

Agile HR as Catalyst: A Regenerative Framework to Thrive in an Evolving World

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Abstract— Many of the so-called progressive organisations are still stuck on Frederick Winslow Taylor’s concept of systematically managing work, even though the scope have moved from physical work to knowledge work. We need a paradigm shift and to address the need, we are proposing a framework, “Agile HR as Catalyst”. Through this framework, we intent to reposition the role of HR personnel as a catalyst who embraces agility and enable the organization to be more responsive in this evolving world. Agile HR wears a new hat as a facilitator to leverage the seven dimensions of the framework that includes competence, circles, cadence, catalyst, conversations, context and clarity, to create employee experience where work becomes play. Based on the results observed from experiments done at two product based startups during the year 2020, we believe this alternate approach will help to get work done better. The observations includes an alignment to a larger purpose, increased employee engagement, accountability and a steady rise in predictability of team outcomes.

Keywords— Agile HR, Catalyst, Regenerative, Clarity, Competence, Circles, Cadence, Conversations, Context, Evolving.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many organisations working on twenty-first century technologies are still stuck with twentieth century management principles. Frederick Winslow Taylor, introduces the concept of systemising work, through his book, “The Principles of Scientific Management” in 1911. He

believed that it was possible to discover the “one best method” of performing any task through scientific study and analysis. Task idea, as Taylor describes, is developed by management in advance and provided to the worker to be strictly followed[1]. This approach has since then continued for more than a century. While the approach might have helped in increasing efficiency in physical work, this is no more relevant with knowledge work[2][3][4]. In knowledge work, there is no differentiation between a ‘thinker’ and ‘doer’. Everyone is a ‘thinker’ and everyone is a ‘doer’. However, the unfortunate truth is Taylorism still prevails in the form of bureaucracy in many progressive organisations leading to inefficient use of human capital[2][3][4]. Now that work is not working[2][3], we need alternatives in this evolving world that suites the internal and external context of the organization. However, many organisations are looking for readymade how-to-templates rather than creating an approach that best suites them[6]. The biggest barrier that most of us face is our attachment to older way of working and habitual patterns of thoughts[5]. Paradigms provide us context; they determine our perspectives and shape the choices we make and the actions we take[6]. We need to change our perspectives and move out of our comfort zone to design the new way of work.

II. CHANGING PARADIGMS AND THE ROLE OF HR

The need of the hour is to redesign the organization to be free of pathologies including but not restricted to politics, bureacracy, stress, burnout, resentment to

name a few[4]. Organisations have evolved from Infrared paradigm to Magenta to Red to Amber to Orange to Green to Teal paradigms. The three breakthroughs of Teal organisations include self-management, wholeness and evolutionary purpose[4] to leverage the best of available as well as evolving human potential.

There has always been debates about the role of HR personnel raising out of doubts about their contribution to organizational performance[9]. While the debate continues, it is clear that HR does have a very critical role to play being more agile. According to Dave Ulrich, HR delivers organisational excellence in four ways by (a) being a partner in strategy execution, (b) an expert in helping organise work and its execution, (c) a champion for employees, to escalate concerns to leaders and enabling their work contribution; and (d) an agent of continuous transformation[9]. Agile HR is gaining prominence and a Google search yielded over 1,98,000 hits and about 210 article in Google Scholar in December 2020. Agile HR refers to operational strategy applied to HR function[8], and in this study we attempt to reposition the role of HR personnel as a Catalyst[12][13]. In this new role as Catalyst, Agile HR personnel wears the hat of a facilitator in the organisation's transformation journey.

III. REPOSITIONING THE ROLE OF HR

Our journey to explore the current gaps and identify an alternative approach to achieve organisational excellence have given us lots of new insights to leverage the full capabilities of the employees. Based on our understanding of the current deficiencies and possibilities, we propose a regenerative framework[5][6] to help organisations thrive in this evolving and volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, by reimagining the role of HR

personnel[8][14]. Regeneration is a process by which people, institutions, and materials evolve the capacity to fulfill their inherent potential in a world that is constantly changing around them[5]. The initial framework when developed consisted of four dimensions. As we experimented and iterated, these four dimensions evolved into seven dimensions. The seven dimensions of the framework is explained in the following subsections.

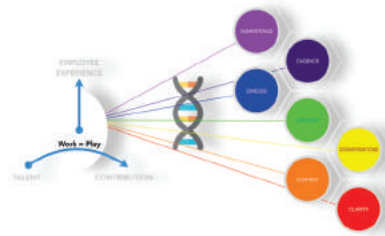


Fig. 1 Agile HR as Catalyst as framework
A. Competence

Competence is the quality of having sufficient attitude, knowledge, skill, and intention & ability to upgrade regularly. People, not machines, are an organisation's greatest source of competitive advantage. Hence it is the people who drive business results through their contributions. Meaningful contribution requires a growth mindset[15] and the ability to learn, unlearn, update and react to the changing environment. Ability in the form of competence is what sets one apart from the other.

Competencies are not static, it evolves with the changing environment as well as requirements. Hence, early identification of factors contributing to change and mapping the competencies required to respond to change, will be key to thriving in an evolving world.

B. Cadence

Cadence enhances predictability of results, and certainty across circles, with clear and measurable outcomes. Stephen Bungay emphasises on the importance of creating

an operating rhythm within the organization[17].

The ceremonies agreed upon by the members are planned in a rhythmic fashion, to bring in predictability. Each of these ceremonies have a desired outcome, for example : the daily huddle has an objective to remove impediments within 24 hours, sprint demos provides a platform for the members to showcase their work to all stakeholders and request feedback, the retrospectives provides a psychologically safe[18] environment for members to express their emotions, feelings and concerns regarding what worked and what did not, and identify opportunities for learning and continuous improvement. the monthly heartbeat provides an opportunity for members to have open feedback related to their work performance. The cadence helps bring in more predictability and transparency within the organisation.

C. Circles

Circles help remove bureaucracy. Member holds a specific role in a circle and may be part of multiple circles. Steve Denning talks about three core characteristics of an agile organization [19] :

1. The Law of the Small Team: work should be done in small autonomous cross-functional teams working in short cycles on relatively small tasks and getting continuous feedback.
2. The Law of the Customer: every member has a clear line of sight to the ultimate customer and can see how their work is adding value to that customer—or not.
3. The Law of the Network: members take initiative on their own, and interact with other members as a fluid and transparent network of players that are collaborating towards a common goal of delighting customers.

Circles are designed to align on the three core characteristic. Every circle may consist of 5-9 members and work towards

to achieve a specific goal. The objective is to generate more value with less work. It is a hierarchy of competence, not a hierarchy of authority. Any member in a circle can connect with any member in other circle, without an intermediary. Every circle has a chief, who acts as information radiators.

D. Catalyst

Being the torchbearer of the transformation, catalyst acts as an agent that enables or speeds significant change[14]. According to Dave Ulrich[9][12], HR delivers organisational excellence in four ways by being (a) a partner in strategy execution, (b) an expert in helping organise work and its execution, (c) a champion for employees, to escalate concerns to leaders and enabling their work contribution; and finally (d) an agent of continuous transformation. Through this framework we are repositioning[12] the role of H personnel to Agile HR[8] as Catalyst. Beginning with identifying the drivers of change to support business in decision making and enabling transformation through communicating the need for change, HR acts as Catalyst to drive business results through people. As a Catalyst, offering expertise to accelerate decision making and implement change will be key to successful transformation[13].

E. Conversations

Clear and concise communication among all stakeholders to ensure that the organisation achieves its desired outcomes[20]. Conversations are result based communications that happens among the circles with focus on clearly defined outcomes. Few examples may include addressing impediments, reducing gaps in information flow across the organization, bringing in a culture of continuous improvement. Every conversation may leverage different approaches to achieve the desired result[20][21]. It ensures clarity and create opportunities for regular learning and

information sharing[27]. Ultimately conversations act as tool to leverage contributions from talent by enhancing their ownership and pride via PULL mechanism[22].

F. Context

Members need to comprehend the circumstances constituting the background of an event, challenge, idea or statement to make decisions[5]. Leading and managing in a world of change and disruption requires a thorough understanding of the context (both internal and external) to drive business results[23]. Putting in place context enablers that will help explain the evolving environment will help people better connect and respond to change. Setting Context is important to be able to communicate, collaborate and commit to change.

G. Clarity

Every organisation exists for a reason(purpose) and the organisation thrives when every contributor is aligned to this[10]. Gaining clarity[11] of purpose is key to building an anti-fragile organization in this continuously evolving world. Unearthing clarity amidst today's chaos, gives a sense of direction as well as meaning for both organisation and it's employees. It is a habit which requires reinforcement, like any other habit, to be able to ingrain it in an organisation's culture[25]. If leveraged through a well-designed communication strategy, clarity will serve as a connecting bridge between the expected outcomes and achieved results.

H. Talent and Contribution

Jim Collins speaks about the three simple truths that leaders of great organisations understand[24], (a) In this ever changing VUCA world, beginning with 'who' rather than 'what' makes it easy for organisations to adapt. (b) It is important to have the right people to be part of the organization, who

are intrinsically motivated to deliver their best in creating something meaningful and impactful. (c) When the people are not the right fit for the organization, being in the right direction may not always help in creating a great organization.

Having the right talent helps the organization achieve the desired outcomes through the contributions of the members associated.

I. Work and Play

For members who are intrinsically motivated[26], work does not feel like work, instead they enjoy their work as in play. When work becomes play for the members, they enjoy and flourish within the organisation because for them work is its own reward[25].

J. Employee Experience

When various factors required to make the members deliver are taken care of, that is when their experience within the organization peaks[20][28]. An organization that focuses on employee experience gets the best out of their employees because they are capitalising on the intrinsic motivation of the members[25][26].

K. Culture

The culture of an organisation is what makes it unique. Just like DNA is the fundamental and distinctive characteristics or qualities of any organism, culture is the signature of an organization[18][20][29]. As the organisations continues on their purpose journey, the culture evolves and becomes inseparable to the organization which gives it a unique flavour.

IV. DISCUSSION

The approach has been piloted at three organisations, of which two pilots were conducted during the year 2020. Table 1 provides the summary of the experiments against each of the seven dimensions.

TABLE I
SUMMARY OF SEVEN DIMENSIONS
EXPERIMENTED

S.no	Dimensions	How it helps
1	Competence	Selecting the right talent, developing competence through continuous learning and unlearning, measuring contributions and taking corrective actions wherever required.
2	Circles	Dynamic teaming for desired results and providing clear accountabilities.
3	Cadence	Daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly and quarterly cadence of various ceremonies.
4	Catalyst	HR to play role of Catalyst and sponsored by CEO.
5	Conversations	One-to-one and group alignment at various cadence,
6	Context	Internal and external factors impacting the organization.
7	Clarity	Purpose and values to bring in alignment, OKRs (Organization, team and individual) to drive results

At organization 1 (Org1), agile way of working were followed by purpose orientation, followed by OKRs. At organization 2 (Org 2), purpose orientation was followed by agile way of working, followed by OKRs. Both Org1 and Org2 uses different sprint durations for different circles based on the internal context. The data collected during the intervention was analysed and the results showed (a) alignment to organisation's purpose, values and goals, (b) increase in employee engagement, (c) increase in individual and team accountability resulting in improved performance/ outcomes, and (d) increase in predictability of teams outcomes.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The way work is getting done today needs to be fixed and HR personnel must play a vital role by embracing agile approaches. "Agile HR as a Catalyst" framework enables the HR personnel to wear the hat of a facilitator to bring in alignment to a larger purpose, increased employee engagement, accountability and a steady rise in predictability of team outcomes.

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