



Understanding and Embracing Agile Change

WHITEPAPER

Introduction to Agile Change

Agile Change is a transformative approach that combines principles from the agile methodologies, traditionally used in software development, with the processes needed to adopt new ways of working from change management.

Agile Change aligns the project activities that create tangible change with the emotional and psychological support that delivers behavioural change.

In Agile Change, two components are always considered:

1. **Tangible Change:** these are the concrete changes, often created as outputs from projects and programmes. They include the development of new systems, products, operational models, or service implementations.
2. **Behavioural Change:** this is the shift that people make to how they do their work, including the adoption of new skills, routines, attitudes and values. The success of tangible deliverables hinges on how well people adopt and integrate them into their daily workflows.

The integration of tangible and behavioural change addresses a common gap where organisations “throw the change over the wall” expecting users to automatically adopt it. Agile Change instead emphasises gradual exposure to change, allowing users to learn and adapt incrementally, reducing delays and fostering a smoother transition to new ways of working.

Agile Change enables organisations to realise early and frequent benefits throughout a transformation, by ensuring that every change is prioritised based on its ability to create value. This is a benefits-led, not a requirements-led approach to change implementation.

The Evolution and Foundations of Agile Change

Agile Origins

The roots of Agile Change can be traced back to concepts including Toyota's lean manufacturing in the 1940s, and Harvard Business Review's 1986 paper from Nonaka and Takeuchi on [iterative collaboration](#). The Agile Manifesto of 2001 established core agile principles, and the development of frameworks like Scrum and the Dynamic Systems Development Model (DSDM) laid foundational methodologies for iterative development.

Change Origins

Whilst Change Management is a relatively young profession, with the professional bodies [Change Management Institute](#) starting in 2005 and [Association of Change Management Professionals](#) in 2011, change management theories have been in existence for a lot longer. For example, in the [Change Management Practitioner course](#), we still reference Rogers 1950s innovation adoption model which gave us the phrase "early adopter" and Elizabeth Kubler Ross's 1960s work on the grief curve to understand behavioural changes.

Why Agile Change?

We face unprecedented levels of continuous and often disruptive change at work. Traditional linear change management frameworks were not designed from the perspective of supporting people through more than one change. These models treat each change as a separate, independent event, but that is not how we experience change at work.

It no longer makes sense to plan the change activities in isolation from other changes that are taking place. We have to take small steps, achieving some change, and then review our progress in light of all the other changes that have taken place around us since we started our own initiative. We can then decide what is the next most relevant, valuable change that we can make, and repeat the cycle.

Agile Change treats change as an ongoing process, recognising the inter-dependencies between multiple changes. It applies an incremental approach to implementing change, using feedback about the impact of what has been achieved so far, with horizon scanning of what is happening in the business environment, to take informed decisions about the next most relevant step.

Merging Agile and Change

In developing the Agile Change approach, I deliberately brought two worlds together, merging agile principles drawn from a range of Agile methodologies, with change management models of behaviour change, updated for the 21st century using the latest research from neuroscience, positive psychology and emotional intelligence.



10 years ago I recognised that whilst those I was training in the AgilePM certification and the Change Management Practitioner certification were learning important skills, they would benefit from a hybrid approach that demonstrated how the creation of new ways of working could be delivered in an agile, adaptable way.

This led me to write the first edition of the Agile Change Management Handbook, and a meeting with APMG-International led to the creation of a certification to recognise ability in these skills. I became the Chief Examiner for their new Agile Change Agent certification, named to represent those with Agile Change skills as true “agents of change” within their organisations.

Agile Change Agent provides you with techniques to apply Agile concepts to scoping, planning and prioritising tangible and behavioural change. Core areas of focus include identifying business needs, prioritising deliverables, and managing the agile change roadmap.

This course launched first in Saudi Arabia with Saudi Electricity Company the first to commission a training programme for all project and programme managers, followed by the Ministry of Health who trained their national change agent network. Since then it has been used as an entry level change management course in Europe, the UK, US and Australia and New Zealand. It is used all sizes of organisation from global conglomerates looking for a simple, intuitive structure to government

departments seeking to upskill in the latest thinking. It is also very popular with independent consultants and coaches using the techniques as the basis of their approach.

During lockdown I wrote the [2nd edition of the Agile Change Management Handbook](#), and as with all 2nd editions, I was given the opportunity to add more content, which enabled me to include 43 practical techniques for making change happen. These solutions are brain-smart ways for shaping how we explain change so that those impacted are motivated to develop new ways of working, taking ownership and fully participating in the change.

This section of the book is used by so many change professionals that APMG-International and I developed the content into a course and certificate which we called Agile Change Coach, as the techniques are used to coach someone through the journey of change, from initial awareness of the need for change to successful realisation of the benefits from adoption of new ways of working.

Agile Change Coach uses techniques from neuroscience and positive psychology to lead those impacted by change through an incremental, iterative approach to adopting new ways of working and building new capabilities. It teaches techniques for resilience, positivity, participation and celebration.

My partnership with APMG-International continues, as I have added to this learning pathway by developing the new Neuroscience for Change course, based on my most recent book, Neuroscience for Change at Work.

Design principles

To ensure I created an approach that met the needs of a rapidly evolving business environment, I reviewed leadership competency models, interviewed CEOs from across the world, as well as incorporating the best ideas from agile, project, programme and change management methodologies.

I applied these design criteria:

- Treat Agile Change as strategic priority
- Apply 21st century leadership competencies
- Ensure the approach meets employee engagement criteria
- Broadens agile from IT projects to all types of change
- Reduce the academic emphasis, to broaden the appeal for all levels of ability
- Ensure it can be easily applied and adopted

Treat Agile Change as a strategic priority

In creating the Agile Change approach, I correctly predicted that applying agile concepts would become a strategic priority. This is because I recognised that it offered the flexibility needed for the high volumes of simultaneous change that has been increasing over the last 15 years.

Latest statistics demonstrate this growth:

- 41% of respondents in the annual global Capability for Change survey believe that the level of change in their organisations is manageable, 45% believe that staff have the time to adopt new ways of working.
- In a recent survey by IBM of CEO priorities, 43% of respondents said they were going to increase the tempo transformational change in 2024 compared to just 19% who expect the pace to slow.
- Gartner have identified that the volume of enterprise wide changes that an average employee is exposed to has risen 5 fold since 2016, rising from 2 changes to 10 changes impacting an employee simultaneously.
- Gallup have released a survey that shows only 43% of staff are willing to support change, which has fallen from 76% in only 3 years.
- 35% of CEOs in the IBM survey believe their workforce will need retraining and reskilling as a result of the impact of AI over the next 3 years. This is up from 6%, a 29% jump since last year.

Apply 21st leadership competencies

This century is dominated by uncertainty, with constant high volumes of change being a natural response to the volatile, complex business environment. The volume of change means that the old “top down” leadership has been replaced by changes emerging bottom up, with individuals at all levels of seniority and experience contributing to continuous improvement. We expect innovation from everywhere, and we expect everyone to be willing to not only do their job but take part in re-designing their job as circumstances change.

Change is a universal experience, and sustainable shifts in capability only happen if we engage everyone who must work differently in this effort. This meant I needed to design an approach that was intuitive and easy to understand and did not rely on specialist Agile or change management expertise.

This aligns with the advancement in leadership opportunities at all levels of the organisation, as the role of manager evolves from supervision to becoming mentors and change agents.

McKinsey labelled 2023 as “The Year of the Manager.”, recognising that managers are at the forefront of managing adoption of new technology, ensuring that their teams adapt effectively and encouraging continuous learning and innovation.

This shift has been partnered with a democratisation of change responsibility, triggered in part by the impact of Covid, when everyone in the organisation had to take responsibility for changing how they worked. There is now greater recognition that everyone must play their part in doing their job but also in improving how their work is done, by originating, implementing and adopting change.

Key Benefits of Agile Change

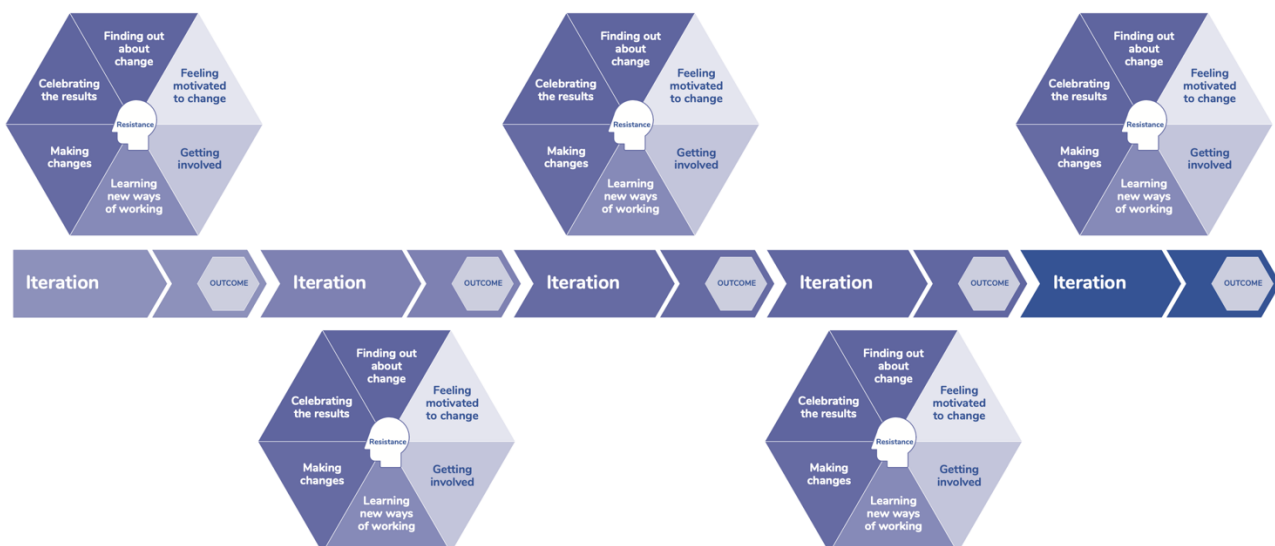
1. **Early Benefit Realisation:** Agile Change allows organisations to realise incremental benefits quickly, boosting motivation and demonstrating value early.
2. **Behavioural and Tangible Integration:** It ensures that as new systems or processes are introduced, users adopt them seamlessly, via the application of the simple, intuitive Agile Roadmap.
3. **Prioritisation and Adaptability:** By focusing on high-priority elements through each sprint or iteration, Agile Change allows organisations to remain responsive to evolving requirements.

Key features of Agile Change

The Agile Change Roadmap

The Agile Change Roadmap outlines an iterative, incremental approach to managing both the tangible and behavioural elements of change. This roadmap is not a one-size-fits-all template; it is customised per organisation to address specific change needs and priorities.

The roadmap is structured into short cycles (e.g., 8-14 weeks), where each cycle includes tangible deliverables and a corresponding behavioural adaptation plan. By the end of each iteration, stakeholders can observe tangible changes, while simultaneously having the opportunity to engage in activities like training, feedback sessions, and habit-building exercises to ensure that new practices are adopted efficiently.



Agile Change and Organisational Leadership

Agile Change is suited for leaders who can balance both performance and transformation. Today's leaders are expected to not only manage daily tasks but also drive innovation and strategic shifts. Agile Change equips leaders with the tools to facilitate change in real-time, nurturing a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Leadership in Agile Change also requires facilitating collaboration across diverse teams, fostering a one-team culture. This alignment helps teams from different organisational functions work cohesively, ensuring that changes align with strategic objectives and yield meaningful results.

Through courses like Agile Change Agent and Agile Change Coach, leaders gain structured techniques for prioritisation, resilience, and creating a team culture of trust and shared ownership.

The Brain-Smart Approach to Agile Change

Agile Change is brain-smart in that it recognises how people naturally adapt to and process change. Agile Change techniques leverage principles from neuroscience, making change easier and more sustainable.

1. **Incremental Processing:** The brain naturally prefers smaller, manageable chunks. Agile Change breaks down large transformations into smaller iterations, making them easier for teams to comprehend and implement.
2. **Visual Planning:** Agile Change relies on visual aids like roadmaps, which are processed more efficiently by the brain compared to text-based plans.
3. **Anticipation and Reward:** Frequent achievements during sprints release dopamine, a powerful motivator, and enhance engagement with the change process.
4. **Setting Expectations and Reducing Anxiety:** By structuring predictable cycles, Agile Change helps mitigate uncertainty, which reduces cognitive strain and keeps teams focused and confident.
5. **Course feedback**
6. A few quotes from satisfied attendees doesn't always give you enough understanding of whether their good experience is something that will apply to you and your situation, so I have given you the backstory for each of these compliments – and in reading them you can see why I kept them anonymised, as the detail gives you insights into the struggles they were having.

These comments are drawn from the second half of 2024.

7. “This course really stretched me and the ways I think and feel about change. I am recommending it to everyone in my network.” – backstory: this comment was from an experienced project manager, whose career success came from delivery of high quality tangible outputs, on time, on budget. He wanted to broaden his scope to take more of a lead in ensuring that what was created was used. He wanted guidance on how to encourage users to get involved and stay active during his projects, moving from listing their requirements to being engaged team members.
8. I found the content very insightful and the Agile Roadmap is so useful – I have already briefed my team so we can use it for our client projects” – backstory: the first thing this team leader did after the course was create his own presentation about the Agile Roadmap and its benefits, and delivered this to his team. He then coached them to think about their work in roadmap terms, and they re-crafted their messy group of projects into a team backlog that simplified how they explained what they were doing to their senior leaders.
9. “Just taken my manager through the prioritisation criteria – he was so impressed, and I feel great – thank you.” Backstory – she was working for a manager who constantly came up with new ideas and expected them to be actioned immediately, forgetting how much other work had already been commissioned. After this first conversation, she had a follow up where she and her manager agreed a set of criteria that could be applied to all new ideas, so that it was clear which of them were the most important, and which could be held on an “ideas board” for implementation later on.
10. “The course gave me so many insights and new ideas. Some of what I learnt I have already used in how I communicate with my stakeholders” – backstory: this person was delighted with the simplicity of the ‘dilution effect’ technique and keeping this in mind, she streamlined her regular emails to her stakeholders, highlighting key points and providing a more detailed additional document giving more information if they needed it. She noticed how her stakeholders were absorbing the most important messages, cutting the amount of repetition she had to do.
11. If I have anything difficult to do, I use the Benefits Dependency Network now!” – backstory: when we were practising this technique during the course, I explained how it not only quickly and easily enables you to mind-map all the benefits in your head, but in creating different streams of benefits you will often identify very personal benefits, helping you find your inner motivation. For example, when I have something difficult at work to do, I not only identify the benefits for my stakeholders and the organisation, but I also think about how the work is

stretching me, helping me develop new skills and new ways of doing things, and putting me in contact with new people, broadening my network.

Conclusion: Agile Change as a Strategic Priority

The increased demand for agile practices across various organisational functions is evident. From customer service to operations, Agile Change is proving to be more than an IT or product-development concept. This approach supports leaders and employees alike by creating a structure that promotes continuous improvement and responsiveness.

With Agile Change, organisations can proactively embrace change, moving beyond the traditional limits of change management. Agile Change is thus more than a methodology; it is a strategic framework designed to foster a culture of resilience, collaboration, and sustained growth in a world that demands agility.