

An enhancement to Agile HR as Catalyst framework

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Abstract— “Agile HR as Catalyst” framework attempts to address flaws in traditional management approaches. In their paper, the authors recommended to reposition the role of HR personnel as a catalyst who embraces agility and enable the organization to be more responsive in an evolving world. Further studies applying the framework were conducted that spanned across five organisations to identify the suitability and effectiveness. While the studies revealed that there were increase in engagement, accountability and a steady rise in predictability of team outcomes, the study also revealed that the catalyst role may not need to be restricted to HR and may be played by other members from senior leadership. The success of the role depended on the leaders capability of direction setting and execution.

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

I. Introduction

Technology has helped us take big leaps and enhance the quality of our life, however, many organisations still follow management concepts which are more than a century old. In his book, “The Principles of Scientific Management”, Frederick Winslow Taylor emphasises that there is this “one best method” of performing any task through scientific study and analysis (Taylor, 1919). The approach has become irrelevant when work moved from being done at factories to being done at the comfort of our homes, with the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. The transition started when the shift happened from physical work to knowledge work. However, the unfortunate truth is that Taylorism continues to prevail today even in many progressive organisations leading to

inefficient use of human capital (Dignan, 2019; Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Laloux, 2014). These approaches created more silos and people ended up working in their own world without collaborating with others in the organization.

When work moved to remote and hybrid work, organisations have been trying to reinvent themselves leading to unprecedented changes to every aspect of life (Shaw et al., 2020). Businesses across the world are being restructured to cope up with the new needs, and people are forced to learn new ways of working, something completely different from how the earlier generations worked (Kniffin et al., 2020).

II. Objective and hypothesis

In their study, Sathianathan and Anish (2021), emphasises the role of HR as a catalyst. Through their framework, they attempts to reposition the role of HR personnel as a catalyst who embraces agility and enable the organisation to be more responsive in this evolving world. According to them an 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. The hypotheses of the study are given below:

H1: Transformation initiatives needs to be sponsored by top management.

H2: Purpose orientation helps organisation to align the workforce.

III. Method

The experiments to enhance the framework has been piloted at five organisations starting from March 2019. Table 1 provides relevant details of the organisations included in this study.

TABLE 1
Summary Of Five Organisations Considered

Details	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Start date	Mar, 2019	Mar, 2020	Jul, 2020	Sep, 2020	Nov, 2020
End date	March, 2021	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing	Ongoing
Duration	25 months	17 months	13 months	11 months	9 months
Total employees	100+	50+	40+	20+	30+
Founder(s)	3	2	1	2	1
Age of organisation	>10 years	5-10 years	<5 years	5-10 years	<5 years

Table 2 summarises the sequence of approaches followed to implement various experiments. Traditional approaches of management is broken and do not provide a reliable structure(Wollmann et al., 2020) for work anymore. Agile way of working enables an organisation to break the traditional approach of getting work done through command and control (Denning, 2018). For members to be effective in their roles, they need to know why they are doing what they are doing and why they are making the decisions they are making (Wollmann et al., 2020). To enable this, it is important for the organisation to have a clear and sustainable purpose and the members aligned to the organisations’ purpose. Purpose orientation is a critical activity that the leadership team need to drive within the organisation. Objectives and key results (OKR) provides a mechanism to help an organisation to reach where they aspire to be (Doerr, 2018). Aligning the organisations’ goals through OKRs is an effective way to measure the progress an organisation is making towards the desired direction.

TABLE 2
Sequence Of Approaches

Dimension	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Step 1	Agile way of working	Agile way of working	Purpose orientation	Purpose orientation	Agile way of working
Step 2	Purpose orientation	Purpose orientation	Agile way of working	Agile way of working	Purpose orientation
Step 3	OKR	OKR	OKR		OKR

The agile way of working was introduced through bootcamps where the members discussed the understandings from readings shared prior to the session. During the discussions, the team members mutually shared their understanding and discussed areas with lesser clarity. Post the bootcamp, the members formed circles based on the products and roles, and agreed on their way of working as well as the ceremonies they will align with. Retrospective was the only ceremony mandated to ensure that the circle members reflects on opportunities for improvement. The circles also identified their ‘definition of done’ to align on expectation of their work outcomes. The circles agreed to have a weekly, fortnightly or monthly sprints based on their needs and commitments. As part of the way of working, the circles and its members agreed on the necessary conversations that will happen among them, which included a monthly heartbeat conversation to assess the progress of commitments at the organisation level and individual level. The teams took about a quarter to become comfortable with the new way of working.

The purpose and values of the organisation is a critical component that helps employees align. This can be done in various ways, and may depend on what the leadership is comfortable with. Among the five organisations, we adopted one of the following approaches (a) leadership team co-created the purpose and values and communicated with the entire organisation, (b) leadership team co-created the purpose and values and later aligned with core members of the organisation, (c) leadership team co-created the purpose and values and later aligned with all members of the organisation. Involving core members and other members helped to have a better buy-in from other stakeholders. The members were introduced to the concept of OKRs after the introduction of agile way of

working and purpose and values of the organisation. The organisation level OKRs were finalised by the leadership team, based on historical data and communicated to the members and each circle derived their OKRs to work towards during the quarter. At the end of the quarter, the circles reflected on the progress made with respect to the OKRs and further actions to improve the results.

III. Discussion

Table 3 provides the summary of the experiments against each of the seven dimensions.

TABLE 3
Summary Of Experiments Against Seven Dimensions

S.no	Dimensions	How it helps
1	Competence	Onboarding the right talent, developing competence through continuous learning, measuring contributions and taking corrective actions wherever required.
2	Circles	Dynamic teaming for desired results , clear accountabilities, circle chief as enabler.
3	Cadence	Daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly and quarterly cadence of various ceremonies.
4	Catalyst	Single accountable person for the initiative, from C suite or a nominated representative who reports directly to either the CEO or the board and to be supported by other teams
5	Conversations	One-to-one conversations, circle level conversations, and organisational level conversations at various cadence, including heartbeat conversations, huddles, learning circles, demos and retrospectives, OKR alignment and reviews.
6	Context	Internal and external factors impacting the organisation.
7	Clarity	Purpose and values to bring in alignment, OKRs to drive results

Table 4 summarises the details related to ‘competence’ dimension. Three aspects were considered which included onboarding the right talent, developing competence through continuous learning and measuring contributions and taking corrective actions, wherever applicable.

TABLE 4
Aspects Considered For Competence Dimension

Competence	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Onboarding the right talent	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Developing competence through continuous learning	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial
Measuring contributions and taking corrective actions, wherever applicable	Partial	Yes	Partial	No	Partial

As part of onboarding the right talent, the recruitment procedure were modified to include (a)relevant job description to attract right candidates, (b)candidates alignment to organisational values, and (c)learning agility of the candidates during the interview process. To encourage competence development through continuous learning, the members were encouraged to have a quarterly learning plan, and monthly progress review. The circles aligned on quarterly OKRs and contribution of each members towards the circle OKRs were reviewed each quarter.

Table 5 summarises the details related to ‘circles’ dimension. The three aspects considered for circles include dynamic teaming for desired results, clear accountabilities and circle chief as enabler.

TABLE 5
Aspects Considered For Circles Dimension

Circles	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Dynamic teaming for desired results	No	Yes	Partial	No	Yes
Clear accountabilities.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Circle chief as enabler	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Dynamic teaming (Helfand, 2019) is the capability of the members to form circles on need basis to achieve a desired outcome. The members get together, collaborate and disperse once the desired outcome is achieved (Robertson, 2016). Each circle is formed with a clear focus on accountabilities or the outcome. For example, the learning circle may focus on learning a specific skill and people who prefer to collaborate comes together. Similarly a reading circle may be a circle where the members read books together. The circles may be formed based on the need like project activities, capability and

competency building, recreational purpose to name a few. A circle may have a chief who is a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970; Gandolfi, & Stone, 2018). who ensures that the circle members gets all necessary support to achieve the desired outcomes.

Table 6 summarises the details related to ‘cadence’ dimension.

TABLE 6
Aspects Considered For Cadence Dimension

Cadence	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Daily (huddle)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Weekly (sprints, retrospectives, learning circles)	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Fortnightly (sprints, retrospectives)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Monthly (heartbeat conversations)	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Quarterly (OKR alignment and reviews)	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

The circles may follow daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly and quarterly cadence of various ceremonies. The circles may connect on a daily cadence (Donnelly, 2016) with a purpose to address any critical dependencies. The circles may have a weekly, fortnightly or monthly sprints based on their needs and commitments including associated ceremonies of retrospectives. Learning circles are forums for continuous learning and may have a cadence of weekly, fortnightly or monthly. The heartbeat conversations happens at a monthly cadence. OKR alignment and reviews happen at a cadence of every quarter.

Table 7 summarises the details related to ‘catalyst’ dimension.

TABLE 7
Aspects Considered For Catalyst Dimension

Catalyst	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Accountable person	COO	CEO	CEO	CEO	CEO
Supported by	People Ops	People Ops	People Ops	Human Resources	People Ops

A catalyst (Sathianathan & Aravind, 2021) is a single accountable person for the initiative, either from C-suite or a

nominated representative who reports directly to either the CEO or the board. The catalyst is supported by other functions including the people operations, human resources team.

Table 8 summarises the details related to ‘conversations’ dimension. The conversations may be broadly categorised as one-to-one conversations, circle level conversations, and organisational level conversations.

TABLE 8
Aspects Considered For Conversations Dimension

Conversations	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Heartbeat conversations	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Huddles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learning circles	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Demos and retrospectives	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
OKR alignment and reviews	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Heartbeat conversations are reflective one-to-one sessions that happen among the circle chief and a member, with an objective to create an opportunity to review progress, impediments and actions plans for upcoming weeks. Huddles (Donnelly, 2016) have a daily cadence with a purpose to address any dependencies among and across circles. The learning circles provide an opportunity for members to experiment and learn. Every sprint concludes with a demo and retrospective. The purpose of demo is to provide a forum for the circle members to showcase their work and receive feedback from their peers. Retrospectives (Baumeister, 2017) serves as a mechanism to bring in continuous improvements. OKR alignment and reviews happen at organisational level and at circle level. The organisational OKRs are distributed among various circles based on the circle functions and responsibilities.

Table 9 summarises the details related to ‘context’ dimension.

TABLE 9
Aspects Considered For Context Dimension

Context	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Internal context	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
External context	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Internal context relates to the internal environment of the organisation. This is related to practices and policies that the team follows and need to be considered while deciding various interventions for the circles. External context relates to the factors that are external to the organisation and may include the political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological factors. Many organisations across the world transitioned to remote work due to impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, is a good example of external context impacting the functioning of an organisation. The circles and the organisations need to be agile enough to accommodate these changes.

Table 10 summarises the details related to ‘clarity’ dimension.

TABLE 10
Aspects Considered For Clarity Dimension

Clarity	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Co-creation of Purpose and values	No	Yes	Partial	Yes	Partial
OKR (Organizational, circle level)	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Partial

The purpose and values of the organisation when co-created by all the members of the organisation helps to have a proper buy-in among the members. Similarly, when the members participate in the alignment of OKRs both at an organisational level and circle level, the team members feel more ownership. The interesting observation also include the structure of the enhanced framework. Competence and clarity forms the foundation of the framework. Catalyst is the key

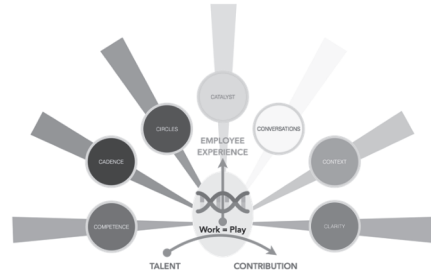


Fig. 1 Enhanced framework

person who holds the strings together. Catalyst creates an environment for talent to flourish in the organisation by making work more enjoyable (Sathianathan & Rajan, 2017). Fig. 1 depicts the enhanced framework

The data collected during the course of intervention at these organisations were analysed and the results showed both the hypothesis to be true. When transformation initiatives are strongly supported by top management, the focus stays in tact even when there are challenges being faced by the organization. Similarly, purpose orientation helps organisation to align the workforce. All five organisations were able to thrive, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic due to above two factors. The agile way of working enabled the circles to focus on sprint deliverables and the cadence of ceremonies brought in better predictability of team outcomes. When the overall predictability increased, it also resulted in improving the quality of deliverables as well as the outcomes expected. The dynamic teaming approach provided a platform for the circle members to collaborate better improving the engagement among them. The clarity of organisational purpose and values along with the OKR brought in better alignment to organisational goals.

IV. Conclusions

The enhanced framework enables the Catalyst to wear the hat of a facilitator (Sathianathan & Aravind, 2021) to bring in alignment to a larger purpose, increased employee engagement, accountability and a steady rise in predictability of team outcomes. Org1, Org2 and Org5 followed the approach of initiating agile way of working followed by purpose orientation and OKR. Org3 followed the approach of initiating with purpose orientation, followed by agile way of working and OKR whereas Org4 followed the approach of initiating with purpose orientation, followed by agile way of working.

Based on the results observed, following recommendations are being made. Initiating the teams with agile way of working, followed by purpose orientation and OKR has been found to be better than other approaches mentioned in table 2. One of the main reasons would be that the organisations embracing an agile mindset and best practices (Harris, 2020) are ready and better prepared to be exposed to higher level thinking required for organisation purpose and values. We recommend practitioners to adopt an approach to involve all the members if possible or at least the key members in the organisation to co-create the purpose and values that defines the organisation. This helps prepare the mindset to embrace and assimilate the importance of purpose and values in context of the organisation. The enhanced framework provides a reliable structure for organisations to flourish in the upcoming days of a VUCA world and organisations may find this approach to be indispensable in their journey to reinvent itself (Prahalad & Hamel, 2017; Sathianathan & Ramasamy, 2021). The observations also implies that the success of the any transformation journey using the enhanced framework is tightly coupled to the catalyst role.

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