

“A tour de force . . . that deserves a wide readership.”

FRANK J. BARRETT, author of *Yes to the Mess*

THE AGILITY SHIFT

Creating **AGILE**
*and Effective Leaders,
Teams, and Organizations*

PAMELA MEYER

Praise for *The Agility Shift* and Pamela Meyer, PhD

“Pamela Meyer has done it again. This book is a tour de force for leaders at every level who must develop a capacity to experiment, adapt, and learn amidst a turbulent VUCA environment. She offers insight that ranges from neurobiology to relational webs; stories that range from leaders of major corporations to UPS managers; the challenges that range from recruiting agile leaders to creating cultures that nurture them. Covering a wide terrain at such a deep level, this is an important book that deserves a wide readership.”

—Frank J. Barrett, author of *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons*

“Business is changing at a more rapid pace today than has ever been seen before. *The Agility Shift* offers an insightful view of understanding changing contexts, taking necessary action, and building an ecosystem that makes positive shifts happen. Brilliant yet simple, *The Agility Shift* is a must-read for all professionals and will serve as a useful, practical guide in today’s constantly changing business environment.”

—Rohit Manchanda, Trade & Investment Commissioner,
India, New South Wales Government, Mumbai

“Just as I did, you will learn what agility is and how it can work for you and your team in this detailed and highly entertaining road map to the countless benefits of the agility shift. Brimming with compelling examples of agility in action, this is an essential guide to a new and more effective organizational approach.”

—Tom Barr, PhD, knowledge manager, Enablon
North America Corp

“This book is a powerful guide to navigating change, especially the unexpected shifts in every industry and market context that call on us to respond more adeptly and meaningfully. It offers leaders, teams, and organizations strategies to enhance their practices, and the courage to discover the opportunity present in every challenge, change, or crisis we encounter in the workplace or in our lives. Dr. Meyer’s writing is clear and insightful, with relevant and diverse examples and stories that drive significant points about intentionally transforming organizational life. Without an Agility Shift, there is no path to learning and growth.”

–Lisa Gundry, PhD, professor and director, Center for Creativity and Innovation, DePaul University

“Pamela Meyer’s new book is a must-read. She brings a unique combination of personal and professional experience and her practical approach and tools can help leaders, individuals, teams, and organizations make the shift to being more responsive, innovative, and agile. I highly recommend this book!”

–Ann Manikas, VP of human resources and inclusion, United Way of Metropolitan Chicago

“Pamela Meyer makes clear in *The Agility Shift* that if we want to survive and thrive (in good times and in crisis), all individuals, teams, and organizations must make a strategic priority of becoming more agile. Just as importantly, she lays out recommendations for how to do it.”

–Greg Owen-Boger, coauthor, *The Orderly Conversation: Business Presentations Redefined*

“Meyer’s research and experience illustrates that agility is not an option—it is a necessity in order to survive the demands of today’s business world. Yesterday’s ‘comfort zone’ is gone, replaced by the challenging ‘UNs zone’: all that is unplanned, unpredictable, unexpected, and unknown. *The Agility Shift* details how companies can become agile and prepare for the UNs by questioning assumptions, continually learning, being open to trial and error, making incremental decisions, and forming a robust relational web. Meyer provides a powerful framework and accompanying practical suggestions to help you immediately start creating an effective culture of agile leaders and teams. Shift your mindset now, become agile, and find unlimited opportunities in the UNs!”

–DeBorah Lenchard, director of education & talent development, Spot Trading LLC

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Teams, and Organizations*

PAMELA MEYER



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*To all who wish to live and work in the dynamic
present moment, where anything is possible.*

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INTRODUCTION

As the team members filed into the workshop I was about to lead, it was clear that they were still digesting what they had just heard. No one knew any details about the just-announced job cuts or about her individual fate, let alone the implications for the team. Months earlier I had been invited to lead this team in what was intended to be a somewhat playful team-building session that left the group (and the organization as a whole) feeling better about their capacity to improvise.

On the day of the session I arrived at the corporate campus early, and as I waiting in the lobby I scanned the business news on my smartphone. My heart started racing as I read a headline announcing that the company that I was about to work with had just that morning reported record losses and announced it would be laying off thousands of workers across the global organization. I then realized that the building I was in seemed like a ghost town. After seemingly endless minutes passed, the human resources director who had engaged me appeared in the lobby. As he walked me back to our session room he let me know that the offices were so quiet because the entire company was in a hastily called town hall meeting with the CEO about the layoffs. But not to worry, he assured me, the team I would be working with had been asked to leave the meeting early and would arrive on time for our long-scheduled learning experience.

I admit my first impulse on the fight, freeze, or flight continuum was flight. Perhaps I could arrange for an urgent call from my nonexistent child's school or be overcome with a mysterious illness.

Rather than give in to my flash of panic, I took a few breaths as we walked the long corridor. I couldn't help but recognize the irony and opportunity. After all, responding effectively to the unexpected and unplanned was the very focus of my work and was one of the main reasons I had been asked to design a workshop for this team. However, my original plan for helping them develop these capacities no longer made sense. That morning, the company's leaders, their countless teams and departments, and the entire global organization found themselves smack in the middle of the unpredictable and unplanned—and, with no notice, I found myself there too. The organization was confronting VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), a term now widely used to describe today's business reality. Regardless of the degree to which members of the organization were aware of the gathering storm, it was clear that no one was prepared for its timing or intensity.

As I arrived in the workshop room, I quickly abandoned my original plan and began to regroup and reframe the session objectives and approach. What was originally designed as a lighthearted team-building session quickly became an opportunity for the shell-shocked participants to rediscover their own individual and team capacities to be agile in a very stressful situation.

After acknowledging the current reality and the uncertainty the team members were experiencing—and perhaps, partly due to their state of disequilibrium—we were able to quickly co-create a space for mutual support and discovery. Through a series of competence and capacity-building activities, team members soon began to share philosophical insights and reflect on the opportunities this change presented. They became more confident as they reaffirmed their shared human capacity to embrace rather than deny the unexpected.

I was humbled when, after years of helping organizations become more agile and innovative, I realized that the session—conducted in the very midst of the unexpected—had been one of the most rewarding and ultimately impactful I have had the honor to facilitate. In the months and years that followed that session, many of the participants did, in fact, move on to other opportunities as the company drastically downsized and reconfigured. One such participant is now

a valued advisory board member at the Center I oversee at DePaul University's School for New Learning and a leader at an innovative and agile company. The enduring relationships I saw and participated in that day exemplify the power of interpersonal dynamics at the heart of this book. Something else happened in the workshop room that day, too, I realized one of the most important aspects of agility—the ability to make an *intentional* shift in order to be effective in changing contexts.

While you may not have had this particular opportunity to be agile, every person in every organization will experience the need to respond to the unexpected and unplanned in big and small ways, and will have a choice whether or not to make their own agility shift. Among the possibilities:

- Your key supplier is suddenly out of business
- Your CEO or another key leader leaves the organization
- Your phone system goes down for a few crucial hours
- A new social trend holds a significant business opportunity for the first responder
- You are asked to cut your product development cycle by 50 percent
- Your company headquarters is moving out of state or out of the country
- A new competitor enters the market
- A work stoppage takes place at your central distribution hub in Asia
- You go through a major restructuring, but you need your people to continue to collaborate effectively

Each of these examples happened to organizations I work with. While none of the organizations expected events to unfold as they did, each company was able to turn a challenge into an opportunity.

The shift from challenge to opportunity does not happen by accident, as I have seen in my years leading countless workshops with leaders, teams, and organizations that wanted to become more agile and innovative. The shift begins when one or more leaders recognizes a need and takes action (my definition of leadership in this

book). Some wanted to feel more confident thinking on their feet; others needed to improve their ability to collaborate in their teams or departments while building a more responsive organizational culture. You may be surprised to learn that as I work with these organizations, in addition to the latest management research and best practices, just as often I find myself drawing on the strategies I learned in my first career as a theater director, producer, and stage manager. In regional and smaller urban nonprofit theaters I learned some of my most valuable lessons in agility—how to make optimal use of available resources, be creative under pressure, and always, always be prepared to respond to the unexpected and unplanned.

Seeing so many individuals, teams, and organizations transform as they implemented these practices led me to conduct more in-depth research. I was curious to know more about what happens for people as they are learning to improvise and be more agile. My most interesting discovery was that, rather than attribute their increased agility to new skills and knowledge, most attributed it to the context or space they co-created with their colleagues. I soon came to call this context *playspace*, and I wrote about these transformations in my book *From Workplace to Playspace*. This is not the funny hats and games kind of play, but space for:

- The *play* of new ideas
- People to *play* new roles
- More *play* in the system
- Improvised *play*

When we have the intention to create such playspace, we naturally expand our individual and collective capacity for agility. Some especially good news grew out of this research: when there is a shared intention to create playspace, it takes very little time for it to come to life. It is not dependent on long-term relationships but on the shared intention of participants to support one another's success. This is why improvisers can jump in at a moment's notice, joining a group of players with whom they have never performed, and create a delightful performance. In this case, *connecting* happens through the implicit

shared experience and intention, and *building* happens in the moment on stage, as new worlds are co-created and explored.

Helping leaders, teams, and organizations create this playspace has been incredibly rewarding. However, it wasn't until I had the opportunity that I just described to support the team at the very moment they encountered life-changing unexpected news that I discovered a missing piece, one that helped bring into focus the essential dynamics of what I have come to call *the agility shift*.

Regardless of your role, you need the capacity to make the agility shift. The good news is that we all have this capacity, and we actually improvise in response to countless unplanned situations each day. The challenge is to tap into this capacity for organizational success. When a leader, team, or entire organization has this capacity, we characterize that person or group as agile. We tend to assign superhuman qualities to those who possess superior agility. In awe, we tell the tales of heroes who display agility in the direst circumstances. This book removes the mystery to reveal the mind-set, strategy, and practice shift everyday organizational heroes make and sustain for organizational success.

What's Stopping You?

Everyone agrees that there is real, tangible value in being more agile. Agile individuals are happier, healthier, and more creative and engaged; agile teams are more productive, collaborative, and innovative; and agile organizations are more profitable. In fact, there is so much value in heightened agility that many organizational leaders regularly talk about it and even write it into their strategic plans and mission statements. A McKinsey survey found that nine out of ten executives ranked agility “both as critical to business success and as growing in importance over time.”¹ With all of this talk, it is surprising we don't see more organizations making significant shifts toward greater agility. This is actually the root of the problem: (1) most of the talk remains at the leadership level and (2) when there is action, it is initiated and executed using the same models and methods that inhibited agility in the first place.

To become truly agile, leaders (by whom I mean anyone who takes responsibility for responding to and discovering emerging opportunities and challenges), teams, and entire organizations need to make a fundamental shift—one that begins with a mind-set change and extends to a shift in models and methods followed at all levels of the organization.

In this book, through the stories of four very different types of organizations, you will discover the nature of this agility shift and how to make it happen for yourself, team and organization. Regardless of your role in your organization—or your position as an external consultant—this book will show you how to reach business goals by improving agile performance.

These case stories are not the stuff of corporate fairy tales, in which all of the real-life struggles and setbacks have been edited out. In fact, I chose each example to illustrate the conditions and strategies that led specific leaders, teams, and organizations to realize the urgent need to make the agility shift. All of these organizations are success stories, not because their results are pristine on any given day, news cycle, or quarterly report. They are success stories because they have made a commitment to strategies and practices that enable them to learn from each challenge, quickly find opportunities in the unexpected, and succeed over the long haul.

The Triple Bottom Line

In my years working across industries with organizations ranging from Fortune 50 companies to fifty-employee start-ups, I have been most inspired by those that measure success in terms of the “triple bottom line”: people, profits, and planet. Whether they do so explicitly or implicitly, the companies I profile put people first and recognize that their success is dependent on the individual and collective strength of what I call their Relational Web. This web is a personal and system-wide network for mutual support, coordination, resources, and idea sharing. The employees who received such life- and organization-changing news just before my workshop that

day, were able to be agile and effective in large part because of the strength of their Relational Web. By putting the Relational Web and the dynamic human ability to connect and build relationships and resource networks at the center of this book, I take an intentionally more humanistic approach to agility than most management experts.

In reading *The Agility Shift*, you will discover or have reaffirmed important business practices that enhance agility at every level of the system, including that of individual leaders, teams, the organization, and the entire business ecosystem. While shining a light on these aspects of the organization is not new, placing the human system at the center is a rare, and long overdue, approach. Each of the mind-set shifts, strategies, and specific practices described here are designed to sustain the health of the human system and Relational Web, which is the foundation of sustainable business results, and, ultimately, a sustainable planet.

Agility Lessons in Unfamiliar and Familiar Places

Karl Weick, one of my favorite organizational thinkers, once said, “If you want to understand organizations, study something else.”² I have found this idea to be helpful again and again in both my own experience and in that of the organizations with which I work. Often, we can see issues and opportunities more clearly when we hear stories of leaders, teams, and organizations that are very different from our own. For this reason, don’t be surprised to find yourself reading about agile airline pilots, SWAT teams, and film crews, as well as about those whose agility is highlighted in more familiar, but sometimes equally high-stakes, business settings.

I also share lessons from my own in-depth research on people who intentionally developed their agility competence, capacity, and confidence, as well as important new findings from neuroscience. Having a better awareness and understanding of how our brains and bodies are wired to respond to the unexpected and unplanned will help you be more effective when you experience VUCA and agility

is paramount. Finally, while this is not a book specifically about agile methodologies, such as Scrum, originated by innovative software developers, you will learn many of their work habits and the strategies that lead to their impressive results.

You may have noticed that this book's title is a double entendre. First and foremost it references the shift all organizations must make to compete in increasingly changing contexts. But it's also about another kind of work shift. Whether you are working the night shift, the help desk shift, or the Saturday morning catching-up-on-e-mails shift, if you work for an organization that makes agility a strategic priority, you are also always working "the Agility Shift." Agility supposes that innovation, responsiveness, and performance will trump once-familiar constraints of job titles, organizational structure, and outdated processes.

Make Shift Happen

Today's best leaders are making *shift* happen. They're bravely challenging the status quo and trying unconventional methods to make real progress in the way things get done. They shake up workplace norms and show others what agility really looks like. And most importantly, they inspire their teams to follow suit. One of the most important shifts is being made in the very notion of leadership. When it comes to agility, a leader is anyone who sees an opportunity or challenge and takes responsibility for doing something about it. In this sense, anyone who is effectively making shift happen is a leader in an agile organization.

As a busy professional who is accountable for business results, I know you don't have time for lengthy conceptual and philosophical musings. I include just enough to lay a foundation in each chapter, then quickly focus on specific strategies, tactics, and methods that you can begin to implement even as you are reading, to make the shift toward a more responsive, innovative, and, yes, agile organization.

These Make Shift Happen segments invite or remind you of a mind-set shift while guiding you in new strategic directions or offering specific

practices. Some of these practices can be implemented the moment action is needed, while others are intended to prepare you to be effective when that moment occurs.

You Are Invited

This book was conceived and is offered as an invitation. Unlike an invitation to an event, this is an invitation to begin a process. Because this process includes a shift from the familiar and known to the unfamiliar and unknown, it may at times be uncomfortable and challenging. However, if you truly wish to become more agile and effective, you will also find the process exhilarating, renewing, and energizing. For it is when we become more comfortable being uncomfortable that we are not only most effective but are most alive.

PART ONE

Understanding the Value and Dynamics of the Agility Shift

CHAPTER ONE

The Agility Shift: What and Why

We rightly hail the heroes in history who display a remarkable capacity to be effective in the most challenging of circumstances. Captain Chesley Sullenberger had only seconds to choose a course of action after a flock of geese flew into the engines of a passenger jet he was piloting, landing safely in New York's Hudson River. The Apollo 13 astronauts had just hours to collaborate with NASA engineers on the ground to devise a way to filter the life-threatening levels of CO₂ from the cabin and conserve enough power to return to earth. Sullenberger knew his disabled aircraft could not make it to a suitable runway. The Apollo 13 astronauts did not have the optimal equipment on board. Each rapidly shifted the mission, maintained an attitude of optimism, engaged and improvised with the available resources, and safely returned to earth.

The Agility Shift is the intentional development of the competence, capacity, and confidence to learn, adapt, and innovate in changing contexts for sustainable success.

Every day, though typically in less spectacular contexts, agile leaders, teams, and organizations maintain creativity under pressure, whether

in the midst of a merger, a sudden supply-chain disruption, or an unexpected business opportunity. Awareness of available resources is clearly not enough; agile organizations must have the capacity to use their resources creatively and effectively at a moment's notice in response to the unexpected. In fact, truly agile organizations have a well-developed ability to make shifts that turn those challenges into opportunities.

How do they do it? Some time ago neuroscientists discovered that, faced with extreme stress, the amygdala (located in what is sometimes referred to as the “reptilian brain” because it is thought to be the oldest in evolutionary terms), can send us into the familiar fight-or-flight response.¹ In this state, the brain is in survival mode, no longer able to fully access the prefrontal cortex, the site of executive thinking.² While this response is hard wired into our neural networks, agile individuals, including Captain Sullenberger, the Apollo 13 crew, and their organizations, have learned how to continue to be effective in the midst of high-stress situations. This ability does not happen by accident but through intentional and continuous development.

Think about the last time you experienced something unexpected. It could be as simple as a disruption in your morning routine or as complex and life changing as a merger, acquisition, downsizing, relocation, or other significant unplanned change. Do you remember your immediate response? Were you hijacked by your reptilian brain or were you able to find the opportunity under stress? Perhaps you were constrained by your preconceptions about what was happening, or by your organization's culture, systems, and processes? If you were, you are not alone.

Our brains are wired to go into survival mode when we perceive a threat. It doesn't matter if this threat is to our original plan, our core beliefs, our status, or our physical survival. In the heat of the moment, the brain and the entire nervous system and body can react the same—as if our very existence is under attack. Your individual, team, and organizational success depend upon your ability to make the shift from fight, freeze, or flight to a mind-set in which you can be effective and agile.

The agility shift is dynamic, intentional, and continuous. In addition to the mind-set shift and practices presented here, this change requires that plans, agendas, and preconceptions be held lightly so that

they don't eclipse new discoveries, information, and opportunities. Neither Captain Sullenberger nor the Apollo 13 crew—nor most of the employees of the company I described in the introduction—could have predicted the specific unexpected and unplanned events they encountered. However, all were able to be successful because they were prepared, or quickly became prepared, to make the necessary shifts.

These shifts originate with and are sustained by leaders, teams, and organizations that interact within human systems in the dynamic present moment. Italian organizational theorist Claudio Ciborra located the “dynamic present” somewhere between panic and boredom.³ When we respond to the unexpected with panic or frustration, we are too paralyzed to be effective; when we respond with boredom, we are simply too disengaged to care. Somewhere in the middle, awake to the possibilities of the dynamic present moment, we develop and discover our capacity to be agile.

In the dynamic present, agile leaders, teams, and organizations are effective because they are able to quickly become aware of the current reality and reframe the challenge to reveal its opportunities. This shift is depicted in the dramatized movie account of the Apollo 13 mission when the team in the NASA control room is working feverishly to bring the astronauts home and the NASA director, after hearing a litany of the problems onboard, says, “This could be the biggest disaster NASA has ever experienced.” The flight director, played by Ed Harris, turns to him and says, “With all due respect, sir, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.” He then famously leads his crew with the line, “Failure is not an option.”⁴

I am certainly not the first to call out these stories of creativity under pressure. I draw your attention to them precisely because they are part of our cultural lore of heroic action. It is not enough, however, to appreciate the remarkable capacity these leaders and teams, and the organizations that supported them, displayed. We must understand the nature of the thinking and actions that contributed to their success. When we do so, we can become effective as we encounter our own chaos. Though our challenges may be less dramatic and are rarely life threatening, our ability to shift from panic (or boredom) in the workplace can be the difference between disaster

and triumph. The good news is that you don't need to be a seasoned pilot or have the talent of a Hollywood screenwriter to make these shifts when you encounter the disruptions, or even disasters, that are inevitable in the life of a team or organization, and certainly within the span of any career. You *do*, however, need to learn how to shift your mind-set, strategy, and day-to-day practices.

Agility Is Your Competitive Advantage

If the rapidly changing contexts you must negotiate each day are not enough to convince you of the urgent need to make agility your strategic priority, the growing body of evidence of the bottom-line benefits will surely make the case. Research conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) suggests that agile firms grow revenue 37 percent faster and generate 30 percent higher profits than non-agile companies. This same study found that an overwhelming majority of executives (88 percent) cite organizational agility as key to global success.⁵ Another study on the use of agile methodologies in software development showed a 38 percent increase in productivity.⁶ Additional research on learning agility, a key competency, shows that the ability to learn quickly from experience and apply the new knowledge in fresh contexts is the strongest indicator of leadership success.⁷

Captain Sullenberger displayed his learning agility on January 15, 2008. Prior to that day, in his forty-two years of flying, he had never experienced engine failure for any reason. Despite this, he maintained a mind-set that kept him from behaving as if any flight was a routine operation. Over his career as a military pilot, he had grieved the loss of twelve comrades who had perished in plane crashes. Searching for answers, Sullenberger realized that many of these pilots had not adapted to the changed reality of their situation quickly enough. Not wanting to be blamed for the loss of the multimillion dollar jets they piloted, many struggled to land, waiting past the point that they could have safely ejected and saved themselves.

This painful lesson did not go to waste. As soon as the flock of geese disabled both engines, Sullenberger was able to quickly draw on his

understanding of other pilots' mistakes as well as his own years of experience. "As soon as the birds struck," he reflected, "I could have tried to return to LaGuardia so as not to ruin a US Airways aircraft. I could have worried that my decision to ditch the plane would be questioned by superiors or investigators. But I chose not to."⁸ Rather than spending valuable time attempting to return the aircraft to LaGuardia, Sullenberger quickly shifted his mission to saving the lives of the 155 passengers on board by using the only viable runway available, the Hudson River.⁹

The agility shift is crucial to the survival and success of entire organizations, as it is to individuals. And the shift is even more relevant today than it was just a few short years ago—and not just because of the external, market-driven factors I cited earlier. The workforce itself is changing. I'm sure you've noticed that a new generation has arrived, and these new workers bring with them new expectations and ways of getting things done. A recent PwC study of millennials (those born in the 1980s and '90s) confirmed what most of their parents and teachers have been saying for some time: they are more attuned to working in teams, value community, and are comfortable using technology for communication and collaboration.¹⁰ Not only are millennials particularly suited to effective action in changing conditions, they thrive in unsettled situations. Why should you care about this? Because millennials currently make up more than a third of today's workers, and by 2020 will account for almost half of an increasingly global and diverse workforce.¹¹ If you and your teams and organization are not making the agility shift, you are not preparing for success with those who will actually help you sustain it.

The *Real* Reason to Care About Agility

The knowledge that agile organizations are more profitable, sustainable, and innovative may be reason enough for you and your organization to make the agility shift. However, this shift is not only practical—ensuring your ability to survive and thrive—its core dynamics (interacting and interconnecting) are the key to your ability to create and experience meaning, purpose, and happiness. Yes,

I am putting meaning, purpose, and happiness at the center of the agility shift. Why? Because it is essential to fostering and sustaining the level of engagement, commitment, and creativity you need to respond effectively when the unexpected hits.

Organizations that prioritize agility also prioritize ways of being, thinking, and acting that enable agility and create space to move, reflect, and respond effectively.

Those who are making the agility shift necessary to sustain success in a changing world are committed to mastering the strategies and processes outlined in this book. Mastery for the agility shift is unlike mastery of a specific skill; it is a continuous process and demands a commitment to developing the competence, capacity, and confidence necessary for adapting and innovating. The extrinsic rewards of increased productivity, profits, and competitiveness may be enough for you to initiate this shift; the *intrinsic* rewards of deepening purpose, meaning, and, yes, happiness will help you sustain it.

The Three Cs of the Agility Shift

So far, you have gotten a preview of the mind-set shift and state of readiness necessary for agile success. Making and sustaining this shift requires a commitment to the continuous development of the three Cs: competence, capacity, and confidence.

Agility competence consists of the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to respond to the unexpected and unplanned, as well as to find opportunities in new developments and emerging trends.

Agility capacity is the degree of uncertainty and volatility in which a person can be effective. For example, a team may have the competence to get a new product to market on a tight deadline, but it may not have the capacity to do so if the deadline changes several times, if

the product specifications change, and/or if there is a worker strike at the manufacturing facility.

Agility confidence is the human need to trust in one's own and others' competence and capacity to be effective in changing contexts.

The Three Cs of the Agility Shift are not interchangeable, though they are interrelated. For example, without agility confidence, there is little value in agility competence and capacity; of course, any amount of agility capacity is wasted without agility competence and vice versa.

The three Cs are embedded in each of the dynamics of agility introduced in the next two chapters, as well as in the strategies and practices I outline throughout the book. Competence, of course, is only the starting point. In chapter 8, I describe specific competencies and outline how everyone, no matter his role or level of leadership, can take responsibility for developing his agility competencies and then can move beyond competence to *performance* when things don't go as planned. In fact, those who make the shift understand that “the plan” can actually be part of the problem.

From Planning to Preparing

The agility shift is also a shift from planning—with its focus on a linear process with a beginning, middle, and end resulting in an actual *plan*—to a focus on preparing, where all aspects of the system continuously develop the competence, capacity, and confidence to perform effectively in changing contexts. For those who make the agility shift, the purpose of preparing is to develop readiness for the unexpected rather than solely to execute a set plan. Captain Sullenberger took all of 208 seconds from the time the birds struck his engines to the time he landed in the Hudson. He had spent forty-two years preparing.¹²

The agility shift is not simply accelerated planning.

Lest you be tempted to cancel your annual strategic planning retreat, remember that the agility shift is not a dualistic one: either we create a plan or we prepare for the unexpected. The agility shift embraces the creative tension between planning and preparing. The act of planning serves several valuable purposes; chief among them, it helps us clarify, engage with, and recommit to our values and vision. As anyone who has participated in strategic planning, or even the plan for the office holiday party, knows that the plan itself may be the least valuable aspect and often bears little resemblance to what actually happens. Or, as the mid-nineteenth-century Prussian field marshal and war strategist Helmuth von Moltke said, “No plan survives contact with the enemy.”¹³ While I don’t advocate relating to the unexpected and unplanned as “the enemy,” simply replace those words with “current reality” and you will understand the limitations of plans.

A plan made today is based on the assumption of a knowable future.

With a core focus shifted to preparation, or, more aptly, to *preparing* all participants to do more than adapt to change, you and your colleagues are able to leverage its opportunities for innovation.

From Events to Processes

The shift from planning to preparing is something you may have already made in another area of your life. Anyone with a gym membership knows that physical fitness is a daily commitment, a way of being in the world, not an initiative that is launched with a burst of enthusiasm, lasts a few weeks or months, and then loses steam. Agile organizations are comparable to fit individuals. Fit individuals integrate their exercise and wellness practices into their daily lives, because the outcome is not any one accomplishment but an overall quality of life and capacity to live it to its fullest. Truly fit individuals also train for more than one activity; they develop strength

and flexibility in body and mind to respond to anything life throws their way. Agile organizations also maintain their strength by focusing on their core competences while regularly stretching themselves for maximum flexibility and resilience. Injured athletes and ordinary individuals recover more quickly if they are physically fit. The combination of strength and flexibility, along with the mind-set that goes with it, provides a solid foundation to rebuild a depleted system.

Physical fitness and organizational fitness are mutually reinforcing. Fitness is useful both as a metaphor and as a mind-set for agility throughout the organizational network and ecosystem, supporting faster recovery from the unexpected as well as improved capability to innovate. CEOs of major corporations such as Unilever, Whole Foods, and Apple are embracing this shift by speaking out against a shortsighted focus on quarterly returns. Marc Benioff, CEO and chairman of Salesforce, calls it simply “Wrong. The business of business isn’t just about creating profits for shareholders—it’s also about improving the state of the world and driving stakeholder value.”¹⁴

Driving stakeholder value is a process, not an event. It requires organizations to make both a mind-set shift and a practice shift, in which everything from preparing to learning to innovating is continuous, engaged activity rather than simply moments in time.

From Information to Interactions

We love information. Especially in times of crisis. Have you ever noticed your tendency to become glued to the television or Internet when disaster strikes? It is human nature to try to gather as much information as possible, to make sense and create meaning when we don’t understand what is happening. We seek information for another reason, too: control. We operate under the illusion that if we can gain more information, we will not only understand what is happening, we might just be able to control it.

I am not suggesting that there is no value to information or to clearly defined reporting and accountability relationships for routine business operations. I am instead calling out the temptation that an

information-centered approach to agility offers: there's a desire to settle into the illusion that information will give you control, when in many situations it is simply not possible to gather or process enough information to be effective when it counts.

Recognizing that there are many situations that you not only cannot control but cannot predict is a radical mind-set and practice shift for most. It requires that you decide whether your goal is to reduce the perception of uncertainty or to actually become more effective in its midst. It also involves more than a simple reconfiguration of the org chart and job descriptions. It requires relinquishing the *illusion of control* that lies at the very foundation of most management training and business practice.

This shift is being made in one of the most hierarchal, command-and-control organizations in the country, the United States military. Recognizing the insidious nature of information age strategies and their tendency to lead to either analysis paralysis or the false security of convenient stories, the U.S. military has begun to make a fundamental shift in its approach to VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), a shift from *information to interactions*.¹⁵ This change does not begin with restructuring and redeployments but with a fundamental shift in mind-set.

In fact, the term VUCA was first coined by the U.S. Army War College to describe increasingly complex and unpredictable combat conditions.¹⁶ VUCA has become shorthand for the reality of life in the twenty-first century. Most business approaches to VUCA focus on strategies to reduce uncertainty. These strategies tend to center around gaining greater control, including amassing more and better information, minimizing risk, and improving planning and analysis.

While risk and uncertainty reduction are valid strategies, they do not necessarily make an organization more agile, for two reasons: (1) collecting more and better information takes time and may foster the illusion of control and comfort when, in reality, it is impossible to gather all available information in complex, changing contexts, let alone fully analyze and make meaning of it and (2) planning and analysis are dependent on relatively stable contexts.

Another liability of information-centered approaches is that

they typically lead to more questions and the need to gather more information to reduce the uncertainty created by the information already collected. There is an even more significant liability of the information-centered approach to agility: our preconceptions lead us to filter out information that does not align with our expectations. The transcript of Sullenberger's interaction with air traffic controllers shows how quickly he shifted from information gathering to interacting with his available resources. Thirty-five seconds into the exchange, as controllers are still trying to offer alternative runways, Sullenberger replies, "We're unable. We may end up in the Hudson."¹⁷

Most of us will not find ourselves in literal life-or-death situations that demand an agility shift within seconds. Yet the stressful contexts we negotiate each day do include similar pitfalls. Under the stress of an unexpected challenge or opportunity, our ability to access our higher thinking capacity can be reduced, leading us to fall back on the version of the story we expected: the routine flight, the glitch-free product rollout, the seamless intercultural communication. The power of our brain's wiring and our comfort with these stories are evident in crises that did not end as well as that of US Airways Flight 1549. Warnings of terrorist threats before 9/11 and potential malfunctions of crucial components prior to the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster went unheeded because they did not fit the narrative that was co-constructed by leaders during years of experience and expectation.¹⁸

What stories might you and your colleagues be constructing with the information available to you? What warning signals or opportunities might you be missing in your comfort with this information? Agile leaders, teams, and organizations know they cannot afford to get caught up in a story. They are instead learning how they might be more effective by focusing on their interactions with one another *and* with the available information in the dynamic present moment.

The mind-set shift necessary to improve agility is a change from an overreliance on information and uncertainty reduction toward intentional interaction.

Let me emphasize that this is a shift away from an *overreliance* on information. I am not suggesting you curtail important industry and market data analysis, or take this as encouragement to blindly make decisions when further investigation is warranted. I *am* encouraging you to shift away from the false comfort such information can offer, and toward the relational context in which you make sense of it, decide and act.

When we make the shift from information to interaction, we may be called to shift more than our relationship to external information; we may need to shift the way we perceive ourselves as well. The agility shift requires that we value our capacity to connect and build relationships over—or at least as much as—our hard-won expertise. Years of experience, training, and credentials are, of course, still valuable. But their value is minimal without the networks to which the skills, knowledge, experience, and resource awareness are linked. In other words, separating the process of “knowing what” and “knowing how” from the process of “knowing who” significantly diminishes agility capacity.

The shift from information to interaction values the human system in which all meaning and action take place. Rather than problematizing this system as nonobjective or messy, the agility shift embraces it and engages it more fully. You may not be able to control or predict what happens, but with a conscious, continuous commitment to interacting within your web of relationships and resources, you will be more effective than you ever imagined.

The agility shift is first and foremost a shift in mind-set. This mind-set values interactions within the dynamic present moment. It is also a shift from the false comfort of “a plan” to achieving a state of readiness to find opportunity in the unexpected. In the next chapter you will discover how to build this readiness with the most important resource you already have in your organization, your Relational Web.