Increase Agility By
Creating A Learning Culture

BY SARA SADDINGTON MAY 2017

It's been more than 50 years since Bob Dylan first crooned, "the times, they are a changing." Since then, change has been just about the only consistent thing in our lives. Globalization, technology, automation, the subsequent rise of startups that are eating into the market share of long established industries, and an increased focus on knowledge work over process-oriented workflows, are just a few of the trends driving the massive industrial shifts we're seeing, and will continue to face in the years ahead.

On a recent webinar, Chris Taylor, Actionable.co's Founder & President described the change realities with a great metaphor: we used to hold our breaths to dive beneath the surface of "business as usual," for long enough to glimpse what lurked in the depths, make a change, and return to the surface gasping for air, anxious to return to our status quo. Discrete change initiatives, managed using outdated processes and structures, were difficult but necessary elements of business as usual.

Today, we need to start evolving gills—we can't just keep holding our breath, and hope to make it back to the surface. We need to get comfortable in the depths of change.

Here at Actionable, we believe that working to create a **robust learning culture** within organizations will help develop the skills required to **increase agility and navigate a world of constant change**. To continue the metaphor, learning can help us find the pockets of air beneath the surface of change, and eventually, to learn to breathe under water.

Unlocking the Change Skills Organizations Need to Thrive

As the exponential development of technology continues to outpace the capacity of human development, organizations need a high degree of agility, supported by a robust learning culture.

"Greater organizational agility leads to better performance—providing organizations with a powerful edge on the competition."[1] We believe that an **effective learning culture**—which integrates learning into daily activities—is the **best strategy** for organizations looking to increase agility.

71% of respondents identified **faster response to changing market conditions** as a benefit of agility.

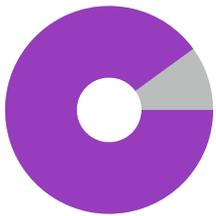—PMI, ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY REPORT, 2012
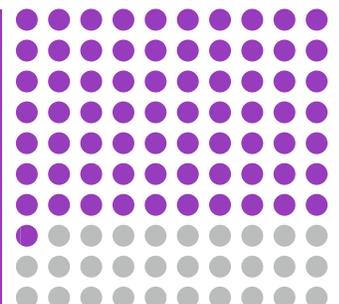
Why Agility Matters.

70 % of agile companies rank in the top quartile for organizational health.[2]

Organizations are feeling the effects of disruption as a result of new technology, yet most are concerned that they lack the skills required to manage these shifts.
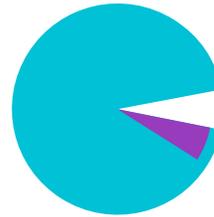
90% of CEOs believe their company is facing **disruptive change** driven by digital tech.[3]

Yet 70% of CEOs say that their organization is **lacking the skills** required to adapt.[3]

Although agility is clearly identified as critical to organizational success, few organizations feel they have the agility they need to face the challenges of a VUCA[4] world.

94% of companies say **"agility and collaboration" are critical** to their organization's success.

Yet 6% say they are highly agile today.[3]

In an effort to increase agility, organizations are moving into more matrixed environments—however increased collaboration often results in a decrease in role clarity.

84% of U.S. employees are **"matrixed"** to some extent.[5]

Sources: 1) PMI, Organizational Agility Report, 2012. 2) McKinsey Quarterly, Why agility pays, 2015. 3) Deloitte Global Human Capital Report, 2017. 4) Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. 5) McKinsey Quarterly, Revisiting the matrix organization, 2016.

The data is clear—**agility matters to the bottom line**. It's also clear that organizations are failing to create the conditions required to increase agility. Part of the challenge is that organizations are often using the same constructs—org charts, reporting hierarchies, business models, familiar tools and processes, etc.—while attempting to adapt to a world of constant change. Instead, organizations need to be willing to examine the legacy pieces that are holding them back, and adopt a growth mindset that embraces the realities of uncertainty. The pace of change is astounding—you can't try to do the same things you've always done, only faster, and expect to keep up.

The good news is that a **learning culture** will help create the conditions your team needs to increase agility and thrive in a state of constant change. The bad news is that culture doesn't shift overnight, or as a result of a one-time initiative. You cannot declare that your organization will change its culture and expect it to shift immediately. Culture is much harder to control—it has to be lived and breathed by all the individuals that make up your organization. To create a learning culture, you can't rely on **event-based training**—a once a year field trip to a conference won't change much, but a deliberate and sustained effort to integrate learning into daily activities can yield profound results.
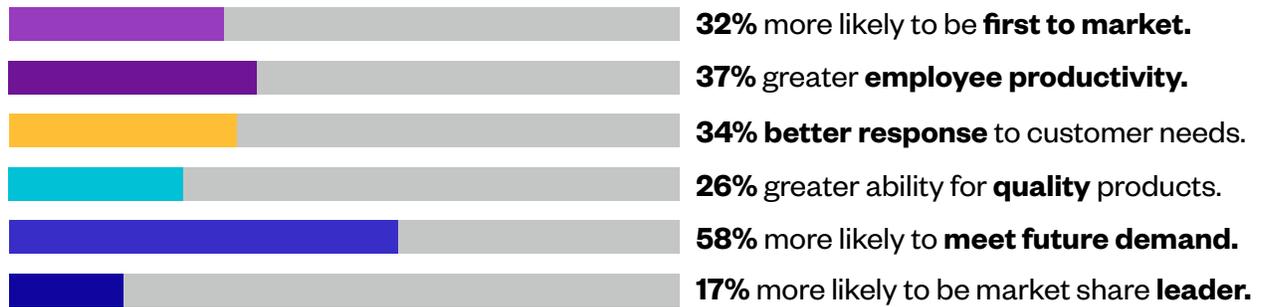
> **"You can either set the pace of the market or be the one to react.**
> **Whoever is fastest out of the gate is the one everyone else has to react to."**
>
> DAVE GIROUARD, *FIRST ROUND REVIEW*

Learning is Critical for Success.

Creating a robust learning culture in your organization will create the environment that team members need to experiment and try new ideas. Furthermore, organizations that prioritize learning in their culture enjoy better results.
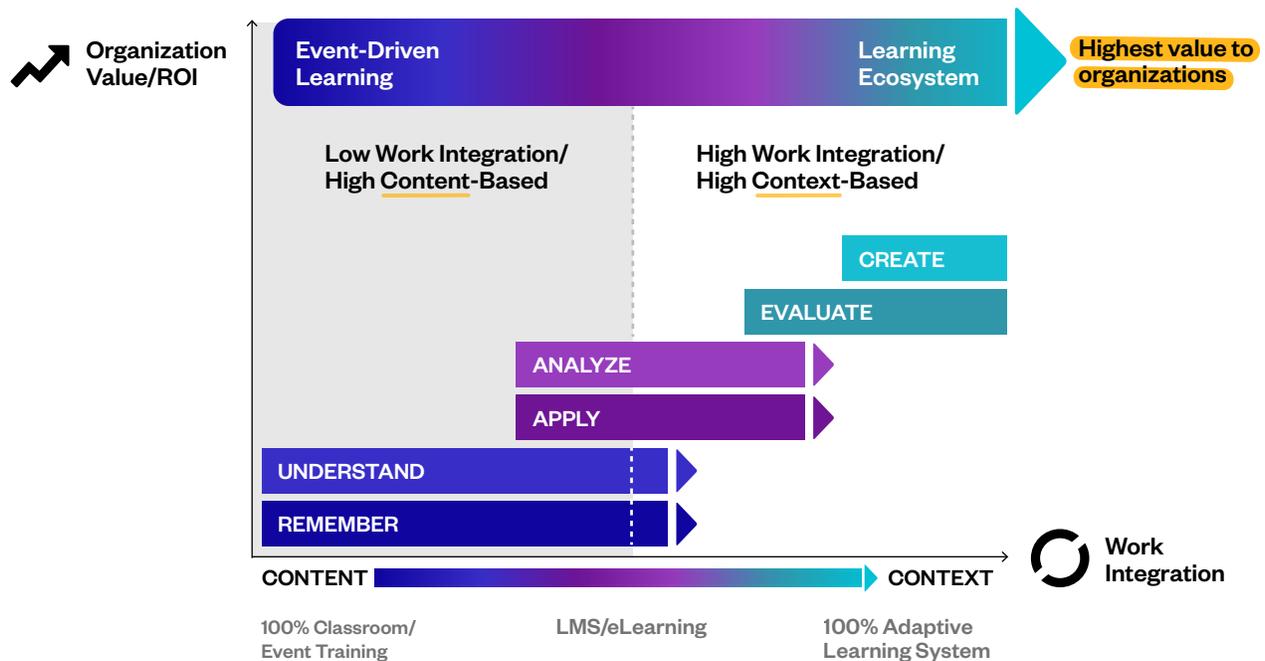
High-Impact Learning Organizations

32% more likely to be **first to market.**

37% greater **employee productivity.**

34% better response to customer needs.

26% greater ability for **quality** products.

58% more likely to **meet future demand.**

17% more likely to be market share **leader.**

Source: Oracle, 2013

In order to create an effective learning culture, organizations need to move beyond event-based content delivery, and toward **creating a learning ecosystem that integrates learning into daily activities.**

Learning Culture Evolution

Organization Value/ROI

Event-Driven Learning

Learning Ecosystem

Highest value to organizations

Low Work Integration/
High Content-Based

High Work Integration/
High Context-Based

CREATE

EVALUATE

ANALYZE

APPLY

UNDERSTAND

REMEMBER

CONTENT — CONTEXT

Work Integration

100% Classroom/
Event Training

LMS/eLearning

100% Adaptive
Learning System

The model above maps **Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning** onto an axis that reflects the shift from context based learning (events, discrete training sessions, etc.), to a more contextual based mode of learning (integrating learning into work activities), and that shows the increased ROI for organizations that are able to reap the rewards of a learning culture.

Let me use a personal example to unpack this model further:

My work requires a cursory knowledge of HTML in order to make changes and improvements to our websites. I joined Actionable with a pretty limited repertoire of tricks—I understood the basic mechanics of adding tags, and could code in bold and italic text, bulleted and numbered lists, and a few other pieces. I also had a few basic troubleshooting skills to help me figure out what was going wrong if a challenge presented itself. As my role at Actionable has grown and evolved, I've become more involved in making changes to the websites, stretching my skills.

A model of learning that was highly dependent on content might suggest that my employers would recommend an online course, video tutorial, or off-site training to brush up on my coding skills. However, that model of learning would have little integration into my day-to-day work activities, and ultimately have a pretty low-impact on my abilities.

Instead, I've been setup with access to the backend of the websites, and given increased authority to make changes as I see fit. With the support of my peers, and license to politely pester our Director of IT with questions (who has been incredibly gracious and patient), I have been able to learn as I go—picking up new skills and knowledge along the way. My learning has been highly integrated into activities—when a need arises, I can figure it out in the moment, and then implement it. This builds my confidence, allows me the time and ability to practice what I'm learning in the context of my work (increasing retention of what I learn), and allows me to focus my learning priorities on the work that matters most for my KPIs. It's a win for everyone.

It's important that this mode of learning is supported by my team leaders, who help me connect what I'm learning to the larger picture of organizational objectives. When I learn something new, I feel **energized and invigorated**, which also strengthens my engagement with the team. I still have a long way to go, but I know that I my learning is well-supported. And because the stakes are high—I'm applying what I learn immediately—I'm able to retain a great deal of what I learn for the next project. If I was sent into a corner to teach myself HTML without the opportunity to practice, I'm certain that I wouldn't be able to retain much. That's the increased ROI of integrated learning.

> **"It's in the combination of consistency and agility that leaders can become strategic, performing an organization's purpose with excellence but changing course when the situation demands."**
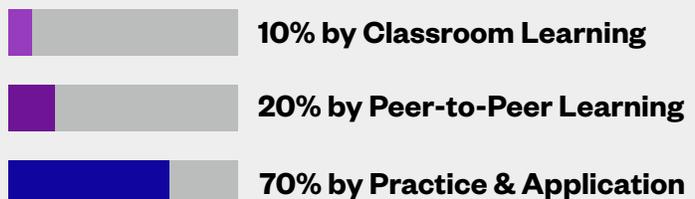>
> **JOHN COLEMAN,** *HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW*

Creating an Agile Learning Culture.

Integrate learning into daily work activities to help teams build skills to adapt to shifts in a VUCA landscape.

HOW DO WE LEARN?
We know that formal, classroom style education is generally ineffective.

10% by Classroom Learning

20% by Peer-to-Peer Learning

70% by Practice & Application

4 Things Organizations Can Do To Create More Agile Teams

✔ **Adopt an Iterative Approach to Work Activities**

Start with a minimum viable version of a project, and work through improvements from there—this allows for a continuous process of refinement that allows teams to learn as they go.

✔ **Create Realistic Timelines About Decision Making**

Remove bottlenecks around the decision making process, by determining how long a decision should take to make at the beginning of the process (it's often less time than you think).

✔ **Be Transparent About Market Shifts**

Take time with your team to discuss the trends and challenges they see on the horizon for your industry. Do a SWOT analysis as a team. We know that uncertainty can create anxiety—so make an effort to include your team in these discussions.

✔ **Integrate Learning Into Work Activities**

Seek out opportunities for learning that occurs in the context of daily work activities. Share articles and other resources with your team that can help them improve their skills right now, and encourage them to apply what they've learned to a project or process.

To increase agility by creating a learning culture, leaders need to be actively involved in the development of their teams. The suggestions above are a great starting point to help you create the kind of adaptive learning that teams will need to thrive in a state of constant change.

As you work to create a learning culture within your team and organization, it's also critical to keep a close eye on employee engagement, which can get lost in the shuffle of shifting priorities to manage change through active learning. As teams become more agile and collaborative, and continue to focus priorities on learning and adaptability, they also run the risk of eroding the foundations of strong engagement — clarity around role and culture fit, self-management and capacity to take on new activities, and team communication.

Make sure that you continue to make time for your one on ones, coaching conversations, and opportunities to connect on a personal level. These conversations will ensure that you have a strong foundation of engagement to help see you through the challenges and changes that will result as you increase agility.

The pace of change is not going to let up. We all need to be thinking of ways to adapt to the rapid shifts in the business landscape, without burning out, relying on outdated processes or hierarchies, or allowing competitors to take a bite out of our market share. Will you help your team evolve the skills they need to thrive in this environment? Or just hope that they can hold their breath long enough to keep from drowning?

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