

AGILE ORGANISATIONS NEED HUMAN FLEXIBILITY

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– Development of coping strategies builds psychological and mental capacity

Agility is not self-evident

Without the human perspective we fail when we attempt to create agile organisations that must be able to perform in the long term. But why is that? The answer is quite simple: the leaders and employees who have to run the organisation in an agile manner are in a constant and two-way relationship with the challenging environment that is made up of mergers, cutbacks, changes, conflicts and large amounts of work combined with the perception of these. In purely cognitive terms we appraise each situation as either a (social) threat or reward, and the above scenes from organisational life are typically something that is automatically perceived as risky. Our senses, emotions and brains put our bodies in a state of alert, and we therefore do not always act

rationally, clearly and resolutely. And it does not happen just once in a working day. We are quite simply obliged to take seriously what happens between the individual and the environment we are in, if we want agile organisations fit for humans and hence future commercial sustainability. Evaluations of well-intentioned 2020 plans and statistics for mental health and performance clearly call for us to become better in this regard if we want to ensure the sustainability, we aim for^{i,ii,iii}.

If organisations are to be able to act in an agile and adaptable way, we need above all to develop the people who make up the actual organisation to be able to cope in a constructive manner. We expect them to be able to act flexibly and adaptively

through changed structures, ways of running projects, new procedures and forms of cooperation, but that is far from enough to fully realise the ambition. We are human, and when we are in stressful situations arising from the complexity and change that per se are built into the organisation, it becomes considerably more complex. Human adaptability is not something we can just take for granted, even if the more functional things are adjusted in the organisation. Adaptability must be made conscious, trained and developed so that we become aware of what we actually do and what we can do differently at the slightly deeper levels that are affected by, and affect, the specific situations.

Coping is a complex psychological phenomenon

If we take a look at what we call psychological coping, it becomes a question of how we continuously and variably make cognitive and behavioural efforts to enable us to meet specific demands^{iv}. These demands may be external demands from the outside world or they may be internal demands we make on ourselves. We appraise these demands as being in balance with our resources or exceeding our available resources and thereby affecting our well-being, engagement and performance positively or negatively^v. In other words, our perception of this helps to frame our thoughts and the meaning we attach to the situation with consequences for the result^{vi}. The actual way in which the situation is perceived is crucial. I therefore often help leaders to re-frame the situation, where demands or appraisal of the resources must be re-appraised. It is not easy, but after first training and learning to apply the techniques it can help leaders, teams and organisational cultures further through the fixed assumptions and non-constructive patterns of behaviour that the cognitive framing can derive.

Coping is in principle healthy and something we do to protect ourselves by screening, reducing or mastering a mental conflict that arises in an interaction

with the outside world. By coping we get through and we can actually overcome quite a lot as individuals. It is therefore in essence a principle that works quite reasonably, if it brings sound behaviour and ultimately is beneficial to the cause. However, it is also a complex mechanism that is difficult to practise purposefully and constructively.

For example, humour is a positive form of extroverted and social coping that can have an enriching and building effect for the individual^{vii}. Conversely, this form can also have a negative impact on the outcome if it is used to ignore what ought to be talked about seriously using a more responsible coping strategy. Similarly, a tendency to fulfil obligations can be supported by this more responsible coping strategy, but conversely this can also lead to a destructive effect if it leads to behaviour that results in stress and burnout that could be avoided if a more confrontational coping strategy was adopted. To illustrate the complexity, we can further imagine with the latter example that the person concerned also employed other strategies, where the person for example rejects what appears stressful, and therefore does not relate to it and consequently does not obtain an overview and tackle it through a more intellectual form of coping. The examples merely illustrate that it is not a matter of the coping strategies ultimately being good or bad as such, but of it depending on the person, the situation and the choices that have different consequences.

Lazarus, the most recognised researcher in the field, argues that coping takes place at two levels: in the primary appraisal, where we appraise which 'threat' is concerned, a kind of perceptual selection and interpretation. In the secondary appraisal we consider and appraise what can be done to avert the 'threat' in the current situation. Coping is thus a process in the situation and not a result of the situation. And the process may be characterised by our personality traits, assumptions and experiences with ourselves and the world we live in.

Coping is further divided by Lazarus into an emotion-focused and a problem-focused coping element. The emotion-focused element is concerned with us managing and achieving control of the feelings or changing the emotional perception of the situation (for example through emotional intelligence and explanatory style). Problem-focused coping changes the stressor through action and problem-solving behaviour (for example planning and problem solving).

From the start we as humans thus have built in both emotional and cognitive flexibility and adaptability, in which we naturally have a tendency to make use of one or the other approach, depending on our neuro-based and psychological preferences. If we are to become wiser about our way of acting in an agile manner, it is crucial to be aware of these preferences, as well as our own preferred coping strategies.

8 different ways in which we typically adapt

Coping strategy 1 – confrontational coping

This strategy involves fighting back against difficulties or opposition. During crises or problems, you say: 'This challenge should not overwhelm me, I do not want to be stressed but on the contrary be in control of things.'

Coping strategy 2 – distancing coping

This strategy is simply the expectation that the problem will resolve itself. You do nothing, even though the problem is well known.

Coping strategy 3 – outward emotional coping

This strategy involves talking about your problem with others – expressing your feelings and experiences in relation to the adversity.

Coping strategy 4 – inward emotional coping

This strategy involves keeping the difficulties and the attached emotions to yourself. The advice and guidance of others would just be distracting and make it difficult to make choices and decisions.

Coping strategy 5 – responsible coping

This strategy involves careful reflection. You will try to understand what went wrong, learn from the situation and look for possible solutions in the future.

Coping strategy 6 – irresponsible coping

This strategy involves complete denial that there is a problem. You peer through your fingers at what is happening and ignore what is difficult.

Coping strategy 7 – intellectual coping

Here you apply common sense. This strategy involves careful examination of possible solutions after a thorough analysis of the problem. Clear goals are defined, and the barriers that might impede attempts to achieve a solution are considered. The same mistake is rarely made twice.

Coping strategy 8 – hope-oriented coping

This strategy involves believing in and hoping for the best. It is based on a very optimistic and positive attitude to life in general.

What about your own coping strategies?

The above cognitive strategies show how we can perceive situations and frame the world we are in. We typically employ two to three of the coping strategies that can work more or less appropriately for us.

Perhaps you can already work out what it is that you tend to think and do in challenging situations? It is a good ability to be able to spot your coping strategies and then consider questions such as the following:

- Why do I employ the coping strategies I do?
- Is it effective? For me? For others? For task-solving?
- Is it in particular circumstances that I do what I do?
- Could I have handled it differently in the specific situation or is the adaptation I do effective?
- Where could different strategies be effective? What would I then think, say and do?
- What has this taught me about myself that I must watch out for the next time I am in a particular situation or under pressure?

Training of adaptability and resilience

Once you have discovered your own coping strategies, it becomes possible to consider them and consequently train more appropriate use of the strategies. It becomes particularly important when we need to interact in complex organisations and in situations, which need our flexibility and ability to perform. And still we must be able to flourish as human beings. The organisation should ensure a context that promotes well-being as far as possible – the context or the environments that form the basis for the various coping strategies that are brought into play and that conversely will contribute

to creating this environment. If we work seriously on this dualism and the link between environment and individual, we must first create awareness of the mutual relationship between them and consequently focus on the coping strategies to use within the context.

Awareness and development can take place through active learning, where we make it possible for the individual and the team to experience or imagine stressful situations and learn through resilience training how coping strategies work and how they can help towards building capability with an impact on both performance and well-being^{viii}. It is effective here to set up different scenarios that are reminiscent of a stressful everyday situation in the organisation. Resilience is built by the employees together having an opportunity to experience and imagine the ‘threat’ and understand their own ways of coping when handling it in the organisational community.

Resilience training requires a tailored design, so that the specific and organisational environment appears relevant and realistic as a context. Only in that way can learning and experience be transferred with sufficient purpose to the everyday situation from the categories that we know from empirically based research will be relevant for building resilience^{ix}. The common learning arises when we subsequently reflect together on what happened in the situation: How did we cope? What strategies did we employ? How did it help us through what was difficult, or how did it prevent us from perceiving the situation clearly and constructively? Through attentive training in which we experience, feel, think and discuss the coping strategies with others, and when this experience is transferred, we will become better at coping and dealing with similar difficult situations in the future. This may be of significance for the culture that exists in the organisation and the common ability to act in an adaptive and agile manner. Our complex world without doubt calls on this psychological capacity, which is necessary for a mentally healthy work life, sustainable

collaboration and reliable performance in organisations that have reshaped themselves towards the future.

How could we design a training programme?

A leadership training programme that builds agility and flexibility capabilities, can, based on the above, as well as experience with other effective leadership training programmes, be designed as follows:

Pre-programme

The individual has identified their current level of resilience through an assessment and has spoken with an external management consultant, their manager or colleagues about the ability to deal with challenging and difficult situations. Articles, videos, podcasts, e-learning, etc. can be sent out to prepare the individual for the development process, and instructions can be given for small studies or 'field work' within agility and coping in the company.

Camp 1

Knowledge and models for leaders who in demanding contexts wish to be able to act in an agile manner through personal psychological insight. Insight into own coping strategies and mental flexibility in relation to mental health, psychological motivation and behaviour to be sustained in the organisation despite complexity and strict requirements.

Camp 2

Simulator training based on stressful situations, coping opportunities and

responding behaviour followed by immediate feedback and constant learning iterations. The leaders will be able to try out and experience coping strategies live and learn how these have preventing and promoting effects in different situations. They are all observed in groups by a subject matter expert and instructor who ensures a suitable learning context¹.

Camp 3

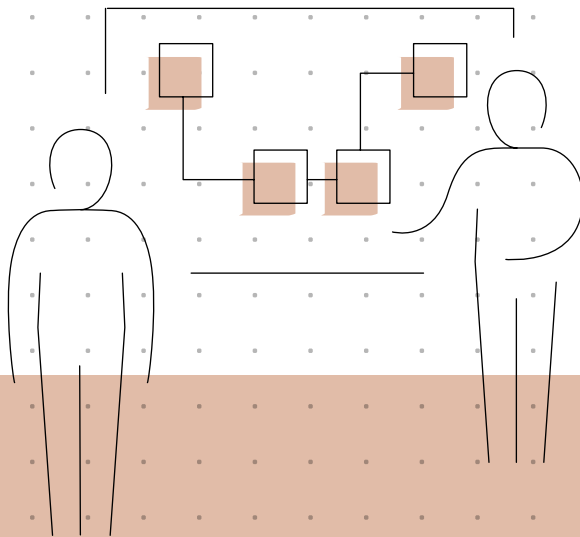
Here the understanding of coping and resilience is developed in depth. The individual coping strategies are converted into handling options filtered through culture, leader groups and teams. At the individual resilience level, the leaders work in depth with their own coping strategies, as well as the handling of stressful events embedded in a forward-looking behavioural design.

Post-programme

Key people from the organisation can be trained in the role as internal follow-up partners linked to the individual or joint behavioural design or more in-depth follow-up conversations can be held with external (subject matter expert) consultants. It can also be complemented by digital nudges and networks. This can be done at an earlier stage of the journey or just here in the post-programme. Thereby, the implementation and long-term impact can be supported effectively.

I hope that it will be an exciting journey to build good coping strategies and resilience in the organisation. Pay attention to the individual and common adaptability when it becomes most difficult to meet existing demands and adversities in the situations that arise. Difficult situations will arise for sure – this is part of organisational life and the future we need to be able to face in a resilient way to become even more agile and adaptable as humans and organisations.

¹ Source: "Create leader and team resilience in organisations": implementconsultinggroup.com/simulator-training



FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

Founded: 1996

Number of employees: 850

Headquarters: Copenhagen

Offices: Aarhus, Stockholm, Malmo, Oslo, Zurich and Munich

implementconsultinggroup.com

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