

JCURV PERSPECTIVES

HOW CAN YOU STRENGTHEN YOUR ORGANISATION'S AGILE CULTURE?



[The Agile Business Consortium](#), management consultancy [JCURV](#) and neuro-tech platform [Truthsayers](#) hosted a recent panel discussion with industry experts to explore practical steps to help build an agile culture.

If you missed it, here's our summary and some short videos (just click on the images to view) to help you on your journey.

The challenge

We know that organisations with a strong agile culture outperform those that don't. Think Amazon, Apple and Asos. Yet transforming an organisation's culture is hard to do. How can companies make this important transition?

Understanding what makes up an agile culture

The Agile Business Consortium defines agile culture as 'creating an environment that's underpinned by values, behaviours and practices which enable organisations, teams and individuals to be more adaptive, flexible, innovative and resilient when dealing with complexity, uncertainty and change'.

Employee empowerment, openness to learn and experiment, and customer-centric decision-making are features of a successful agile culture in practice.

In our [State of Agile Culture Report 2020](#) we found that those organisations with a strong agile culture outperformed those that didn't by an astonishing 235%.

However, building a strong agile culture isn't easy. A recent McKinsey survey revealed that 70% of respondents identified that changing the culture was the biggest challenge they faced in transforming businesses to agile¹.

So why do organisations struggle to build an agile culture?²

1. There's no shared concept of what the culture is and how it relates to their organisation.

Many organisations have an agile manifesto forced on them, but it's not specific to how they work in practice.

2. There's no shared language that people understand and can apply.

In many cases, agile concepts are technical (they often come out of development teams) which prevents individuals understanding and applying them.

3. There's no meaningful data to support the understanding of success.

Organisations find it hard to measure success and, when they do, the data is often out-of-date and backward-looking, meaning they fail to produce useful insights.

This means many organisations focus on tactical approaches to agile, such as training, rather than actually embedding an agile culture.

“One organisation I'm working with as a strong agile leadership team but not an agile culture because there are no articulated expectations and behaviours.”
 – Amanda Colpoys,
 Business Agility Coach,
 OVO



Key things to consider before you start your journey

The panel noted a few simple considerations to support a successful implementation.

1. Culture change is a long game

It's not easy to have your leaders, managers and delivery team unlearn what's previously made them successful and re-learn a new way of thinking and working. It takes time and patience.

2. There's no silver bullet

Culture requires changes in many parts of an organisation. Don't rely on training or an agile manifesto to deliver it. You need to be specific.

3. Recognise that every organisation is different

Ensure any behavioural and cultural framework you use is tailored to your organisation. That way, it will leverage your existing strengths and address any weakness.

¹ [Four global success stories offer insights and lessons learned on achieving organizational agility, McKinsey & company.](#)

² [3 Reasons It's Impossible To Change Your Culture, Forbes, Jun 2019.](#)

Practical levers to strengthen an agile culture

These seven steps will support your organisation in its journey:

1. Strong case for change

Ensure there's a strong and well-articulated platform that helps the entire organisation understand the need for change and the consequences if it fails to do so.

2. Strong senior sponsorship

Find an effective and active sponsor, preferably at ExCo level, who'll champion the required behaviours for the organisation and act as an agile role model. This includes:

- Building a psychologically safe environment that enables the teams to comfortably apply new ways of working.
- Role modelling the behaviours they'd expect the organisation to exhibit.
- Becoming the voice of agile at the ExCo, owning the ways of working, but also holding the organisation to account for its success.

3. Commitment and engagement at a senior level

Make sure your leadership team is committed to changing its ways of working. In a recent JCURV survey, leadership awareness and support were highlighted as the biggest impediment to embedding agile working (see figure 1). It was rated as more important than challenges such as team agile capability, organisation structure, and legacy technology.

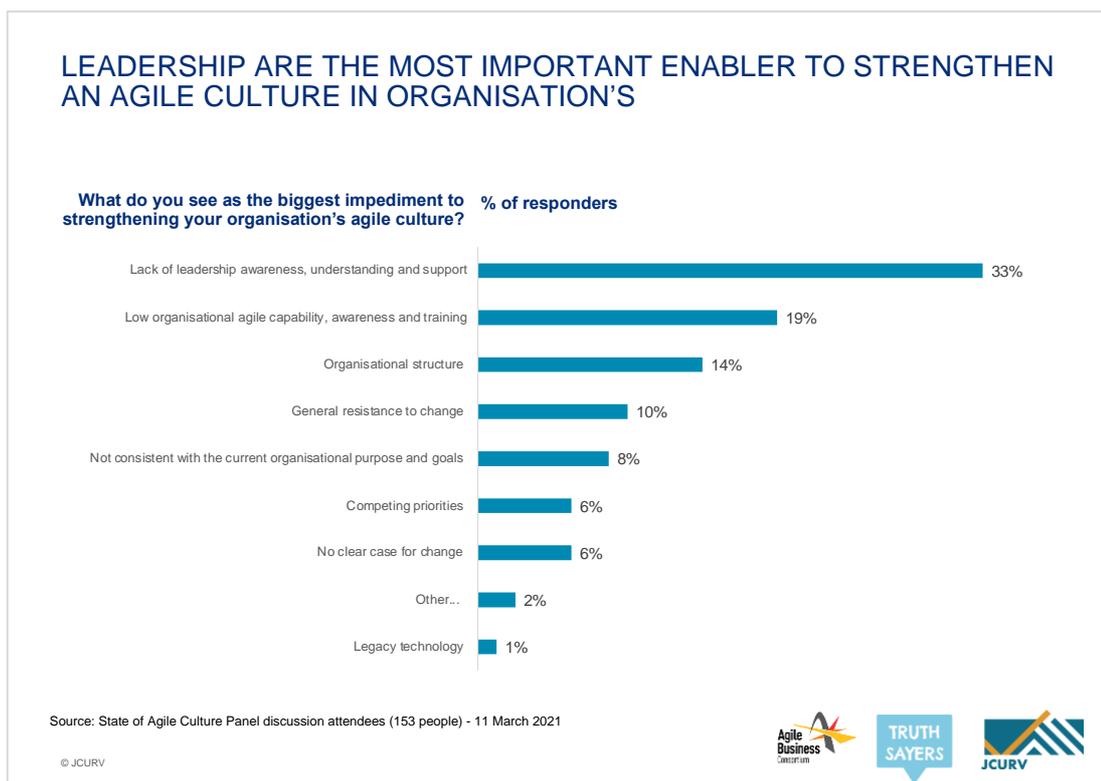


Figure 1. JCURV survey showing what agile practitioners believe are the most important enablers for an agile culture.

4. **Changing leadership behaviours often requires people to *unlearn* what has made them successful in the past. Key levers to creating that ‘eureka moment’ include:**
- Visiting other organisations (taking an ‘agile safari’) to hear from their peers about what’s possible, and their experience of how to adapt in their roles.
 - Speaking to delivery teams in their own organisation to understand their progress and impediments. Run root cause sessions for them to see the link between the teams’ performance and their own management approach.
 - Ensure the leadership capture their learnings and agree what they’ll do differently to experiment with this approach in line with their strategic priorities.

“It’s important to gain leadership understanding and commitment.”
– **Vikram Jain, Managing Director, JCURV**



“You can have teams work well with an agile mindset, but they’ll be slowed down without support from above.”
– **Dan Wilkinson, Agile Leader, Lloyds Banking Group**



5. **Create a ‘pincer movement’ from the top down and the bottom up to create a sustainable culture shift.**

Assemble and mobilise a coalition of change agents (from the executive to the front line) who understand the need for change, who want to change and who are committed to driving change.

Train and support them so they can define a behavioural framework to allow them to operate as role models to the organisation and encourage them to experiment so that other colleagues can do the same.

“The CEO was the champion for agile working as he knew how much disruption it could cause and wanted to ensure people felt they had permission to go with it. We also had great people to start to deliver using those new ways of working.”
 – Simon Pakenham Walsh, SVP IT, Sweaty Betty



6. Experiment with the new ways of working and behaviours in different use cases to continuously learn and improve the behaviours iteratively.

- The panel concluded the best way to learn is through action, so it's key for organisations to quickly set up delivery teams that are focused on unlocking business value in priority areas.
- Make sure your experiments are sufficiently high priority for your key stakeholders to have an interest in their success.
- Leaders should focus on creating a safe environment for teams to experiment in and be prepared to understand the learnings to support improvement and scaling in later stages.
- Share progress on the experiments, celebrating successes and learnings that will feed into the next iteration.

“We started with a few select people who wanted to try something different supported by a sponsor, but we learned through practice and experimentation. Over two or three sprints we started to see a positive impact and the culture and ways of working grew from there.”
 – Dan Wilkinson, Agile Leader, Lloyds Banking Group



7. Measure and monitor behaviours frequently and act on gaps you identify.

- Measure, monitor and learn by incorporating your defined agile behaviours into the reviews and retrospectives for the entire organisation every three months.
- Adapt and scale iteratively based on your findings at three-month stages enabling the business to develop, learn and strengthen their ways of working and culture strategically.

“It's important to visualise the behaviours and measure them on a monthly basis. The leaders will also check in on them monthly and look to address any gaps.”
 – Vikram Jain, Managing Director, JCURV



8. Hire for the new culture as well as develop people from within:

- Recruit for your agile organisation using your agreed behavioural framework to build a team which share your mindset and behaviours.

“You have to hire for the new culture. One of the challenges businesses face is that you’re transforming to a culture that you didn’t hire people for.”
– Amanda Colpoys, Business Agility Coach, OVO



Strengthening an agile culture isn't easy to do but bringing your leaders on board and following the steps we've outlined above will help you start your journey to a successful and sustainable agile transformation.

JCURV is a London-based management consultancy whose mission is to increase the agility of organisations so they can thrive in an increasingly changing world. We work with leading global and UK-based firms including several FTSE 100 companies.