learn about agile, to become agile. The journey takes time and effort, but the agile destination justifies the quest to learn. You will not become agile overnight. Let the sleeper in you awaken. You must be the change you wish to see, cf., Herbert (1965).

Don't strive to do agile, rather strive to be agile.

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