

Being Agile Without Chaos

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What is a fundamental difference between successful people and very successful people? Hint: It is the same difference between people who make a few mistakes and those who make many mistakes. Answer: Their willingness to take action. People's successes as well as their failures are often rooted in a "let's do it" mentality.

People who start new businesses, launch new products, create new offers, and take risks give them themselves the opportunity to succeed. And to fail. They are like baseball players at the plate. They can swing for the fences and strike out most of the time or wait for just the right throw and watch a lot of balls go by. Hence homerun record holder Barry Bonds, like others at the top of the homerun leader board, rank high on the strikeout list.

Studies find that nine out of ten new businesses fail. Even in businesses that make it, about 50 percent of new products launched fail to produce a meaningful financial return. Makes you question why anyone would ever start a new business or launch a new product. Thankfully, the business landscape is also full of successes.

What prevents people from putting themselves at risk? From stepping up to the plate and swinging for the big hit? Some people lack the ambition. Some are indecisive. Some are too logical. Some simply don't conceive the ideas or have the resources. But perhaps the biggest issue preventing people from taking action is because everything isn't quite right. At least not now. They don't have all the answers. They don't quite know how they will overcome the obstacles. They don't have all the resources, capabilities, partnerships, prospects, and so on that they need to be successful. So they wait. They continue doing what they've been doing. They take the path of least resistance.

What is better: A start-up mentality where decisions are made quickly, roles and responsibilities are not well defined, everyone does whatever is needed to get the job done, accomplishments are often the result of a heroic act (or a lucky break), everything is at stake, and everything seems to change weekly? In other words, an environment that looks like chaos. Or a high-quality lean culture where roles and responsibilities are well defined, people follow consistent best practices, accomplishments are the result of excellent execution, and everything is well planned in advanced? In other words, an environment based on order. Clearly there are downsides to both. If you prefer order, you might never take risks or achieve any big hits. If you prefer chaos, you may strike out nine out of ten times.

The good news is that you don't have to choose one or the other. There are people who plan ahead and execute with sustainable excellence, yet without having all the answers. People can act with a sense of urgency while following best practices. Order and chaos can coexist.

Of course, there are circumstances best suited to the "we'll figure it out when we get there" approach and others that deserve the "let's slow down and plan this out" approach. Big companies have successfully reinvented themselves, sometimes several times over, by fostering the "we'll figure it out when we get there" entrepreneurial mindset. So too have small companies benefited from planning, implementing repeatable best practices, and adopting lean methods. But most organizations, large and small, benefit from both.

Over the lifespan of businesses, products, and teams, there are distinctive stages. Teams, for example, as described by Bruce Tuckman in his famous storming-norming model, storm before they get to a stable level of performance. In other words, they go through a period of chaos before finding order.

But organizations can storm and norm at the same time. They can sort things out as they go along. They can put equal emphasis on maintaining agility, being innovative, having a sense of urgency, and taking action as they do being efficient. They can execute with speed and quality. Established organizations can effectively compete with their nimble competitors as much as new organizations can compete with established ones.

So what do successful organizations do besides take action? How might you and your organization maintain the agility of a startup, yet minimize the risks and inefficiency that usually go with them? Here are six principles to consider:

1. **Focus on the strategy.** Don't sweat the details until after you get the strategy right. Even after the strategy, follow principles and processes instead of prescriptive tactics. Don't get bogged down in minutia. If you are focusing resources on policies, procedures, specifications, budgets, and reports, you've possibly crossed the line from an agile organization to a bureaucratic one.
2. **Plan, but don't over plan.** Get the right people together and put the "big brain" to work, but don't create the not-so-practical plans that sit on the shelf and collect dust. Some of the best plans fit on one page. Identify key milestones, value-adding tasks, responsibilities, owners, and resources. Put dates on them and then take action as planned. Review progress and make mid-course corrections as needed.
3. **Maintain an external perspective.** Keep your eye on your clients and markets. Focus activity on what differentiates you in the market and adds value to your clients. If your initiatives, meetings, actions, and to-do lists don't touch your clients or create value for them, question their validity. Focus on that which is meaningful to your target market.
4. **Allow for the intangible.** Not all benefits fit into a spreadsheet. Don't dismiss the reality that people buy on emotion. Don't ignore the fact that highly engaged employees put in more discretionary effort. Give attention to things that matter. Great leadership, inspired employees, and highly collaborative teams produce more results than so-called guaranteed solutions.
5. **Don't require certainty.** Not to say you should bet the entire organization without proper due diligence. For sure you should conduct research, experiment, and test before committing considerable resource. Create a prototype or partner before buying or building in large quantities. But once you have a level of confidence greater than the flip of coin, take some kind of action.
6. **Challenge the status quo.** Don't tolerate complacency. Maintain a continuous improvement mindset. When the improvements stop, you start going backwards. You lose relevance and ultimately become obsolete. Be vigilant about constantly improving skills, methods, and features. Don't rely on past successes. There are always better methods and offerings waiting to be conceived.

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