: How does an agile person cope with adversity?

by Daniel J. Power

and Ciara Heavin

People, teams, and organizations frequently encounter adverse or unfavorable circumstances, calamity, difficulties, or distress. Sometimes the adversity is an inevitable part of the change process, sometimes it is extremely serious or continuous and must be overcome quickly. For example, it is common for teams and organizations trying agile for the first time to experience adversity like people resisting the change, miscommunications, status issues, project interruptions, and even conflict, cf., Pavkovic (2016). People with an agile mindset attack problems and tasks directly, work with a positive attitude and provide suggestions to overcome adversity and obstacles. They care about their performance, the outcomes of their decision-making, and about how decisions and performance impact their team/organization and/or clients.

An agile person asks questions to understand what is in the best interests of the team, business/organization, client. An agile person strives to stay flexible and identify innovative solutions. An agile person experiments, and gets feedback and uses the feedback to make continuous improvements in their actions and practices. A person with an agile mindset has realistic and practical attitudes that are focused on helping the team succeed. Howard (2015) argues that for a person with an agile mindset "'There is no failure, only feedback.' It's about taking everything as lessons, adjusting actions according to the feedback, and proceeding toward desired outcomes, resulting in continuous improvement."

People often work together to cope with adversity and obstacles. People with diverse backgrounds are more likely to bring a fresh perspective when a team faces adversity or complexity. These resilient, diverse team members help the team and organization face the challenges. Kapp and Dame (2018) discuss 7 strengths that agile teams can gain when diversity is embraced and sought. These 7 strengths include: 1) Better Communication, 2) Greater Emotional Maturity, 3) Empathy, 4) Humility, 5) Openness, 6) Resilience, and 7) Participative Leadership.

Overcoming adversity requires the right mindset -- be positive and flexible. Agile people are courageous, accept change and responsibility, look for causes and solutions, communicate about existing or impending challenges, and do not make excuses. Feedback both positive and negative is sought and considered an opportunity to learn and grow. A person with an agile mindset stays focused on goals, opportunities, and strengths.

In general, a person aspiring to be more agile should:

1) **Monitor what is occurring**. Let others know that you try to anticipate and avoid surprises. For people and teams moving from structured, bureaucratic approaches to an agile mindset there are often many surprises that could not have been anticipated. Stay flexible, adapt yourself to adverse circumstances, and "roll with the punches" as you take the agile journey;

2) **Seek feedback and listen**. Positive and negative feedback both need to be considered and acted upon appropriately. Myatt (2012) recommends "talk less and listen more ... The first rule in communication is to seek understanding before seeking to be understood. Communication is not a one way street.";

3) **Respond quickly and thoughtfully**. If a course of action does **NOT** appear to deliver results, admit that quickly, and then determine how to move on, how to change what you are doing. Agile people make mistakes too;

4) **Avoid groupthink** (Janis, 1971; Janis and Mann, 1977; Cherry, 2019). An agile person 1) should express opinions and creative thoughts, 2) should not self-censor, 3) should not coerce others and be the self-appointed censor, and 4) should not rush others to arrive at a forced consensus. In many cases, agility can be enhanced by seeking the advice of outsiders;

5) **Carefully make "one-way door" decisions**. Use facts and careful consideration when making decisions that involve a long-term commitment. Many agile actions can be reversed or even abandoned, they are two-way door decisions. Strive to make high-quality, high-velocity decisions (Bezos, 2015; Filloux, 2017; Power and Heavin, 2018). Making divisive decisions quickly and imposing them on others often leads to suboptimal and inappropriate decisions.

An agile person has accepted that ambiguity and various interpretations of facts exist, that the external world is increasingly volatile with high levels of uncertainty, that change is real and that problems must be overcome, that digital disruption is accelerating, and that situations are often complex and multicausal involving several causes and requiring careful analysis and critical thinking. An agile person tries to anticipate consequences and outcomes. Finally, an agile person adapts, avoids rationalizing, initiates change, responds to adversity, and removes barriers to success.

Becoming agile for a person, team or organization is a challenging and never-ending journey, but it is worth it. There will be setbacks and adversity, agile is not solely a method, rather it is a different way of thinking, understanding, and acting, cf., Denning, 2018. Becoming agile and developing an agile mindset is a means of coping with adversity, enhancing customer value, and finding greater

success.

References

Bezos, J., "2015 Letter to Shareholders," Amazon Annual Report, January 30, 2015 at URL https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1018724/000119312516530910/d168744dex991.htm and at URL https://ir.aboutamazon.com/static-files/f124548c-5d0b-41a6-a670-d85bb191fcec

Cherry, K., "How to Recognize and Avoid Groupthink," verywell mind, September 26, 2019 at URL https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-groupthink-2795213.

Denning, S., "The 12 Stages Of The Agile Transformation Journey," Forbes, November 4, 2018 at URL https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2018/11/04/the-twelve-stages-of-the-agile-transformation-journey/#47cd06df3dd4.

Filloux, F., "Lessons from the 'Bezos Way' and the success of Amazon," Quartz, April 18, 2017 at URL https://qz.com/961350/lessons-from-the-bezos-way-and-the-success-of-amazon/.

Handscomb, C., A. Jaenicke, K. Kaur, B. Vasquez-McCall, and A. Zaidi, "How to mess up your agile transformation in seven easy (mis)steps," McKinsey & Company Insights at URL https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-mess-up-your-agile-transformation-in-seven-easy-missteps.

Howard, L., "What Does It Mean to Have an Agile Mindset?" AgileConnection, April 1, 2015 at URL https://www.agileconnection.com/article/what-does-it-mean-have-agile-mindset.

Janis, I. L., "Groupthink," Psychology Today, November 1971, 5 (6): 43–46, 74–76.

Janis, I. L. and L. Mann, Decision making: a psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment. New York: Free Press, 1977.

Myatt, M., "Why Most Leaders Need to Shut Up and Listen," Forbes, February 9, 2012 at URL https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/02/09/why-most-leaders-need-to-shut-up-listen/#4b69 6acb6ef9.

Pavkovic, L., "6 Challenges in Applying Scrum and How to Overcome Them," DZoone, September 29, 2016 at URL https://dzone.com/articles/6-challenges-in-applying-scrum-and-how-to-overcome.

Power, D. J. and C. Heavin, Data-Based Decision Making and Digital Transformation, Business Expert Press, May 31, 2018.

Verma, R. (moderator), Uta Kapp and Dave Dame (panelists), "7 Strengths of Highly Diverse Agile Teams," Scrum.org webinar, August 23, 2018 at URL https://www.scrum.org/resources/7-strengths-highly-diverse-agile-teams.

Wikipedia, "Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity," at URL https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity.

Author: Daniel Power
Last update: 2019-11-27 10:25