How agility can help organisations meet the challenges of an uncertain world

Capita

The five-year plan is dead. This news may come as a relief to those organisations who were not very good at forecasting and planning in the first place.

But I would imagine that many are looking at the VUCA environment we are in – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – and wondering where to start.

Since we cannot know what will happen next, let alone in five years' time, organisations should be focused on building the capabilities that will allow them not just to survive, but to thrive, and the most important capability in this era of constant change is agility.

Agility implies being fast, but also being flexible. Fast to execute, fast to fail, learn and pivot. Fast to hire, fast to re-skill your people, fast to spin up teams or redeploy them quickly when needed. This start-up mentality will be required by organisations old and new, large and small.

As will being flexible enough to adapt to changing customer behaviours, market conditions, competition and regulations. Flexible enough to look with fresh eyes when the old ways that brought seemingly endless success are no longer working. Flexible enough to bend without breaking.

So how can organisations develop the speed and flexibility that enables agility and thrive despite ongoing waves of disruption?

People

Many of the desirable attributes that drive organisational agility actually reside at the individual level. From top decision-makers to ordinary team members, you need agile people. People who are not afraid to make a mistake, who are willing to listen to the data – and to what other team members and customers are saying. People who are willing to work outside their job description, learn new skills and try new approaches. People who have high emotional intelligence but who are also able to work comfortably alongside artificial intelligence and automation technologies. You need "T-shaped" people, who have deep specialist knowledge but also a broad understanding and skillset in relation to your markets and customers - and to their fellow team members.

Data

If you don't have the data you need to make good, fast decisions – and quality, accessible data at that – you may find yourself flip-flopping from one mistake to another instead of pivoting to successively better courses of action. This means putting in place rigorous policies around data integrity and cyber security, as well as creating a coherent technology plan for data collection and storage. As important as having the right data is being able to draw actionable insights from it. This calls for a combination of artificial intelligence and human data science skills, and for the analytics function to be embedded throughout the organisation, not just in a silo such as finance or technology.
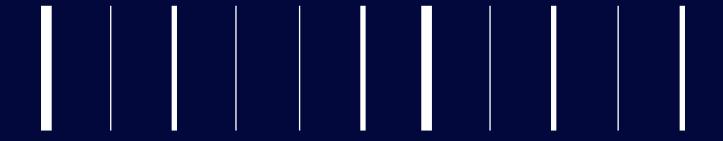
Technology

Your customers and employees expect a consumer-grade digital experience from every touchpoint, and they are comparing you to their last interaction with Netflix, Amazon and Uber. It's also critical that you digitise back office functions and create efficiencies through artificial intelligence and automation. All of this is hard and expensive to do, and you will probably need help. Five-year long enterprise-wide technology overhauls are no longer appropriate. By the time your mega project is finished, if you manage to execute successfully, which many don't, your technology will be obsolete, your business model may have changed and your customers may have moved on. A better approach in this VUCA world is to use modular services that can be plugged in and out without requiring you to retrofit your entire platform, to find ways to make existing systems work better together, and to contract managed services for specialised functions.

Purpose

Most important of all, you need to have a story. A narrative that pulls teams together and helps people to think critically about problems. Almost every successful transformation starts with a crisis and focus on a big issue. Why do you exist in the first place? Why do you need to change? What is the burning issue that is going to create the energy your teams will need to get out there and innovate, every day? Leaders will need to dig deep to find their authentic story. Because underpinning agility is resilience, the ability to get back up, even when a global pandemic has knocked you sideways, and to keep adapting. And for that, you need to know your purpose and your story.