# Agility Anathema: A Culture of Optionalism
By Tom O'Shea, CMC  Organizational Agility Practice Leader

**WE ARE WHAT WE TOLERATE** ... is a core truism that tends to shape the culture (or at least the climate) as well as define the *de facto* spectrum of accepted behavior for societies as well as our organizations!   There are many iterations and angles on this basic tenet including some strong quotes from the leadership guru, John C. Maxwell, or one of the motivation gurus, Tony Robbins among others.



We tend to get in life what we are willing to tolerate.

John C Maxwell

The wisdom in this adage applies fully to each of us as individuals as well to us as leaders of teams, functions, units or, in some cases, entire enterprises.   It is equally as applicable and relevant as we think about the dynamics in our families, partnerships and other social relationships.  Collectively, it rolls up into the kind of customs, mores and codes of conduct that define us in all our communities, cities, regions and countries.

*One of the daunting issues we see in many organizations –  is the need to dismantle the ubiquitous "culture of optionalism" that can be a dangerous cancer growing and getting out of control if not detected!*   In our work around the world with organizations of every size, description and industry, we are often having this discussion in our workshops as one of the real obstacles to strategic speed.   Overcoming this hurdle is essential as you strive to build greater organizational focus, speed and adaptability in order to compete successfully in this faster, more turbulent VUCA world.



Remember: we all get what we tolerate. So stop tolerating excuses within yourself, limiting beliefs of the past, or half-assed or fearful states.

Tony Robbins

Invariably, as we work with leadership teams to build more clarity in their strategy roadmaps and plot the pathways to Shape the Future, we find that "strategizing" becomes the "easier" part of the equation. The really "tough stuff" comes as the leaders go back into their teams where there is the conditioned programming of an existing agenda and entrenched inertia of "the way we do things around here". To be an Agile Leader in this world, it takes great skill and commitment to marshall the energy and fortitude to lead REAL transformation and offset the tendencies that promote this insidious culture of optionalism.

**So, what are some of the symptoms and signs of this "optionalism" cultural virus?** Do you recognize any of these organizational behaviors:

- Few people willing to step up to make decisions, own outcomes or initiate action without prodding
- Decisions and agreements that are made in meetings rarely get implemented on time … without any corresponding consequence
- Senior leaders tend not to communicate information actively down through their teams … resulting in many down the line folks operating blind … unaware of strategy or group priorities
- Rogue managers who do not own or share the core values are allowed to continue … sometimes even recognized or rewarded
- Functional agendas and priorities "trump" the group or enterprise priorities … without consequences or accountability
- Team members are regularly confused and uncertain … is it that people come first, or is it customers come first or is it profit at all cost … what is it this week?

**Focused, Fast & Flexible – these three simple words amplify loudly as the counterweights to a culture of optionalism.** Easy to say … hard to create and sustain! Focus is the anchor for agility when it embodies the Why, How & What for your Agility journey. The greater the clarity of these values, operating principles and success metrics – the less room there is for optionalism to exist. Focus directs and informs where we must build organizational speed and flexibility – especially when allowed (or expected) to percolate at all levels within the organization.

**Yes, we are what we tolerate and yet we can also be what you aspire to be** … if you are willing to do what it takes and have the courage to be accountable to your vision and values. The real paradoxical challenge and wisdom comes from understanding that the counter to "optionalism" is not more "command and control" where everything is prescriptive and boundaried. Agile organizations operate from strong core belief system that values people as the central nervous system, encourages the freedom to act, promotes idea diversity and liberating thinking as we strive to create a better and faster operating mindset and capability. These agile capabilities (**along with the rest**) contribute to what makes agile organizations different and better equipped to succeed in this VUCA world.

There has been lots of related discussion in the national news during the past few weeks about who we are and what we stand for … I am hopeful we can all work harder on this in all aspects of our lives.  Our future and the future of our kids (and grandkids) depends on it!

I would love to hear your experiences and perspectives.

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**Tom O'Shea, CMC**

Organizational Agility Practice Leader

tom@agilityconsulting.com

336-282-1211

skype-osheatom