

Agility, John Wayne and a Lovable Fish

By Ben Baran, Ph.D. Agility Analytics Practice Leader

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

- Nelson Mandela

While preparing for and enduring a year serving in Afghanistan, it became clear to me that agility is a fundamental aspect of personal, inner strength that’s necessary for thriving in adverse circumstances. It’s also a concept that has some close cousins, ones that many people are using somewhat interchangeably.

That can get confusing. And Agility Analytics seeks to destroy confusion whenever possible.

Drawing upon what social science (and John Wayne and a Disney character) can tell us, here’s some clarification. Specifically, here’s a crash course in the concept of agility as it relates to **grit**, **hardiness**, **adaptability** and **resilience**.

1. Agility: Being Proactively Nimble

Agility allows people, teams and whole organizations to flourish in the face of continual change by rapidly sensing and responding to an ever-shifting reality. At the personal level, it’s about having nimbleness and a proactive posture about oneself that supports continual effectiveness. In our work, we’ve seen that having agility is a mindset accompanied by specific behaviors (see The Agile Model®), and it requires the deep engagement of an organization’s leaders.

As Nick Horney—our Leadership Agility Practice Leader—once wrote, “Leadership agility is the capability of a leader to dynamically sense and respond to changes in the business environment with actions that are focused, fast and flexible. It is about a leader’s ability to prepare all employees ... to shift their mindsets and supporting skills from ‘I know change is coming, but I can’t really see the potential changes that might impact our organization’ to ‘I see change coming and am prepared and already doing something about it.’ⁱ

2. Grit: Just Keep Swimming

Grit is about picking long-term goals and going after them with gusto, regardless of the obstacles. When I think of “grit,” I think of John Wayne. Grit isn’t about one’s mental ability. It’s not about one’s intelligence quotient, or IQ. But what’s great about grit is that it captures that ever-important quality of stick-to-itiveness, something that we can all relate with as a key to success from our childhood, from school, from our careers.

That’s why, in part, that grit is starting to get more serious attention from researchers. For example, Angela Duckworth, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, has been studying grit for a number of years. Her research confirms the value of grit as a predictor of success above and beyond that of IQ and one’s personality.ⁱⁱ That’s not to say that talent is irrelevant. What it means is that if you’re going to be a high achiever, you’ve got to have not only some level of talent, but you’ve also got to have the perseverance and long-term orientation to set big goals and keep chasing them—doggedly, day after day after day. It’s a lot like the fish Dory, the lovably absent-minded character from Disney’s Finding

Nemo, who said, “When life gets you down, do you wanna know what you’ve gotta do? Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming.”ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Hardiness: Always Find Meaning

Hardiness is a personal quality that develops early in our lives, but likely becomes shaped or even strengthened by life events. Whereas grit has to do with tenaciously pursuing future goals, hardiness is about having purpose and meaning in life—having a sense of commitment to something greater than us, controlling what we can, and viewing adversity as a challenging opportunity for learning. Paul Bartone, a senior research fellow at National Defense University who has studied hardiness extensively, puts it this way, saying that hardiness “involves the creation of meaning in life, even life that is sometimes painful or absurd, and having the courage to live life fully despite its inherent pain and futility. It is a global perspective that affects how one views the self, others, work, and even the physical world.”^{iv}

Any adult who has tried to do anything remotely difficult experiences failure at some point or another. Many of us fail over and over again. If we have grit, we keep going. If we are hardy, we find meaning in the journey. Not surprisingly, hardiness is another characteristic that tends to predict high performance, specifically leader performance, above and beyond IQ.^v

4. Adaptability: Accept External Changes

Adaptability describes the ability to change in order to fit with external demands. Elaine Pulakos, president of Personnel Decisions Research Institutes and a well-known researcher within the field of industrial/organizational psychology, has studied adaptability as it relates to job performance along with other researchers. Her findings include uncovering eight different dimensions of adaptability as it pertains to peoples’ behavior at work.

Namely, adaptability tends to involve one or more of the following dimensions: handling emergencies, handling work stress, solving problems creatively, dealing with uncertain situations, learning, interpersonal adaptability, cultural adaptability, and physically oriented adaptability.^{vi} As such, being adaptable involves being able to “fit” within numerous types of different circumstances. And with an ever-changing organizational landscape, having employees with these types of abilities will surely set organizations apart from those that do not.

5. Resilience: Regain Stability Quickly

Finally, there’s resilience. Whereas agility reflects a certain perspective toward change and volatility, resilience is more about how we deal with and react to adversity.^{vii} It’s about how people can maintain stability in the face of the unexpected. It’s about not letting surprises throw you off your game.

The concepts I’ve outlined here are certainly related. One way I like to think about is as follows: Grit, hardiness, adaptability and resilience are part of the individual characteristics that will make you more agile. And being agile will allow you to succeed in times of turbulence.

The Agility Difference

The biggest difference between agility and these related concepts is that agility contains an element of proactivity that the others don’t necessarily embody. Most importantly, it’s a concept that we’ve built

out to include solutions that include the individual leader but also includes teams and the overall organization.

In our research that went into developing the Agility Personality Profile™, we uncovered a handful of factors that underlie these characteristics. Stay tuned for more about that assessment, as it'll be available soon in a user-friendly, online format.

ⁱ Nick Horney, Bill Pasmore, and Tom O'Shea, "Leadership Agility: A Business Imperative for a VUCA World," *Human Resource Planning* 33, no. 4 (2010): 34.

ⁱⁱ Angela L. Duckworth et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087–1101, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Best Dory Quotes," *Disney Blogs*, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://blogs.disney.com/oh-my-disney/2013/06/26/the-best-dory-quotes/>.

^{iv} Paul T. Bartone, "Resilience under Military Operational Stress: Can Leaders Influence Hardiness?," *Military Psychology* 18, no. 5 (2006): S131.

^v Paul T. Bartone et al., "Big Five Personality Factors, Hardiness, and Social Judgment as Predictors of Leader Performance," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 30, no. 6 (2009): 498–521.

^{vi} Elaine D. Pulakos et al., "Adaptability in the Workplace: Development of a Taxonomy of Adaptive Performance.," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 85, no. 4 (2000): 612–24, doi:10.1037//0021-9010.85.4.612.

^{vii} Anthony D. Ong et al., "Psychological Resilience, Positive Emotions, and Successful Adaptation to Stress in Later Life.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, no. 4 (2006): 730–49, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.91.4.730.

