

Four Steps to Creating an Agile Marketing Culture

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Achieving marketing agility starts with your company's culture, which is where the rubber hits the road.

However, companies often put in place a process, or a set of processes, to address agility instead of taking the time to work on building the culture required to achieve agility and sustain it—to really change the organizations operational habits from what they are today to a much more fluid, flexible, and iterative approach to doing work.

Although processes can help you make small gains in agility, the big gains are going to happen because of your culture and your people.

What does an agile culture look like?

- People work across functions and silos to collaborate in self-organizing teams.
- Decision-making is empowered, and it happens as close to the work as possible.
- Teams are trusted to experiment, to take initiative, and to even fail as long as they learn.
- Work is done in short, active cycles of prioritize-test-learn, prioritize-test-learn, and so on.
- The customer is at the center of decision-making.

The following four steps to an agile culture are a guide for companies that are making the transition from traditional to agile marketing.

Step 1: Be a committed leader

"Your customer and process are important, but if you don't have a culture where your people feel empowered to be adaptable, to learn and communicate, you won't be able to serve the rest of the business." —Leslie Snavey, VP of marketing and corporate sales, CHG Healthcare Services

Put simply, leadership can make or break the agile culture. Leadership drives the mindset and embraces the methodology that brings agile marketing to life. Leaders empower their teams to test and adapt as needed without traditional rounds of approvals. That means support for taking

risks and making mistakes because they will teach you something new.

Successful agile leaders get buy-in from the C-suite and their staff to undertake a completely new approach to marketing strategy, planning, testing, and measurement. By flattening their team and allowing decision-making by the role closest to the work, they cut red tape and eliminate delays caused by internal hierarchies. These leaders welcome change, encourage flexible solutions, and embrace learning that can be exploited for continual improvement.

Tips:

- Be clear about goals with those inside and outside Marketing.
- Expect and reward experimentation and creativity as a way of work.
- Put in place the processes that support data-driven and customer-focused decision-making.

Step 2: Define a shared purpose

"One major thing that slows a company down is a lack of a shared purpose.... If you want to move fast, you have to know where you are going. That's why our goal is to join people together around a shared purpose. This is the essence of what we want to accomplish." —Allen Olivo, in his former role as VP of global brand and marketing communications, PayPal; currently, VP of global brand and communications at Brocade

Setting a culture of agility requires communicating where you are heading and how you are going to get there, and reinforcing that purpose along the way.

Lisa Arthur, CMO of marketing applications for Teradata, used a vivid analogy to create a shared purpose among her team. Showing the view from the top of Mt. Everest, she'd repeat her mantra: "We are going to be the best B2B marketers on the planet." She'd reinforce her message at team meetings by showing a view from the top of the world's highest mountain.

Arthur used this metaphor for inspiration as well as coaching, sharing what it would take to reach the top: "I talked about base camps [along the way] as a scorecard for how we are doing. These are things like success for sales and customers. The base camp methodology created a scorecard for how we were doing." Frequent check-ins on progress to your shared goals also allow for adjustments at shorter intervals so campaigns will continually improve and garner better results in the end.

Tips:

- Break down silos and bring together teams that fit the goal, not the org chart.
- Be transparent about goals, progress, and support for your agile teams' projects.
- Define governance for, and empower decision-making to encourage, quick action.

Step 3: Act with speed and transparency

"Adopting a way more Agile approach, we probably pulled off in 5-12 to 6 months what most organizations would do in 12."—Lisa Arthur, CMO of marketing applications, Teradata

Making big changes to become agile can be hard for marketers who are attached to traditional cycles and current ways of operating. However, today's consumers frequently change their behaviors or provide instant feedback, and you as a marketer need to respond accordingly.

Agile marketing means you anticipate results based on early insights and data, respond to results based on measurement, and adjust often to get the best result—even if that means shutting down the effort.

Another crucial aspect of agile marketing is that you are transparent about your methods with the rest of your company. Many of the marketers we have interviewed use "show times" to showcase not just what marketing is doing but also why, with whom, and how it worked (or why it didn't and what they learned).

An agile approach tears down the walls among and between traditionally disparate groups (just as we've seen lately with the advent of Big Data and the resulting need for CMOs and CIOs to work together).

Tips:

- Use short planning cycles to quickly course-correct based on market or customer feedback.
- Offer your organization real-time visibility into Marketing performance.
- Share "show times" that celebrate and broadcast marketing milestones and results.

Step 4: Encourage characteristics that enhance agility

"Finding people who have that right cultural fit and who are going to work effectively in an agile environment is one of the most important things that you can do as a manager."—Tom Vogl, in his former role as CMO of The Clymb; currently, chief operating officer at Barn2Door

After transforming your organization and earning some wins, agile marketing will become the air that you breathe. A crucial way to keep it that way is to fill your organization with people who thrive in an agile culture and who contribute beyond a narrow skillset.

Jonathan Becher, chief digital officer at SAP, has a compensation system that encourages employees to move away from "being a really great 'product marketer' or a really great 'Web marketer' to being a really great marketer, period." The best people for agile teams are called "T-shaped" because they have a vertical specialty but they also contribute horizontally with enthusiasm, ideas, and support.

Tips:

- Identify valued behaviors and build a measurement system around them.

- Develop a system with built-in rewards that reinforce agility and a job well done.
- Be an example by being curious, learning continually, and sharing new insights.

Get agile

As you read about the agile culture, do you see some areas where you are doing great and others where you need improvement? That's probably true for most companies today.