THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

What the pandemic has taught us about managing change

DEBORAH GENDRON, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

MAGDA VOGEL, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

Deborah Gendron, Director of Program Management, and Magda Vogel, Chief Information Officer, champion Express Scripts Canada's Agile Mindset culture. Below, they discuss why this approach has been critical to ESC's ability to seamlessly serve its clients despite the uncertainties of the global pandemic—and how broadly these principles now apply.

Remember when the worst work problems we faced were the commute and our burgeoning inboxes?

Then we heard the term "COVID-19" and began to understand that nothing had prepared us for what was to come. The average economic forecast for the second quarter of 2020 (by economists at Canada's biggest banks) was an annualized decline of almost 23 percent. In a single week in March, one million Canadians applied for unemployment insurance. Parents took a crash course in what teachers do. In North America, only those who lived through the Great Depression have experienced similar disruption.

Every company has faced unique challenges. Yet those that continue to thrive seem to have a few common characteristics, strengths that align with what we at Express Scripts Canada have found to be cornerstones of our ability to pivot and adapt.

The first, not surprisingly, are a robust culture and compelling mission. As a client-centred health benefits management organization, the pandemic's challenges have only highlighted who we are and what we value as an organization.

Our leadership and employees have made each adaptation decision with our values in mind:

> We care deeply about our customers, patients, and coworkers.

> We create a better future–together.

> We innovate and adapt.

> We partner, collaborate and keep our promises.

> We act with speed and purpose.

Because of our focus on these values, ESC employs an approach that's become widely known in management circles as the Agile Mindset or Agile Management. First emerging in the tech world, an Agile approach is centred around clients and executes through small, capable, largely self-managing teams that interact to accomplish organizational goals. It is a framework specifically tailored to meet the challenges of a rapidly shifting environment.

As a result, we've been able to serve our clients and fulfill our mission without disruption even in this unprecedented time. Directors, managers and employees across the organization recognize that thriving in an unpredictable marketplace requires adaptability and a commitment to rapidly evolving procedures and behaviours; the Agile mindset gives us a shared language. It has also honed our collective ability to think constantly in terms of prioritization. This new landscape means we all have to be extremely selective – who you talk to, when you talk to them, what's important to include in the conversation.

We have had to make trade-offs, but we had the foundation in place to put first things first. If we had to work as we worked before, we'd run out of time. But our people were trained in thinking along the lines of "What can I do now to learn and move forward? What's most important?"

When agility is tested

Before the pandemic, this approach enabled us to stay ahead of the continuous evolution that defines the healthcare and, therefore, the benefits management industry. At the same time, it allows the organization and our people to flourish in an increasingly volatile, complex and ambiguous world.

When the pandemic arrived, we were ready to apply these approaches to new questions and daunting challenges. As one social media influencer put it, "We are not 'working from home.' We are 'working from home in a global pandemic.'"

The first primary issue we acknowledged as we implemented work-from-home protocols is that working the way we did in the office was unsustainable. Meetings and face-to-face interactions could no longer be primary vehicles for getting work down. Instead, we needed to embrace tools that equipped our teams to work and communicate asynchronously, and that empowered them to be increasingly self-managed. Breaking down work items and decisions into the smallest viable parts made team collaboration more efficient.

Transitions are always uncomfortable, especially urgent and unexpected ones, but our teams did not miss a beat. An established DevOps culture between our development and production support teams made it possible to continue to flow product capabilities into production without interruption or on-site presence.

What really changed was how we communicated with one another. Meetings had to become much more focussed—all of our communications now have to be intentional. We had to re-think how we used meetings to drive decisions and identify viable work items. Turning on the video to connect for candid conversations and leaving the video on for particularly difficult product outcome discussions has proven to be essential. We often find leaders taking the opportunity to make inter-personal connections online that would happen more organically in a normal setting.

At the same time, some of our teams have used tools to preserve anonymity when exchanging ideas that may be contentious during retrospectives. Using this technique, we continue to inspect, adapt and experiment for continuous improvement.

Our delivery teams make use of the SCRUM framework for delivering and sustaining our complex products. In combination with our processes, organization and technology, this framework provides maximum transparency and empiricism, both of which are particularly critical when uncertainty is high.

As a result, leaders of our delivery teams were immediately able to observe new constraints and focus in on response and resolution. With these supports in place, our teams report that they are completing even more work than anticipated. With the new constraints resolved, the benefits of reduced travel times and more uninterrupted focus time are being realized.

Onward

In business and socially, agility is proving to be vital to Canadians as we move into the sixth month of pandemic life facing a level of uncertainty most of us have never experienced. Many of the principles embedded in the Agile approach are widely applicable, whether we are restructuring our company org chart or arranging for childcare. Its application means that managing change becomes a measurable goal set rather than a chronic process disruption.

In the early stages, of course, communication was our priority, with our clients and within the organization. Our parent company, Cigna, established new channels and support mechanisms to ensure our people and our clients were always fully informed and able to ask questions, raise concerns and get help. There were teams across the organization working to plan and support remote work and safety for those deemed essential onsite. These teams are now designing safe return-to-work protocols, taking into account the health, safety and well-being of our employees and communities, along with local regulations and guidelines.

Over the last five months, we've seen that the organizations thriving in this new environment are those investing in adaptation, providing the resources their people need to meet the challenges ahead. We're proud to be among them, and to support our client organizations in managing the new demands they face.