AGILITY

Ego: **Be willing to be wrong about being right.**

Linked: **Groups, areas and issues**

Innovation: **Embracing differences**

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NQ11: AGILITY

By Jarrod Shappell

FITLIGHT is a wireless light system used by trainers of the United States' best Marines and the NBA's MVP.

Here's how it works. Small light emitting discs, on stands, scattered around the room, flash a color. That color directs the trainee to respond. In some cases they have to touch the light. Other times turn away from the light. In other cases they may only need to acknowledge they see the light. All of this, while maintaining their focus on a core task (like shooting a basketball or driving a tank).

The process is used to increase what scientists call neurocognitive efficiency. The goal is to connect what the eye sees to what the brain thinks and how the body reacts. The goal is to create physical and mental agility.

Today's organizations are desperate to learn this degree of responsiveness. All organization assessments we conduct return laments of too many priorities and too little focus; too much information and too little communication; far more commitments than can reasonably be accomplished, and no ability to make informed tradeoffs between those competing commitments. Most organizations' capacity to respond to internal or external stimulus is painfully impaired.

On one end of the maturity spectrum, established businesses that have become successful structure themselves around those successes and you end up with tenured management focused on maintaining the core business – repeat the success and don't disrupt the ability to exploit it. The unintended consequence of this stability is that the organization is unable to respond to dynamic shifts in the market. These organizations are feeling bombarded by technological advancements they'd long denied any threat from. They are perplexed by finicky consumers whose lack of loyalty they resent. They are overwhelmed by the number of new entrants into their industry. They are perplexed by how to keep Millennials retained and engaged. And their cry to us is to help them become more agile to meet all of these business challenges.

And on the other end of the maturity spectrum, though agility may seem easier for a start up or entrepreneurial organization, their speed and hyper-responsiveness ("faux-gility") could be masked impulsivity serving as a distraction from the core business they need to build. The typical mayhem seen in the startup environment is hardly a display of agility. It's just a different strain of an inability to focus. Organizational agility is much more than the ability to move quickly. It's the ability to move wisely.

> **As humans, and as organizations filled with humans, we are comfort-seeking machines.**

As humans, and as organizations filled with humans, we are comfort-seeking machines. Homeostasis is our true aim despite our claims to want to grow and adapt. When our predictability is disrupted, we don't like it. And yet, disruption is the new normal. The market place is replete with painful stories of organizations who denied disruptions hurling at them for years before their demise. And the unemployment ranks are filled with once-talented people whose skillsets failed to evolve despite many warnings of the need to do so. The great news is, agility can be learned and enjoyed.

Over the next quarter, we are going to be writing about what it means to be an agile organization and an agile leader. We hope that our posts can serve as the flashing lights helping you learn the ways you can be agile strategically, structurally, relationally, and emotionally.

DEVELOPMENT FAST QUALITY NIMBLE DEVICE ATHLETE MEETING AGILITY PLANNING LIFE CYCLE BUSINESS TEAM AGILE WORKING QUICKLY

Beyond Agility:
How your future is more certain when you know how to anticipate it

By Ron Carucci

Autonomous cars. 5G cellular technology. Limitless computational speed. The forces of disruption can be paralyzing for even the most agile leaders. Agility is a valuable skill — but it's still a reactive muscle. It simply enables a faster reaction to something disruptive. But what if leaders learned to anticipate disruptions before they happened and, instead of simply reacting, took advantage of the disruption?

I spoke with Daniel Burrus, CEO of Burrus Research and best-selling author of the forthcoming book, *The Anticipatory Organization: Turn Disruption and Change Into Opportunity and Advantage,* about how great leaders and organizations are doing just that. Says Burrus, "If we continue to solve problems after they happen, we'll only struggle to keep up with more

and more disruptions as they come." The future may feel unknowable, but Burrus says we can nonetheless create pretty accurate predictions. "The future is far more certain than death and taxes. We have to learn how to see the future with accuracy. When we do, it gives us more certainty in an uncertain world. It changes how we plan and innovate. It introduces certainty and subsequent confidence to make better choices."

Burrus suggests there are three major shifts leaders, their teams, and their organizations need to make to become more anticipatory, and therefore more predictive, of future disruptions that can be exploited. See which of these shifts you and your organization are ready to make.

1. **Prepare for trends you know for certain are coming.** Burrus recalls, "I asked more than 100 tech CEOs how many of them were leveraging the speed of 5G by having apps that could be used for logistics, purchasing, and customer service. Only three raised their hands." The speed and scale of 4G is largely being used for social media and entertainment, but rarely for business application. He then asked them how many believed that would change within three years as 5G became more prevalent and the rest raised their hands. But how many of them are acting upon that opportunity now? 5G is a certainty and will have exponential impact on multiple sectors.

By naming those "hard trends" — things we know for certain that are coming, but we can't change, and their likely impact on our current work, we can prepare accordingly. Burrus says, "It requires shifting from reactionary to anticipatory behavior." Semiautonomous and autonomous vehicles offer a significant illustration. The next wave of semiautonomous vehicle will include taking blind-spot accident prevention to a new level. Instead of your driver seat being buzzed or an alarm going off, the vehicle will simply prevent you from being able to change lanes. Given the fact that 80% of car accidents that come to the emergency room are blind spot accidents, what will be the impact on healthcare systems and their patient volumes if there is a dramatic reduction in blind-spot accidents? Burrus says, "Healthcare CEOs can, and should, be thinking about this now, and building financial plans and strategies for when this inevitability becomes reality."

2. **Make innovation everyone's job.** Burrus says, "It's human nature, especially within organizations, to fight for homeostasis. We want predictability based on what we know, not what we don't know. We expect disruption to be uncomfortable, so we avoid it. Culture's that encourage such legacy thinking can thwart innovation." In my 30 years working with leaders and organizations, I've encountered countless "not invented here" cultures in which new ideas are rejected before their merits are considered, and veteran employees squash change with the reflexive excuse, "we've tried that before and it didn't work." To get past this, Burrus says, "Innovation has to become everyone's job. By encouraging everyone to adopt a future-focused mindset and proactively solve problems, transformation can happen at all levels of a company and all levels of innovation as well." A receptionist in one company illustrates a great example. She notices that job applicants in a company doing extensive hiring are taking much longer before and during interviews, and many are getting frustrated with waiting while HR recruiters are giving them short-shrift. The result is sub-par hiring. She recommends consolidating a large portion of standard information about the company and the hiring process onto a short and engaging video presentation and loading them onto iPads that all applicants can watch in advance of their interview. Says Burrus, "When everyone in the organization feels like it's their job to spot such opportunities, and those ideas are adopted, you will see your entire culture shift to a future focus."

3. **Redesign your processes from "protect and defend" to "transform and extend."** When "rearview mirror" thinking gets embedded into organizational processes, they become sources of entrenchment that make change difficult to introduce. When people resolve that innovation is either unnecessary or not possible, protecting against change becomes the default posture. Processes and decision structures become rigid and bureaucratic. Unlike hard trends that reveal inevitable disruption, soft trends introduce changes we can actually influence before facing the negative repercussions of that trend. Says Burrus, "We can all relate to getting excited about new technology and change when we look at how long the lines are people will wait in for new product releases of their smart phones. Forward progress means we aren't going backward. Once we experience 4G, no one wants to go back to 3G. Once rural villages in India experience refrigeration, they're not going back."

The future may feel unknowable but we can nonetheless create pretty accurate predictions.

Employers like IBM, Manpower, and Target offer excellent examples in combating the trend of increasing obesity and diabetes. These challenges continue to rise despite the ongoing push for greater health awareness and preventative care. This is an example of a soft trend because we can change it, and these employers set out to do just that. They gave Fitbits to their employees with incentives for tracking health progress. Some hold contests and offer prizes for various health achievements. In one company's case, the nationwide workforce is virtually "climbing Mt. Everest" together. Beyond a healthier workforce, declines in insurance premiums and sick-day lost productivity become visible evidence of change achieved through a "transform and extend" approach to work.

Traditional brick and mortar retail offers another example. Says Burrus, "If you ask traditional retailers, they believe the 'good old days' of brick and mortar retail are behind us. So they are working to protect and defend same store sales and formats to eke out as much from them as they can before mall rent costs and cannibalization from online retailing forces inevitable death. Though Sears is closing 1,000 stores, why is Amazon set to open 1000 stores?" If retailers believed the best days of brick and mortar retailing were ahead, they would act with less of a defensive posture and more of an offensive posture. The issue isn't that consumers don't want to go to retail establishments. The issue is that the experience of retail hasn't been redesigned in 30 years, and it's currently too time consuming and boring. Says Burrus, "With the rise of blended online and brick and mortar retail experiences, and the future of Omni-channel marketing (multiple blended shopping and sales experiences), the limitations within retail reside only within our own thinking."

Burrus proves through rich illustrations of anticipated change that the future holds more certainty than we've historically believed. While concepts like agility give us novel ideas by which to adapt to change that has already happened, true anticipatory leadership and thinking allow us to shift before disruption hits, giving us greater maneuvering room and a wider range of choices from which to construct the future we most desire. Says Burrus "When you see the future, you don't want to be the one left out. When you know it's coming, how do you not respond?" ◤

When we do, it gives us more certainty in an uncertain world.

Auto-reply: What one of history's most hated leaders can teach us about how to respond to today's macro-economic trends

By Whitney Harper

One of my hobbies is studying leaders who have made a significant impact. I define this by whether we are still talking about them 200+ years after they have died (see my previous article on Hatshepsut here). These are people that weathered the storms of change during their lifetime and the choices they made significantly impacted the course of history. How did they do it? For answers let's look to one of my favorites and one of history's most brutal.

I visited Inner Mongolia in 2012 and noticed a constant travel companion, a jolly looking man on a throne. He is holding court on taxi cab dashboards, greeting you in restaurant lobbies, observing meetings in conference rooms from life size murals. Who is this man? He's the most fascinating man in the world – Genghis Kahn.

Kahn's reputation is one of a ruthless dictator who was willing to do anything to stay in power, including killing his own brother! But he actually has a classic hero's story and there is much we can learn from it. Kahn was born in poverty with no political connections, but through his own grit and strategic choices he built an empire that spanned from the Middle East/Eastern Europe to China and Korea. He transformed the Mongolian culture from one of warring tribes made of poor agricultural or hunters/gatherers to become the leaders of a trade route (the Silk Road) that spread wealth, knowledge, and resources. He was proactive and reactive to macro trends. He was agile.

Today, how does one ascertain the world's macro trends? I could list websites, articles, podcasts, technology, and MOOC. However, these links would be outdated as soon as this post is published. There are however, principles, demonstrated by Kahn, for keeping your eye on the macro trends that will help you navigate the turmoil of a complex marketplace and build your empire. There are a few categories that macro trends fall into that will be relevant for you and your business and they are the same ones that Mr. Kahn kept his eye on: Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal, (aka The PESTEL framework).

P	**E**	**S**	**T**	**E**	**L**
POLITICAL	ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	TECHNILOGICAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	LEGAL

The good executive keeps an eye on each of these categories and how they will influence their organization. The great executive determines in which areas he will be proactive and reactive. Reactive often gets a bad rap, but it is an important skill in a leader's skill set. There will be events that are completely out of your control. Think about the Arab Spring, changes in immigration policies, or the introduction of the iPhone. Not all of these were predicted, but all required quick reaction. Today, there are other trends that you can be more proactive about.

- **AUTOMATION:** *Are you at risk with the impending death of the single skill set? [Economic]*

- **BIG DATA:** *Do you have the cognitive analytics in place to avoid asset failure? [Technological]*

- **GIG ECONOMY:** *How are you motivating and incentivizing flexible workers? [Social]*

- **BUSINESS PRODUCTS:** *Are your business tools useful, usable and satisfying? [Technological]*

Two illustrative examples from Genghis Kahn further help to clarify the benefits of being reactive and proactive. In the political sphere, Kahn anticipated the resistance that can occur after 'acquiring' another tribe and would keep the army captains in their positions of power, but also groom their #2s and #3s to be able to step in if they decided to shift allegiances. This had a two-fold effect – he had successors ready for major leadership positions and it provided political stability as the leaders were internally motivated to perform as their successors were eager to take over the role.

You may be thinking that technology may not have been a major force in Kahn's time, but as they conquered more territories the weaponry and style of fighting changed from bows and arrows to gun powder and catapults. Imagine if your employees were literally putting their lives on the line every time they came up against a competitor with more advanced technology. One of the more unique aspects of the Mongolian army was that they traveled light. Everything a man needed he carried on his horse. There were no supply trains coming behind with elaborate tents, cooking utensils, and food. This trained the army to be reactive to the changing environment, picking up weapons from their latest enemies, building bridges from the captives of their foes. I'm not defending the man's ethics, but the reactive design of his material is instructive.

As you look ahead to the landscape of your future territories, remember the lessons from Genghis Kahn. The ability to keep abreast of what is happening in the PESTEL spheres will get you a few lengths ahead of your competitors. Determining where you will be reactive and proactive is how empires are built.

REFERENCE: Genghis Kahn and the Making of the Modern World

Overcoming the Enemies of Agility

By Josh Epperson

The '50s, so I hear, were a time of outstanding innovation and growth. Credit cards, diet soda, color television, automatic doors, Velcro, and ultrasound all hit the market then and have stood the test of time. However, in the last 60 years, more has changed with the goods and services we purchase than stayed the same. Paper maps, movie rental stores, getting film developed, and pay phones have all become obsolete in the last decade alone.

A parallel story of equal significance is that of the change in successful companies over the last 60 years.

• Less than one in eight companies found on the Fortune 500 in 1955 can be found on the list in 2016. Only two are in the top 10 for both years – Exxon Mobile and General Motors. The vast majority have gone through bankruptcy, M&A activity, or simply have fallen off the list.

• The length of tenure for companies on the S&P 500 is declining year over year. Innosight's research indicates that in 1965 companies on the S&P 500 average list tenure was 33 years. The average dropped to 20 years in 1990. They forecast 2026 to be 14 years.

In the age of multibillion-dollar unicorn valuations, staying or getting on the Fortune 500 is still a significant success. Companies that warrant S&P 500 acclaim today can't keep that status as long as they used to. The speed at which a company's performance becomes competitively irrelevant, is rapidly increasing.

So what are 3M, AT&T, Hershey, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Coca-Cola, Monsanto, Pfizer, Weyerhaeuser, or the other companies that comprise the 60 found in both Fortune 500 lists doing that other companies aren't? If you dig around, you'll find a commitment to their customers. They all have an ever-evolving business model that grows in alignment with customer/consumer need-states and their ability to meet those needs, over time.

Overcoming the enemies of agility will help ensure you create performance that lasts.

In their research of highly agile companies, Chris Gagnon grounds this concept by stating that agile organizations exhibit: top down innovation, frequent conversations about individual behavioral expectations, and what he calls external sensing. The findings aren't super surprising. If we can know what changes are happening around us, create new products and services that address those changes, and behave in ways that realize those needed changes, we'll repeatedly outperform the competition. What the findings don't acknowledge are all the underlying challenges that make those practices extremely difficult.

Why can't all organizations stay on top of the F500? The enemies of agility: Hubris, Defensiveness, Dogmatism, and Isolation. Let's start deep (Hubris), and work our way to the more surface behaviors (Defensiveness, Dogmatism, and Isolation), that keep a company from being agile.

Address Hubris. Being number one – in market share, category, division, or department – is good and worthy of recognition, celebration, and reward. Yet historic success can lead to excessive pride or self-confidence. It happens slowly, over time, and is hard to recognize in yourself. So when historically successful companies are pressed for greater performance, they often double down on what they've always done and try to replicate what made them successful in the past. They fail to take a good, hard look at their business operations and capabilities, and marketplace relevance. These companies fail to see what's happening around them. Think Hallmark and the dawn of the digital e-card revolution. Or, Kodak at the dawn of digital photos. Not sure if your company is excessively proud and self-confident or at risk of keeping pace with marketplace changes? Here are a few questions to get you thinking.

- Does your company dismiss marketplace data or more likely, not even seek it out?

- When confronted with data that warrants change, does your company respond with justification and rationale for why those changes can't be made?

- Do you have legacy technologies that are untouchable because the business can't envision winning any other way?

- Do employees with business and customer knowledge/expertise/experience (and results) get a 'hall pass' when their leadership is damaging to other leaders or businesses?

- If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, hubris has already set in and other more noticeable enemies of agility, may be taking root. Let's look at a few of these enemies and how to overcome them.

The speed at which a company's performance becomes competitively irrelevant, is rapidly increasing.

Defensiveness. This often emerges when history trumps current data. Marketing doesn't care what Sales says customers are buying because their iconic brand is more important than current trends. If you are hearing things like, "That's not how we do things here," or, "Customers don't really know what they want" then you are experiencing the defensiveness that will strangle the data you need to grow. When a company dismisses the data and defends its historic position, marketplace relevance begins to wane. Overcome this enemy by requiring hard data and facts in decision-making settings. Confront historical experience with current trends.

Dogmatism. This emerges when expertise trumps learning. Business strategy is set not because there was dissent and debate during its creation, but because a leader felt he was right, and declared it. If you're hearing things like, "Don't question him, he's always right," or, "Just do more of it, it'll eventually work" then you are experiencing the dogmatism that will cripple innovative growth. Overcome this enemy by normalizing, even rewarding, alternative points of view and varied perspectives; create a diverse working environment. Confront the need to be right with the need to learn.

Isolation. The most successful among us, often isolate, assuming that whatever led to their success is "it". This isolation emerges as a byproduct of over reliance on past results and expertise. The traditional, non-ridesharing, taxi companies were upended by Uber because of this. Little by little, these companies become displaced from the markets they serve. Overcome isolation by regularly checking in. Check in with customers. Competitors. Adjacent opportunities. Your team. Track what you learn and act on it. Confront over reliance with a humility.

10 to 20 years from now, what list will your company be on? One indicating repeated performance over time? Or just a flash in the pan? Overcoming the enemies of agility will help ensure you create performance that lasts.

PIVOT: Organizational Agility-
What is it? Why does everyone want it?
And what does it get you?

By Jarrod Shappell

Automation, globalization, and specialization are increasing and will greatly impact the global economy and job market. These are not trends that will impact specific industries, but a tidal wave of change that is certain to wipe out all organizations and leaders who cannot find holistic ways to adapt.

We find many organizations today are tinkering with how they respond to these changes. Like a giant machine, bolting on a new gear, organizations add an employee engagement program, a business unit charged with INTRAprenuership, or a newfangled org structure. But the cog-by-cog attempts of change are not enough. With all the change afoot, this decades old metaphor of organization as machine is breaking down. And much like an aging computer or dated manufacturing equipment, upgrading parts is unlikely to bring success.

In order to achieve organizational agility we need to look at the entire machine.

With our clients we reference this organizational model. Each organization contains four key components: the work; the people who perform the work; the formal organizational structure; and the culture that reflects their values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns. In order to move from aging machines to agile organisms, all parts of the system must be addressed and fit together.

WORK: From Marketing to Listening

Organizations have more tools than ever to tell the world about their products and services. You probably found this blog because someone from our firm shared it on social media or because it came to your inbox. These tools can fool us into thinking that the work of overcoming consumer and market trends is to be louder and more active

with our marketing. Rather, because of the quickly changing demands of Millennials and iGen generations, it is listening that must be at the core of our work. But listening is more than what people say in a focus group. It's being curious about someone's desires and motivations and having the empathy to pivot your activity to meet those needs. This capability is crucial for all organizations trying to create products, services, and solutions. It is also critical for executives seeking to understand their employees as the employment value proposition evolves and employees' expectations change.
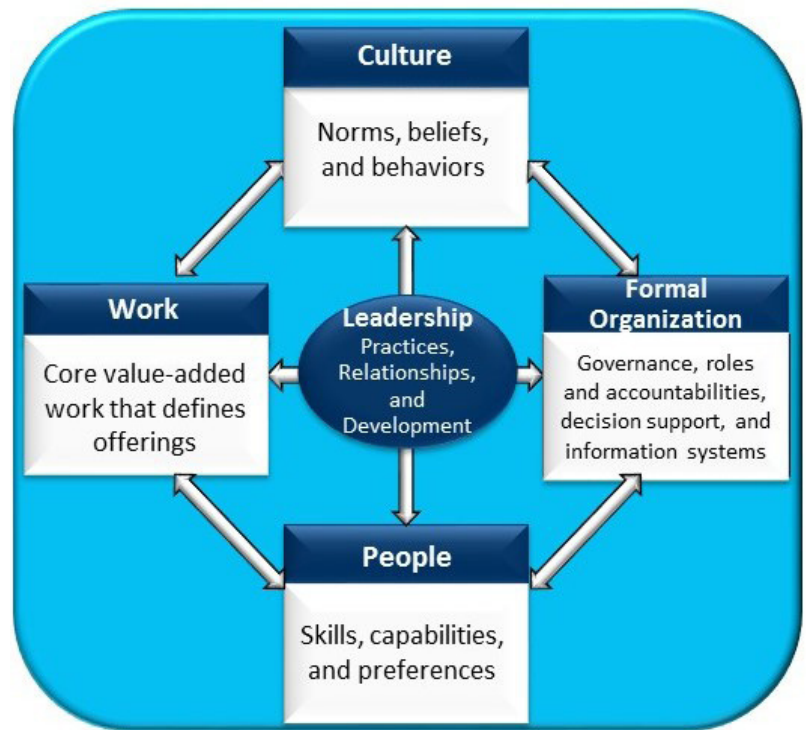
CULTURE: From GTD to GTDT

Like all good machines, our organizations are measured by their output and productivity. And the cogs in our organizations are primarily the people (sorry if you nodded along as you read that). The individual productivity focus has created a boatload of productivity tips — prioritization, list building, "someday maybes"— to getting things done (GTD). But today, as jobs become automated, what remains of "work" will be more social. It will be less about what one person can do at their computer but rather about the breakthroughs that will come from a group of people with a shared mission. The agile organizations of the future have a culture (and tools) that invites collaboration, has participative processes, and even allows for self-organizing teams.

FORMAL ORGANIZATION: Top down organizing to self-organizing

Recent studies show that nearly 60% of all employees have experienced a redesign in the last three years. There are more reorganizations today than ever before. Executives are constantly shuffling chairs to respond to the disruption they are experiencing in their industries (see Walmart's most recent efforts). But what if our reorganizations create more chaos than clarity? People naturally organize together to accomplish more. Science has shown us that all life forms are self-organizing. Agile organizations understand this. Leaders of agile organizations know they don't have all the answers and successfully organize the orchestra. Allowing those closest to the change (consumer demands, technological advances, etc.) to inform your organization's structure is key. Navigating in today's high-change environment requires this kind of ground-up structuring.

PEOPLE: From Depth to Breadth

Harvard Professor David Deming says that there is a "death of single skill jobs." Whether because of automation or the rapid speed of change, those who have depth of expertise in single areas are struggling to keep and find jobs. So what do the employees of the future have? His study shows that workers who successfully combine mathematical and interpersonal skills in today's knowledge-based economies are the ones who will gain and hold jobs. As different forms of communication evolve, the need for a wide range of media literacy is vital. As work becomes globalized, cross-cultural understanding is a basic necessity. As every industry and organization has technological components of it, coding and mathematics will be must-haves. The people of our organizations, whether in finance, marketing, operations, supply chain and/or human resources will need to have breadth more than depth.

LEADERSHIP: From Command and Control to Action in Ambiguity

Business school teaches leaders that it is their job to tell others what to do. Management texts for decades have taught us this command and control. That kind of leadership will not work in times of changes because the impact of change is fast and cuts deep. Think about a response to an unexpected change like a natural disaster. First responders are on the front page because they act quickly, decisively, and without fear of failure. This is the kind of employee that organizations of the future need and leaders need to make room for. The procedures, policies, and laws of command and control style leadership breeds passivity, deference, and an abdication of responsibility. Agile leadership tolerates ambiguity, trusts others, quiets their own anxiety, and invites action.

We can create agile organizations that respond continuously to shifts in markets and environments. But it's not one part that needs fixing. It's the whole of your organization – and yourself – that must undergo transformation

Automation, globalization, and specialization are increasing and will greatly impact the global economy and job market.

How Binary Thinking Undermines Organizational Agility

By Ron Carucci

In the face of unforeseen hard choices, leaders commonly resort to binary choice making, limiting the options available to them to address complex challenges. This is because, as major research on decision making shows, our brains are naturally wired to be more impulsive under stress. Spotting false patterns, we reach for premature conclusions rather than opening ourselves to more and better options. Binary thinking actually undermines our agility personally and as organizations.

One senior sales executive I worked with recently illustrated this in a moment of frustration. She'd been working on delegating more to her team, who had asked for more empowerment. To her dismay, many were struggling to take on the levels of freedom she'd offered. Exasperated, she vented to me, "I thought delegating was supposed to free me up to do more of my own job. But every time they drop a ball I hand off, it takes me twice as long to clean up the mess as it would have taken for me to just do it myself." Her complaint is not uncommon, because – like many leaders – she saw her only options as "delegate" or "control." Now exhausted from failing at one extreme, her natural impulse was to revert back to the other. What she needed to ask herself was, "What parts of this task are my people ready and confident to take on, and what role must I play for this to get done?"

To avoid the whiplashing effect of bouncing between polarities, leaders must learn to increase their agility across an array of leadership challenges and increased pressures – because that gives them a more effective set of options from which to choose.

Here are four common sets of extremes that leaders tend to default to when facing tough challenges;

1. Communicating tough news. One of a leader's most stressful demands is delivering messages that disappoint people. The two extremes leaders tend to bounce between here are being overly blunt and excessively politically correct. I've watched leaders waste precious minutes in a long wind-up of couching and softening-the-blow as their teams braced for impact from an impending message of doom. I've also seen leaders convince themselves that "just ripping the bandaid off" is the best way to deliver bad news. Neither option ever works. Worse, they only take into account the leader's discomfort delivering the news, failing to consider those receiving it. Leaders must learn to blend their degree of directness and their degree of diplomacy based on the impact of what they are saying on those hearing it. Leaders who don't have sufficient range of motion to appropriately deliver tough news have even less capacity when they need it most – dealing with the inevitable aftermath of what they've said. The key is preparation. If leaders spend time carefully crafting messages that blend the right degree of diplomacy and directness, tailored to those hearing it, they will be far better prepared to deal with what comes afterwards.

> **"BINARY THINKING ACTUALLY UNDERMINES OUR AGILITY AND AS ORGANIZATIONS."**

2. Facing high-risk decisions. When faced with higher degrees of risk associated with a decision, leaders can revert to one of two extremes. The "trust your gut" leader makes highly intuitive decisions, and the "analyze everything" leader wants lots of data to back up his choice. For routine decisions with relatively predictable outcomes, a leader's strong preference for one of these poses minimal threat to the decision's quality. But when the decision has far reaching implications, such as long-range financial performance, a leader's angst can provoke them to their extreme preference with greater consequences. The highly intuitive leader becomes impulsive, missing critical facts. The highly analytical leader gets paralyzed in data, often failing to make any decision. The right blend of data and intuition applied to carefully constructing a choice builds the organization's agility for executing the decision once made, and avoids wasting resources cleaning up after a decision goes bad or an opportunity is missed.

3. Introducing radical ideas. When faced with chronic challenges for which traditional problem solving approaches haven't worked, leaders must bring radical ideas to the table that haven't been considered. The notion of departing from conventional approaches can stress leaders, driving them to one of two comfort zones. On one end of the spectrum, a leader can hold a level of unyielding certainty about the efficacy of their idea and its likelihood to solve the problem. On the other end, leaders offer ideas very tentatively so as not to come across as overly domineering. The problem is that whatever the chronic issue is, it has already exhausted and discouraged the organization. If people feel the leader is being dogmatic about their views, leaving no room for anyone else's, they will likely disengage, regardless of the merits of the idea. Or, if people feel the leader lacks confidence in their idea, they will struggle to muster conviction to try it, concluding, "Well, if she isn't all that convinced it will work, I'm not going to stick my neck out." The right blend of conviction and openness sets the stage for others to participate in surfacing an untested solution that builds on the leader's best thinking, but refines it with the inputs of others. This collectively energizes a leader and her team, giving the organization the agility it needs to put the idea into action.

4. Delegating higher levels of authority. Many leaders struggle to let go of decision rights to those they fear aren't ready. As was the case with the sales executive above, taking risks on untested followers can feel overwhelming. But in demanding situations, leaders are often forced to give people chances to step up to new challenges. Leaders obsess over letting go of their own authority because a follower's failure will make them look bad. Worse, they fear a follower's success will make them irrelevant. So they cling to their authority with exhausting levels of control. By contrast, some leaders throw caution to the winds. With unfettered optimism, they declare, "I trust you," and let direct-reports go off with limited perspective and experience. In challenging circumstances, that is not delegation; its abandonment. The balance of authority one retains and relinquishes is an artful blend that matches the person's skill and readiness with the situation at hand. Done well, this begins with a clear contracting session between the leader and follower clarifying expectations, honestly assessing what the follower is ready to take on, and how the leader will remain involved. Too often the stressful condition causes leaders to skip such important preparation in a false sense of reflexive urgency. The more urgent a situation is, the more carefully planned delegated authority must be.

The more demanding circumstances are, the more a leader can benefit from a wide range of options to choose from. Reverting to extremes may create a false sense of comfort in the moment but set up disaster in the end. There are no complex challenges in the world for which there are only two options to solve them. Agility is required. The minute you find yourself torn between two extremes, assume that both are limited, step back, and build a broader menu of options. That's where you're likely to find your optimal choice.

Sailing the Seven Seas: Cultural Agility

By Eric Hansen

"Stop!" My family and I had just rushed in the door of the Russian consulate in Houston, Texas for our 9 a.m. appointment. I abruptly stopped.   "Sit," she said pointing to chairs against the back wall, "we open not until nine." Her raised finger and fixed stare reminded me that I was now technically no longer in Texas. I looked at my phone. It was 8:58 a.m.

"So, this is how it is in Russia," I thought. A flood of stereotypes--reinforced by being a child of the Cold War era and remembering desperate defections by Soviet athletes, and yes, even cold, robot-like characters from more recent movies—filled my mind. I felt a tinge of anger. The visa application process had been challenging—so much, in fact, that at times I had wondered about the worth of completing it.

Now, there I was, on the verge of paying a lot more money to experience this same treatment for a couple of weeks in country. Really? Suddenly, a staycation became much more appealing.

"Micah, come," she commanded at 9:10am. My son stood and approached window. He spoke to her, tentatively at first, but clearly in Russian. Her expression revealed her confusion. "You speak Russian," she asked in her native tongue. Then, as they spoke, distance and apathy melted. There was a noticeable change in the mood of the entire room. Even the other agents, now engaged with Micah as well, smiled behind their glass. Suddenly we were on the inside. All five of our visa applications were on a fast track. And Micah got her daughter's email address so they could practice Russian together.

With an ever-shrinking global economy and international boundaries...

While this experience had a bit of a fairy tale ending, it was a timely reminder of the importance of paying attention and adapting to cultural difference as you enter a different country, a different organization, or even a new group within your current organization. As you contemplate your next foray into foreign territory, here are a few practices to adopt and competencies to develop that will improve your cultural agility whether you are going to Russia or just down the hall to the Marketing Department:

1. UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT.

Before entering foreign territory, invest time learning something about the history of those you will be with. What key events have shaped their prevailing values, attitudes and behaviors? Who do they look to for inspiration and leadership? What are current events or issues they may be wrestling with? Even with some contextual understanding, you may not agree or feel fully comfortable with their perspective, customs and practices, but you can avoid reflexively judging in ignorance, and will hopefully avoid trampling on their "sacred cows."

2. PRACTICE EMPATHY:

Discipline yourself to look past outward appearances, practices and mannerisms. These esoteric judgments typically raise unhelpful comparisons, pride, and competitiveness; instead, focus on seeing everyone as human beings. Regardless of heritage or circumstances, at our core, people all want essentially the same things. Whether in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or Russia, I look for ways to get behind the esoteric wall of tourism (or business) and understand more about the lives of the people. When they engage in casual conversation together, what is most on their minds? What do they talk about? I always ask this question and, regardless of where I am, the answer is consistent. They worry about family, friends, having enough, being enough, health and well-being. Healthy relationships are the basis of most successful human endeavors. Developing cultural agility requires the same human foundation.

3. EXERCISE SELF-AWARENESS AND CONTROL.

Most who travel internationally, know to anticipate uncomfortable situations. But regardless of whether yours is an entry into a new country, a new leadership position, or a new organization, clarify your personal boundaries and establish appropriate ways to reinforce them without causing offense. A personal example: I don't drink alcohol, so I knew going into Russia that I should prepare to graciously turn down the social custom of sharing Vodka—a source of national pride for many locals and a practice in many restaurants. Being in a new territory does not require that you adopt or participate in every aspect of the dominant culture; however, being gracious is a must. Any overt indictment you make can seriously limit your effectiveness and experience. Identify cultural or organizational practice equivalents that you will not engage in and practice doing it inoffensively.

...there will be cultural whitewater ahead that you must navigate.
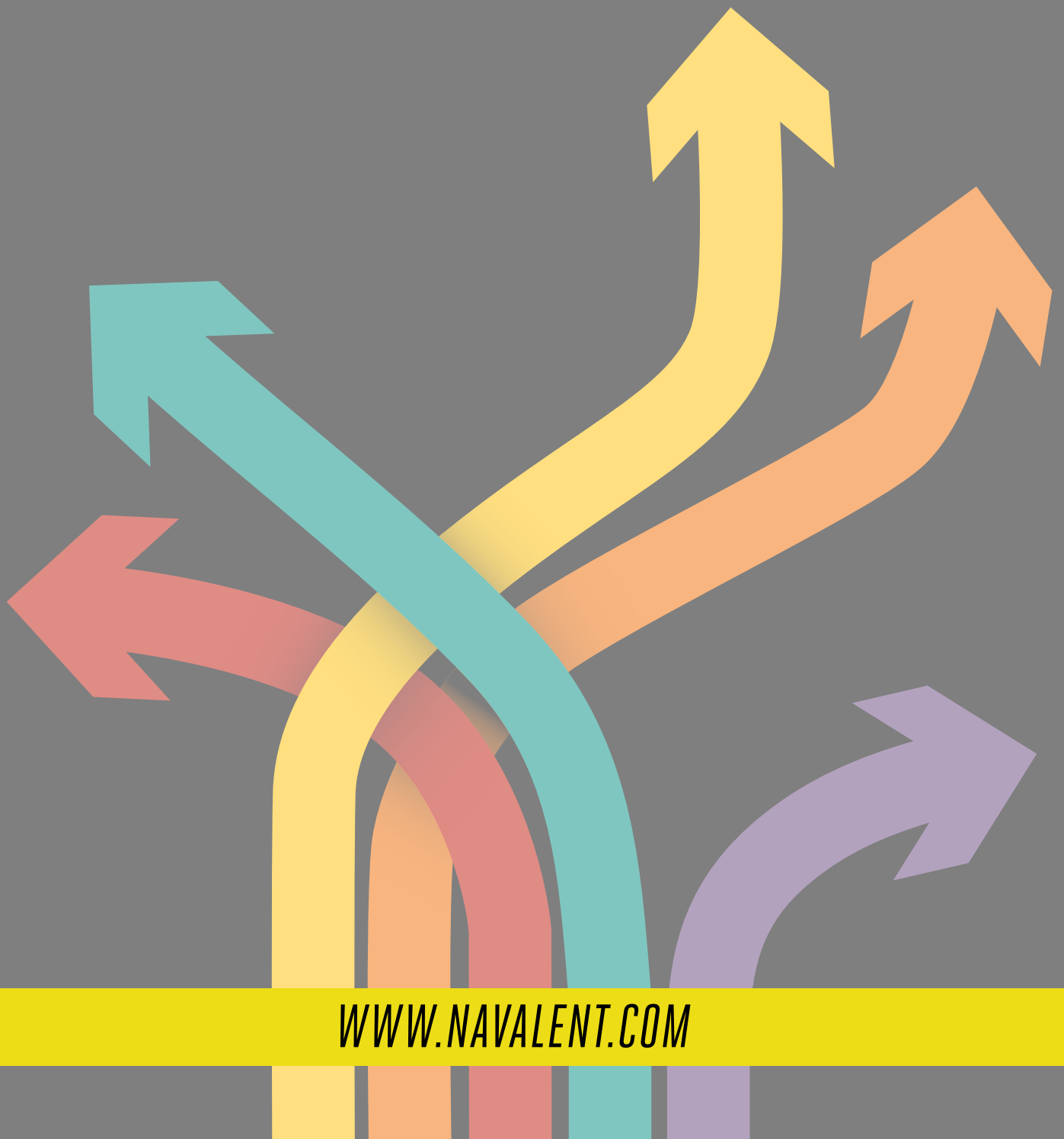
4. CULTIVATE COMMON GROUND.

Make an honest effort to learn and use basic phrases in the native language, eat the local food, use local transportation, adopt local customs, and look for similarities. When in Rome—or a new organization, watch and do as the locals do without harsh judgement.   Understand and learn. Avoid vocalizing comparisons unless asked. Unsolicited and frequent comparisons come from a place insecurity and only serve to create distance and alienate others. We get it, your country or previous organization is awesome, but you're no longer there. Draw from your previous experience to help you be curious and ask insightful questions so that you are learning, not judging. Share comparative observations only when asked or when it can support you establishing a beachhead for yourself in the new environment.

5. USE A LOCAL GUIDE.

Navigating language barriers and unfamiliar cultural norms often requires using a translator of some sort. Whenever traveling or experiencing something new, I hire someone who knows the territory and whose expertise will enhance our experience. The challenge when using a guide becomes not using the them as a crutch to limit your immersion; rather, find one who will help you to prioritize, eliminate the noise, navigate around barriers and then introduce you into situations where you can maximize your connections and experience. Quickly finding and effectively using a trusted advisor who is familiar with the local terrain will accelerate your ability and confidence to engage effectively and get the most from any new experience.

With an ever-shrinking global economy and international boundaries, with active industry and organizational consolidations, as well as the need to simply manage your own career ambitions, there will be cultural whitewater ahead that you must navigate. Cultural agility is an even greater imperative in our modern world. We would be wise to consider the time-tested counsel of Cicero, a second century Roman statesman who said, "But man, because he is endowed with reason by which he is able to perceive relationships, sees the cause of things, understands the reciprocal nature of cause and effect, makes analogies, easily surveys the whole course of his life, and makes the necessary preparations for its conduct." Prepare well.