



Why Agility is more than the Agile Manifesto

Presented by Hilary Bryan

The Agile Manifesto

It was developed in 2001 by 17 software developers as an alternative way to develop software, rather than by the waterfall method.

Four values

1. **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools.
2. **Working software** over comprehensive documentation.
3. **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation.
4. **Responding to change** over following a plan.

12 principles

1. Customer satisfaction through continuous delivery of the product
2. Divide large chunks of work into smaller and achievable tasks for quicker completion and easier integration of changes
3. Adhere to the decided timeframe for the delivery of a working product
4. All stakeholders must frequently collaborate to ensure that the project is going in the correct direction
5. Create a supportive environment to motivate team members and encouraging them to get the job done
6. Prefer face-to-face communication over other methods
7. Working software is the primary measure of progress
8. Try to maintain a constant pace of development.
9. Maintain the quality of the product by paying attention to technical details
10. Maintain simplicity
11. Promote self-organisation in the team
12. Regularly reflect on your performance for continuous improvement

Why agility is more than the Agile Manifesto

Why do we need more? Here goes:

1. The Manifesto is about developing software and we need a wider perspective when we want to translate it to other parts of organisations.
2. It's not always clear who the customer is. Do they know what they want? They may not until they see it.
3. There's no mention of leadership and culture. Agile has borrowed servant leadership to fit in with self-organising teams.
4. An Agile Industrial Complex has evolved from the Manifesto with round 70 different methods of 'doing Agile' on offer.
5. Methods take over from the mindset and a focus on outcomes. Some are more like rock than water logic.
6. Organisations are complex and adaptive. Trying to impose a method that will suit every context isn't realistic. We have a habit of developing our own elephant paths – workarounds or ways to do our own thing and ignoring the path we're told to follow.
7. Complexity lends itself to multiple experiments, particularly in a VUCA and TUNA world.
8. Agility is about innovation and responding quickly to ever-changing circumstances.

What we need to add

An agility mindset

Start with where your organisation is and then blend together ideas and practices that work for your people. Come to terms with the VUCA and TUNA elements of your world, particularly the ambiguity. But stay curious, expose yourself to new learning and keep expanding your broad view of what agility is all about.



People acting with agility

If working with agility is about anything, it's about being human-centred and people feeling psychologically safe, and able to experiment, fail, and learn.

Are self-organising teams the end of the story? Multi-functional teams are great, but they may not always be harmonious. Look at the evidence from Tim Harford. Get a group of friends working together and they'll enjoy it and produce a result. Add a stranger with a different perspective and you get a better result, but the core group won't enjoy it as much.

We need collaboration, inclusion, diversity and belonging. And this includes diverse thinking. But a recent Business Agility Institute report (2021) states:

“Greater diversity does not automatically create more collaborative and productive teams. Differing viewpoints, operational structures, cultural norms and so on all create additional complexity and complicate the operation of teams and organizations. In truth, less diverse teams generally perform better than diverse ones, for a variety of reasons: easier alignment, reduced potential for microaggressions and tensions, etc.”

Ouch! You have to work at creating great teams. Empowering self-organising teams won't automatically create agility. Traditional career paths and performance management are based on linear models of how people behave. They don't fit an agility mould.

Changing to agility

Get the why clear. Define the outcomes you're driving towards and take people along with you. People who've survived Business Process Re-engineering, Lean Six Sigma and now Agile may well be a tad cynical. That's particularly if they're being asked to adopt practices that fit a model and not them or their organisation.

Ignore change leadership at your peril.

Leadership is critical

It always is. People aren't daft. They know when their leaders aren't buying in. We can smell even the faintest whiff of inauthenticity. Leaders need to walk the talk, have high EQ and operate effectively as enablers, innovators and disrupters. They'll know when to abandon ideas and when to take advantage of serendipity.

Communication is key

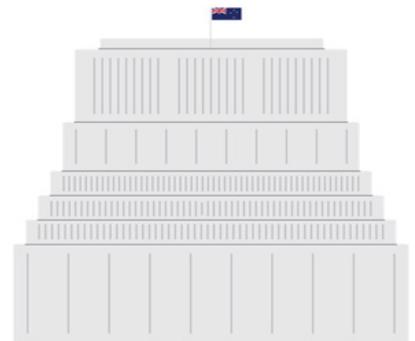
If you want to change people to move them towards agility, and maintain an agility-based culture, engage their emotions. Be transparent and hold ground truth conversations. Transparency is golden when all around is so much spin. That means listening and dealing with all the VUCA and TUNA elements.

A word about Government

We're in Aotearoa. We're a small country with small institutions with relatively small government agencies. Lift and shift from Silicon Valley doesn't work. Government has its own context. Political nous matters. Many of the problems government is attempting to tackle are wicked.

That means they:

- are hard to define: there's no one and agreed definition of what the problem is
- are interdependent and have multiple causes
- have unintended consequences
- are a moving target
- have no clear solution
- involve multiple agencies
- are socially complex, involving government, not-for-profits, the private sector and individual behaviour change.



And of course they need agility to attack them. But the context is complex. Ministers are more than key stakeholders. Customers are also citizens, subject to regulation as well as services.

And yet Government in Aotearoa has pulled off some great feats of agility.

Think about the COVID wage subsidy payments and responses to the Christchurch earthquakes.

The quest is how to capture that agility from crisis time to peace time. There's a real case for recording what public servants do when the status quo isn't an option. Then we have a chance of embedding their actions in the future, to map out those elephant paths.



Agility before Agile

“OUT OF THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY, NO STRAIGHT LINE WAS EVER MADE.”

- KANT (1784)

“LIFE IS CURLY. DON'T TRY TO STRAIGHTEN IT OUT.”

- SUSAN SCOTT (2002)

Think water logic, not rock logic

De Bono describes rock logic as the basis of our thinking system. By this he means, logic, reason, and the search for truth. We're back here to the thinking of the Enlightenment. Rock logic is hard-edged, permanent and unchanging. It uses argument to create absolutes. But De Bono argues this type of critical thinking is flawed.



What's rock logic? If you have a rock, it's just that—a static collection of atoms and molecules. If you add one rock and one rock, you get two rocks.

Water flows; rocks are solid

On the other hand, water logic is far more fluid. If you pour more water into a glass of water, you don't get two layers of water. Instead it mixes together and creates one whole.



A word about obliquity

Leading economist, John Kay, talks about obliquity. The world is too complex to be direct. Examples of direct thinking are long-term planning processes based on assumptions of what the future will be like. But the future is oblique: we should drop the fiction of prediction. What we understand about our complex environments and organisations is piecemeal and imperfect. It follows that how we solve problems needs to be adaptive and iterative.

Kay criticises rational design over adaptation. We imperfectly understand our complex systems. Problems we face are rarely completely defined. The environment in which we tackle them contain numerous uncertainties. We discover by taking action; we learn as we go.

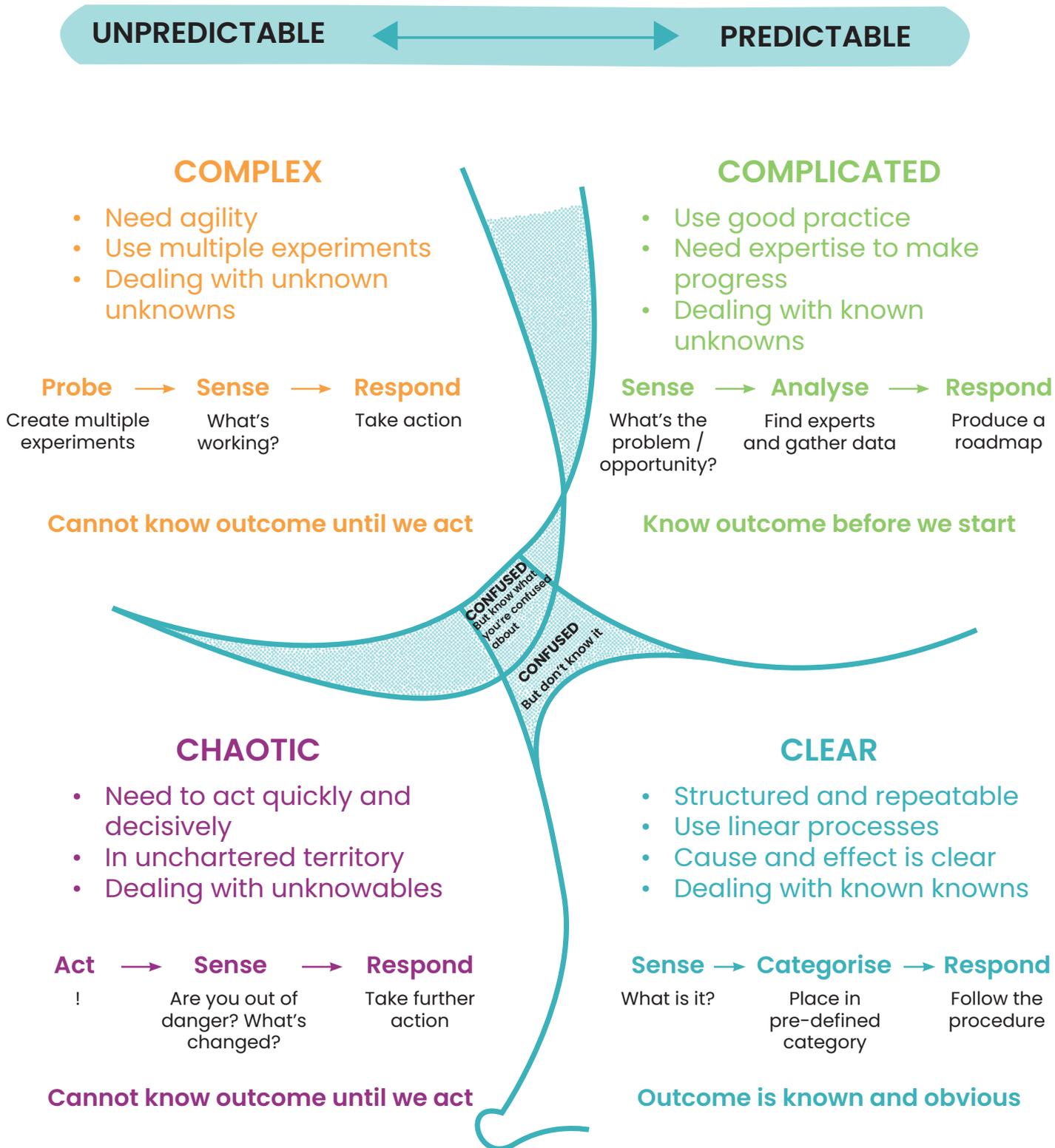
Two sisters: VUCA and TUNA

We've got used to VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous). Now let's add TUNA (Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel, Ambiguous).

This is why we need agility. That means to be nimble, flexible and adaptive.

A look at the Cynefin framework

Statistician, George Box stated that “all models are wrong but some models are useful.” In other words, any model is at best a useful fiction. No two situations are ever the same. But Cynefin is one of the useful ones. It’s particularly useful for working out when you’re in the complex or chaotic domains. That’s when we need agility.



Final word

“Organisations are complex adaptive systems. There is no one way of working that suit every context. Change is emergent. Changing how you do change is emergent. Organisations are emergent with a memory. Its emergence tripled. The only feasible way to progress is by running experiments, being sensitive to context in a fast feedback loop and a safe to learn environment. There is no such thing as best practice; there is no one-size fits-all set of practices that optimizes for all contexts.”

– Jonathan Smart, 2020

Our world is unpredictable, messy, crooked, fluid and oblique. You could try to create predictability; clean up the mess; straighten out the crooked timber; put rocks in the water, and make the oblique explicit. Good luck. I believe the world will come back and bite you.

An agile and adaptive way of seeing the world and acting within it is a better bet.

And to do that, a broad and human-centred view of agility is best. See our [‘Human-centred workplaces’ webinar](#) for helpful tips.

Find out more

Agility Powerpack

To find out more about this broad, human-centred and agnostic agile approach, check out our [Agility Powerpack](#).

Free agility session

Also, ask us to join you and your team for a [free 60-minute session](#) to find out and explore these ideas and more.

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'I don't know what I'm doing': How to have that conversation at work

