

A survival kit to business agility

By [Biase De Gregorio](#)

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Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for society, business and government to embrace uncertainty. This global crisis will force us to solve highly complex problems in new and creative ways. Ultimately this will lead us to reinvent ourselves, and our world, for the better.



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What is business agility?

Business agility is an organisation's skill in adapting to the changing demands of customers, markets and technology. Successful organisations are embracing agile ways of working to enhance their ability to generate ideas, reduce costs, and remain relevant in the changing marketplace. It's important to mention that this is not limited to technology-driven areas but spans the entire business value chain.

According to the 2019 State of Agile SA report by IQbusiness, as well as the 2019 Business Agility Report, by the Business Agility Institute, organisations have not yet achieved the promise of agile.

The reasons can all be found in these reports but, ultimately, organisations have failed to transform because they have lacked a real sense of urgency or 'burning platform' (noted by John Kotter, author of *Leading Change*).

The upside of urgent

Establishing a sense of urgency helps managers and leaders of change fight against complacency. Complacency is seen in employees who are satisfied with the status quo. When employees are complacent, phrases such as 'well, we've always done it this way' or 'why make a change, the old way still works' are part of the company culture. Urgency is the opposite of complacency. Urgency helps employees understand the need for the change and embrace it.

Right now, we have the urgency for change. The current global crisis is the burning platform for embracing business agility. We have witnessed in the South African government and organisations that we are willing and able to respond to change and uncertainty.

From my perspective, our team's business model required face-to-face interaction through facilitation, coaching and training. It is not a coincidence that the first value in the agile manifesto indicates individuals and interactions over processes and tools.

Covid-19 has definitely tested the resilience in our business model. Leading up to lockdown, many client transformation projects were paused. As a result, a few of my team members became non-billable.

As a team, we had to re-assess our value proposition. Within two weeks, our Agile Fundamentals and Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) training courses were launched as a remote offering. We adapted our coaching to assist our clients in moving to the Work-From-Home scenario and focused on assisting teams getting back to productive ways of working.

Initially, our clients experienced shock and disbelief: "How is this possible?" Then they began to ask: "How do we make sure that our people remain productive and how can we trust our team to work effectively from home?"

However, once they started approaching the challenge from a new perspective, teams began operating as if they were in the office. The importance of daily team synchronisations and collaboration, along with our primary value of "Care", has been key to launching new value propositions to the market in a short amount of time.

There is a joke doing the rounds about who was responsible for initiating your digital transformation, the CEO, CIO, CTO or Covid-19? This is humorous, but also very true. I know of organisations that were able to move to the cloud, use remote tools and work from home policies within a week or two. This was possible by removing all the red-tape and bureaucracy that has infiltrated organisations over the last few decades. Before the current crisis, this would have taken months of unnecessary processes, signoffs and wasteful governance.

Business agility requires that the organisation look at their end-to-end value chain and forces the removal of this waste from the value chain. Covid-19 has created the burning platform and urgency for change for organisations to look at improving the flow of value to their customers.

Teaming up for success

The ability to collaborate and break down silos is another element of business agility and I want to reflect on what is happening in South Africa.

As a result of a common purpose and a sudden urgency for change, government and private enterprises are working together to solve complex problems. Within government, the ministries that previously worked in silos have now been forced to work together to ensure the health, safety and security of our people. Our government's response has been a better example of dealing effectively with the complexity of the pandemic than some first world countries.

This crisis has changed the language. Prior to this crisis, people would have said that this was impossible. However, we, as South Africans, have proven that this is indeed possible (and effective). I hope that, when this initial crisis is over, we will continue to collaborate and work together to take South Africa out of the economic turmoil that we will inevitably face.

What will business agility look like post-Covid-19?

Organisations will need to look at operational efficiency and effectiveness. Typically, this will result in job losses, however applying an infinite mindset (as per Simon Sinek) organisations should look at this as the last option. Organisations should look at the wasteful processes and red tape. These should be removed from the value chain first. Organisations will need to make serious decisions about which projects or initiatives to continue investing in. This will force them to adopt a Lean Portfolio management framework, applying Lean-Agile approaches to decision making and funding.

'Agilists' will need to show their value to the organisations by going back to the essence of Agile, i.e. improving speed and quality of delivery. Agilists need to cut through the fluffy side of Agile and focus on creating high-performing teams. Leadership and management must continue trusting and empowering their teams to focus on the right things.

Leadership will need to enable individuals and teams to be self-organised by providing them with the right tools and environment to improve delivery. The focus must be on Getting Sh!t Done (#GESHIDO).

Leaders will need to accept that they don't have the answers to everything. Covid-19 has proven that individuals are creative and innovative when allowed the space and can find excellent ways to solve these complex problems. The ability to collaborate and crowd-source solutions is a differentiator during and post the crisis.

Create your own crisis. Typically, organisations and government wait for a crisis to occur before reacting. Perhaps, as organisations, we need to create our own crisis by identifying different scenarios and running problem-solving sprints to allow us to be more proactive and to prepare for the unexpected.

We can all agree that Covid-19 will change the way we work, and perhaps the entire way we live, forever. If there was ever a time to embrace and adopt business agility, the time is now.

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