Executive, Board and Corporate Agility*

Prof Colin Coulson-Thomas

In dynamic contexts, and for people, organisations, communities and societies, agility in the sense of being able to rapidly respond and adapt to changing situations and circumstances and new challenges and opportunities can be a requirement for remaining relevant. On occasion, agility in certain areas and/or particular forms of agility may also be a determinant of success or failure. Slowness in adjusting, or an inability to adapt, to rapidly changing conditions and/or requirements can lead to marginalisation or redundancy for individuals, stagnation or failure for companies, the collapse of civilisations and the extinction of species (Darwin, 1859; Williams, 1966; Turner and Maryanski, 2008; Dasgupta, 2021).

The nature and extent of the agility required for 'remaining in the game', success or survival can themselves depend upon the context, situation and circumstances and they may evolve as these change. The gains or losses of a market trader may depend upon split second buy, hold or sell decisions in response to signals such as relative price movements. Entrepreneurs may need to live by their wits during the start-up phase of a new enterprise and be ever ready to try new ways of gaining and keeping customers. As businesses mature and become more established their management may be delegated to professional executives. Competitors, new business models and disruptive technologies may alert them to a continuing need for agility.

For some board members of major corporations, while the agility of a founder or front-line trader may be something they have heard or read about rather than personally experienced in recent years, there may be other forms of agility that they might need to be concerned with. This article will look at aspects of agility from the perspectives of an executive, the members of a corporate board and the entity whose long-term success these directors should be concerned with. It will also consider whether from the perspective of a contemporary board, we may need to rethink the meaning of agility to reflect the wider and continuing adaptation that will be required to address certain existential challenges facing humankind.

The Requirement for Agility

Agility can be required for a variety of reasons, ranging from withdrawal or escape, or negotiating a path through contending forces and interests to moving forward through an uncertain business context. Change in some areas may have to be accompanied with continuity in others. While it may be sought and needed, change for changes sake and unnecessary disruptions to important and valued relationships should be avoided. Movement should have a purpose. Agility may involve risks and risk appetites and risk registers should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are still appropriate in a dynamic and uncertain context.

Agility can be a desirable quality and in certain circumstances may be a requirement for continued survival. Organisational endurance might also depend upon accompanying factors such as will and purpose, an underlying requirement or rationale, and the support of external people and other organisations. Agility and rapid movement can involve risk. Rapid adjustment to suit a temporary requirement might incur a longer-term cost. However, modest

risks may need to be borne and should not cause undue concern, while inaction or delay may incur larger risks (Stern, 2007; Rabin, 2019).

Some people and organisations are able to move, change direction, react to challenges and seize opportunities more quickly and easily than others. They may be able to rapidly adjust, adapt or alter course. The agility that is prized in dancers can require balance, flexibility and suppleness. A craftsman may need to be dextrous, nimble and adroit and use tools appropriate to a commission or occasion. In difficult situations, agility may need to be accompanied by alertness and resilience. In crises, when there insufficient time for adaptation, adjustment, reinvention or transformation it can be a determinant of life or death.

While individuals may train and prepare to be agile and might be able to test their agility, whatever their hopes and expectations, organisations may not know how agile they are or could be, and what external support they might receive, until the need for agility arises. In some situations agility may be an instinctive reaction. Emergency services usually carry out regular exercises to test speed and nature of reactions to simulated crisis situations. Some companies do likewise in respect of certain scenarios and computer and other recovery arrangements. Boards need to understand what is needed for continuation, and enduring advantage, relevance and sustainable delivery of corporate and stakeholder priorities.

Agility and the Business Executive

The contribution of the people of an organisation usually reflects their roles and responsibilities. Where they have the discretion to adapt and change and/or alter the speed at which they adjust, it may be influenced by how agile and responsive they are when undertaking them. For some, personal agility may be a factor that might influence their career or progression within an organisation. Executives in large companies have sometimes needed to be agile to sustain their careers and survive changes of strategy, organisational restructuring and other efforts of corporations to remain viable (Kanter, 1989).

Executives may also be expected to remain current and aligned with current requirements, policies and priorities. Where these regularly change, developments occur and there are new approaches, offerings and technologies to understand, an ability to learn and learning agility may help those with talent and ambition to advance. Learning agility has been found to have a robust relationship with both leader performance and leader potential (De Meuse, 2017). It may therefore contribute to leader success. As well as benefiting career aspirations, learning agility has been found to be correlated with CEO proximity and total compensation and positively related to ratings of leadership competence (Dai et al, 2013). High learning agile individuals were found to have been promoted more often and to have received higher salary increases than low learning agile individuals over a ten year period (Dai et al, 2013).

Strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity and collective commitment have been identified as enablers of strategic agility and it has been suggested that specific skills and capabilities that individual executives need and supporting HR practices that strengthen the enablers and required behaviours can be identified and put in place (Doz, 2020). Boards need to understand the pressures people are under and be empathetic in difficult situations. Staff

retention post COVID-19 may require sympathetic responses to requests for greater flexibility in working and other arrangements.

Executives are usually required to operate according to applicable laws and regulations and within a framework of purpose, goals, values, objectives, strategic direction and policies established by a board. Within these constraints, they may have some discretion when exercising delegated responsibilities. They may be encouraged to display responsible initiative in relation to local challenges and opportunities, especially in entrepreneurial settings, where a more risk averse board might prefer consultation prior to commitment to action with someone who can see the 'bigger picture'. Creativity, innovation and enterprise are not always compatible with prudence and caution. Management and governance arrangements can sometimes constrict rather than enable (Coulson-Thomas, 2021c).

Agility and the Business Corporation

Corporate agility has been described as a firm's ability to adapt to changes in its environment (Lehn, 2021). Businesses and other organisations need to be agile in the sense of being responsive to changing conditions, priorities and requirements and adapting to them (Coulson-Thomas and Brown, 1989; Coulson-Thomas, 1992). In some arenas, windows of opportunity to successfully confront challenges or be proactive have narrowed as quicker reactions from others have been possible. Falling barriers to entry, increased competition and technological advances have also speeded up response and reaction times and reduced concept to market times. Quicker and more inclusive and sustainable ways of delivering the value that customers seek may be required. For some challenges, the negative consequences of inaction or slowness may grow disproportionately (Stern, 2007; IPCC, 2021).

Whether agility is critical or desirable can vary according to sector, scale, competition and economic, political and technological developments in the operating environment. For example, agility may be important for multinational companies operating in culturally different host countries (Shams et al, 2021). The company-specific and external factors that determine where activities, operations and establishments are located sometimes change. Concentrating manufacturing in a home country may increase organizational agility and stimulate innovation (Theyel and Hofmann, 2020). Clustering, integration and closer collaboration between related value chain activities, such as research and development and sales and marketing may increase flexibility, speed and responsiveness to changing customer requirements. The greater agility proximity may bring might outweigh the cost advantages of offshoring and/or outsourcing. Shorter supply chains may also reduce the risk of disruption.

The advantages of greater speed and whether it is required and/or should be sought may depend upon the costs of obtaining it and the situation and circumstances. A pipeline leak, oil spill, change of regime or takeover attempt may require immediate attention at senior and board level. A fundamental shift or longer-term trend may require more than a quick adjustment or response. Business agility has been associated with both change and transformation (Orvos, 2018). The latter may need to be achieved by means of a programme of steps and initiatives over a more extended period of time. The speed, duration, direction

and purpose of change need to balance a requirement for adaptation, transition or transformation with the required and available or accessible capability to achieve it. Directors and boards must also ensure organisational agility matches the speed and nature of changing requirements, the capability of alternative providers and sustainability requirements.

Agility and Corporate Boards

The roles and responsibilities of company directors include establishing purpose, providing vision, values and strategic direction, setting goals and objectives, agreeing a strategy for their achievement, ensuring a competent Chief Executive Officer and executive team is in place, providing a framework of policies and delegated powers within which they should operate, monitoring their and corporate operations and activities and reporting to stakeholders (Coulson-Thomas, 2007a). Their exercise requires responsiveness and responsible leadership. Boards should ensure that a company's purpose, goals, priorities and culture are responsible (FRC, 2016; Mayer, 2018; Coulson-Thomas, 2021c). Corporate purpose and whether or not it is shared by stakeholders can determine the extent to which they support strategies and initiatives to achieve it. ..

As well as dealing with current issues that cannot easily be delegated to executives, directors should think about the future and the role that a company could play in creating it. Strategic foresight is especially needed in corporate boardrooms (Coulson-Thomas, 2021b). Its exercise might involve attempts at forecasting, scenario planning and the assessment of future consequences, expectations and implications in an era of unpredictability. If possible, trends and developments in the business environment should be monitored and their implications for corporate activities and operations and those of stakeholders assessed in order to determine the responses that are required (Coulson-Thomas, 2007b). In relation to climate change there is already some consensus on what may happen (UN Climate Change, 2021).

Certain governance structures may have an impact on corporate agility and hence firm performance and survival (Lehn, 2021). Boards should consider the implications of governance arrangements for how they operate and for an organisation's ability to adapt within available timescales. A key activity for directors is thinking, and especially strategic thinking and thinking about strategy (Coulson-Thomas, 2021c). These are arenas in which agility is often required, particularly in uncertain times. Strategic agility has been described as the ability to remain flexible when facing new developments by continuously adjusting a company's strategic direction, which is something that boards should do when appropriate (Weber and Tarba, 2014). Ideally its exercise should instil confidence rather than unsettle.

Strategic agility as an outcome has been attributed to the behaviours and skills of an organization's managers in taking and implementing strategic actions initiated by a board (Doz, 2020). As well as independent or non-executive directors, board membership usually includes executive directors who may have executive or managerial as well as directorial responsibilities. A board is likely to be dependent upon them, other executives, company employees, and in some cases value chain partners, to implement its decisions and the strategy it agrees. Ideally, such agility as occurs should be aligned and consistent across a

corporation and its value chain. Agility is more complex in some contexts than in others and it may require teamwork and motivation as well as shared purpose and compatible objectives among those needed to determine, agree and implement whatever forms of agility are required, where and when (Coulson-Thomas, 2018).

Consequences of Encouraging Executive Agility

Rather than operate or work in a certain and largely standard way, where, when, how and with whom people work, the tools and technologies they use and the business models and forms of organisation they adopt should be appropriate for the purpose, objectives and task, and the situation and circumstances, including the challenges faced and available opportunities (Coulson-Thomas, 1997). Various forms of agility may be required to remain relevant, current and vital. Directors should ensure the people of an organisation have the freedom to vary contributory factors when moving between projects, and according to whatever might best lead to effective adaptation and a successful outcome. Boards should ensure that people are equipped with the performance support to do what is expected of them (Coulson-Thomas, 2007b). For example, a decision support tool might enable a targeted agility level to be achieved within available resource limitations (Patel et al, 2020).

It has been suggested that in certain contexts centralisation of decision making can have a negative impact on corporate agility (Lehn, 2021). When the future is uncertain, corporate planning may need to be replaced by empowerment and intelligent steering. However, more discretion for executives to do what they feel is best in the situation and circumstances, including being agile, may need to be accompanied by greater tolerance of mistakes. A focus on avoiding all mistakes can prevent initiative, stifle creativity and inhibit innovation and enterprise. Where errors occur, executives should be encouraged to manage them by taking steps to both correct and learn from what has happened (Dimitrova and Van Hooft, 2021).

People and organisations also need to learn from past mistakes and continuing failings over a long period of time, for example not operating sustainably, reducing biodiversity, over-exploiting natural capital or contributing to global warming. Agility in perpetuating operations that result in such negative externalities is not desirable from the perspective of subsequent generations. Future movement in a more sustainable direction, for example in relation to living in harmony with nature, may involve learning from the past, traditional wisdom and the heritage of indigenous people, and other belief systems (Sharma, 2005; Renugadevi, 2012; Baindur, 2015; Lal, 2015; Coulson-Thomas, 2019a).

Supply Chain and Network Agility

Corporate relationships and supply or value chain networks also need to be agile, resilient and capable of adaptation. As events occur, requirements and conditions change, and during transition and transformation journeys as more is learned, and also if agility in some areas falls behind that in others, changes of direction and/or a shift of emphasis may be required. Directors should ensure key stakeholders remain engaged and that relationships with them are built upon trust and shared understanding, and are also mutually beneficial while continuing to be relevant (Coulson-Thomas, 2021c). New capabilities and collaborations may need to be

rapidly assembled and resources quickly reallocated as priorities are reassessed and to confront challenges and seize opportunities as they arise.

In an evolving international business environment, and as new business models and enabling technologies are adopted, a board should ensure that arrangements are in place to periodically review the ability of a company's supply chain and network of relationships to quickly adapt. The prerequisites for supply chain agility can depend upon the context and nature of the enterprise. For a multidivisional firm, supply chain agility could require an organizational structure for supply chain management (SCM) that facilitates it development, with factors such as the hierarchical positions of top divisional and headquarters supply chain executives and the scope of divisional supply chain operations and headquarters SCM coordination being possibly significant (Li et al, 2019). Such arrangements for achieving continuing agility should embrace supply and value chain partners and be regularly reviewed

If supplier innovativeness is diffused into and across a supply chain, it can have a positive impact on supply chain collaboration and agility (Kim and Chai, 2017). Information sharing and strategic sourcing may also help to improve supply chain agility, although it has been suggested that in some contexts the impact of supplier innovativeness, information sharing and strategic sourcing on supply chain agility may be stronger with domestic sourcing than global sourcing (Kim and Chai, 2017). This is consistent with earlier comments on the benefits of clustering, proximity, integration and closer collaboration, and the greater adaptability of flexible network forms of organisation that can evolve organically (Coulson-Thomas, 1992).

Technology Enablers of Agility

Board strategies for enabling or disruptive technologies, and the new models of business and operation and ways of working they can support, are especially important for flexible adaptation to changed conditions and quickly scaling up and down to match changing demand (Coulson-Thomas, 1992 & 2019b, c & d). The speed, quality and cost-effectiveness of information technology (IT) services, and the social networking and collaboration they can enable, may have a beneficial impact upon organisational agility, depending upon how they are used and for what purpose (Strassmann, 1985; Ahmadi, Shadi and Ershadi, 2021). The agility achieved by an organisation and/or its supply chain can also depend upon the performance support tools used by key work groups and decision support tools used by key decision makers (Coulson-Thomas, 2007b, 2012a & b, 2013; Patel et al, 2020).

More IT expenditure *per se* does not always or necessarily lead to greater agility (Strassmann, 1985). However, when intelligently managed, spending in such a way as to enhance and foster IT capabilities may be beneficial (Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011). It may enable new possibilities and more sustainable alternatives. Appropriate use of IT capability and the processes and tools it supports can enable organizational agility, adaptability and responsiveness and transition to more agile and effective business models and ways of working and learning. It has been suggested that a more diverse and less hostile environment is required for firms to build up a superior IT capability for realizing enhanced agility (Panda

and Rath, 2021). In relation to a shared challenge such as climate change one hopes that there will be sufficient time for technology enabled collective responses to occur.

Large and complex organisations may need both corporate wide capabilities and the agility and flexibility to provide compatible, consistent and cost-effective responses to the changing support needs of individual business units, important work groups and key customers. IT and agility and flexibility in different operational areas, across supply and value chains, and internationally may need to be integrated if an organization is to become an "agile multinational" (Shams et al, 2021). Shared, or at least compatible, objectives and resilient stakeholder relationships may be required to develop key dynamic capabilities that can cope with economic shocks, extreme weather events and other disruptions. If superior technology everywhere is not affordable, a board should ensure executives focus on key work groups and critical success factors for the achievement of key objectives (Coulson-Thomas, 1992).

Agility and the Contemporary Business Context

In the contemporary business environment, and for both executives and directors, mental agility is particularly valuable, whether to adapt and cope, explore and investigate, or question and challenge. The latter pair is especially important for independent or non-executive directors. Purpose, vision, goals, objectives, policies and priorities, and the approaches and assumptions that underpin them, should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are still relevant and current. To be agile, one needs to be alert and sensitive to what is happening in the business, market and operating environment, open to new ideas and able to think and exercise independent judgement. Sadly these qualities are not always as evident or widespread as would be desirable.

Some people have entrenched views and/or established and perhaps narrow perspectives. They are resistant to new evidence and influences that challenge their existing beliefs. Others may be intellectually lazy or face social pressures to conform. They don't question and they 'go with the flow' or succumb to groupthink (Janis, 1972). Moving away from an agreed position may sometimes be interpreted as disloyalty. Not standing firm might be portrayed as weakness. Even when the case for change is overwhelming, those who are endeavouring to be agile may face resistance, or be confronted with opposition, from vested interests in favour of the status-quo. Fossil fuel consumption has grown fastest since scientists confirmed that it is a major cause of potentially devastating global warming (Pirani, 2018; NAS and The Royal Society, 2020).

Sometimes an initial push or or spark might be required for movement to occur. A crisis or shock may 'open up' those thought to be 'closed'. It might alert them to wider, more pressing and shared concerns. The increase in the severity and frequency of extreme weather events, associated with insufficient global commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to levels required to limit the global warming that contributes to them and climate change, suggests a growing requirement for continuing adaptation as well as quick reaction to individual floods, fire and other incidents (IPCC, 2021; UN Climate Change, 2021). Greater expenditures will need to be devoted to increasing resilience, agility in crisis situations, recovery arrangements and transition to new models of city, urban and rural living with associated infrastructure.

Crisis Agility and Wider Societies

Existential challenges can affect multiple areas of corporate activity and the wider communities and societies in which companies operate and consequently democratise the need for agility. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of a nation state to an emergency that affects the whole of government, society and the economy (NAO, 2021). Governments and public, private, voluntary and professional organisations as well as individual companies will need to strengthen their preparation for system wide threats. Emergency services are expected, required and trained to be agile, but in order to control the spread of a respiratory virus, people, organisations and communities in general have had to move quickly to cope with imposed restrictions, supply chain disruption and resultant shortages, and move between different projects and ways of working, learning and operating.

Contemporary societies with their extensive division of labour and high levels of dependence upon technology enabled infrastructure and just in time supply chains, are particularly at risk of a meltdown caused by a lack of resilience that, for example, interrupts the operation of the internet (Harris, 2019). As was apparent with measures introduced by various Governments to control the spread of COVID-19 and in comparison with others, the nature of some national cultures and societies may enable certain regimes to quickly impose changes and also make it more likely that people will conform (Hofstede, 1983, 1993, 1994, 2001). In the short-term and until there is a revolution or other system change, those who control a totalitarian state that can monitor individual citizens may be able to quickly introduce and enforce restrictions.

Agility in mitigating global warming and its climatic and other affects, and adapting to them, is likely to become increasingly important for a company's stakeholders, other organisations and wider city, urban and rural communities. Boards should consider how best to consult certain stakeholder and other groups in relation to certain issues and involve them, for example in the prioritisation and the identification of opportunities. The case has been put for the bottom-up participation of communities to strengthen their position as the "third pillar" of a democratic society in addition to markets and the state (Rajan, 2019). Certain communities are heavily dependent upon particular local enterprises. Engaging these and other communities, additional enterprises, city and municipal authorities, public bodies, and key customers and suppliers may enable shared interests and collective responses to be explored.

Enablers of Human Agility

Individuals within wider populations and the ranks of executives can vary from revolutionary pioneers and early adopters to reactionaries and laggards (Rogers, 1962). The characteristics preferred when promotion and selection decisions are taken may depend upon the extent and speed of adaptation required to remain relevant and viable. The adaptation and change associated with agility that is unsettling for some may be exciting for others who are stimulated by challenges and the possibilities that may accompany them. The absence of the latter may lead to complacency, boredom and stagnation. Entrepreneurs often set out to shake up an existing situation and create new options and choices (Coulson-Thomas, 2001). Thrill

seekers such as skiers may actively look for slopes where agility in the form of flexibility, balance and rapid decision making is required to navigate a safe passage around known obstacles and others that may be encountered on route.

The unexpected can and often does arise. Openness, alertness and agility are desirable characteristics when there is a requirement for adaptation. Directors should be open-minded and prepared for novel situations, new challenges and unanticipated events. They should not be wedded to particular approaches, tools, operating models, structures, technologies and ways of working and try to live so as to have few regrets in the future. Traditional, learned and approved responses may not be sufficient, appropriate or effective. Where possible, one should select and bring together whatever people, approaches and support is relevant to addressing issues and problems as and when they arise (Coulson-Thomas, 1992 & 1997). A willingness to challenge, think and be a creative problem solver, using whatever means and disciplines are felt to be relevant, could become a sought after requirement for addressing existential threats. The confidence to have a go can be more important than evidence that in the past one has mastered a particular knowledge set. Executives should not pass up opportunities to contribute and innovate or to lead, manage, help and support others.

The social infrastructure of organisations and communities can be conducive of creativity and mental agility and stability (Kelsey and Kenney, 2021). Homogeneity of thought, groupthink and narrow skill sets can be entrenched and reinforced by departmental structures, group norms, peer pressure and a process of socialisation (Janis, 1972; White, 1997, Bond, 2015). Greater diversity, particularly of experience, ideas, perspectives and ways of thinking can be conducive of creativity, innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship (Coulson-Thomas, 2017a & b). It might be encouraged by making more use of multidisciplinary and inter-organisational teams, co-creation and proactively looking for circular economy opportunities. Openness and a diversity of complementary talents and personalities can stimulate the creativity to turn threats and challenges into inclusive opportunities to ameliorate negative consequences and develop alternatives and substitutes, but listening leadership is required if ideas and suggestions are not to be lost (Coulson-Thomas, 2014; 2019b & 2020).

Building Strategic Relationships

A greater mixing of generations within and across teams and organisations could be conducive of agility. Particular attention should be given to building relationships with young people upon whom the future of humankind and companies depend. Younger members of societies whose lives are most likely to be negatively impacted by climatic and other consequences of continuing global warming have been vocal in calling for more urgent action and quicker change (Maynard, 2019). Many young people are motivated by aims and activities that are inclusive, socially and environmentally responsible and sustainable. They may actively look for further opportunities to contribute to shared community and societal objectives and/or international aspirations such as UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Boards could actively seek to provide them.

Opportunities can often be shared. A key skill is the ability to engender trust and build and maintain mutually beneficial strategic relationships. Directors and boards need to ensure that relationship building policies and practices are sufficient to enable a company to pursue its mission and achieve its strategic goals. They also need to confront certain dilemmas and ensure that the right calls are being made by the executive team. Customers and business and supply chain partners can be involved with co-creation and be a source of innovation that is conducive of organisational and/or supply chain agility (Kim and Chai, 2017). Care needs to be taken over the selection of collaborative partners. For example, certain state owned companies may be expected to give priority to national interests, which could involve spying upon a naïve partner and stealing its intellectual property. The benefits of shared learning and co-creation need to be weighed against the risk of losing intellectual capital.

In relation to global warming and climate change, the speed of adaptation needs to be increased to reduce the severity of their impacts and avoid much higher costs of adjustment and coping at a later date (Stern, 2007; IPCC, 2021). A board should ensure that a company and its supply chain partners have net zero plans and targets and that corporate climate action plans match what is required to avoid triggering tipping points that could result in an uncontrollable escalation of global temperatures (Coulson-Thomas, 2021a). Some relationships may breed an unhealthy dependency that could lead to vulnerability when they end. There may be case for spreading the benefits of particular relationships to a wider range of organisations. For example, it might be possible and cost-effective to make certain benefits offered to key customers available to others. Periodic assessments of the costs and benefits of relationships within a portfolio may increase its overall resilience and inform its evolution.

Supporting Desired Relationships

Existential challenges such as climate change are often accompanied by related opportunities for mitigation, adaptation and innovation. Seizing them requires senior executives and directors who encourage creativity, exploration and enterprise (Coulson-Thomas, 2017a & b). There are possibilities for creating more sustainable and mutually beneficial lifestyles, operations and relationships. In arenas as varied as the utilities, healthcare, aging population support, waste disposal, cleaning up the environment, increasing inclusion, transforming public services and dealing with a challenge such as climate change there are unprecedented opportunities for collaboration and imaginative business and social entrepreneurship.

To pursue such opportunities more business leaders and entrepreneurs should look for people who are potential business partners and co-creators rather than dependent employees. They should seek people who are curious, inwardly directed and capable of independent thought, while at the same time able to collaborate with others who have complementary capabilities. Latent entrepreneurial potential may exist that could be released if people are encouraged to review their aspirations in the light of their COVID-19 experiences and undertake personal transformation and individual adaptation journeys to support those required at organisational, community and societal levels (Coulson-Thomas, 1999).

Strategy formulation and organisational design needs to be accompanied by management practices, behaviours, skills, values and beliefs that animate the senior management of an organization in making and implementing strategic commitments (Doz, 2020). Those who have a choice tend to favour relationships with associates, partners and suppliers who understand their aspirations and are competent, honest and can be depended upon. Legitimacy and trust are particularly important for sustaining desired relationships. Contemporary connectedness and the democratisation of portable technologies enable questionable conduct to be quickly captured and uploaded with the potential to go viral. Values should not be compromised on adaptation, transition and transformation journeys.

Responsible Agility and Leadership

In certain organisations, some of those at the top may be perceived as walking overheads and barriers to change. Whatever their past achievements, they might no longer be seen as leaders who are instigating, initiating, inspiring, innovating or otherwise encouraging change and making things happen. They and any executives or other staff who exhibit damaging and/or unsustainable behaviour may be viewed by aware stakeholders as engaged in harmful activities, rather than making a positive contribution. As the consequences of global warming and other negative externalities increasingly bite, more people in organisations and society generally may experience concern and doubt. As a result of a loss of faith and trust, and/or a lack of interest, motivation, opportunity or inspiration, some may have already become free-loaders or passengers. They may coast along and keep their heads down. Others may become disaffected and consider the initiation or support of protest or legal action.

Whether or not relationships can be formed and sustained can depend upon the appeal, desirability and allure of a corporate purpose and vision (Mayer, 2018). Leadership for confronting existential challenges needs to be far more than just occupying a position within a hierarchy. Stakeholders may wish to know what a company and agility are for in the context of their contemporary concerns and priorities (Handy, 2002; Coulson-Thomas, 2019b). For people to commit and follow, they may need a rationale, purpose or cause they can relate to, empathise with and share. A combination of inter-related and shared existential challenges now provides boards with an opportunity to articulate a purpose and vision and goals and priorities that may appeal to a wider range of interests than has hitherto been the case. The agile ones will seize the moment while the prospect of desirable outcomes exists.

In relation to the natural world and alternative lifestyles in harmony with it, there are alluring and visually attractive visions that could be articulated and communicated (National Geographic, 2008). Some boards and the companies for which they are responsible are already embarked on adaptation, transition and transformation journeys. They could point out to colleagues who are reluctant to adapt or move more quickly the leadership positions being taken up by enterprises that are more committed to sustainable operation and whose boards view increasing global awareness of the need for action as a historically unique arena of opportunity (Coulson-Thomas, 2021a). Early movers may be able to access transition finance and secure the most desirable customers and value chain partners. If they remain agile,

relevant and desirable, and forge relevant relationships, their offerings and mitigation or adaptation solutions may reach economies of scale that give them an enduring advantage

Differing Perspectives on Agility

Reactions to measures associated with agility may depend upon its purpose and whether or not one is in control and introducing them, or on the receiving end of them. Agility in avoiding laws, regulations, codes, cyber defences and constraints that have widespread support may be condemned or sanctioned, while agility in the pursuit of common interests and shared goals may be applauded and rewarded. Voluntary agility may be more acceptable than imposed agility, especially when an imposition results in costs, such as the loss of freedoms associated with restrictions introduced by Governments to limit the spread of COVID-19. While limitations perceived as temporary might be acceptable for a period, after a time fatigue may set in and levels of disobedience may increase.

Totalitarian and surveillance societies might be better able to quickly enforce and retain measures for coping with certain crisis events, such as a global pandemic. However, what is imposed may be a universal standard and without the agility, flexibility and freedom to tailor implementation to individual situations and circumstances with the involvement and support of those directly affected. The more severe a restriction and the longer it lasts, the more likely it may be that in a democracy it might be ignored or flouted and that protests will arise. There is some evidence that restrictions to limit and/or slow the spread of COVID-19 can have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of a vulnerable group such as older people to such an extent as to impact their ability to 'bounce back' (Age UK, 2021).

Although it has historically had advantages in areas as varied as innovation, responsiveness and diversity, questions have been raised about the continuing relevance of capitalism in the face of contemporary challenges (Mazzucato, 2021). Much will depend upon the extent to which contemporary lifestyles and consumer preferences and choices, or how enterprises drive and respond to them, are regarded as responsible for the negative impacts of human activity on the natural world and the responses of corporate boards to the resulting existential challenges that humankind now faces. Many boards have greater freedom of action to simultaneously pursue multiple solutions, change direction, alter financial allocations, switch resources, seek collaboration and support, and offer a variety of possible responses to particular requirements, than public bodies whose agility and remits might be limited by enabling statutes, Ministerial intervention, annual requests for funding and a possible requirement that all citizens everywhere should receive a similar or standard service.

Consequences of Agility

It has been argued that green philosophy and protecting the environment are compatible with conservatism and enterprise (Scruton, 2012 & 2017). Conservatism encourages consideration of the impacts of behaviours and the results of decisions. Agility is rarely free. It can have consequences and implications. These may differ for those affected by it and some outcomes may be unintended. Agility often involves costs and where there is choice these should be exceeded by the benefits it confers. An agile organisation and its supply chain may need to

adapt to changes in the business environment and swiftly adjust due to dynamic conditions, while remaining cost-effective and without compromising efficiency (Patel et al, 2020).

Agility can be disruptive for those affected by it, particularly when it is unexpected and unwelcome. The greater the disruption, the more likely it is that people may feel aggrieved, protest or suggest the consequences of steps quickly taken might be worse than the harm they were intended to mitigate. Some parts of a wider system may have a greater ability to be agile than others. Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that global supply chains are only as agile as their least flexible and slowest links. Widespread disruptions occurred. In some cases these led to shortages and resulting inflationary spikes as economies around the world endeavoured to recover from successive waves of infection.

Agility may not be achieved easily and it is not always a guarantor for success. However, depending on the context and implementation of organizational agility, it may significantly improve process and product performance (Werder et al, 2021). Change itself can use scarce resources and time, and so involve opportunity costs. Where a requirement for agility is not self-evident to the people affected, those seeking to introduce it should explain to them why it is needed, how they and others might benefit, and what if anything they can do to help to bring it about (Coulson-Thomas, 1992). The rationale could include the consequences of not acting or continuing as before, which might not be sustainable (Higgs, 2014, IPCC, 2021). Many boards and corporate executives urgently need access to the scientific advice and technical expertise required to distinguish between potentially expensive distractions and possible time consuming dead ends and practical action that is likely to be affordable and effective in their particular situations and circumstances (Coulson-Thomas, 2021a).

Limits to Agility

While organisational agility or the ability of organizations to sense and respond to changes may be considered by senior executives as important for sustained competitive advantage, steps towards it come at a cost and may or may not be successful (Strassmann, 1985; Werder, et al, 2021). There may be limits to acceptable flexibility, welcome agility and easy adaptation, especially when they are not from choice, but the result of external events. For many people around the world, the consequences of multiple disruptions, including periods of enforced working from home and the loss of income from part-time, temporary and other jobs, has had mental health consequences. For some, they have led to a desire for more stability and security and a craving for more of the relative certainty, continuity and confidence that sustains relationships and markets. 'Agility' may need to be justified.

Whether an individual executive or director can be agile and adapt may depend upon others, whether colleagues within a workgroup or departmental team, or a board respectively. Corporate, community or societal agility can be reliant upon a growing number of different parties and players, and a widening range of stakeholders and other interests. For a time people may accept inconvenience, disruption and change, especially for a desired outcome or cause. However, where and when agility and adaptation become journeys without foreseeable ends, will the cooperation and collaboration needed to sustain them endure?

In respect of global warming, the perspectives of directors and boards need to extend across organisational and national boundaries and embrace our relationship with the natural world (UNEP, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021; IPCC, 2021). In the case of climate change, and maybe a succession of pandemics or mutating viruses, might reactions to 'forever agility' echo those to what has been described as a 'forever war' (Filkins, 2009)? After a time, in a democracy could a continuing level of inconvenience, cost and pain, become unacceptable to sections of the public and unsustainable? In regard to climate change, achievement of the outcomes sought by many countries at COP 26 remains uncertain (UN Climate Change, 2021). Without hope of success, as costs and other impacts of extreme weather events and mass migrations mount and adaptation and mitigation measures become unaffordable and unworkable, will support of adaptation measures erode and organisations, communities and societies fragment? Will the allegiances, expectations, rituals and trust that have held them together fail?

Rethinking Agility and Adaptation

COVID-19 has shaken views of what is normal and what is possible, raising questions about conventional norms, ways of working and our understanding of agility. In response to initial shortages of ventilators, procurement and supply chain management processes were speeded up. In the context of the pandemic, trust, empowerment and applications of technologies enabled the construction of an entirely new ventilator supply chain, from scratch, in five weeks (Fearne et al, 2021). As with the unprecedented speed with which new vaccines were developed, in times of crisis and with a shared purpose, people and organisations can rise to the occasion, collaborate and use technology to be agile and achieve what had previously been thought to be impossible (Fearne et al, 2021).

Directors should work for the longer term success of the companies on whose boards they serve. Against a background of conflict, pandemic, climate change, environmental and other systemic risks and existential threats caused by human behaviour, including corporate activities, what 'success' might look like may be open to debate, although the consequences of not acting are getting ever more serious (UNEP, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021; IPCC, 2021). There are now opportunities for a wider range of people and organisations to seize the moment and collaborate in pursuit of a common interest not just in survival, but also using existential challenges as a catalyst for rethinking what agility and adaptation might achieve in terms of beneficial or positive 'upsides' as well as preventing negative 'downsides'.

Increasingly, both Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and risk-averse investors and companies and public bodies awarding contracts, may shun businesses perceived as less agile in relation to climate change adaptation and whose climate change targets and actions fall short of expectations and what is required to slow and subsequently reverse global warming (Coulson-Thomas, 2021a & c). As well as taking steps such as requiring carbon impact statements when proposals come to a board for decision, and requesting assessments of the impacts of other negative externalities, boards could be proactive in the pursuit of opportunities to mitigate and adapt in ways that harness the power of collective agility and beneficial collaboration to imagine more sustainable ways of living. For example, the need to

adapt and be more resilient and sustainable could be a historic opportunity to rethink future cities (Dobraszczyk, 2019).

Conclusions

In the context of a company, movement of itself could be desirable or undesirable depending upon whether it is aligned with stakeholder interests, corporate purpose and strategic direction. It can be frustrating for people in the 'front line' and others when enforced corporate policies and priorities stand in the way of what they feel are required changes if customers are to be retained, negative externalities addressed and opportunities seized. While directors should have a longer-term perspective and may be aware of wider considerations they should ensure that corporate purpose and strategic direction remain current and relevant and are consistent with stakeholder concerns, requirements and priorities.

Agility sometimes suggests a degree of optimism and for those who make the effort to be agile it could indicate a desire to survive, or achieve other outcomes, or otherwise make a difference. The experience of the first year of the Earthshot Prize suggests that, as with the development of ventilators and COVID-19 vaccines, a wide range of individuals and organisations may be able to rise to the occasion, think creatively, collaborate and innovate when a common challenge is compelling and the need is pressing (Butfield, Hughes and HRH Prince William, 2021). Untapped latent potential for mental agility and practical and agile problem solving may exist within many work groups, companies and communities.

Our understanding and expectations of agility may need to change. Perhaps we need to take a longer-term, wider and more balanced, collective and inclusive view of agility. Being quick, clever, adroit and dextrous at an individual or organisational level in navigating a succession of incidents and events may no longer be enough to cope with contemporary and inter-related challenges. Maybe we need to move on from agility to adaptation, and the systemic thinking, shared purpose, collaboration and collective transition and transformation journeys over a longer time horizon that are required to address an existential threat such as climate change.

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Author

Prof (Dr) Colin Coulson-Thomas, President of the Institute of Management Services and an experienced chairman of award winning companies and vision holder of successful transformation programmes, has helped directors in over 40 countries to improve director, board and corporate performance. He leads the International Governance Initiative of the Order of St Lazarus, is Director-General, IOD India, UK and Europe, Chancellor and a Professorial Fellow at the School for the Creative Arts, an Honorary Professor at the Aston India Centre for Applied Research, a Distinguished Professor and President of the Council of International Advisors at the Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management-Research, a Visiting Professor of Direction and Leadership at Lincoln International Business School, and a member of the advisory board of the Aravind Foundation and ACCA's Governance, Risk and Performance Global Forum.

Colin is the author of over 60 books and reports. He has held public appointments relating to healthcare and the protection of public health at local, regional and national level and professorial appointments in Europe, North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, India and China. He was educated at the London School of Economics, London Business School, UNISA and the Universities of Aston, Chicago, Southern California and Westminster. He is a fellow of seven chartered institutes, an honorary fellow of professional bodies in both the UK and India and fellow of the Institute for Responsible Leadership and World Academy of Productivity Science. Colin obtained first place prizes in the final exams of three professions. His awards include a CSR Lifetime Achievement Award and a Global Excellence Award in Renewable Energy from the Energy and Environment Foundation. Details of his recent books and reports can be found on: http://www.policypublications.com/

Executive Summary

For people, organisations, communities and societies, agility in the sense of being able to rapidly respond and adapt to changing situations and circumstances and new challenges and opportunities can be a requirement for remaining relevant. Different forms of executive, corporate, board and network or supply chain agility can be required for a variety of reasons. Agility may not be easy to achieve and may or may not be desirable, depending upon its purpose and the situation and circumstances. Agility has its technology and human enablers, can have costs and consequences and may also have limits. Crises and existential threats in the contemporary business environment may require new forms of agility and relationships. They present challenges and create opportunities for individuals, organisations, communities and societies and give rise to aligned and shared interests, a requirement for collaboration and collective responses, and a need to consider agility from different perspectives and rethink what is possible. Our understanding and expectations of agility may need to change. Being quick, clever, adroit and dextrous at an individual or organisational level in navigating a succession of incidents and events may no longer be enough to cope with current and inter-related challenges. We may need to take a wider and more balanced, collective and inclusive view of agility and move on from agility to adaptation, and the systemic thinking, shared purpose, collaboration and collective transition and transformation journeys over a longer time horizon that are required to address an existential threat such as climate change.