



Agility for Life

Turning your organisation's rapid response to Covid-19 into new normal levels of speed, agility and effectiveness

Stuart Cross, May 2020

Over the past few weeks, since the coronavirus pandemic hit western nations in earnest, teams from across every business have made superhuman efforts to turn their organisations on a dime. Changes that would have taken months, if not years, to complete, have been done in days.

Some companies have completely shifted production lines. In the UK, Brew Dog, for example, has shifted production from beer to hand sanitizers. Others have transformed their online fulfilment capability. At one retail client, for instance, the warehouse team improved picking rates fourfold in a matter of days so that they could meet demand following the closure of their stores.

No business has been left untouched. All companies are now different to the ones that existed before the lockdown.

The changes have been difficult, but, in many cases, they've also been rewarding. Senior executives

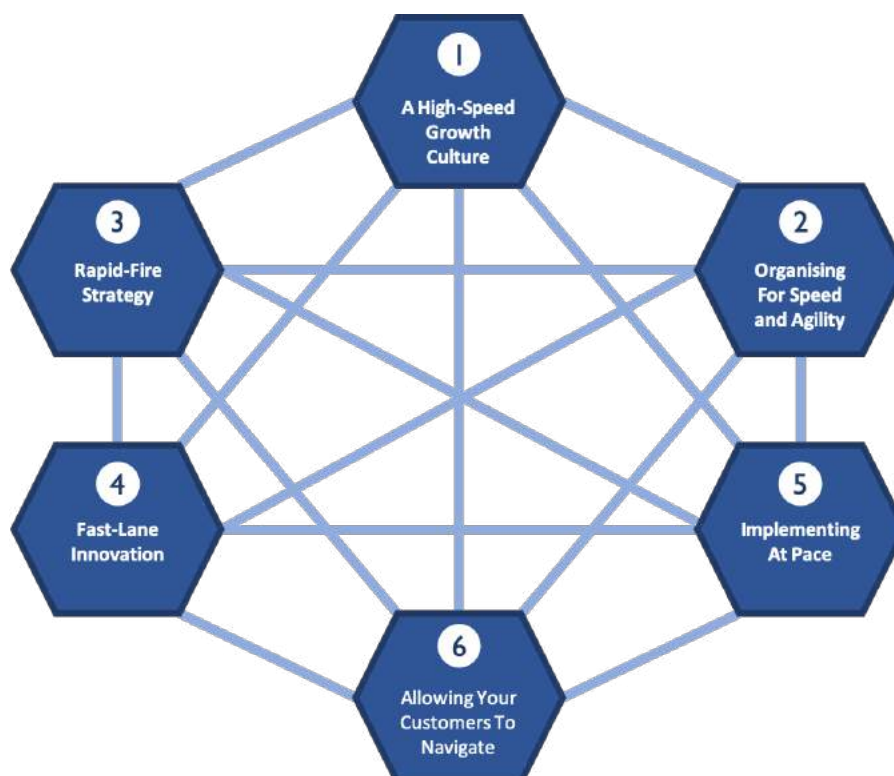
that I talk to have told me that everything feels more focused. Meetings – many hosted by Zoom or Teams video technology – are shorter, decision-making is faster, accountabilities are clearer. The leadership team feels more like, well, a team!

The question is, how can this new level of organisational speed and agility last? How do you embed the lessons of your response to the Covid-19 crisis into the 'new normal'?

In 2016, I published *First and Fast* (Business Expert Press), where I identified six speed drivers (Figure 1). Each of these is critical to improving the speed and agility of your business, but, on reflection I believe that there are six principles that underpin the drivers:

1. Reset expectations
2. Err on the side of simplicity
3. Everyone focused on the same goals
4. Team as noun and verb
5. Engaged, delivery-focused talent
6. Lead by results, not plans

Figure 1: The Six Speed Drivers



Reset expectations

There is a Chinese proverb that says: “*The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; the second-best time is now.*” Similarly, the ideal point for any leader to set expectations about behaviours, standards and performance is right at the start of their tenure. But, if things have slipped or become a little unclear, the new organisational requirements brought about by the coronavirus can give you the opportunity to refocus your teams and yourself on a clear set of expectations.

When Richard Baker became CEO of Boots the Chemists, the UK’s leading pharmacy chain and health and beauty retailer, in 2003, he believed that the company’s constant dabbling in unnecessary initiatives had meant the organisation had lost focus. Worse, Baker identified a lack of ambition across the leadership. As a result, while the wider organisation was relatively engaged and capable, there was a general air of defeatism, a lack of energy and little evidence of pace.

On Baker’s first day, he shared his expectations with his newly-inherited team in the form of a memo (see Figure 2). The memo focused on his personal values and his expectations of the behaviours of his fellow leaders, emphasising a need for energy, decisiveness and action.

The results were fairly immediate. While Baker let a couple of the directors go, he was able to promote replacements from within the business, and the new team began to re-energise the wider organisation.

Raising standards doesn’t take months to deliver; it can be done very quickly if the leadership team is clear and aligned.

What actions can you take to underpin the higher levels of energy, action and performance that you’ve seen during the crisis to reset expectations for the longer-term?

Figure 2: Richard Baker’s memo

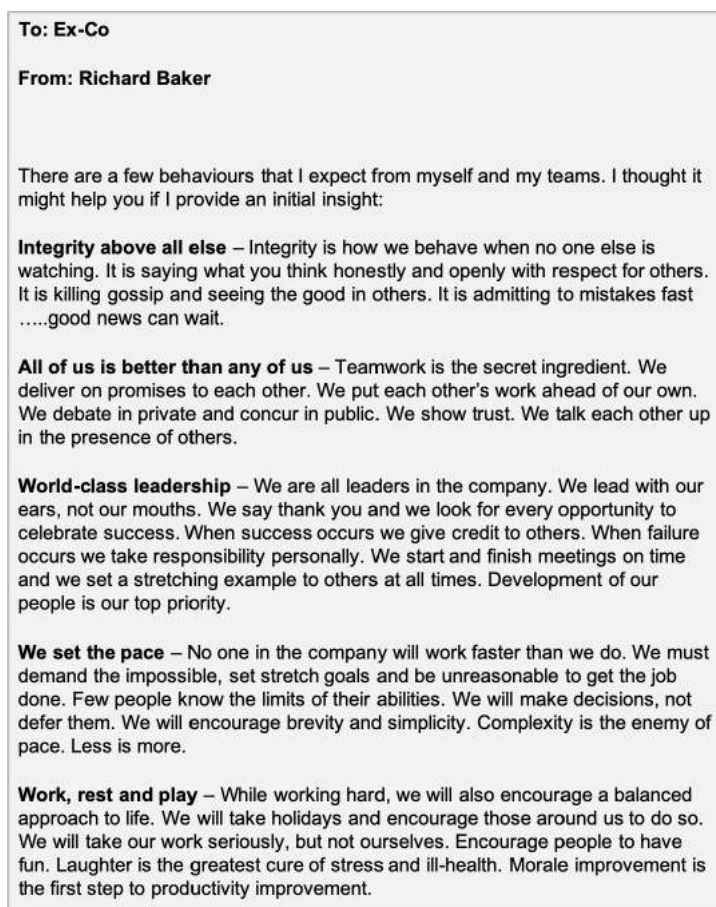


Figure 3: The Simplicity Test

| | Simplicity Statement | Scale of Agreement |
|----|--|--------------------|
| 1 | We have a clear strategic intent that, in simple, every day terms, articulates how we will succeed | |
| 2 | As a management team, we have set a handful of objectives (3-6) that drive our focus and activity | |
| 3 | We have an over-arching #1 goal that is the ultimate driver of our decisions | |
| 4 | We have crystal-clear accountabilities across the business and managers are never concerned that they're stepping on someone else's toes | |
| 5 | We have minimized the number of management layers – there is no further room for improvement | |
| 6 | Managers know exactly how to seek approval for a major decision or investment | |
| 7 | Our planning process is short, sharp and effective, taking only a few weeks to complete | |
| 8 | When an initiative or business activity isn't working it is quickly improved or killed – we don't allow problems to fester | |
| 9 | We minimize the number of formal meetings and senior managers' time is focused on delivering a great customer experience | |
| 10 | This is not a political organization. Everyone feels free to have their say and we all feel that we're on the same side | |

Err on the side of simplicity

William of Ockham was a fourteenth century English Franciscan friar, logician and theologian. We know him now, however, primarily as a result of Ockham's Razor, which was his key principle to problem solving. Ockham's Razor states, "plurality should not be posited without necessity", but it's probably easier to think of it as this: "All things being equal, the simplest solution is probably the best."

The concept of Ockham's Razor is equally relevant to organizational design. If in doubt choose the simplest option. The response of many companies to the Covid-19 crisis has been to cut their internal red tape, fast-track decision-making, clarify accountabilities and focus on getting things done. The bureaucracies that can creep into large organisations have been swept away.

Your next challenge is to keep it that way and to find the simplest organisational solution that enables your business to continue to move at pace. I'm not saying that your organization must be simple; but it must be as simple as it possibly can while still delivering your strategy.

Figure 3 gives you 10 questions to determine the simplicity of your organisation. All companies are different, but The Simplicity Test does highlight specific opportunities for you to make your business simpler, faster and more agile.

What are the results of your Simplicity Test and what does that tell you to focus on to drive ongoing speed and agility?

Everyone focused on the same goals

The pandemic has forced companies to reset goals and priorities. While the goal-setting has been done top-down, these new goals have, in general, been rapidly embedded across businesses. As a result, activities have become aligned faster and political considerations have been swept away in pursuit of a set of common aims.

The more that the entire organization is pursuing the same goal, the greater the chance that you will remove functional silos and build a single organisational community. At one of my clients, for instance, the entire business was focused on delivering the company's #1 goal of growing market share.

As the CEO observed to me, one of the side-effects of the goal was to step-change the level of interaction and integration between manufacturing, sales and marketing. As a result, issues were resolved more quickly and new ideas to help the company achieve its goal faster were developed much more rapidly than happened in the past.

As we have seen throughout this crisis, genuine organisational pace can only happen when your people are fully committed to your success, and are not merely compliant. That only happens when people feel that is in their best self-interest to pursue the same goals and objectives as the ones that you have set. A critical starting point is aligning each team's and each individual's objectives with the organization's most important goals.

What steps can you take now to embed a common, shared set of critical goals across the business?

Team as noun and verb

There cannot be any speed or agility without real teamwork. Organisations cannot move and adapt quickly if they are simply a series of disparate, functional fiefdoms, each with their own agenda, priorities and ways of working.

Teamwork is critical right across your business, but it starts at the top. It is the job of the CEO to clarify executive accountabilities, develop a sense of shared purpose, support and encourage honest communication and trust between the team members and develop a strategy and leadership agenda that demands cross-functional behaviours.

If necessary, the CEO should be willing to change the players to create the team. At one organisation I know, there had been years of mutual antipathy and mistrust between successive Commercial Directors and Marketing Directors. Consequently, each function pursued its own agenda almost irrespective of the other's priorities.

A newly appointed CEO decided to address the issue, however, and promoted two new directors on the basis of their existing working relationship. The pair's mutual trust and respect led to joint initiatives and strategies, and created an environment where their teams were willing to co-operate on new, emerging ideas.

Within a few months of the new directors' appointment, a new customer strategy and plan had been agreed, compared to the previous five years where no real change in customer focus had been possible.

Critically, the team doesn't end in the board room. You need to think of 'team' as a verb as well as a noun. You need people who are able to 'team' effectively across your organisation, both within their functional departments, but also, more importantly, outside it. Only then will you be able to deliver your priorities at pace and ensure best practice is embedded throughout the business.

What steps do you need to take to bring higher-performing teamwork to the centre of your organisational agenda?

Engaged, delivery-focused talent

Embedding speed and agility is a huge management task. It cannot be achieved by 'remote control' but needs proactive, direct leadership right across the business to succeed. As John Madden, the legendary NFL coach once said, "*Success in the coaching profession all comes down to a single factor – talent. Although not every coach can win consistently with talent, no coach can win without it.*"

What's true in football is equally valid in business. Only 'A' players who fully own their decisions and actions can deliver the rapid, consistent organisational change and innovation that's demanded, in times of crisis and beyond. This means, for example, that you must involve your next level of leaders in developing the solutions to your key challenges and opportunities, rather than just telling them what to do. You must also give them crystal-clear accountabilities for delivery.

Of course, managers who are able to deliver ongoing, rapid change must also be willing to take prudent risks, even if it means that some failures will result. That means that in the post-Covid world you should ensure that you look for cause, not blame, when reviewing progress. After all, a few 'glorious' failures are often a sign of a hugely successful, fast-moving and innovative organisation.

How can you engage your next level of managers and future leaders to deliver against your goals at pace?

Lead by results, not plans

The old business saying, 'fail to plan and you plan to fail', exemplifies an implementation approach that can create inertia, risk aversion and drag. Far from aiding implementation, this mindset acts as a brake on speed and progress.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not against planning, and I think that detailed plans and professional project management is critical for many major infrastructure projects. But, when it comes to creating and delivering a new or enhanced product or service, rather than the 'fail to plan' mantra, I much prefer the military adage, 'Plans rarely survive contact with the enemy' or, even better, Mike Tyson's quote that "everyone has a plan – 'till they get punched in the mouth!"

Success in the Post-Covid world won't go to those companies that can plan the best, but to those that learn and adapt the quickest.

The 'agile' approach to software development – a series of weekly or fortnightly sprints before reviewing, learning and agreeing the next sprint – provides a model for all projects. But this is nothing new. Back in the 1990s, the leadership team at Asda, the UK grocer, turned round the retailer's fortunes in part by having a weekly in-store review of the latest ideas and innovations for customers.

That is why my favourite business quote of all time is this passage from *Bloomberg By Bloomberg*, the autobiography of Michael Bloomberg, the founder of the media and financial information empire: "We made mistakes of course. Most of them were omissions we didn't think of when we initially wrote the software. We fixed them by doing it over and over, again and again. We do the same today. While our competitors are still sucking their thumbs trying to make the design perfect, we're already on prototype version No. 5. By the time our rivals are ready with wires and screws, we are on version No. 10. It gets back to planning versus action. We act from day one; others plan how to plan – for months."

How can you shift the cadence and focus of your project reviews to encourage and demand action and better results – faster?

Summary

The coronavirus pandemic will change the business world for many years to come. As a result, speed will become even more critical to success and growth. Many companies have been acting rapidly in recent weeks to adapt to the new Covid-19 realities. Applying these six principles will not only help your organisation have the speed and agility required for the period of the pandemic; it will also embed the necessary attitudes, approaches and capabilities that will give your business agility for life.

About Stuart Cross



Stuart Cross is a consultant and coach who helps market-leading companies accelerate growth. Since its launch in 2006 his firm, Morgan Cross Consulting, has attracted clients including Walgreens Boots Alliance, Green King, Dunelm, GSK, DFS, Morrisons and TD Ameritrade.

"I have worked with Stuart Cross for over a decade. Stuart has always helped me to think and act differently, and that is the key to innovation in any leadership role." **Alex Gourlay, Chief Operating Officer, Walgreens Boots Alliance**

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