

Cultural barriers to becoming Agile

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“Hierarchical organizational models aren’t just being turned upside down — they’re being deconstructed from the inside out.”¹ (McDowell et al., 2016)

Traditional functional structures are being tested as agility and change adaptability become as important as (if not more than) efficiency.

In this article I explore Agile organization trademarks, challenges in becoming Agile, and what leaders and managers can do to overcome them.

Agile organization trademarks

Agile organizations — “quick in responding to changes in the marketplace or environment”² — have a number of trademarks, including:

- a network of empowered teams
- rapid learning and fast decision cycles, enabled by technology
- all usable information being available to the whole team
- decisions pushed to the lowest level possible
- being robust but also “embracing uncertainty and seeking to be the quickest and most productive in trying new things.”³ (Aghina et al., 2018)

In these environments the ‘customer is king.’ and their preferences are closely listened to.

This approach may not be the best for all circumstances e.g. in specific legal and regulatory situations, speed and experimentation may be less important than precision and accuracy.

Nonetheless, the overall trend is to strive to get products and services to customers ahead of the competition and to provide frequent, tangible value.

What barriers do organizations face in becoming more Agile?

As organizations seek to adopt more of an Agile approach they face cultural and structural challenges.

Those evolving from a more traditional hierarchical structure can struggle with the transition. It is often a change to how decisions are made, to channels of communication and relationships (an increased number of horizontal or matrix relationships) and how products are delivered (iteratively).

It can be difficult to let go of proven ways of working that may have been successful.

If the cultural shift is significant, acknowledging the challenges and the extent of change required can help build trust. “People can tell when the rhetoric doesn’t match the implementation.”⁴ (Cottmeyer, 2011)

¹ McDowell, et al., *Organizational design: The rise of teams*, 2016 *Global Human Capital Trends*, Deloitte University Press, February 29, 2016, <https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/focus/human-capital-trends/2016/organizational-models-network-of-teams.htm>

² Agile Organization, Posted in Information Technology & Systems, mbaskool.com, <https://www.mbaskool.com/business-concepts/it-and-systems/6703-agile-organization.html>

³ Aghina, et al. *The five trademarks of agile organizations*, Mckinsey and Company, January 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations#0>

⁴ Cottmeyer, M., *12 barriers to agile transformation*, leadingagile.com, January 11, 2011, <https://www.leadingagile.com/2011/01/12-key-barriers-to-agile-transformation/>

A related challenge can be overcoming a need for certainty. A need to know what's going to happen might be hardwired or have become an established way of working, so creating an environment where it is safe to be uncertain is key.

Expectations of employees also influences adoption of change:

- are existing employees incentivized or guided to operate in a more agile way?
- are new employees encouraged to assimilate and align with existing culture or help it evolve?
- what level of managerial tolerance is there for failure and experimentation? If it is low, risk-taking and creativity will be suppressed.

While structure may have changed, without sufficient role models exhibiting the desired behaviors, a natural tendency can be to revert to ways you know.

What can leaders and managers do to help?

In Agile, the role of the manager is “to enable those doing the work to contribute their full talents and capabilities to generate value for customers” and “eliminate any impediments that may be getting in the way.”⁵ (Denning, 2015)

Hence, it's important for leaders to decide on the level of structure and formality they really need and to be clear with their teams i.e. when do you need to provide input and when don't you?

Also, question your own tolerance for experimentation and failure on your projects. If you are trying to come up with something new but regularly step in and remind the team of their mistakes, they are less likely to experiment. Equally, if it's a more routine solution, convey your expectation around a standard delivery. In summary, be clear.

“Changing a corporate culture or ideology can't be achieved by the introduction of methodologies” (Denning, 2015) or a change of structure. How you behavior as a leader — in your expectation setting, decision-making, delegation and in providing feedback — might be the biggest influencer in whether your team adopts a different, more 'Agile' way of working.

⁵ Denning, S., *How to make the whole organization agile*, Forbes.com, Jul 22, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2015/07/22/how-to-make-the-whole-organization-agile/#7a211c0d5841>