

Business agility and you

The ability to respond to change



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by Andrew Hobday

Many organisations are trying to become more agile. It's not just about software delivery or technology departments. Business agility is about everyone and everything within the organisation. So, what does increasing an organisation's business agility mean? What does it mean for everyone that works there?

Please, take your mind back to the first job you had - The first day or first shift of that job. Perhaps, you felt on top of the world and at the bottom of a cliff, at the same time. Excited by the unknown, but fearful of getting things wrong or not being able to learn the role. A feeling of independence through starting to earn money, but also feeling dependent upon colleagues and your boss for direction and support.

Zak's story

This is Zak. His first job was working at McAlien's – a family restaurant selling burgers, fries, and hot apple pies.

Zak's first shift was a busy one, and it was his job to keep the dining area clean. He was out the front wiping down tables and as he walked behind the counter one of the customers grabbed him by the shoulder and demanded, "Get me a McAlien value meal!"

Poor Zak didn't know what to do. He didn't want to say, "no" to a customer. But he knew he wasn't allowed to serve food yet. So he used that word that's about halfway between "yes" and "no"... Have you ever used that one to escape a situation? It kind of sounds like, "aheah". So Zak used it, and then rushed out to the kitchen area to wipe down some benches. He kept peeking around a partition to see if the customer was still waiting at the counter. Eventually the customer was served and Zak heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Zak looked up and saw his manager staring straight at him. She'd seen the whole thing. She walked over and asked, "Have you got a minute Zak? I just want to have a quick chat with you." Zak thought this didn't sound too good, and hoped he wasn't going to be the shortest-lived employee in McAlien's long history.

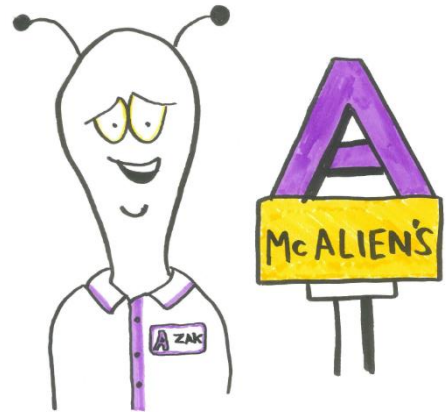
His manager led him to the storeroom and on the way, she said, "Don't worry Zak, you're not in any trouble. I just saw you seemed very stressed, and it's your first shift and all. So, I wanted to have a chat to see how you're going." Zak was relieved to hear it.

His manager flattened out a cardboard box and drew a circle on it, before placing it on the floor. She motioned to it and asked Zak, "Can you stand inside the circle?" Zak did as instructed. She then said, "Zak, do you think I'd be easy enough to say inside the circle?"

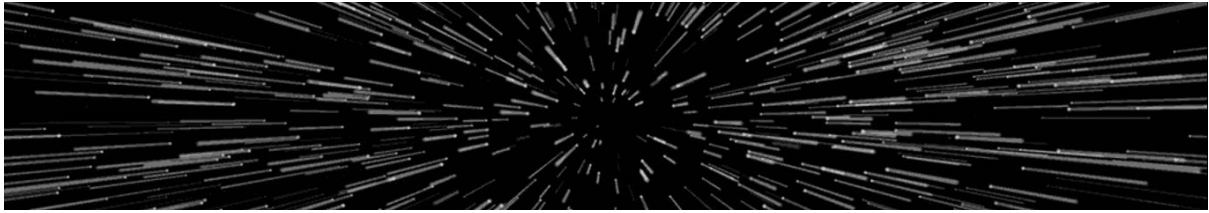
Zak replied, "Yes."

His manager continued, "It's as simple as that. All you have to do is stay inside the circle... Just stay inside that circle. The circle represents our employee handbook, the ten commandments for amazing customer service you see on the lunchroom wall, my instructions to you as your manager, and your senior colleagues' instructions to you. And if you can stay inside the circle, you'll be a valued employee, with happy teammates, the store will have happy customers, the company will be prosperous, and you'll have secure employment for as long as you want. All you have to do is stay inside the circle."

Zak was very happy. He felt a lot of clarity and it really made a lot of sense to him. After thanking his manager for the chat, he bounded back out to the dining area to wipe down some tables.



Let's fast forward ten years into the future...



Zak's got a few more wrinkles and McAlien's has had a 'brand refresh' (or two).

Zak's now applying for a store manager's role and is being interviewed by the regional manager.

He is asked an interesting question... The scenario describes a new employee on their first shift and it pretty much mirrors Zak's 'first day' experience... So now he has to place himself into the manager's role and explain how he'd coach a young, stressed employee on her/his first shift.



Have a think about which of the following possible responses seem reasonable:

A: Zak pretends the 'circle analogy' is his own idea and he'd use it in the situation.

B: Zak acknowledges his former manager and says he'd use *her* 'circle analogy' in the situation.

C: After acknowledging his former manager's analogy, Zak says he'd coach the employee to 'step outside of the circle', using business agility.

Let's see how each of the responses would have fared in the scenario-based interview question

A: Zak pretends the 'circle analogy' is his own idea and he'd use it in the situation.

Regional Manager's response: "Hang on. I remember the manager who used to use that circle thing... Why are you pretending it's your idea? That's not good..."

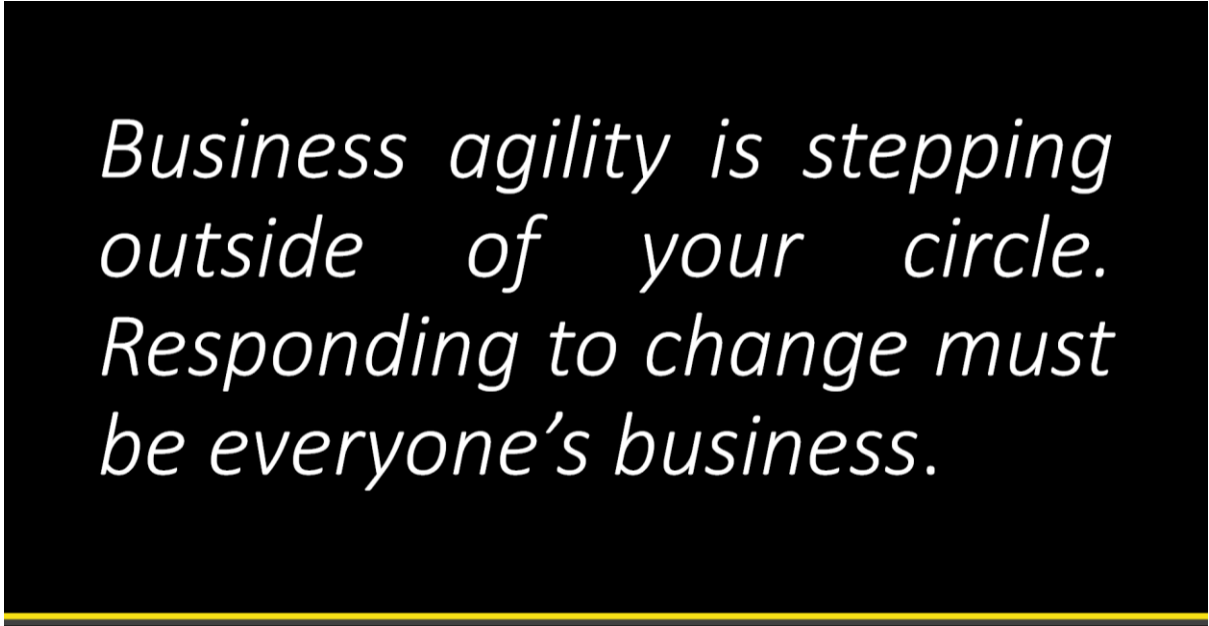
B: Zak acknowledges his former manager and says he'd use *her* 'circle analogy' in the situation.

Regional Manager's response: "I remember her. That was ten years ago though. We've moved on since then. We don't want robots working for us. We want empowered, innovative aliens... willing to challenge the status quo. Granted, that might not be an employee's first day on the job... but this circle thing locks their potential down. It constrains their thinking and locks down their creative potential. That's not good..."

C: After referencing his former manager's analogy, Zak says he'd coach the employee to 'step outside of the circle', using business agility.

Regional Manager's response: "Sounds interesting... Please, tell me more."

Zak recalls and recounts what he knows about business agility...



*Business agility is stepping
outside of your circle.
Responding to change must
be everyone's business.*

Business agility is:

- Stepping outside of restrictive processes
- Stepping outside of mindless completion of tasks
- Stepping outside of a mindset where you feel you'll be more rewarded acting like a robot than like a human (or like an alien, in Zak's case)

'Responding' isn't simply a 'knee-jerk reaction' to a narrow view of change. It's a proactive, thoughtful, innovative response to deep insights into change, with a broad view of change across the organisation.

Let's define 'business agility', and we can do this by contrasting it to a related term that's a little more familiar.

defining business agility

Let's compare **Business agility** with **Agile development**, (i.e. agile software or solution development.)

Little 'a' vs. Big 'A'

'agile' (when relating to Business agility) is an adjective, describing the state of the organisation.

'Agile' (when relating to Agile development) is a noun, as it names a methodology (or group of methodologies) for solution delivery.

Business agility	Agile development
(little 'a') agile agile being Business agility is about responding to change	(big 'A') Agile Agile doing Agile is a change-based delivery methodology

agile being vs Agile doing

When you start off following an Agile methodology, it's about tools and techniques and 'doing' them. For example, 'stand up' meetings, showcases, and retrospectives. As your agile mindset strengthens and you have to think less about the specifics of what you're doing, you start just 'being' agile.

To explore this further, consider the following question: How many times have you breathed in the last minute? Was it three times? Four perhaps? Well, how would you know exactly, because you don't count your breaths.

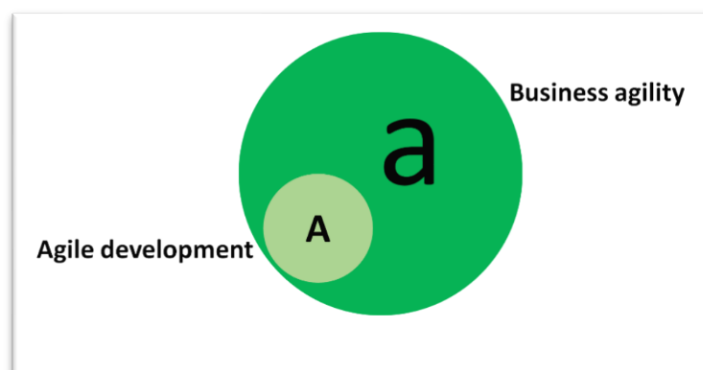
Whilst you're 'doing' the breathing, it's part of 'being' human. You don't have to think about it... It just happens. It's the same with agility. You may apply some of the tools and techniques, but you're not specifically thinking about them... You don't have to think about it... It just comes naturally in the course of things.

Business agility is about responding to change from a 'whole of business' perspective.

Agile development is a change-based delivery methodology, generally focused on a particular project, initiative, or portfolio of work.

But fortunately, it's not a case of picking one or the other...

Business agility takes all the value of Agile development and places that into an even broader, 'whole of business' context.



Business agility: one concept, three areas, and six elements

There are lots of models around for Business agility and I've come across a few I like. I've chosen a simple one here as an anchor point for the six elements I've identified.

Three areas of business agility

- **Hyper-awareness**
- **Informed decision-making**
- **Fast execution**

The *Global Center For Digital Business Transformation* position this as a model for Digital Business Agility, centred around responding to digital disruption. But I think it applies more broadly than just digital and articulates three essential capabilities for building your organisation's business agility. I refer to these as the three **areas** and briefly interpret them below:

1. You have to be aware of change in the first place and aware of your internal and external business environment... That's **hyper-awareness**.
2. You then have to make good decisions with that information... That's **informed decision-making**.
3. And from those decisions you need to be able to execute on them quickly... That's **fast execution**.

What fuels these three areas?

What are six critical elements for an agile business environment?

Anyone that spends time reading articles and posts on *Linked In* or finds business material through platforms like *Twitter*, will come across plenty of interesting concept models. I marvel at the brilliance of well-rounded, nicely balanced and visually depicted business concepts. I read them and nod my head in agreement, thinking "Yeah, they *are* the attributes of a good leader", or "They *do* reasonably seem like the four keys to project success". Often, they'll use 'good vs bad' or 'do this vs don't do that' comparisons. These illustrate a point really well. I even try to use this format in my own writing. When reading these – no matter how much I nod and agree – I'm left wondering how I can use what I've read to help change me or my organisation for the better. How do I bring it to life? Is it truly accessible or just a nice, neat little model?

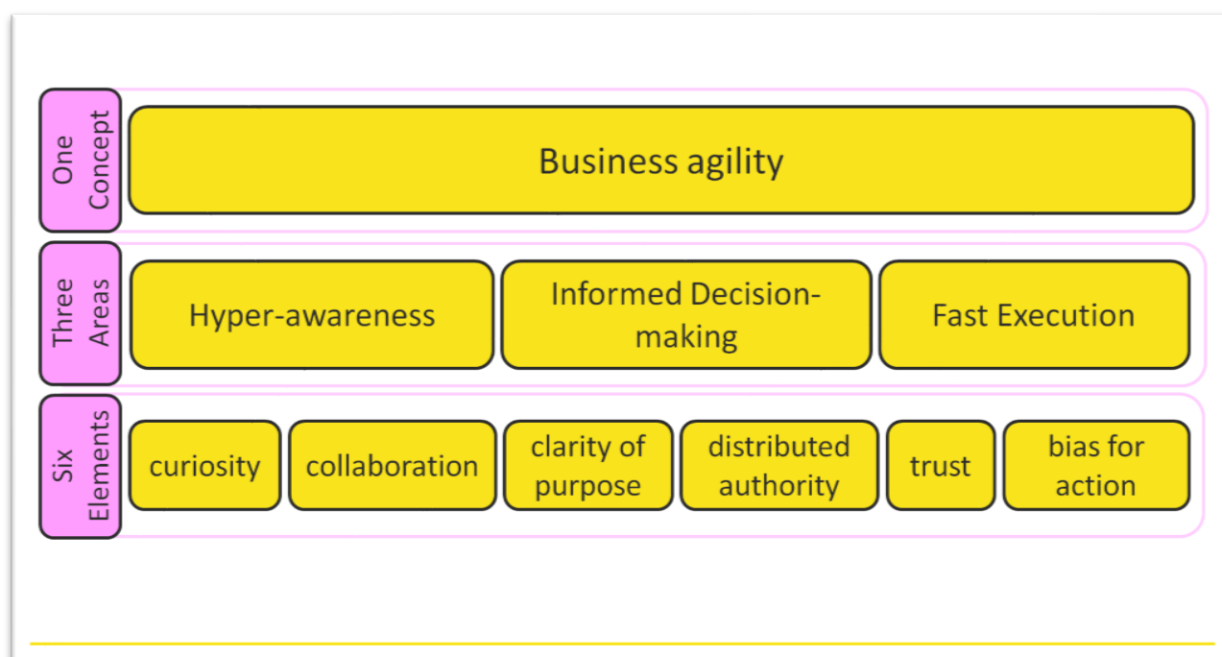
My mission is to bring Business agility to life with thought-provoking content that helps facilitate actionable outcomes. This is what I had in mind when identifying six critical elements. I didn't want there to be too many layers of detail below them, needing to be uncovered in order to make them actionable and helpful.

How the six critical elements were identified

I was sitting in one of the co-pilot seats for what was essentially a large agile, lean, and design thinking transformation. I was having conversations with others in similar situations, and doing some research in the area at the same time. At a point when things had settled down a bit, I reflected on what had happened – How things had played out. What went well, what could have gone better, and what still confused me (Sound familiar?). After further conversations and reflection, the six critical **elements** surfaced.

It's not *only* about these. Having *only* these doesn't spell success. However, missing any of them will be problematic if there's an intent to become more agile.

Business agility: one concept, three areas, and six elements



The six **elements** are interlinked and each one of them indeed serves all three **areas**. However, two stand out for each **area** as being especially critical.

When thinking about the two **elements** per **area**, I found it helpful to place them in a 2x2 matrix and consider what it would mean for each **area** to have one **element** supporting it without the other. This helped draw out the importance of each **element** and their pairings.

Let's take a closer look at the six **elements**, how they fuel the three **areas** of Business agility and how to develop them.

Hyper-awareness

fuelled by curiosity & collaboration

I believe **hyper-awareness** is fuelled by **curiosity** and **collaboration**.

Hyper-awareness to some organisations may be a team of analysts, a technology radar (picking up new trends), an internal team of process specialists, or even a team focused on customer insights. Whilst these are all worthwhile, here we're focusing on scale and diversity. To adequately fuel hyper-awareness, all employees need to play their part.



Low collaboration | Low curiosity

Here, you're basically letting others do it. You're hiding away in a hibernation pod. This isn't good for anyone.



Low collaboration | High curiosity

Here you're discovering, but only for yourself. This isn't good for the organisation. It's actually not even that good for you as an individual, because you miss out on the benefit of the diversity of thought that comes from sharing your curiosities.



High collaboration | Low curiosity

So here, you're collaborating but it's very insular – very much limited to the usual themes and ideas within the organisation. You find yourself going over old ground. I think of it like sharing 'burgers and beers' with your colleagues – it may be fun but in isolation it's not that valuable.



High collaboration | High curiosity

This is where we want to be, enjoying discovery and sharing. And as the image demonstrates, it doesn't have to be a bunch of people in the same room. It can be. But it can also be sharing via digital means.



building curiosity & collaboration

The following are examples for building **curiosity** and **collaboration**.

collaborative platform

When seeking to uplift collaboration across an organisation, a good place to start is with a collaborative platform.

There are heaps on the market (e.g. HipChat, yammer, Confluence, chatter, slack, jabber, etc.). Whilst some are targeting project and development teams with fancy tech plug-ins and features, others are targeting 'whole of company' with no barrier to entry and simplicity for non-techies. The underlying intent is common to all – to provide a group of people a way to share, cooperate, and collaborate.

Many organisations have one or many of these platforms, but fail to leverage them properly to realise their value. The following are tips to help get the most out of an enterprise-wide platform.

Getting the most out of a collaborative platform

- Consider specific features of each platform and select one that provides the most value to your intended users
- Select one that will be suitable to span your organisation. You may have several others used by specific departments or users (e.g. for software development teams), but there should be one that can be used by every person across the organisation (i.e. an enterprise-wide solution)
- Ensure the one you pick for an enterprise solution has capacity and licensing for everyone to use it
- Make it easy to access (e.g. 'Single Sign On', so that users can seamlessly access it and don't have to create additional 'log in' credentials)
- Make it easy to contribute (e.g. easy to post something new, add comments, include images and video, and like/vote for things.) If it's too complicated, many of your intended users won't use it
- Whilst these platforms generally all support multiple forms of communication (i.e. '1:1' via private messages, '1:many' via announcements and posts, 'many:1' via polls and likes, the real gold is in what the platform can do for 'many:many' communication. This is where discussion threads swell with posts and comments. The layering of ideas and opinions from a diverse group takes the original point beyond where it could have ended up without the power of 'many:many' communication. 'Many:many' communication can be encouraged by letting users know it's valuable and that it's a good way to use the platform
- Diversity within collaboration is really valuable. There will be some people that just start using the platform because it comes naturally to them (e.g. perhaps they're very social beings, or have a fear of missing out on any news across the organisation). However, they'll be many people who are unsure of getting involved (e.g. maybe they're more introverted, or perhaps they're not sure whether they're 'permitted' to use it). It's important to get as many people using the platform as possible and ideally everyone across the organisation. This includes front-line staff through to the CEO
- It needs to be a site worth visiting. Ways to achieve this include posting breaking news on there before it's distributed via email, running competitions, and proving that it's an easy and safe way to access the executive team with your thoughts and ideas. It needs to be lively and with a good flow of diverse content to attract users
- Even enthusiastic contributors can struggle finding time to keep across a vibrant and active platform. Make it an 'everyday' thing and give people some time to be part of it. Whether that's between customer calls, or first thing in the morning – it's important that people feel they have the time, space, and liberty (/ 'permission') to be part of it

As an individual

Get involved in the platform. Find areas of interest and areas you're looking to move into and contribute to the conversation. This is a great way to keep up with what's going on across your organisation and to build your personal brand. It's a great way to interact and meet people you may not have met otherwise.

curiosity week

Many people lose a bit of curiosity as they get older and busier. Kids ask questions all the time. But adults tend to speak more than we listen and tell more than we ask.

Curiosity Week encourages curiosity... Pick something you've wondered about but never bothered to investigate.

my spinach story

For me, this came down to a bag of spinach. When using spinach from a bag, I'd notice these thin little leaves (right). My immediate thought was they were a weed that grew amongst the spinach crop. I used to throw them into the composting bin. 'Curiosity Week' inspired me to find out the actual story behind the leaf. So where did I start?... Google of course. And it only took me a few seconds to find an article entitled, "*What is this grassy crap in the spinach?*"... And I knew I was onto something. Turns out it's the Spinach cotyledon leaf – the first pair of leaves that emerge from a seed.



Encourage people to share their discoveries

But is my new-found knowledge relevant to everyone else?

It may be relevant for Zak if his store sells those fancy gourmet burgers with spinach in them. Relevant for an organisation in banking, insurance, or superannuation? Hmm... Maybe not.

However, it's important not to get caught up on relevance too soon whilst building curiosity across the organisation. It's easier to begin by getting people curious about whatever draws them to find out new stuff... Some will be more relevant to business than others... Over time focus can be refined if needed.

5 Whys

5 Whys helps curious minds discover...

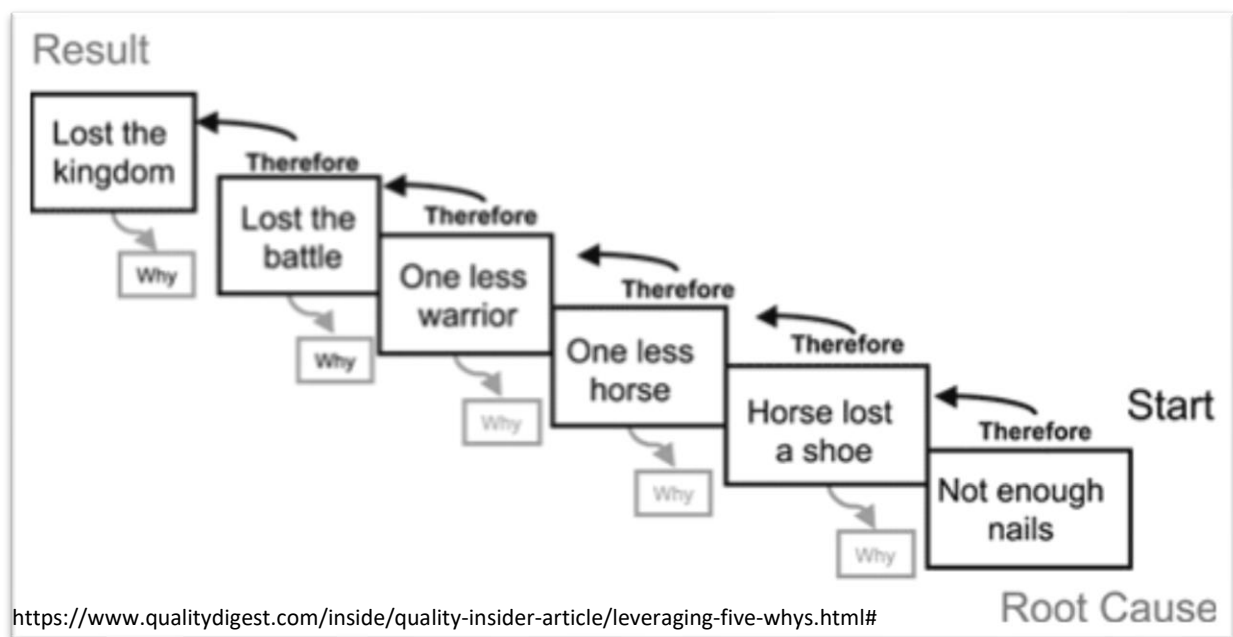
Not everything is as simple as a quick Google search. Sometimes we have to dig deeper.

It's straight forward enough to do. Ask 'why' five times to get to the heart of an issue. This facilitates your discovery, one layer at a time.

There's a classic story that illustrates how this works. It's about the loss of a kingdom.

Could you lose a kingdom over a few, simple horseshoe nails?

Using '5 Whys' to dig deeper



So, you can trace the loss of the kingdom through to the root cause – not enough horse shoe nails.

Informed Decision-Making

fuelled by
**clarity of purpose &
distributed authority**

I believe **informed decision-making** is fuelled by **clarity of purpose** and **distributed authority**.

What is distributed authority?

Let's understand what distributed authority is by comparing it to several, more commonly understood dynamics.

Command & Control

Managers dictate all actions rather than allowing teams to decide some for themselves. This often involves tiers of hierarchy with decisions going up level by level for validation of strategic alignment and approval. Communication then cascades back down through a slow, confusion-prone process.

Delegated authority

Often this is seen as very good and it is potentially okay. However, in practice, this can be:

- Limited by pre-solved, rigid tasks – which is essentially Command & Control in disguise
- Stifled through ambiguity – where you have to keep checking in with the boss for more details. There's no authority in that
- With a constantly vetoing overseer – that's the boss that wanders around looking over shoulders and reversing people's decisions and making adjustment to details to align with her/his views (not necessarily what's supported by broader perspectives, data, or other materials)
- With an unbearable, 'blame-likely' burden – this is the poisoned chalice or hot potato. For these, nobody is willing to take the authority because it's just too dangerous

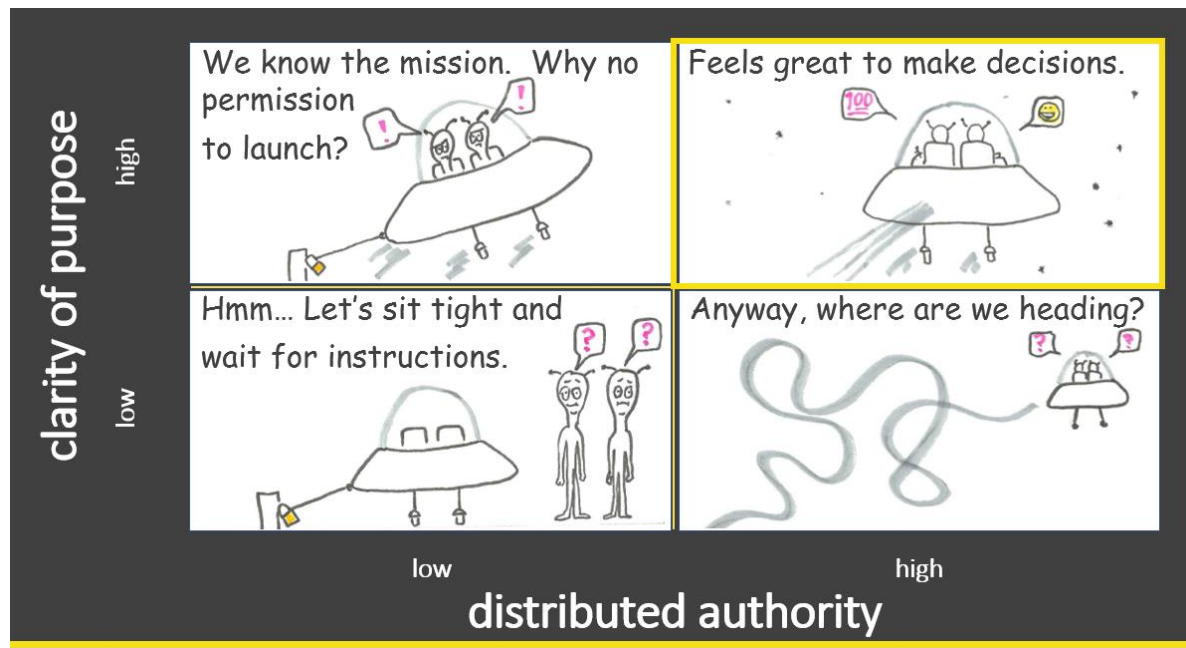
Distributed authority

Decisions are made locally with the teams. It's typically where the most information for the decision exists. The biggest critics of this method may ask, "How will they make decisions that are strategically aligned? How will they know the organisation's/ department's/ team's purpose?"

This can be addressed and it starts with communicating the *purpose* with them.

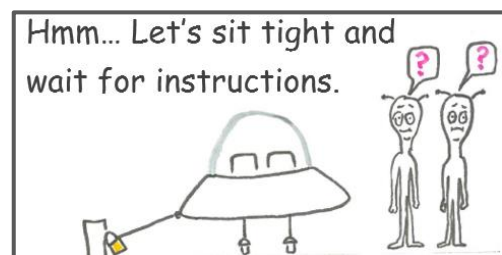
Bring the strategic intent, purpose, vision, etc. to the front-line so they can use it as an immediate guide for strategically aligned decision-making.

Now let's take a look at the 2x2.



Low distributed authority | Low clarity of purpose

Here these aliens are confused. Their UFO's shackled... it's padlocked, so they can't go anywhere. Even if they could, they don't know where they're meant to be going.



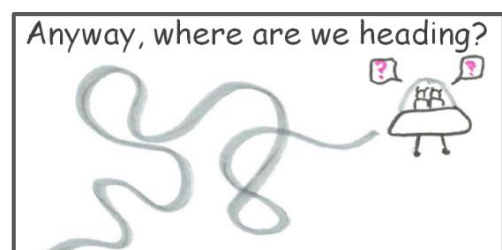
Low distributed authority | High clarity of purpose

Now they're not confused... They're frustrated! They know the mission, but they're still shackled. They're trying to get on with it, but they're tethered.



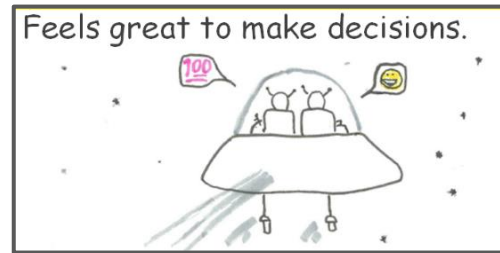
High distributed authority | Low clarity of purpose

They're confused but not shackled. They're allowed to fly, but because they don't know where they're meant to be heading, they're just flying around in circles.



High distributed authority | High clarity of purpose

In this case they're happy. They feel great to be making decisions and they're confident to make those decisions because they know where they need to be heading.



building clarity of purpose & distributed authority

The following are examples for building **clarity of purpose** and **distributed authority**.

building clarity of purpose

Elevator pitch

An elevator pitch can be a great way to create and share a purpose.

Here's a basic template that, give or take a few words, is used widely:

For [target customer], who has
[need/opportunity], [product name] is a
[market category] that [a key benefit/ reason
to use].

Unlike [the primary comparative alternative],
the product [key differentiator].

Here's a McAlien's example to help bring the template to life:

McAlien's elevator pitch



For alien families on the go, who are health conscious and time poor, McAlien's is a family restaurant that serves healthy meals quickly.

Unlike Burger Galaxy, McAlien's meals are under 2000kJ, nutritionally balanced, and served in under 30sec.

So, of course there are **layers of detail under this one**, but it's a really good start for bringing some **clarity of purpose** to a product, service, experience, etc.

You can customise such a template to suit your needs.

When creating the document, using plain language and small words will help make it accessible to a broader audience.

Make it clear

Use simple, clear and accessible language. Ensure clear context for the audience. Ideally make it memorable and able to be easily retold with a reasonable level of accuracy.

Share the purpose broadly

Share it early, often, and broadly.

Refer back to it

Link projects, initiatives and actions to it. Demonstrate the strategic alignment and traceability from actions back to purpose.

Review and refresh

You can only make decisions at a point in time with what you know at the time. Therefore, you need to review and refresh the purpose regularly. In doing so, you need to be comfortable to reaffirm, tweak, pivot, or take whatever action needs to be taken. Importantly, if you find yourself down the wrong track, no matter how far down that track you are, you need to be able to stop. This can be challenging, with people using phrases such as, “We’re too far in now”, or “It’s too late to stop, we just have to keep on going”, or “It’s too big to fail now”. It should never be too late to stop, pivot, or tweak.

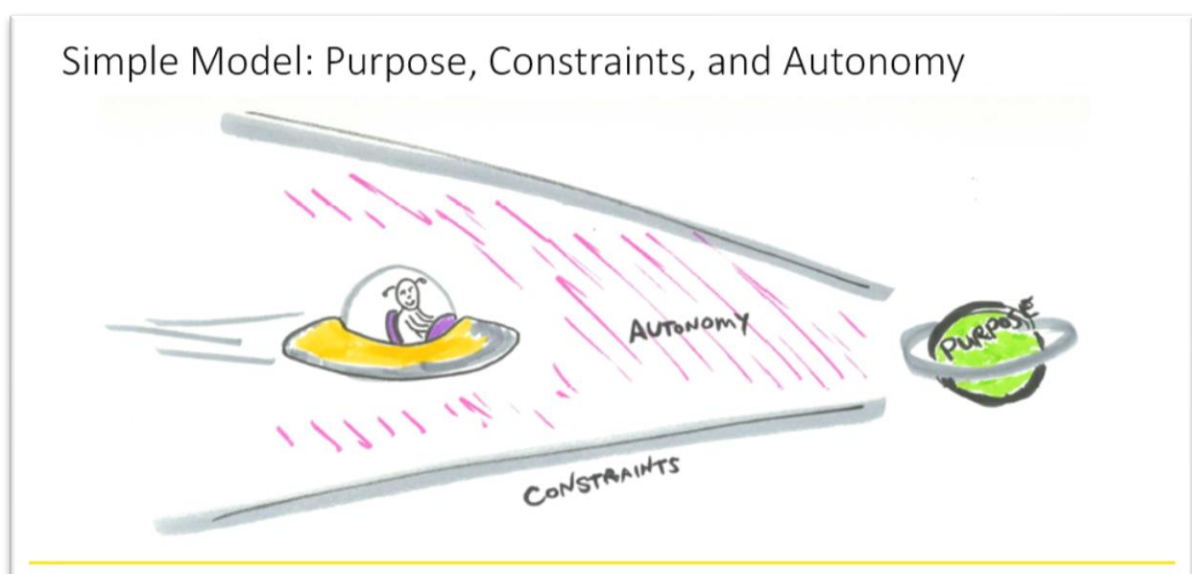
As an individual

You need to understand the purpose relating to the value you’re delivering the organisation (through the work that you do). Constantly seek to strip away work that doesn’t go towards achieving the purpose. For example, misdirected tasks, low value meetings, and general distractions. You may also find it worthwhile challenging others to do the same.

building distributed authority

Constraints enable autonomy

A while back I heard Erwin Van Der Koogh present a talk on, ‘The Science behind Self-Organisation’. He presented a simple model for autonomy which also applies to delegated authority. First you need a really clear **purpose**. Then you need some **clear constraints**, and **within those constraints you have complete autonomy** to do what you want to do **to achieve the purpose**.



Initially it seemed counter intuitive – constraints are something associated with a lack of autonomy rather than being a creator of it. However, as he further explained the model, it made more sense.

Let's consider an example that illustrates how this works. Your team is tasked with a project. The sponsor explains the purpose. It's really clear and the team understands why the project is being done and what needs to be delivered. It's now over to your team to exercise your autonomy to deliver. Just as the sponsor's leaving the room, he says, "Just don't spend too much money." Team members are now confused. Does this mean there isn't really any budget for the project? Is the budget \$1M, as this would be relatively small compared to the other programs of work currently underway across the organisation? Or perhaps it's \$50K? Your team will now find it hard to get on with the project and will need to seek further clarification. You'll need to repeatedly ask permission.

Fuzzy constraints unnecessarily erode autonomy.

Let's consider an alternative. The purpose is clear. It's now over to your team to exercise your autonomy to deliver. Just as the sponsor's leaving the room, she says, "Just don't spend too much money. The budget is \$90K. Our absolute cap is \$100K... basically if we go a dollar over that, we stop the project. But as I said, we want to keep it within budget which is \$90K." The team are much clearer as to their financial constraints and are much more able to get on with the project.

Narrow constraints unnecessarily constrict autonomy

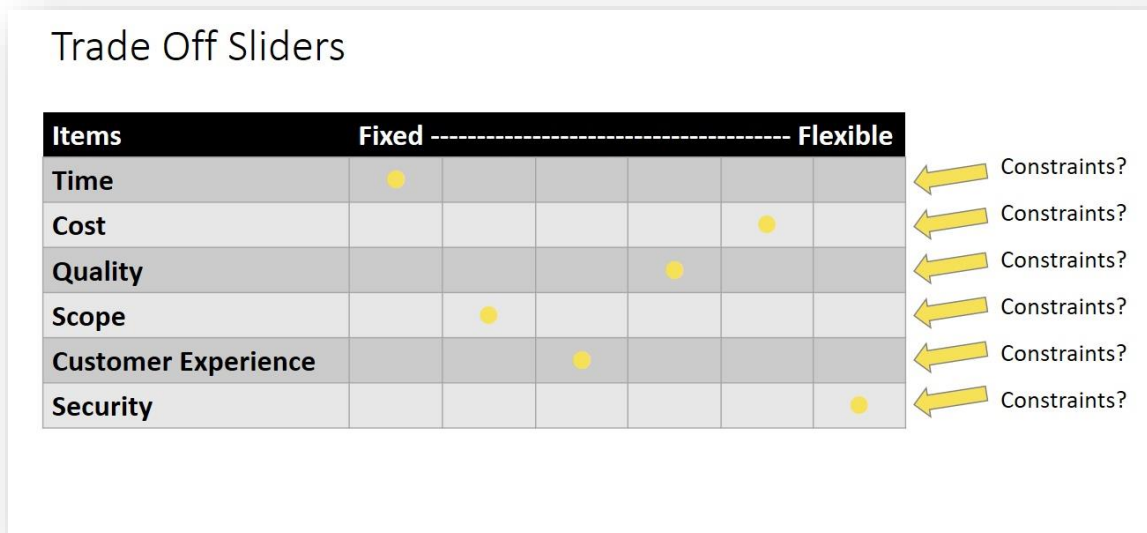
Another trap is for constraints to be too constrictive. Imagine in our picture (right), the constraints looked more like a water slide – narrowly separated, squiggly lines, forcing the spacecraft down a very specific route. This doesn't create any autonomy. This is just another form of Commanding & Controlling the actions of the team. For there to exist true autonomy, the constraints should be clear and firm, but also be as wide as possible. They shouldn't be unnecessarily narrow, or narrow by default.



Note: More recently I've heard the expressions, 'guardrails' and 'guiderails' being used to describe a similar / the same concept of 'constraints'.

As an individual: If you're asked to lead a piece of work, ensure you know the purpose and constraints, and confirm your autonomy within that. If it's not confirmed, find out if there are additional constraints. If you're struggling to draw out the constraints applicable to the work,

consider using the standard ‘trade-off sliders’ as a reference to help draw out the constraints from your sponsor/stakeholders. e.g. What are the constraints relating to time, cost, quality, scope, customer experience, and security?



Constraints should be meaningful and understood. Arbitrary constraints should be challenged with, “Why?”.

Note: Clear purpose and constraints make room for autonomy, effectively allowing teams to exercise their delegated authority. This model should not be confused with Dan Pink’s very popular model which brings together purpose, autonomy, and an ability for mastery to explain employee motivation.

Support for (new) decision makers

Making decisions can be challenging, particularly for those new to it. New decision makers can also experience increased likelihood that people may ignore or undermine their decisions. There may be need for coaching, and support for (new) decision makers.

Safe to fail environment

You’ve probably heard this talked about a lot. That’s because it’s important. If you don’t have an environment where decision-makers feel it’s safe to make a mistake here and there, then they’ll either make really, really conservative decisions, or will avoid making decisions altogether i.e. avoid exercising their authority. Neither of these are good for agility, innovation, or cultivating great decision-makers.

Be willing to lead

Increasing distributed authority within an organisation is a two-way street. Senior executives and managers must be willing to distribute it. But individuals and teams within the organisation must also be willing to receive it.

Now you're a decision maker, don't 'flip to the dark side'

Occasionally decision-makers (/leaders) let the authority go to their heads. They turn their backs on their former peers and settle into a new, 'privileged' existence. Decision-makers should bring their teams along, involving them in the process.

Be forgiving of others' failures

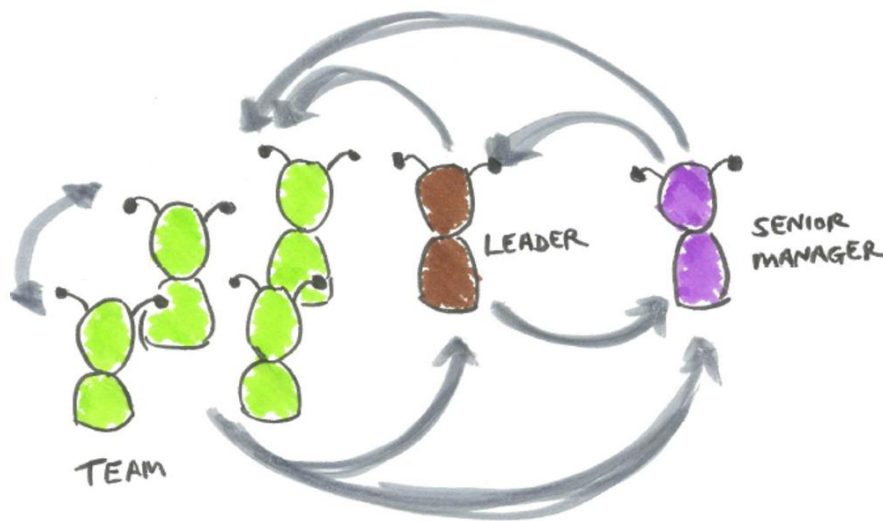
We all make mistakes. If a decision-maker has good intent, is open to feedback and strives for continuous improvement, then be forgiving of their failures. This creates a more positive work environment and helps build a 'safe to fail' environment.

Fast Execution

fuelled by
trust & bias for action

I believe **fast execution** is fuelled by **trust** and a **bias for action**.

Trust

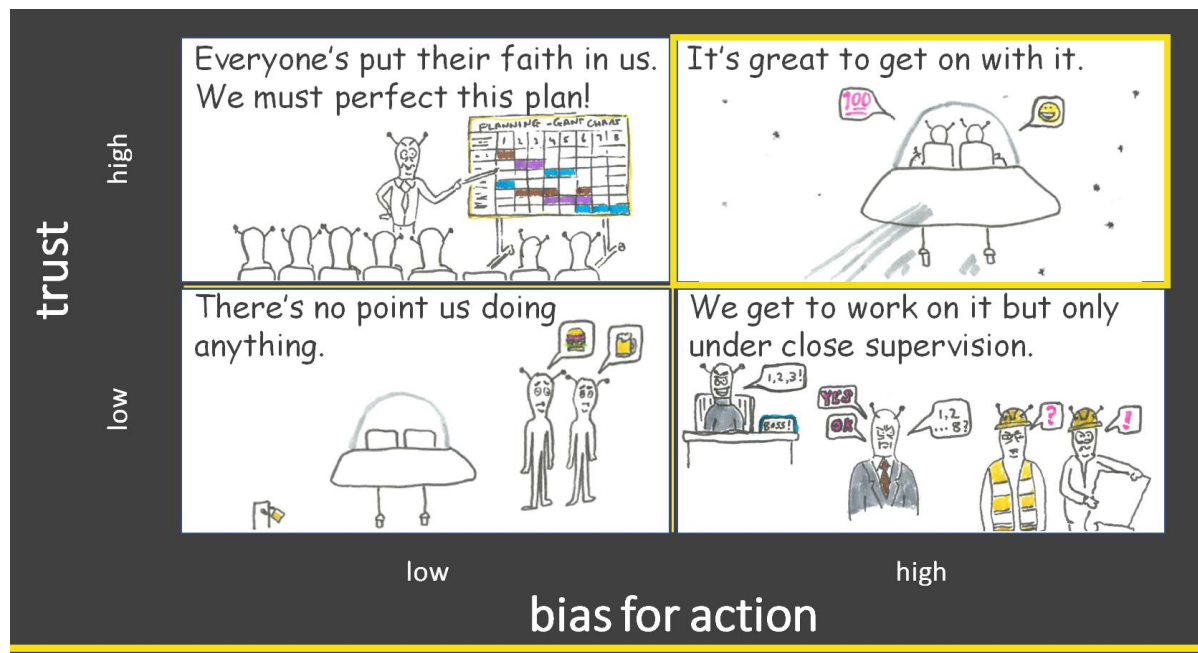


Trust (or lack of) exists across many dimensions within an organisation. These include, between team members, between a team and their leader, between a leader and a senior manager.

All of these aspects are important.

Ideally, trust will exist across and between all levels of a hierarchy.

Now let's take a look at the 2x2.



Low bias for action | Low trust

These aliens are technically able to fly. Their UFO isn't shackled. But with a lack of trust and bias for action, they just don't see the point. They'd rather distract themselves with 'beers and burgers'. Interestingly, a lack of trust really erodes a bias for action, to the point where they're left asking themselves, "What's the point of doing anything?" This scenario isn't good for anyone.



Low bias for action | High trust

We tend to find this is where the 'over-planners' live. Everyone's put their faith in them and so they feel they must perfect the plan. They don't embrace the value of doing something small and using the available feedback to help shape the next piece. They could plan a little, then doing a bit. After that they could assess the result, consolidate the learning from doing, and allow that overall experience to shape the next bit of planning. However, they prefer to plan and plan some more. A bias for planning is not the same as a bias for action. Planning does not constitute action in relation to a 'bias for action'.



High bias for action | Low trust

They get to work on it but only under close supervision. There's a boss in the background pulling the marionette strings. Then there's the person in the middle relaying information and getting the detail wrong, and only creating a one-way communication mechanism (i.e. only cascading instructions down to the team.) This results in a frustrated and confused team, still trying to action the work, but being derailed by slow, incomplete and error-prone information.



High bias for action | High trust

Trusting the motivated team to get on with it.



building trust & bias for action

The following are examples for building **trust** and **bias for action**.

building trust

Earn trust

Trust has to be earned. The following are a couple of generally effective ways to do this:

1. Say you'll do something, and then actually do it.
2. Value the individual people within the organisation. Believe that people can cluster and configure their capabilities and networks for a role and successfully reconfigure and re-cluster to adapt for an additional or alternate role (e.g. people aren't disposable and should be given the opportunity to evolve as the organisation evolves).

Show trust

A simple way to build trust is to lead by example and show a bit of trust in others first.

Communicate Openly

We want less Secret Squirrel – that’s the stuff that has to be kept secret and can’t be shared. Granted, there are going to be times when something can’t be shared. But I think in most organisations, the number of things that need to be kept secret are grossly overestimated. Rather than asking, “Can we share this with our people?”, we should be asking, “Is there really any reason we cannot share this with our people?” Flip from a bias for “no” to a bias for “yes”.

Know each other beyond the role

When we know each other a little better, outside of what we do at work, it can really serve to build more trusting relationships. This doesn’t have to be time-consuming, expensive, or stage-managed by leaders. Even just having conversations that go beyond the ‘small talk’ helps. Most teams meet around actions (e.g. ‘stand ups’ and planning meetings) but there’s also value in meeting around free-form chat.

Be inclusive

Avoid creating sub-groups, privileged with information, rewards and perks that others don’t get. Ensure any kind of reward is clearly linked to meaningful outcomes and behaviours.

Don’t place blame

Separate the people from the problem. For example, there may be a dispute over which quality assurance approach to use between two options. Each option may have a key supporter. As the options are debated, it’s important to focus on the pros and cons of the approaches, and not which supporter you like the best or you’re friends with, or who’ll be most upset if they ‘lose’.

Focusing on the problem and not the people may not increase trust significantly. However, focusing on the people and making it personal can severely erode any existing trust between all involved.

building a bias for action

The following are very much interlinked and complement each other.

Break ‘mega projects’ down

The world moves too quickly now to allow a project several years before delivering any useable value. It’s not enough to break the work down, only to plot it on a Gantt chart. There needs to be incremental value delivered often - a culmination of which may constitute a grander plan or longer end-game.

There needs to be built-in feedback/reflection cycles to identify required pivots and allow for them.

Learn by creating

The best way to understand an audience is to present them something and see how they respond. Whether it’s a product, service, or experience, the same is true for all of these. The first ‘something’ you present them, shouldn’t be the most polished – they won’t feel as open to responding candidly to something that’s already been fully built out. Having said that, the raw version of your ‘something’ doesn’t have to be presented to a massive audience. You can learn a lot from the responses of a relative few. Just create something that’s good enough to present to your audience in order to get a useful response. It may be a prototype, a rough version of something, or something with enough features to be useful without any of the fancy stuff.

You may have seen at some point in the past, an executive rubbing her/his hands together and gleefully exclaiming, “They’re going to love this!” as they look over the detailed plans. Many times, this ends in a fully built out solution, followed shortly after by disappointment as the audience responds. If only they had have built just enough to get it out to some people to see the response and craft it into something worthy of the eventual, big reveal.

MVPs in everything – “Is it *good enough*?”

Minimal Viable Products (MVPs) are about delivering value as early as possible. Also known as Minimal Marketable Features (MMF), these products contain just enough features to be marketable. Once released, additional features can be added for future releases. The point is that at least there’s already a version on the market while this happens, and actual user feedback is being incorporated into the next design. A challenge with MVPs is to know what’s minimal and stick to it.

Can an MVP mindset be applied to everything? I think it can, and with great benefit. It’s as easy as taking the question, “Is it good enough?” and applying it to the things you’re working on throughout the day. But it does take the right environment for most people to feel

comfortable to do this. Here's an example. Sometimes when I'm drafting an internal company email, I find myself spending way too much time polishing it – particularly if it's going out to a large audience or to an executive group. I read through it and by the end I'm just tweaking the most minor of details... To the point where I've probably tweaked "it is" to "it's" and back to "it is" again. Well, not quite that extreme, but close enough. It's just a waste of time. Perhaps you've done this yourself, or you've done a similar thing with other tasks or communications you create. I think a big part of why we do this, is collective expectation and the environment where people may think less of your work if they see a mistake in it or something that could have been better. Realistically, your two-paragraph email will still hold the same clarity even if there are a couple of simple grammatically errors in it. We need to do what we can to create an environment where everyone's comfortable to not overinvest time in tasks. For emails, they should be clear enough and crafted enough that the audience understands them, but they don't need to be word perfect. Please note though, this example is for intra-company emails. Having grammatical errors in communications to your customers may freak out your marketing department. Your customers aren't generally going to have the same expectations and set the same environment that you can internally.

Visual boards and 'stand ups'

Maintaining a Scrum or Kanban board for example, and holding 'stand up' meetings to review the board, keeps the focus on action and doing things. This lets everyone in the team and visitors know what's going on (Great for building trust!), and helps surface any issues or blockers for getting things done.

'Stand Ups' aren't just status updates. Status updates can be a bit fuzzy and we don't find out, what people are actually going to be doing about an item today. Status updates also tend to encourage people to talk about absolutely everything they've got on their lists, rather than just the items they are doing something about right now. Stand Ups generally take the format of "What you worked on yesterday", "What you're planning to work on today", and "Any issues or blockers" that are stopping or making that work more difficult than it needs to be to get done.

Don't over-plan

The challenge with plans, is they almost always need to change as soon as we execute on them.

Have a vision and purpose and understand the long game but keep creation/delivery iterations short. Always learn from these iterations and be prepared to adjust the plan or pivot.

Plan the iterations as you go and ensure they remain aligned to purpose.

It used to be that the plan and originally-determined end goal was magnetic – we'd have to steer delivery back to the plan. Now the customer or purpose must be magnetic. We need to plan and execute an iteration, learn from it, and steer to the customer or purpose.

Finishing more things than starting

A healthy bias for action isn't just starting a bunch of stuff. We've all probably come across or been a 'serial starter' at some time. These people are excited about kicking off new things but lose interest very quickly when something newer and shinier turns up or pops into their mind. Whilst an abundance of great ideas is a 'good problem' to have, 'serial starters' don't help with moving an organisation to a healthy bias for action.

Finishing stuff is important too. Think: Start, Stop, Continue, Pivot, Scale.

Of course, then we ask ourselves, what 'finish' means. This is where it's important we don't get caught up on 'finish' being static – it's definition for an initiative should evolve as we learn more. What we thought 'finish' was at the start, won't be what we know it to be at the end. But be careful not to manipulate the flexibility around defining 'finish' to be brash or lazy.

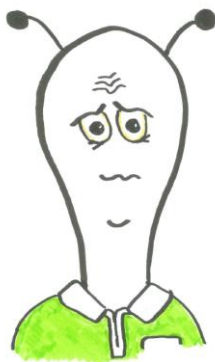
Using Acceptance Criteria

When we work out what we need from a product, service, or experience, we often include 'acceptance criteria' for what we're planning to create. This is really helpful to develop a shared and solid understanding before launching into the work. However, we need to remain pragmatic about it. If something's changed or been discovered, that impacts 'acceptance criteria' then they must be revisited. Sticking to initially agreed 'success criteria' no matter what, is akin to sticking to the plan no matter what - just at a more detailed level.

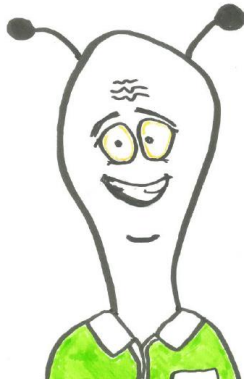
Don't forget finishing may just be finishing an initial iteration or MVP. Finishing shouldn't have to go hand in hand with 'polishing'.

And so, there's some of what Zak knows about business agility.

So, do you think Zak go the role of McAlien's store manager?



Yep, of course!



Business agility is about people.

Business agility is simple, it isn't mystical, mythical, or magical. It's uplifted through common elements – those that can be found in good teams and good practices... curiosity, collaboration, clarity of purpose, distributed authority, trust, and a bias for action.

If done well, business agility is very powerful.

'Stepping outside of the circle' isn't hard... or is it? We've been creating circles for people to stand in and standing in them ourselves for a very long time.

It comes down to human factors... Can you remain curious within a complex and busy life, trust others, share information freely, and even relinquish some of your power? These can be really challenging.

It isn't about processes, algorithms and business rules... It's about people. And without us adopting these elements, our organisations can't change.

If we can change, the benefits of being more agile are huge... A more agile organisation responding better to change, offers a better working environment, and builds the kinds of skills in us that will ensure our continued value into the future - the future of work.

If you're not already agile. If you don't see the six elements in your organisation, department, or team, or in the way you operate... Challenge yourself and those around you to open your mind to thinking differently. That's the first step. The first small, yet significant step on the path to business agility.



Are you ready to find out how business agile you and your colleagues are?

The *Business agility health check*