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Understanding Agile for Strategic Communicators: Foundations, Implementations, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Disruptive change has become the new normal for business and society. In turn, Agile thinking, values, and principles are permeating a growing number of organizations as they try to navigate such changes. Unfortunately, many strategic communication professionals are unlikely to have received training in Agile. This article provides communicators with a foundational understanding of Agile through examining the history and development of Agile from the world of information technology (IT) to functions across the enterprise; reviews major Agile approaches, methods, and terminology; and examines implementation, including the nexus of Agile and strategic communication, and the gap between interest and implementation. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the rise of Agile for future scholarship, professional practice, and pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Agile; agile communication; scrum; lean; change communication; transformation

Disruptive change is the new normal. Within this new normal, the pace of disruptive change seems to be accelerating due to a range of technological, sociopolitical, and environmental factors converging (Neill, 2018; Penning & Bain, 2018). Many organizations are planning a transformation or are in the middle of a transformation to address one or more of these disruptive factors (KPMG International, 2016, 2019), as they try to survive and thrive amidst unprecedented changes in business and society (Bucy et al., 2016; Scott, 2019).

Companies unable to successfully navigate these disruptive changes face serious consequences, including a decline or worse (Anthony et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2019). The Standard & Poor's 500 index, better known as simply the S&P 500, is a well-regarded index of 500 of the largest U.S.-based public companies based on market capitalization. In 1964, the average tenure of a company on the S&P 500 was 33 years (Anthony et al., 2018). By 2016, the average tenure on this list had declined to 24 years. By 2027, this lifespan is forecast to decline to just 12 years. Nearly half of the companies on this list are forecast to be replaced over the next decade, due to being overtaken by faster growing companies or a merger or acquisition (Schwartz, 2019). Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon.com, one of the world's most powerful companies, has repeatedly warned that big companies have short lifespans and that Amazon will be disrupted one day (Hamilton, 2019; Kim, 2018). Bezos says his job is to delay that date by as long as possible (i.e., stay in what he calls "Day One" mode).

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the C-suite have responded in recent years to the bevy of disruptive changes facing established organizations by trying to make their organizations more adaptive, flexible, innovative, and responsive to change – in a word, *agile*. A global survey of CEOs found that nearly seven out of ten of them (67%) say that acting with agility is the new currency of business and that being too slow risks bankruptcy (KPMG International, 2019). A similar percentage of CEOs (71%) feel that companies must disrupt their own legacy strategies and business models,

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rather than wait to be disrupted by competitors and new market entrants (KPMG International, 2019). While there is much talk about "embracing Agile" and "doing Agile" within the business world (Phillips, 2019) – and increasingly across a range of corporate functions, from the C-suite on down (D. Rigby et al., 2020a; D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b) – what does this really mean specifically for strategic communications professionals and the strategic communication function?

Agile thinking, principles, methodologies, and terminologies are permeating a growing number of organizations around the world (Denning, 2017, 2018, 2019; Garton & Noble, 2017; T. Ragas, 2019; D. K. Rigby et al., 2016, 2018). Unfortunately, many strategic communications professionals are unlikely to have received formal (or even informal) training in software development and/or project management, two of the ancestral homes of the Agile mindset, a way of thinking about and doing Agile projects (Aghina et al., 2018, 2019). Embracing the Agile mindset means learning the Agile values, principles, and practices, including the basics of specific Agile methods and approaches like Scrum (Griffiths, 2015; Phillips, 2019; Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a, 2017b; Rose, 2015; Sutherland, 2014).

As such, the purpose of this article is to provide strategic communications professionals, including practitioners, scholars, and educators, with a foundational understanding of Agile. More specifically, this article examines the history and development of Agile from the world of information technology (IT) to functions across the enterprise; reviews the major Agile approaches and methods being implemented within the enterprise; and helps improve the cross-functional fluency of strategic communicators by reviewing key Agile concepts and terminology gaining traction within the enterprise. This article concludes by discussing implications of Agile for future scholarship, for future professional practice within the workplace, and for future pedagogy within the classroom in training the next generation of communications leaders.

Foundations

The paradigm shift in organizational management

There is a paradigm shift underway in organizational management, product development, and project management. Under the traditional scientific management paradigm, the focus has been on "top-down" organizational hierarchies and often "command and control" leadership styles with "boxes and lines" reporting (Morgan, 1986). This classic organizational structure is built around functional specializations with the organization's departments generally co-existing in fairly segmented silos. Organizations that operate under this traditional paradigm can be thought of as linear and sequential "machines" (Aghina et al., 2018, 2019). Such organizations are stable but are not particularly nimble or dynamic in the ability to pivot and address disruptive change. This is problematic as the velocity of change accelerates. Conversely, under the new management paradigm, leadership shows a strategic direction and then enables action, such as providing flexible resources to empower cross-functional teams built around end-to-end accountability. These more agile organizations can be thought of as "living organisms" (Aghina et al., 2018, 2019). Such organizations try to balance stability with dynamism, allowing themselves to better adapt to disruptive changes.

The seeds of this new paradigm were planted in the 1980s with the rise of new management approaches to physical product development and manufacturing. In a now classic article by Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986) published in *Harvard Business Review*, the researchers identified a major shift among successful U.S. and Japanese companies in new product development. Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986) observed that many firms had discovered it now took more than the basics of "high quality, low cost, and differentiation to excel" but rather "speed and flexibility" (p. 137). They described traditional product development as being like a "relay race," with one group of functional specialists passing the baton to the next group. A project went sequentially from one phase to the next. Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986) found that successful companies were adopting a new holistic, rugby-style approach based on

multidisciplinary teams where members worked together from start to finish: "as in rugby, the ball gets passed within the team as it moves as a unit up the field" (p. 137). The Agile framework of Scrum, which has its roots in software development (D. K. Rigby et al., 2016; Sutherland, 2014), draws from this pioneering work. Note that the scrum is a formation in rugby in which the players pack closely together.

Around this same time, Japanese automotive manufacturers were aggressively taking market share from U.S. and European automakers. Researchers began to study the success of Japanese automakers like Toyota and its Toyota Production System (TPS), which uses what is called value-stream mapping (Liker, 2004). This map separates activities that add value for customers from those that are waste. The research stream into these successful product development and manufacturing systems evolved into what is known as Lean thinking (Womack & Jones, 1996, 1996). Lean thinking and Kanban, a method used specifically for knowledge work and inspired by the original Lean manufacturing system, focus on delivering value, respect for people, minimizing waste, being transparent, adapting to change, and continuous improvement (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a, 2017b). In many ways, the Agile

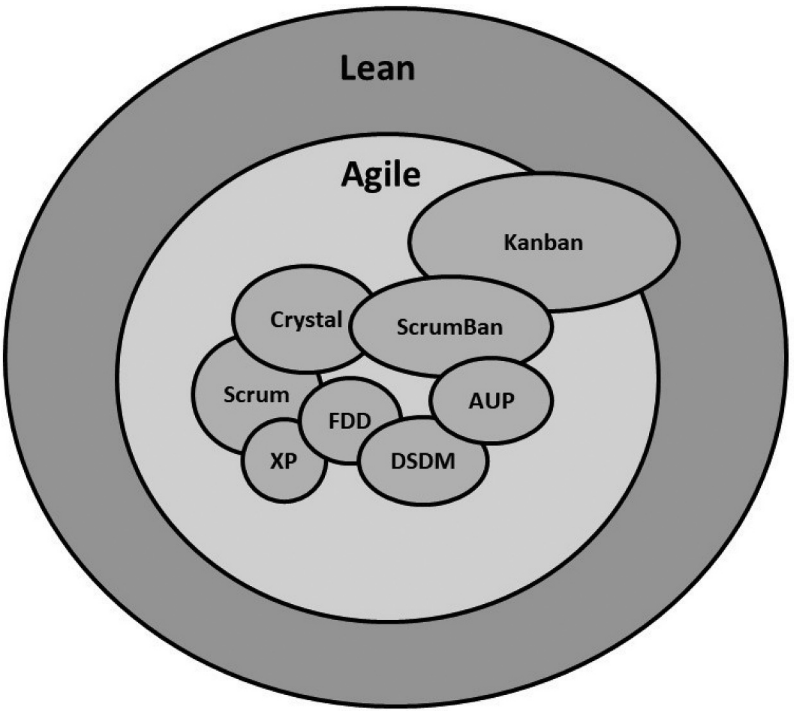

Figure 1. Relationship between Lean, Agile, and Kanban. *Source: Adapted from* Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a.

mindset, principles, and methods that have their roots in the software development world are descendants of Lean thinking from the physical product manufacturing world (Phillips, 2019; Rose, 2015). Figure 1 shows the relationships between Lean, Agile, and Kanban.

The Agile Manifesto: Values and principles

In 2001, 17 software developers and software project managers met at a ski resort in Snowbird, Utah, in the U.S., to discuss what was then being called "lightweight" software development (Rose, 2015). Unlike traditional product development, "lightweight" approaches were more adaptive and less

prescriptive. The developers met to see if they could agree upon what was making their projects successful. They dropped the term "lightweight" and agreed upon the term "Agile" to describe the adaptive, quick, and flexible approaches they were using for development; they informally dubbed themselves the "agile alliance" (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a). A critical output of this meeting was the creation of an influential document called the *Agile Manifesto* (Agilemanifesto.org, 2001). This document was an attempt to establish some general guidelines for managing software development projects (Phillips, 2019). The manifesto includes a list of four core shared values and 12 supporting principles for leading Agile projects.

Although originating in the software industry, the values and principles of the Agile Manifesto have since spread to many other industries, sectors, and functions (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a). The four Agile values, as stated in the manifesto, are:

- Individuals and interactions over process and tools;
- Working software over comprehensive documentation;
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation;
- Responding to change over following a plan.

The 12 principles of Agile have been distilled down to the following by Phillips (2019), an internationally recognized expert on Agile: 1) create value through continuous delivery; 2) work with changing requirements; 3) deliver working software frequently; 4) work collaboratively with

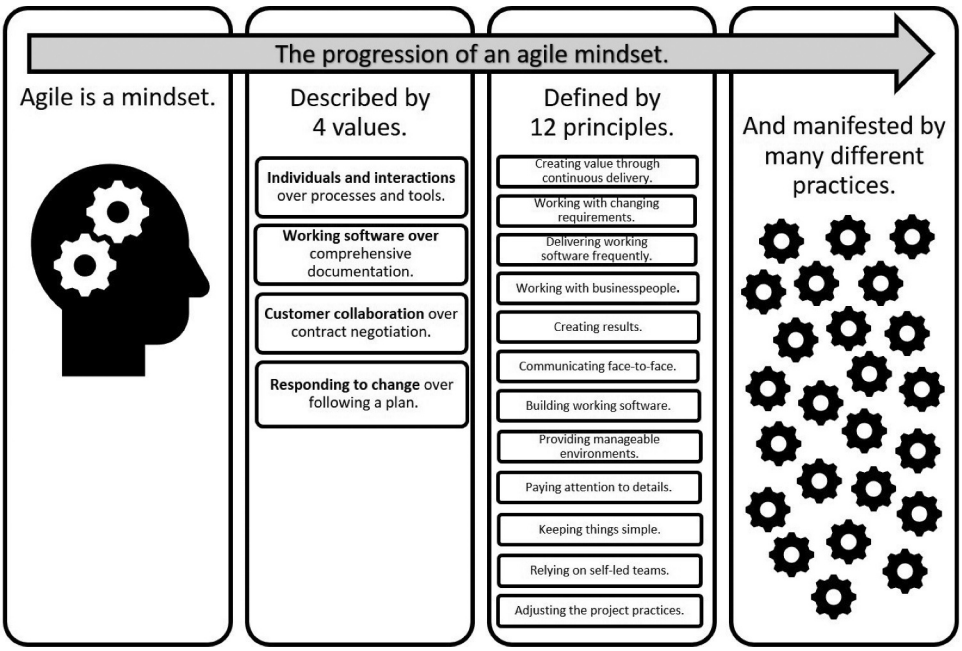

Figure 2. The Agile mindset, values, and principles. *Source: Adapted from* Phillips, 2019; Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a).

businesspeople; 5) create results; 6) when possible, communicate face-to-face; 7) build working software; 8) provide manageable environments for teams; 9) pay attention to details, including technical excellence and good design; 10) keep things simple; 11) rely on self-led and self-organizing teams; and 12) the team adjusts the project practices as needed. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the Agile mindset, values, principles, and practices.

The Agile approach to development has taken off since the manifesto's publication in IT departments and Project Management Offices (PMOs) of organizations around the world (T. Ragas, 2019). The PMO, a management structure that standardizes the project-related governance processes and facilitates the sharing of resources, methodologies, tools, and techniques, has grown in prevalence and importance inside of many organizations as they embark on complex digital transformation projects (McGinnis, 2018). Such projects have helped propel the growth and influence of the project management profession within business overall. For example, the Project Management Institute (PMI), the largest association for the project management field, serves more than 2.9 million professionals "working in nearly every country in the world" (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2020, para. 2). With chapters in more than 80 countries, PMI offers a range of certifications, including awarding the industry standard Project Management Professional (PMP) certification (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2020). There are more than 1 million PMP certification holders around the world (PMI Today, 2020).

Agile has become an umbrella term used to describe many different approaches and methods that support the mindset, values, and principles outlined in the Agile Manifesto (Rose, 2015). Common Agile methods and approaches include Scrum, eXtreme Programming (XP), the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe), DevOps, Crystal Methods, Scrumban, and Test Driven Development (TDD). These Agile methods and approaches emphasize project adaptation and flexibility in short development cycles. This is in contrast to the traditional engineering approach to project management, which is known as the *waterfall* or plan-driven methodology. The waterfall approach is heavy on planning and gets its name from how it breaks a project down into flowing sequential phases. Waterfall approaches tend to be used for definable and predictive work projects, meaning projects that have lower levels of execution uncertainty and risk (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017b). Agile approaches, on the other hand, are iterative and tend to be used for higher-uncertainty work projects. It is important to note that, while there is lots of momentum behind Agile, in practice, research shows that many project managers and developers use a mix of *both* waterfall and Agile approaches in their jobs (PM Solutions, 2018).

Adopting Agile approaches and methods to project management do not come without their share of challenges. As wryly observed by Rose (2015): "The activity around agile is a bit like the frenzy around a major league sport. A lot of people are talking about agile. Some people are writing about agile. Many teams try agile. But only a few teams play at a professional level" (p. 26). To start introducing Agile, teams need to understand and identify *why* the organization needs to change. Looking at an Agile transformation at this foundational level will help teams better prepare for the longer term transformation efforts (Rose, 2015).

Teams that have operated in a traditional project management environment might struggle with how Agile projects and teams are run (D. Rigby et al., 2020a; D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b). Agile projects have different project roles and rely heavily on self-organized teams to get the work done. Project managers, who are used to serving as the leaders of the project team, might struggle with the concept of self-organized teams in which project managers (or Scrum Masters as project managers are often known under the Agile framework of Scrum) are responsible for removing the roadblocks for the team and making sure the project team has a good team environment, rather than focusing on project delivery (Phillips, 2019; D. K. Rigby et al., 2018; Rose, 2015).

Agile training, development, and certifications

As Agile approaches, methods, and frameworks have gained broader adoption within enterprises, a growing number of professional training and development programs, including certifications, have emerged. According to the Project Management Institute (PMI), its fastest-growing certification is the PMI Agile Certified Practitioner (PMI-ACP). As of 2020, PMI reported that there were more than 34,000 PMI-ACP certified project management professionals around the world (PMI Today, 2020). The Scrum Alliance, another nonprofit association, offers a range of certifications for Agile practitioners, including the Certified ScrumMaster (CSM), Certified Scrum Product Owner (CSPO), and the

Certified Scrum Developer (CSD). Finally, Scrum.org, an organization founded by Ken Schwaber, the co-creator of Scrum, also provides various certifications for Agile practitioners, such as the Professional Scrum Master (PSM), the Professional Scrum Product Owner (PSPO), and Professional Scrum Foundations (PSF).

In recent years, professional training and development programs and certifications on the Agile mindset, values, and principles have expanded beyond the traditional domains of IT and project management. Many of these same organizations now offer trainings and certifications for business-people, particularly focused on Agile leadership. For example, the Scrum Alliance offers Certified Agile Leadership Essentials (CAL-E), Certified Agile Leadership for Teams (CAL-T), and Certified Agile Leadership for Organizations (CAL-O). Scrum.org also offers training geared to businesspeople, including the Professional Agile Leadership (PAL I) certification.

Implementation

The need for Agile in a VUCA world

The business management acronym VUCA succinctly summarizes the complex operating environment facing organizations and their management teams today (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Leaders in the corner office and the boardroom are facing arguably unprecedented levels of disruptive change, thereby forcing them to be more open to new ways of doing things (KPMG International, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018, 2016). As such, a growing number of CEOs and C-suite leaders are interested in implementing Agile within their organizations to try and better deal with this disruptive change (Garton & Noble, 2017; Martin, 2017; D. Rigby et al., 2020a; R. K. Rigby et al., 2020b; Rodrigues, 2018).

Agile is no longer simply the lingua franca of the IT department and software development (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018). In recent years, aspects of the Agile mindset, values, principles, and methodologies have repeatedly been featured in top business management publications and in best-selling books geared to business managers (e.g., Bühler, 2019; R. K. Rigby et al., 2020b; Sutherland, 2014). For example, the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*), the influential business management journal affiliated with Harvard University, has featured Agile from a management perspective multiple times within the past five years. This includes the cover story articles: "Agile at Scale: How to Create a Truly Flexible Organization" (D. K. Rigby et al., 2018) and "The Agile C-suite" (D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b). The *HBR* is also the home of the classic article by Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986) that formally introduced the Scrum approach to product development, which was then adapted for Agile software development (Sutherland, 2014).

Agile thinking, terminology, and processes have crept into the language of business without many being even fully aware of the origins of these concepts, ideas, and approaches (Friess, 2018; Martin, 2017). For example, the use of self-steering, multidisciplinary, cross-functional teams have become more common within organizations and across functions, including strategic communication (Arthur W. Page Society, 2016, 2017; Nothhaft et al., 2020; Zerfass & Volk, 2018). The uses and benefits of such teams trace back to Lean and Kanban, then more recently to Agile methods like Scrum (van Ruler, 2014, 2015). More teams within organizations also now work in shorter iterative cycles on projects, as a way to gain faster and better feedback from key stakeholders, such as customers and suppliers (T. Ragas, 2019). This work pattern is consistent with Agile's emphasis on time-boxed, short development cycles of one to four weeks, known as sprints. Core to sprint planning is a physical or virtual task board, which prioritizes the highest-value items from the product backlog – the ranked list of all features and functions the customer would like to see in the final product or project.

Some departments outside of IT have even adopted the Agile concept of the daily standup, which is typically a 15-minute team meeting that is often held in the morning and in which the team shares progress updates. Physically standing helps to keep the meeting focused and brief. Often, in these daily standups, the team will go around in a round-robin fashion and briefly answer the following questions: What did I complete since the last standup? What am I planning to complete between

Table 1. Agile terms and definitions.

Agile Term	Definition
Agile mindset	Teams and people that have an Agile mindset exemplify the values and principles of Agile in how they lead projects, and in the ways they work.
Daily standup	Teams use 15-minute daily standups to answer the following questions: What did I complete since the last standup? What am I planning to finish between now and the next standup? What are my roadblocks/ impediments (or risks/problems)?
Information radiator	A visible, physical display that provides project information for the organization enabling real-time knowledge sharing on the project, without having to disturb the team.
Iterative life cycle	An approach that allows feedback for unfinished work to improve and modify that work. The more frequent delivery of smaller deliverables is common.
Predictive life cycle	A more traditional (often known as "waterfall") approach, with most of the planning occurring up-front, then executing in a single pass; flows in a sequential process.
Product backlog	The product backlog is a list of prioritized project requirements. The product owner is responsible for maintaining the product backlog.
Product owner	This is a key role in the Scrum Agile methodology. This position describes the individual that manages the product backlog for the project.
Retrospective	A regularly occurring meeting typically held at the end of each iteration, where participants review their work and results so they can improve processes and product.
Self-organizing team	A self-organizing team decides who is going to complete what task. Self-organizing teams don't look to the project manager or the team lead for instruction, but instead are comfortable assuming leadership as needed to achieve the team's objectives.
Scrum	This is a well-known Agile framework for developing and sustaining complex products with specific roles, events, and artifacts.
Scrum Master	The Scrum Master makes sure everyone understands the rules of Scrum, removes obstacles for the team, facilitates Scrum meetings, helps the product owner groom the backlog, and communicates the vision of the project.
Sprints	A timeboxed iteration in Scrum. Sprints can last from two to four weeks. During this period, the teamcompletes the selected requirements for the current iteration.

Sources: Griffiths, 2015; Phillips, 2019; Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a, *Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017b*.

now and the next standup? What are my impediments (or risks or problems) to getting this work completed? (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a). See Table 1 for a list of commonly used Agile terms and brief definitions for each term.

The nexus of Agile and strategic communication

The chief communications officer (CCO), the senior most strategic communication professional in an organization, and their communication team and agency partners are sometimes at the forefront of organizational change and transformation initiatives (McGinnis, 2018; Neill, 2015, 2018; Nothhaft et al., 2020). CEOs and other C-suite leaders increasingly see infusing Agile thinking, principles, and methods into organizational cultures as cornerstones of successful change and transformation efforts (KPMG International, 2019; D. Rigby et al., 2020a; D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b, 2016; Scott, 2019). In turn, communications professionals are embracing Agile through the development of more agile teams and processes within their own in-house departments and/or agencies/consultancies. On the agency side, agile training and consulting services are being offered by some agencies/consultancies as a product offering, particularly within change communication practices areas (e.g., APCO Worldwide LLC, 2020; Toups, 2019).

Penning and Bain (2018) conducted mixed-methods research into high-performing corporate communication teams at large organizations. This study found that CCOs believe the following five factors define a high-performing communication team: adaptability; collaboration; specific and appropriate forms and levels of expertise; analytical abilities, such as strategy and measurement; and demonstrating leadership across the organization and to other functions (Penning & Bain, 2018). According to Penning and Bain (2018), high performance "requires people who are adaptive and can make quick, data-driven decisions based on an understanding of the business model and strategic

plan" (p. 8). While this study doesn't explicitly invoke Agile, many of these factors and conclusions align with the Agile mindset, values, and principles.

More recently, Korn Ferry (2020), a global executive search and organizational consulting firm, assessed the skillsets required of high-performing CCOs during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The need for agility was specifically highlighted. According to Korn Ferry (2020), beyond having excellent communication competency, CCOs should have the following five skills and traits: agility, strategic thinking, risk management, holistic insight, and stakeholder relationship management. When it comes specifically to agility, "on any given day, CCOs are faced with a range of disparate issues that require deft management" (Korn Ferry, 2020, p. 5).

Research by the Arthur W. Page Society (2016, 2017), a global association for senior strategic communication leaders, finds that CCOs are increasingly key players in organizational change and transformation initiatives, serving as conveners that help bring together cross-functional team across the enterprise to then advance organizational strategy, mission, and goals. A multi-year, global study of CCOs by the Page Society (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019a) found that strategic communication departments are often tasked with supporting corporate brand stewardship, corporate culture, and societal value creation. As it relates to company culture and agility, Page (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019a) finds that "pacesetting CCOs are playing a key role in helping CEOs transform their companies" (p. 2). This research further indicates that "progressive CCOs are establishing dedicated teams" and "formally training them on Agile methods" (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019a, p. 2).

The gap between interest and implementation

CCOs claim that becoming more agile is a strategic priority, but they do not yet seem to be fully doing so at scale in daily practice. In other words, there appears to be a gap between the interest by strategic communication professionals in Agile and the actual implementation of Agile thinking, processes, and procedures into the function and across the enterprise. For example, CCOs indicate that creating a culture of Agility will be the most important attribute of high-performing organizational cultures in the future (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019b). Agility rates higher than other attributes, such as diversity and inclusion (D&I), less hierarchical/more empowered teams, a growth mindset, adherence to values, and risk-taking and experimentation. By region, respondents indicated that Agility was the most important organizational culture attribute in North America and Europe, while having a growth mindset rated the highest in Asia.

When it comes, though, to communication technology, such as data analytics, CCOs report limited usage of Agile within their communication departments and teams (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019b). More specifically, only approximately one out of five respondents report using Agile to optimize campaign performance. Conversely, the majority of respondents indicate they monitor social platforms, track content performance and measure conversion rates for content as part of using communication technology (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019b). Just as with other organizational functions, interest in Agile among strategic communication professionals is rising (e.g., van Ruler, 2014, 2015). However, until there are more dedicated efforts towards creating Agile communication-specific training and development programs, resources and tools, and research and scholarship (such as this journal special issue), more widespread adoption may be hindered.

Implications

An acceleration of disruptive change seems to be the new normal (Anthony et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2019). Technology is at the heart of many organizational transformation initiatives trying to address such disruptive forces (D. Rigby et al., 2020a; D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b, 2018, 2016). It is difficult to imagine a world in which information technology (IT) departments and IT professionals, such as software developers, data scientists, and project managers, will not be even more important to the

success of enterprises in the years ahead (Aghina et al., 2018, 2019). These professionals, including one or more members of the C-suite, such as the chief information officer (CIO) and/or chief technology officer (CTO), likely speak the language of Agile and some of its various dialects, such as Scrum. As such, more chief communication officers (CCOs) and strategic communication professionals are recognizing the importance and value of Agile to organizational success but are not yet fluent in Agile as a second language. The rise of the Agile mindset, values, principles, and practices has important implications for the future of strategic communication, spanning from theoretical and applied scholarship to teaching and training.

Implications for scholars and future research

The rise of Agile within enterprises may shape the very way that strategic communication is practiced, researched, and defined in the years ahead. The now seminal article by Hallahan et al. (2007) argued that the essence of strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication to advance an organization's mission. More recently, in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) have argued that strategic communication "typically is a communication process that follows from an organization's strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling the organization's strategic goals and objectives" (p. 4). In this article, they go on to acknowledge that "the notion that communication can be controlled and regulated is now largely redundant" (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 7). This is a key point, particularly in light of Agile encouraging organizations to abandon more rigid and elaborate planning in favor of adaptive strategies that pivot as needed (Phillips, 2019). This is encapsulated in one of the four core values of the Agile mindset: "respond to change over following a plan" (Agilemanifesto.org, 2001, para. 2) In light of such changes, van Ruler (2018) has argued that strategic communications should be conceptualized "as an agile management process" and should focus on "testing strategic decisions by presenting and negotiating these in a continuous loop" (p. 367).

While effective strategic communication is often conceptualized as two-way, dialogic, and even omnidirectional communication, scholarship often focuses on the "architecture of speaking," such as studying communication messages and other forms of organizational voice (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b). Less research attention has been paid to the "architecture of listening" (Macnamara, 2017; Place, 2019). Agile emphasizes the importance of ongoing iterative feedback from stakeholders, such as customers and employees, for driving continuous innovation and adapting to change (Denning, 2018, 2019). For example, Agile project teams participate in regular retrospectives, typically held after each sprint (or even if a team appears or feels stuck). In these retrospectives, teams review how to become more effective, and then adjust their behavior (Project Management Institute, Inc, 2017a). In a traditional project management environment, project teams often gather or document their "lessons learned" at the *end* of a project or a phase, which does not always allow teams to *quickly* make improvements or pivot.

The rise of Agile practices within the enterprise, such as retrospectives, underscores the need for more scholarship into the increasing importance of organizational listening, including environmental scanning and monitoring. These are not new concepts, but they are understudied (Place, 2019). Research by Verĉiĉ and Zerfass (2016) confirmed that most excellent communication departments engage in listening practices and they function as "the ears and eyes of their organizations" (p. 279). Research at the intersection of Agile and organizational listening could be pursued through contributions to the Organizational Listening Project (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2017) as well as through the lens of established theoretical perspectives, including dialogic communication, co-orientation and organization-public relationships (OPR).

There are many areas and aspects of strategic communication that seem ripe for researching the role and influence of Agile within organizations and teams, including change communication and management, crisis and risk communication, issues management, internal communications, employee engagement and organizational culture. Penning and Bain (2018) have found that adaptability, which is at the core of Agile, is a key component of high-performing corporate communication teams. A logical path

for future research is to develop measures that evaluate the extent of agility demonstrated by strategic communication professionals, teams, and departments. Such measures could then be used to examine the precursors and outcomes associated with agile communication professionals and teams.

Implications for professionals in the workplace

This article underscores that both in-house and agency strategic communication teams would benefit from becoming fluent in at least basic Agile concepts and terminology. Unfortunately, many strategic communication professionals may know just a dictionary definition of *agile*. This limited understanding of Agile can lead to preconceptions – and even misconceptions – that are detrimental when working with colleagues in IT, such as developers and project managers (Friess, 2018; Martin, 2017), not to mention functions outside of IT, such as human resources (HR), that are getting more into Agile (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018). To build such fluency, strategic communication managers should consider making Agile a focus of future professional development workshops for their teams. This might include partnering with their colleagues in the IT department and/or the PMO on developing an internal workshop. A basic step is for managers to purchase and assign one or more Agile books for their teams to read and discuss. This discussion could then be incorporated into a workshop on Agile communication.

A more advanced commitment to Agile by a communication department or agency team would be to support one or more team members completing training in and becoming certified in Agile for business professionals through organizations like the Scrum Alliance and Scrum.org. To respond to the need for greater market-driven talent development (Jain & Bain, 2017), professional associations and centers in the field should consider developing programming and resources on Agile that are geared specifically for strategic communication professionals. In a related vein, there is a growing interest within the field in developing the business acumen of communication professionals so they are better prepared to serve as trusted counselors and advisors to C-suite leaders on strategic decision-making and policy matters (Bronn et al., 2016; M. W. Ragas, 2019; M. Ragas & Culp, 2018; M. Ragas et al., 2015). With more executives in the C-suite – and particularly the CIO, CTO and other leaders of the IT department and related functions – embracing the Agile mindset and its nomenclature (Denning, 2018, 2019; Garton & Noble, 2017; D. Rigby et al., 2020a; D. K. Rigby et al., 2020b), professional training and development on business literacy should also start incorporating at least the basics of Agile.

Implications for educators and the classroom

Educators are trying to transform strategic communication curriculum in college and university programs to better reflect the changing needs of the strategic communication profession (Krishna et al., 2020). Within many curricula, students complete coursework in communication campaigns, management, and/or case studies. Often, such coursework teaches strategic communication planning with roots in Hendrix et al.'s (2013) ROPE (Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation) model or Marston's (1963) RACE (Research, Action Planning, Communication, Evaluation) model. Such models are circular in design, but progress in a linear fashion from one stage to the next. In many ways, the campaign and program planning models often taught in courses mimic the classic predictive waterfall approach to project management (Bégin & Charbonneau, 2012). Students would greatly benefit from also gaining exposure to Agile's use of iterative work patterns that are non-sequential and more adaptive and flexible in planning (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019; van Ruler, 2014, 2015). Out in the real world, graduates may very well find themselves using a mix of both waterfall-like and Agile-like approaches depending in part on the level of work project uncertainty and risk.

Traditional communication campaign planning models may inadvertently present students with an illusion of order and control that increasingly does not exist in business and society. To better prepare future professionals for a world in which disruptive change and ongoing adaptation is the new normal,

students should be introduced to basic Agile project management concepts and principles as part of their coursework. Such perspectives could be integrated into existing courses or new courses could be developed specifically in agile communications. Completing an elective course in project management is another possibility. A useful repository for educators interested in pursuing such a path may be the project management curriculum and resources for higher education section of the Project Management Institute (PMI) website.

Conclusion

Strategic communication and Agile should go together like two peas in a pod. At its core, strategic communication is about using communication purposefully to advance the organization's mission, often through creating *value* for both the organization and its stakeholders (Hallahan et al., 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Zerfass & Volk, 2018). When asked what one word best describes the purpose of adopting an Agile mindset, principles, and practices, the same one word – *value* – is often invoked (Phillips, 2019). At its core, Agile approaches are about creating more and better value for *project and product owners* or, in the case of strategic communicators, *stakeholders*, such as customers, employees, investors, and communities. With disruptive change and continual transformation increasingly looking like the new normal for business and society, Agile thinking, approaches, and practices should gain even greater currency within enterprises. If strategic communication commits to closing the gap from *interest* in Agile to *implementation* of Agile, the field will be even better positioned to create value on behalf of their organizations and clients in the potentially tumultuous years ahead.

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