Book review

Exploiting Agility for Advantage: A Step-by Step Process for Acquiring Requisite Organisational Agility

The author David L. Francis is an organization development specialist, Principal Research Fellow in the CENTRIM Research Group/University of Brighton and a Chartered Fellow of the Institute of Personnel and Development.

Preface: The book begins with a preface where the author, David L. Francis, recalls the various enterprises his father was involved in, making him a practitioner of agile, although the term wasn't used then. He then recalls his early working experience in Harrods' and how this sparked his interest in organizational agility. He explains how organizational agility was driven by individuals but now computer algorithms can enable agility; the world is changing faster than human agency can keep up with, and agility driven by technology will need to be integrated into those organizations who need to keep up.

Part I – Requisite Agility: This part starts with an explanation of what the book is about and very importantly says "this book does not seek to sell agility as the answer to all the 21st century's managerial problems. The purpose of this book is to make the management of agility less elusive." It explains ideally who this book is aimed at and then describes the structure of the book, and how it provides a seven-step structured learning journey to help managers grasp the functions and potential dysfunctions of organizational agility, enabling them to explore how to make the most of agility so they can use it to their advantage. The author has spent many years perfecting this system of exploiting agility for advantage (EAfA) and he provides seven truths which have become clear:

1. Not all organizations need to be equally agile.

2. Being agile is not the only thing that organizations need to do.

3. Leading an agile organization needs a distinctive set of competencies.

4. Adopting the wrong type of agility can be dysfunctional.

5. The sub-units of an organization need distinctive pathways for operationalizing agility as 'one size does not fit all'.

6. Becoming requisitely agile is a long journey, with progress being made over time.

7. Agility can be lost as well as gained.

The author explains that the high level of change and disruption that businesses face currently, or VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), is the reason why agility, and the ability to use it, is essential. The author then gives an example of successful agility and also explores what is known as dysfunctional agility, by using Nokia as an example, and how they did not embrace smartphones, despite being the dominant player in the mobile phone sector for many years.

When it comes to managing agility, the author does make it clear that becoming agile is often more

beneficial than destructive, but people need to be aware that it isn't a magical solution, and should be seen as a "mission-critical organisational asset but one that has associated risks and needs to be fit for purpose."

In the second section of part 1, there is a further definition of organizational agility, using an example and then the author provides the EAfA definition of organizational agility, which explains it as an aligned set of attributes that enable an organization to (1) adapt proactively and intelligently to situational changes; (2) create or find, select, and responsibly exploit, sufficient numbers of promising opportunities to gain comparative or competitive advantage; (3) robustly avoid or mitigate threats and (iv) acquire the full range of assets, resources and competences needed to thrive in a different future. The author breaks these four attributes down into further detail. Then some other specifics are explained in relation to EAfA such as: *agility deliverables, quantities of agility* and *fitness and agility.*

Levels of agility are now described, starting with Systemic Agility: which refers to the agility of an entire organization. Level 2 is Local Agility: not all parts of the organization need to be as agile as each other. The relationship between agility and innovation is looked at, examining how the two characteristics have a close but complex relationship. The author stresses that context is a capability and that agile organizations are best viewed as organisms rather than machines; there seems to be a distinctive personality to those organizations that are effectively agile. This section concludes that agility itself is a dynamic construct.

Section three is called Prudent Opportunism and covers many different types of opportunity, but starts with providing the EAfA definition of opportunity, which identifies two levels of opportunity:

strategic and local. When defining opportunities, the author provides an example and categorizes opportunities as alertness and hunting opportunities. Where opportunities can be hunted are hunting grounds and here he provides five examples of good hunting grounds:

1. Customers.

2. Potential customers.

3. Stakeholders.

4. Mavericks.

5. Rivals.

Next, the author explores some blockages to opportunism 'a blockage is a factor that inhibits the output of a system, which can be a whole organisation, a sub-unit or an individual'. The author stresses that blockage removal is essential to the EAfA process. Further types of opportunities are now defined: opportunity maturity, strategic opportunity seeking, local seeking, targeted opportunism, inner-directed opportunities, need-driven opportunities, fragmented opportunities, energizing opportunities, innovation-based opportunities, re-found opportunities, windows of opportunity that open and close, and opportunity famines. A quick guide to identifying promising opportunities is provided, and does say that there is no definitive method for telling the difference between promising and un-promising opportunities, but if managers use evidence-based methods in decision making, and understand costs, risks, strategic fit and potential benefits, then risks are greatly reduced.

The fourth section starts with guidance on leading agile enterprises where it states that agile-friendly leaders develop three managerial philosophies:

- Theory of Winning.

- Theory of Change.

- Theory of Action.

The author then delves into these three theories in more detail. More is

discussed about the qualities and traits of agile leaders such as boldness, visionary thinking and proactivity. Two questions are proposed in regards to identifying what it takes to lead an agile-friendly organization effectively: is agile leadership distinctive? If so, what are the characteristics of agile-friendly leaders? The EAfA theory argues that leadership in agile-friendly organization needs to be both strong and hands-on, and uses Apple as an example of this.

The author then sets out the EAfA Leadership Framework, which requires leaders to:

1. Build an agile-friendly TMT.

2. Define an organization's Agility Ambition.

3. Select facilitative types of agility.

4. Embed effective integrating mechanisms.

5. Adopt an agility-oriented organizational personality.

6. Relentlessly unblock blockages.

7. Promote optimistic discourse.

8. Take fast go, no-go decisions.

9. Sponsor a salon culture.

10. Acquire individuals with grit.

11. Exploit multiple technologies.

Each of these characteristics is then explored in further detail, explaining what it means and what it looks like, with examples from different organizations, most of whom, the reader will be familiar with.

Part II – **The EAfA Process:** this part begins with a brief introduction to using the EAfA Process and recommends the use of a workshop-based approach, the author stresses that for the process to be most effective the steps should be completed in order, although he does concede that each step can be used separately and can be adapted for this purpose.

Five paths are given for taking the steps of the EAfA process, and the first four are resonant with the colors of ski runs: the *green* path is a gentle orientation; the *blue* path is for beginners; the *red* path is for an intermediary level so more comprehensive than the others but localized; *black* is for those who want to make a full commitment; the final path is for those who do not want to use EAfA as a process but still want to learn from the tools and techniques provided.

This part is where the seven steps are outlined:

1. Step One: Orientating.

2. Step Two: Predicting.

3. Step Three: Diagnosing.

4. Step Four: Envisioning.

5. Step Five: Scoping.

6. Step Six: Customizing.

7. Step Seven: Delivering.

Section 6 covers Step One: Orientating – what is known about achieving requisite agility? It contains guidance for the leader, structuring the initial kick-off meeting and explains the pre-work tasks with goals, process, core tasks and sub-tasks, along with the time required for this. Next is all about how the leader will structure the workshop for participants and how they will structure these workshop sessions.

The same is repeated for Step Two: Predicting – how might we need to change in the future? Step Three: Diagnosing – do we have the capabilities to be agile? Step Four: Envisioning – what will we be like when we are requisitely agile? Step Five: Scoping – where, when and how, do we need to be agile? Step Six: Customizing – what types of agility do we need? And finally, Step Seven: Delivering – how can we make progress?

Part III – Resources: The third and final part of the book provides the reader with a number of theories, references and follow-up reading if they so choose to. Twenty-four topics are explained in detail and after each the author provides a list for further reading.

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