

As organizations become more agile, employees will need to do their part to be ready for the unexpected.

Employee Agility for a Fast-Paced World

BY AMANDA SETILI

If you are like most businesses these days, you're in the midst of change. Customer behaviors are evolving, new technologies and business models are entering the market, and workforce needs are changing. It's all rather daunting.



Now, imagine a skier heading down a black diamond slope—committed to the path, fully alert, and ready to navigate the unexpected. Just as the skier must anticipate what lies ahead, using the terrain to her advantage and working with the mountain rather than against it, companies need agility to spot and capture new business opportunities as they emerge.

An agile organization is a pleasure to lead and work in. People care. They have energy. They jump on new ideas and are eager to reach across functional lines to innovate. They are decisive.

During my consulting work, and in conducting research for my book, I've identified several behaviors leaders or employees can exhibit to help make their organizations more agile.

Be alert to changes in the market

An agile organization's employees maintain a keen awareness of emerging customer needs, new technology trends, likely competitor moves, changes in supplier markets, and the like. They anticipate what might happen next. They see opportunities, then decide quickly and capably which to pursue.

Nissan, for example, responds continuously to comments customers make on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, and funnels these comments quickly to the relevant employees in customer service, manufacturing, and at Nissan dealers. As a result, quality and service problems get fixed fast.

Make it easy for customers to give you feedback. Talk to and observe customers daily, and you'll be the first to see and respond to changes in their needs.

Conduct experiments

Agile companies test new offerings and ways of doing business often. By



ONLY COMPANIES THAT CONTINUOUSLY ADJUST COURSE AS THE MARKET CHANGES WILL SURVIVE.

constantly experimenting, they minimize risk and maximize the speed with which they adapt to market change.

Businesses that offer software, e-commerce, and online services can learn the results of such experiments within hours. Facebook runs hundreds of different versions of its site at any given time. You may see a version of an ad with one set of colors and features, and I see another—simultaneously. Facebook engineers measure customer response, and retain the versions that perform the best, eliminating the others. Each incremental alteration to the user experience is minor, so users can adapt gradually to change.

Experiments have the added bonus of stimulating employee energy and creativity. The cycle from idea to results is shortened, and learning accelerates.

Paint a picture of the intended future

Military leaders know that a battle plan never goes exactly as anticipated. Therefore, they always communicate a clear “commander’s intent”—the purpose and desired end state of a mission that serves to guide the troops, independent of what conditions exist on the battlefield. No matter what surprises the enemy throws at them and what difficulties or lucky breaks they encounter during the heat of battle, the troops on the ground can work together to respond appropriately.

Painting a clear and compelling picture of the future you wish to create enables employees at all levels to make the right decisions daily to move toward the vision. When employees understand where you're going and

why you want to go there, they make the right choices when new information or opportunities require a change in approach.

Motivate through autonomy and empowerment

We live in a world where creativity is paramount. Operational excellence—keeping costs low and making a consistent, quality product—is still important, but it's no longer enough. Only companies that continuously adjust course as the market changes will survive.

How can we best motivate employees in a world where things are changing so fast, and creativity is so critical? Agile organizations enlist and inspire their employees around a clear and compelling vision and purpose, then give employees the autonomy to adjust course as they see changes occurring in the market.

When employees have a bit of free rein, not only will they be happier and more loyal, but they also will be better able to spot and jump on emerging opportunities, to ensure your company's continued success.

Delta Air Lines has worked hard in recent years to create “situational flexibility.” Delta trains employees on the company's overall intent—say, to rebook passengers in the minimum time possible when a flight is canceled—and has given them increased power and authority to make on-the-spot decisions. When an employee is face-to-face with an anxious passenger who is trying to make it home or to a business meeting, or who hopes to arrive at his vacation destination before it's time to turn around

and come back, employees are able to solve passenger problems without taking the time to check with management—in an industry where every minute counts.

Delta employees also are motivated by a common purpose—to give great service and a remarkable customer experience. This purpose is well aligned with the natural inclination of the people whom the company selects through their day-long interview process: individuals who are inherently oriented to pleasing others.

Employees who feel good about what they are accomplishing together smile more often and perform better. And when employees smile more, passengers treat them better, which creates a virtuous cycle—a feedback loop—that leads to even greater motivation and better performance.

Reinforce and replicate what works

As you begin to execute a change in strategic direction, don't wait until you achieve a major success to reward and recognize your employees. Look for any small signs of success to reinforce.

AGILE ORGANIZATIONS ENLIST AND INSPIRE THEIR EMPLOYEES AROUND A COMPELLING VISION AND PURPOSE.

If, for example, you are looking to increase a sales team's time in front of customers from 40 percent to 80 percent of their time, send them a thank-you note when they achieve a minor improvement—say, to 45 percent. If a manufacturing team is working to improve delivery performance, recognize what they've done when they have taken the first step by figuring out how to measure delivery performance more consistently. Do this early and often, and you'll see desired changes accelerate quickly.

Continuously adapt

In the future, we can expect faster rates of change in the way we hire and manage our employees, collaborate with colleagues, communicate with suppliers and customers, get our products to market, and in other elements of our business system. We must continuously adapt by observ-

ing our environment, assessing our options, deciding on a path forward, and taking action.

As your organization becomes more agile, you'll see more business opportunities and you'll move faster to capture them. And employees will be happier, more energized, and more focused on working together to achieve the organization's business goals.

■ **Amanda Setili** is managing partner of the strategy consulting firm Setili & Associates, whose clients include Delta Air Lines, Home Depot, and Walmart. She is author of *The Agility Advantage: How to Identify and Act on Opportunities in a Fast-Changing World*; amanda@setili.com; @AmandaSetili.

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