

THE NEW NORMAL:

AO

CONCEPTS AND PATTERNS OF

21-ST CENTURY

AGILE

ORGANIZATIONS

BY PIERRE E. NEIS

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Give me feedback

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To my daughters Lou and Camille

I'm not a creator, I'm the translator of the people's work.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is an agile project on its own: it starts with an idea, that idea moved to a project. That project becomes massive with several branches in HR, workshops, global events, training courses and consulting.

I started this journey twelve years ago until I decided to write this book eighteen months ago. I had an initial plan that I improved three times until I found it good enough. Yes, this book isn't perfect. This book will have several updates from me and, from other authors.

Like any agile projects and any experimental research, the ideas are tested and then developed, And once developed and delivered, the outcome is documented.

Like in any project, I finish writing this book by the introduction.

The word agile is often misused and introduce the idea of speed and software engineering when the reality is getting early feedbacks and work together from any areas of the company.

The purpose of AO is to deliver a tool shaping your organization to respond to 21-st century challenges. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we spoke about the VUCA world or complex systems and connected world. Nowadays a new term is emerging: it is THE NEW NORMAL.

It is all about to understand where you are, where do you want to go and to start your journey.

The AO hypothesis is that what we call “Agile” is a dynamic in a system called organization. An Agile Organization is allowing high efficient people interactions leading to better responsiveness on threats or opportunities.

To ensure such dynamics, the AO model is proposing five areas:

1. Structure is not Organization
2. Organization allowing Agile Dynamics
3. Five transition phases to full Agile Organization
4. Five metrics, the five experiences; enterprise experience, organization experience, people experience, customer experience and system experience.
5. Five work areas: the platform, the Plexus, Programs, Projects and Swarms

These tools will help coaches, managers, leaders to design a proper engaging “alliance” with all stakeholders of their organizations.

AO is an answer to anthropomorphic organizational model or organic working models where all the actors are engaged on a shared purpose.

I intend to open the door to the next step of Agile as a continuous re-organization model.

PART ONE:

THE PUZZLE

1.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION?

Agile is everyone's lips.

We are in 2020, and maybe I am wrong, but I have a strong feeling that the whole business world is putting the word agile everywhere. This situation is a bit confusing, no?

When I started my adventure as an agile coach a couple of years ago, my customers considered me as something in between the dodo bird and a unicorn. Nowadays, when telling that I am an agile coach, people are looking at me like an expert. Both are weird, so weird.

There is a massive misunderstanding of the meaning of agile. Often people are caring more about the form as about its function. So what is agile then?

During a workshop in the Middle East, one of the attendees asked me the question "what is coming after agile?" I wasn't able to give an intelligent guess, and I answered: "it is up to you to show me that". Even that answer sounded honest from me at that moment in time; I wasn't able to figure out the end of agile neither to imagine what is coming after.

A couple of years later, I was still troubled by my inconsistency: how can I ask somebody to demonstrate a better improvement of something undefined? Or in

complicated words: I need you to improve the unknown-unknown. How poor is that?

In 2016, while contracting with a well-known global company, I had tough conversations with some managers about their idea of a transformation. They asked me to execute a plan of what they considered to be "agile". During these conversations, I mostly disagree by arguing that in the agile context, the one who plans has to execute while understanding the operational realities. These awkward conversations continued until one of the managers told me that I was an agile "fanatic," even if the word he used was slightly more aggressive. By asking myself "If this manager is thinking that way about me, and if we need to

Have such vigorous debates each time, isn't that argumentation only deserving our egos? I have to

Change something, starting by me.

A. WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN BE CONSIDERED AS AGILE AND WHY?

Attending conferences and reading as much that I can do about organizations; I was impressed by great case studies. All these cases galvanized me, and I wanted to see it with my eyes.

That huge bank is now agile was one keynote a couple of years ago. That case was used as a reference in most of the leadership congresses.

A couple of months ago, astonishingly, another case about the same bank came out but now from a different

department. Both presentations used the same arguments, the last one giving the impression that they started their organization model from scratch again.

At the same moment, the same bank asked me to provide some agile coaches to support their program. The dream went away once I faced reality: no performance, no communication, no alignment, no agile. "No agile" is a bit rude. It was like when your five years old daughter is showing up with pride that weird picture she draws: you are happy for the effort, but the drawing remains rudimental.

During our weekly "supervision" (coaching the coaches), I discovered that the first experiment never worked and the second seems to lead to the same results. In our conversations, I wanted to understand what was the understanding of agile.

Genuinely, some IT development teams are using agile practices, and only those. I was confused.

A tremendous amount of money invested in something (agile) used by less than 5% of the whole organization and someone is considering this as an accomplishment, twice?

I used that irritation to dive deeper, and I wanted to know why they failed? What is their understanding of "agile"? What do others understand under "agile"?

Next step was to create a questioner to understand if that case was unique, or maybe I do wrong. On that journey a same sad feeling then before rises in my mind: how can you describe a success (we are agile) when the goal (agile) is unknown?

I asked a friend or better I asked my network if someone has a pertinent answer on that: what is agile , what isn't agile? And what company is agile and how?

Long answer short: most of the responses were entirely out of scope, esoteric or polluted by engineering or methodological biases.

B. IF I USE ONE OF THE AGILE METHODS, AM I AGILE?

From the questionnaire to my network, most of the answers related to methods came out.

TEST:

“IF I USE AN AGILE METHOD, MY ORGANIZATION BECOMES AGILE OR MORE, I BECOME AGILE.”

I believe that we tried that before with PMI, Prince 2 or Lean, and we all know the outcomes: none of them succeeded. We had the Lean Office, the Lean Ambassador, the Lean Coach to ensure that everyone is sharing the same knowledge, that everyone had the setup, that everyone had the support. But once a single piece of that structure left neither the roles, the offices nor the methods survived.

The intention and the logic were correct but was it the right time?

- **Budget time: OK**
- **Performance time: Not OK**
- Did we change the paradigm of work? **NO**
- No benefits to report
- What are the lessons learned?
 - Methods are part of the documentation once you achieved your goal so that someone else can verify and valid your demonstration.
 - The power of methods is to generate an "IKEA Effect" while "overvaluing the creation of poorly constructed products". (M.I. Norton, D. Mochon, D. Ariely.)

WHAT HAPPENED?

I found an answer in Aristotle. We, including myself, thought that teaching tools, methods and processes (techne) were the solution to transform any organizations. We felt that sharing knowledge ("episteme") will make structures wiser. I was wrong.

The new system didn't respond to the plan. We fed a full bucket.

Aristotle, again, came to help me out. Change makes sense when you are acting appropriately ("Sofia") at the "right, critical, or opportune moment". Methods and tools are not wrong. They are just inconsistent when used at the wrong time.

2

WHAT IS AGILE?

On my journey to try to define the meaning of agile, I came through Clean Language.

“Clean” is a way to ask the question in a non-directive manner without influencing the answers.

So, I decided to ask first my network on social media, *“What kind of agile is your Agile?”*.

Once I asked my “agile” friends, I applied it in my daily work in the massive transformations, in my retrospectives, during my workshops. I pray that question since near two years now, and I’m still surprised by the answers.

For your understanding, **I always ask the question before:**

- Explaining that agile is an evolution of Lean manufacturing in the middle of the 1990s
- Introducing “the Agile Manifesto for Software Development”
- And finally to present “the Declaration of Interdependence”.

The belief that a magic silver bullet can solve your problem is hardcoded in our business DNA, we all believe in

magic. Agility (the "ish" of agile) is one hard belief: you take an agility process, and all dreams come true.

WHY?

In 2010-2011, Dave Snowden came in the agile world to explain the principles of Complex Adaptive System (CAS) through his Cynefin model. It was the right time to lift our understanding of agile.

In one of his presentation of CAS, he explained the evolution of work from Scientific Management (mass production) to System Thinking (mass customization) and then to Sense-Making (the ability to situate a network). From a categorization perspective, Scientific Management and System Thinking (Lean) are assuming this "framework" precedes "data" (manufacturing) when Sensemaking model is assuming this "data precedes framework".

Methods are related to "framework," and they are valid if you want to build a factory delivering each time the same product. It isn't the right solution if you produce custom solutions.

In the twenty-first century, and if you have heard about the digital evolution, you might understand that trends are emerging from data. The more data, you have, the more precise you become.

Researchers like Peter Kruse or Peter Niederschmidt are also addressing the principles of complexity.

Peter Kruse, a researcher in intelligent networks explained the impact of the non-linear system nature of the internet shifting the power from provider to customer. These highly dynamic networks (internet, social networks) leads to a change in customer behavior. The consequence is that

organizations and politics have to change or die. Enterprises and politics have to align with the demand.

Peter Nieschmidt explains that complexity is an evolution that influences the nature of work. It is about accepting that a single person does not own the complete knowledge, but the collective intelligence of a group, a system can solve complex problems.

In both scientific management and system thinking, the foundation is built on the idea to create a factory. Factory products having a longer lifecycle and demanding more massive investments, the preparation phase needs to be managed by experts. Once that preparation phase achieved, the experts are handing-over their solutions to be executed by subordinates like a manufacturing process. It is trying to counter in a complicated manner complex problems.

Agile, on the other hand, is trying to address complex problems in a network organized world where the planners are also the makers. That approach reduces the distance by avoiding "organizational cascading".

When "scientific management" distills a somewhat paternalistic way of management, "system thinking" tries to embrace the system to reduce the variability in such systems (pattern precedes data).

The other way around, the purpose of agile is to increase the diversity in a system to produce more data. From that data, an enterprise can then collect emerging patterns allowing adequate decision making. The more information you get, the more precise you can estimate your trends, the most coherent are your decisions.

Agile cannot be a method. By nature, a "method" would reduce the quality of the data spectrum and lead to destabilization of the system. When you try to manage a "complex system" you stop the expected dynamic, and it becomes something else. Like in a conversation, when someone else comes into the conversation, it changes its nature.

C. ARE WE TALKING ABOUT A CULTURE?

Is Agile a culture? That is an interesting point to address.

When you research on the internet, the definition, you will discover some similarities that can make valid the assumption that Agile is a culture.

Agile has its:

- Set customs like iterations, unconferences, open spaces, relaxed attitudes.
- Traditions: gatherings, conferences, blogs, workshops, retreats, etc.
- Values as a society: freedom of speech, curiosity, controversy, critics, collaboration, empathy, co-creation
- Languages: we have our jargon
- Philosophy and mythology: the agile manifesto, hero & stars, etc
- Literature

During the book review, Ben commented “*Going back to the Manifesto, agile has principles too*”. My answer was “*You're right, but the Manifesto is limiting Agile to Software Development. But I agree, the Manifesto is an awesome set of guidelines*”.

TEST:

IF AGILE IS A CULTURE, HOW AND WHEN SHOULD I BE ABLE TO DEFINE THAT MY TEAM, MY ORGANIZATION, MY ENTERPRISE IS AGILE?

- *And, isn't contradictory with what I wrote before regarding diversity?*
- *When you transform an enterprise, and all the people have adopted this "new culture," What happened with the previous one?*
- *Can I be an Italian from 6:00 AM to 9:00 AM, then agile until 6:00 PM at work, later Italian again? How can I be myself then?*
- *If I am an agile manager, What makes me different from a genuine manager?*

Nothing, right? Agile or not, managers are doing the same job...

SO WHAT?

So, it becomes complicated to consider Agile to be a culture as such. It is more something like "Pop culture" for agilists and Agile coaches.

Let us keep in mind the fundamental principle of diversity wards us to not shift into a new age religious crusade. The dissemination of Agile is helpful for the sake of its intrinsic nature by assimilating new approaches or new data, helping us to better understand it in the future. Using the culture,

religious or philosophical strategy as a key is dangerous and counterproductive. The dispersion of principles should enforce the quality of communication between all the actors in an enlarged system. It is all about assimilation and evolution, not colonization.

You can consider Agile as a counterculture like the punks and the hippies helping us to reinvent ourselves permanently.

D. IS IT A MINDSET?

Since two years, a couple of articles have been published to try to explain that Agile is a mindset.

The Cambridge dictionary defines mindset as "*a person's way of thinking and their opinions*".

The Gallup 2018 study of employees in France, Germany, Spain and the UK explains that when an enterprise sets up agility, employees explain that "*we have the right tools and processes to respond quickly to business needs...*" and "*in my company, we have the right mindset to respond quickly to business needs.*"

On the other hand, D. Soule from EMERITUS-MIT explains that digital (i.e., agile), mindset is:

- "Make working together expected and easy."
- "Learn to be wrong."
- "Grounded in strong customer-centric cultures."
- "This ability to give employees a sense of optimism about the organization's capacity to survive — and thrive—amid disruptive marketplace conditions."
- It is not matrixed

I agree, the list before is more like a set of value, but doesn't these values shaping our mindset?

Is "mindset" nothing more like another silver bullet set up of a red herring? Some politically correct not engaging answer to say "*I don't know what agile is?*".

TEST

WHAT KIND OF MINDSET IS THE RIGHT ONE? HAVE ALL THE CULTURES IN THE WHOLE WORLD THE SAME MINDSET?

And definitively, if I have the "right" mindset, does it make my surroundings, my organisation agile because of me?

Unfortunately, there is no causality between “right mindset” and Agile Organization.

Review

Even if my perfidy leads you already have the answer in your mind, I invite you to dive a bit deeper.

Trying to define agile as a mindset is probably wrong too. It is a categorization issue. Why do we need to categorize it at all?

In the meantime, we are applying complex behavior while collecting a massive amount of data from our past agile

experiments and try to cluster it. Clustering leads to resilience. And resilience leads to separation.

Is this a chicken-egg problem?

From the review, Alexandre wrote: "Most of the agile practices that we know today are influenced by Gilb work with EVO who was created in 1960 and the paper came out in 1976.www.gilb.com".

I understand Alexandre's point of view. He sees Agile from an engineering perspective. What if Agile is something else?

A. WHAT KIND OF AGILE IS YOUR AGILE?

I ask the question without any explanations at all. What is your gut telling you about agile? And then start the collective improvement of all "gut feelings".

At this time, around 300 people have been interviewed from entirely different areas: IT, Finance, Governance, Coaching, HR, Pharmaceutical, Manufacturing, Consulting. For better understanding, I clustered the answers in four categories:

- *quantitative* means that agile is understood as results
- *behavior* means that agile is how people are interacting together
- *process*, agile is perceived like a process or a methodology
- *bypass*, people didn't answer the question due to communication issues or lack of focus

From a quantitative perspective, agile is seen as:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|---|
| — fast visible results | — rapid customer satisfaction | — opportunities instead of limitations |
| — quick wins | — more time consuming than previous methodologies | — working on a topic which produces value |
| — deliver quickly | | |
| — quality | — seeing results and not just work in progress | |
| — technical excellence | | |
| — workable software | | |

From a Behavior perspective, agile is seen as:

- | | |
|--|---|
| — flexibility | — trustful cooperation with project-members |
| — pragmatic | — fully dedicated, I have the feeling that I am moving with |
| — mindset | — motivation |
| — adaptability | — happy and satisfied |
| — The capacity to say No. | — consistency of projects |
| — responsibility | — working on topics which fit my skills |
| — multiple competencies | — simplicity |
| — client oriented | — meetings, not that often |
| — putting me in the shoes of my customer to gain a clear vision of his needs | — sustainability |
| — have interaction with customers or users | — welcome change |
| — better collaboration | — challenges instead of problems |
| — business & development working together | — challenging and exciting tasks with own responsibility and decision power |
| — teamwork | |
| — close collaboration | |
| — will empower us to collaborate and share experiences | |

From a process perspective, agile is seen as:

- | | |
|---------------|------------------|
| — methodology | — daily statuses |
| — DevOps | — time to market |
| — feedback | |

- individual and interactions over processes and tools
- workable functionalities overextended documentation

- collaboration with the customer over contract-based relations
- incremental product
- well defined roles within the agile team

Bypassing the question won't be detailed here. The reason is that the content of avoiding doesn't matter; it is withdrawing that matters. As a coach, I try to understand why these people were not able to respond. My interpretation is that 17% of people are not focused enough to answer a simple question due mostly to:

- Stress
- Overwhelming multi-tasking
- Stocking in their expertise

- Switching from one meeting to another
- No time to think
- My boss decides for me

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS I LEARNED FROM THAT QUESTIONNAIRE?

While addressing people's guts and not their knowledge (brain), I was positively surprised to discover that 47% of people think that agile is behavior related. In systemic words, behavior is the interaction of agents in a system when here, those agents are people.

In the next sections, I will explain how you measure that interaction and how you can create the conditions to enforce that behavior.

B. WHAT'S NOT AGILE?

Defining what something might be is hard work, and setting what 'isn't is even harder.

To avoid being polluted by my own biases, I did what I always do, and I ask the team. And in that case, the team is my social network.

From the network, not agile means:

- Believing we have any capacity to predict the future: *"Once I've met a Program Manager of an extensive agile program of 25 teams. He planned all the sprints for the next two years for all teams in his first week."* (Attention, 'that's not good!)
- Telling people what to do and how to do it: it is about commitment and not paternalism
- Believing success is in doing what we said we would do: *"stick to the plan, no matter what."*
- Doing things or making things that are not needed
- Not taking time for reflection
- Intolerance of experimentation and failure: trial and error is critical, only once you have tested your idea, you can assume the design is right
- Imagining what our customers need

- Imposed agile: *“someone in the company decided that everyone has to become agile as a single methodology.”*
- Acting as though the plan were more real than reality
- Early extensive documentation
- The PMO organization
- "Agile" without retrospective, reflection, learning and adaptation
- Playing it safe to be perfect rather than taking a risk to be excellent and learn to be better next time
- I climbing a tree
- Predetermined conclusion
- No heart, no joy and no chance for improvement
- Not caring about events that change your knowledge and continue do the same thing in the same way before the events raise!
- Reluctance to change
- Customer-provider relationships
- Egocentrism and selfishness
- Agile means quick, able to change, and able to respond. Rocks are not "agile"

For sure, my audience wasn't partial and is considering all the negative aspects of the universe as being not agile. But some of them are valid.