

Change Agility: A Winning Capability at All Levels

■ By Wendy Heckelman, PhD and Sheryl Unger, MILR

In athletic pursuits, agility is defined as the ability to move with balance, speed, strength and coordination. Agility is developed through extensive training, frequent practice and ongoing coaching. During competition, the hope is that all of these capabilities effectively come together and lead to victory. Today's life sciences companies require a capacity to change and adapt quickly to win in the marketplace and achieve competitive advantage. Unlike sports where the rules of the game are defined, the healthcare marketplace playing field continues to change rapidly, creating much uncertainty. Applying the sports metaphor, leaders and learning organizations can build organizational, team and individual agility and capacity to thrive during times of uncertainty and instability.

Defining Change Agility on Three Levels: Organizational, Team and Individual

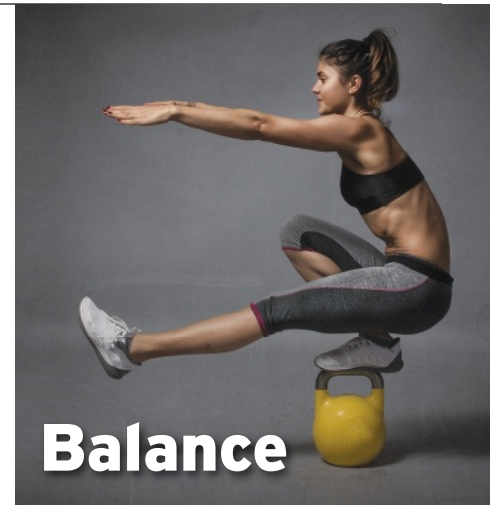
Organizational agility, as defined by BusinessDictionary.com, is the capability of a company to rapidly change or adapt in response to changes in the market. A high degree of organizational agility can help a company react and adapt successfully to the emergence of new competitors, the development of new industry-changing technologies, or sudden shifts in overall market conditions.

Healthcare stakeholders are facing a confluence of factors, such as

political uncertainty around the Affordable Care Act, changing consumer demographics and pressure to reduce costs while increasing quality and healthcare outcomes. Most life sciences companies are responding to external marketplace conditions with strategies that include large-scale organizational restructuring, mergers and acquisitions and other enterprise-wide transformation initiatives. The net effect is the accelerating pace of change amplifies the need for organizations to build stronger change management capacity and capability.

Teams must also remain agile to embrace large-scale changes, adapt quickly and move forward with direction and purpose. Team leaders need to create a culture where creativity and challenging the status quo is accepted and encouraged. Therefore, it is important to provide leadership training and tools that support effective teamwork and collaboration.

As organizations and teams are comprised of individuals, it is important that an overarching philosophy and commitment to develop individual change agility exists. Senior leadership and learning organizations must be committed to work together to embed practices that equip individuals with appropriate skills. These skills will ensure employees at all levels of the organization can respond and adapt positively to change. Below are a few basic principles and best practices that



can be incorporated into leadership and training efforts.

Balance

For athletes, balance is the ability to maintain equilibrium when stationary or during movement. Think for a moment about a quarterback who is forced to stay on his feet when attempting to throw a pass, even when the defensive line is charging ahead. This is how many leaders feel when asked to execute a change in strategic direction. It is not unusual for them to be "off-balance" when changes are coming one after another. Over time, change fatigue sets in and resistance can increase. To counter the potential cycle of disengagement and frustration, leadership and learning organizations must dedicate resources that help prepare leaders to execute change, build leadership resilience and flexibility.

A leader who can manage change in a deliberate, well-planned manner



Speed

is most likely to achieve success. This type of leader benefits from a progressive, repeatable skill set and process that helps him/her translate and implement required change throughout their organization.

Regardless of the type of change, all change initiatives require leaders with the following capabilities:

- Masterful at seizing and translating strategic direction.
- Ability to quickly accept the need for and make a personal commitment to drive change.
- Expertise in risk assessment and identifying the potential impact change may have to the company, teams and people.
- Ability to sharply focus on continuing business requirements, while still pressing ahead with change initiatives.
- Skilled at creating high-performing teams that address pressing business matters during periods of change and concern.
- Effective at coaching and can address personal reactions and resistance to change.

Speed

For athletes, speed is the ability to think, react and move quickly. Images of nine-time Olympic gold-medal winner Usain Bolt come to mind. His abilities to quickly charge out of the starting block and accelerate his pace through the finish line have made him the best sprinter in the world.

Having the capacity to commit to a change effort and motivate others' movement through a transition is a contributing factor in successful, strategic executions.

As leaders and learning organizations, what can you do to help an individual get up to speed quickly, make decisions faster and respond to customer demands more effectively? Consider efforts and learning programs that support the following:

- Integrating the voice of the customer sooner into the process and/or solution.
- Engaging in process improvement efforts that improve efficiency and/or performance metrics.
- Streamlining governance and processes that result in shorter decision time and/or review cycles.
- Developing change management and stakeholder engagement capabilities.
- Accelerating development of high-performing teams.

Strength

Athletes, no matter their sport, often dedicate time to a disciplined strength training regimen to improve overall performance. There is nothing more inspiring than seeing a relay team who can overcome the flawed leg by one of its own team members and then find the strength to finish strong. The same can be said for developing team and individual change agility through effective coaching and development planning.

During times of change one of the most important roles a leader plays is assessing team and individual

readiness for change, as well as determining what support is needed through transition. In both cases, a leader needs to develop a transition plan that leverages strengths and addresses specific performance gaps. Below are a few best practices for transition coaching:

- Identify transition challenges that employees face personally and professionally.
- Understand individual strengths and development needs related to those challenges.
- Conceptualize and take appropriate action by setting specific goals and timelines.
- Assess, understand and evaluate the impact of those actions, and adjust, as needed.

Coordination

In sports, an athlete must possess a high degree of hand, eye and body coordination. This is defined as “the ability to control the body in cooperation with the body’s sensory functions (e.g., hand- and eye-coordination to catch a ball).” From the team perspective, wins are achieved through an aligned effort.

In an organizational setting, coordination can be described as working well with others, engaging in joint problem-solving, aligning on determined objectives and partnering with cross-functional colleagues.

In this evolving marketplace, one of the biggest challenges facing life science companies is to improve the level of collaboration and coordination with customer-facing teams; those who service large and complicated healthcare delivery systems and stakeholders. These



Strength

Coordination



account teams require alignment on objectives and must plan differently to gain access and improve health outcomes. Best practices for these cross-matrix teams include:

- Helping team members understand how broader goals translate to their areas of responsibility.
- Ensuring goals are defined, communicated, measured and monitored.
- Providing a process to assess effectiveness and measure success.
- Dedicating time for jump-start sessions where teams can address the impact of change on their customers and establish rules of engagement for working together.
- Leveraging their diversity of talent and skill sets to understand and

impact customer actions.

- Using technology to ensure communication flow and engagement is high.

Next Steps

The most agile athletes possess balance, speed, strength and coordination, yet they must also remain open to coaching and be willing to make adjustments to achieve high performance results. In the life sciences industry, leaders and learning organizations seeking to develop change agility at the organizational, team, and individual levels must also focus on:

- Dedicating time and resources to enhance overall change management skills.

- Emphasizing strategic execution and the capabilities needed to drive it.
- Reinforcing and supporting the key values associated with agility, innovation, flexibility and nimbleness in the organizational culture.

Following these guidelines can help improve agility at the organizational, team and individual levels of your organization. ■

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