

The Economist

Cultivate Agility to Cultivate Career Success

by Julie Winkle Giulioni

Today's workplace is characterized by the need for agility. And it makes sense. The world continues to move exponentially faster, spawning new problems, solutions, technologies, competitors and more. Teamed with escalating customer expectations for quality, innovation, value, and nearly-instantaneous response, organizational survival demands the ability to constantly sense, respond, pivot and adjust to ever-morphing conditions.

(Individual career survival and success demand the same.)

This is the rationale for many organizations to apply agile methods to their processes and projects throughout the business... in R&D, sales, service and beyond. Responding to unpredictable circumstances requires a more incremental and iterative approach to work – one that acknowledges, anticipates, welcomes and even leverages the changes that are naturally going to emerge throughout the process.

(The same holds true for the process of career development.)

These agile methods and the fundamental organizational flexibility they enable tend to be characterized by an increased level of collaboration, respect, ownership and adaptability.

(Hmmm.. these are the same characteristics of those who experience career success today.)

Those who want to cultivate thriving, satisfying and sustainable careers need to cultivate agility. And, just as organizations have developed agile strategies, so can individuals. Here are four strategies to accelerate personal and professional agility.

Hold expertise lightly. Given the speed of business today, expertise is fleeting. Yesterday's knowledge or experience is likely not going to be sufficient to solve tomorrow's (or even today's) problems. As a result, it's necessary to forego the ego, shed the moniker of 'expert' and be willing to learn... fast.

Address missing pieces versus weaknesses.

While there's general agreement about the value of playing to strengths, the notion of addressing improvement opportunities persists. And if time were not issue, this would be just fine. But fixing a weakness frequently involves a lengthy process – one that today's cadence simply cannot accommodate. Instead, agile career navigators tend to identify missing pieces and focus on quickly and efficiently filling gaps. This typically is less time-intensive; but it's also more focused on contemporary needs, more impactful and more energizing than trying to turn around weaknesses.

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Engage in rapid career prototyping. Gone are the days of neatly moving from one job or role to the next in a single big step. Flatter organizations and evolving structures have contributed to less mobility – and the need for more iterative, incremental and adaptive approaches to career development. That’s why those whose careers are thriving frequently lift the ‘rapid prototyping’ page from their organizations’ agile playbooks. They invite new experiences and challenges into the current role, essentially testing them out, quickly evaluating their fit (without ever changing roles) and making adjustments as necessary for greater alignment, satisfaction, or growth.

Scan the environment. Agility is based upon the ability move quickly and with ease. Doing this within the context of one’s career, though, demands access to high quality information – information about the bigger picture and environment within which careers either thrive or dive. Keeping an eye on the horizon means developing an outward focus. It means creating personal systems for continuously gathering information about the pressures, challenges, changes, events and competitors affecting the business. It means staying attuned to what’s happening on the political, economic, technology, social, economic and cultural fronts. This provides the data required for purposeful and productive pivots.

For organizations – and careers – to keep pace and succeed within today’s fast-moving environment, individuals must become expert at sensing, responding, iterating and adjusting. And that’s why agility just might be 2019’s top competency to cultivate.

*Julie Winkle Giulioni is a champion for workplace growth and development and helps leaders optimize talent and potential within their organizations. Named one of Inc. Magazine’s top 100 leadership speakers, she’s the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of the Nautilus and Axiom business book award-winner, *Promotions Are So Yesterday*. Julie is a regular contributor to numerous business publications.*