

Agile Change

With Mick Brian

On the 27th April 2021, [Mick Brian](#) joined me on an edition of 'On The Spot' to discuss the important topic of *agile change*. [You can see the original broadcast here](#). If you'd rather read an edited transcript of our discussion you'll find that below. You can view previous episodes by visiting [onthespot.today](#).

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Adrian Reed: Hello and a very warm welcome to this episode of "On the Spot", the 15 minute coffee-break shaped conversation about all things related to business analysis, business change and much more besides. I'm really pleased to be joined by Mick Brian, who's into all things business analysis, agile, and all things change. Mick, you're speaking at the IRM BCT (Business Change & Transformation) conference in May. I was really interested to see the topic that you chose, which was around agile change. When I saw your presentation description, one of the things which really sprang to my mind was that balance between planning and agility, because sometimes there seems to be a tension or debate around how much we should plan. What would you say are some of the challenges of planning change?

Mick Brian: Well, I'll give you a personal story. I've been in projects where you have to produce these 50 page change plans. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with doing that, there's a place for all that stuff. However I've been involved in too many projects now, where you produce these massive change plans, and then you realise that only one person reads them. So you ask yourself, what was the point of doing that? I think when planning things, we love to have a level of certainty around stuff, don't we? So we really detail it out and try to become certain on what's going to happen. Yet we know that that level of certainty is probably unfounded. Think about planning a holiday or something like that, we don't we go into all this detail, and even if we did something like COVID could hit and you're not going on holiday anymore. I've been working with agile teams, and I've just found I'm happier in knowing what I'm going to be able to actually do from a change perspective in a small period of time. It becomes a bit more real for people. Instead of putting a 'finger in the air', planning two years out, and probably knowing that it isn't what's going to really happen.



Adrian Reed: It's interesting, isn't it? Because any plan is really just a best guess. And you talk about holidays, that's a really interesting analogy, isn't it? Because probably for most of us, we couldn't even accurately plan how long it's going to take us to drive to the airport. There's a known distance, but the duration depends on traffic or whether there's snow or whatever. So, Mick, you mentioned that often we really don't have certainty. It's almost as if we crave certainty, when there is none in reality. So to what extent would you say experimentation is important?

Mick Brian: When you experiment in this way, you're getting early feedback. So you're knowing what's potentially going to work, what's not going to work. That actually, I think, feeds into giving you a level of certainty. Scientists have relied on experimentation for years. I think the most important thing about experimentation is the early feedback. So you know if you're going down the right path. If you're not, you can do something about it. Instead of heading off down a road for two years, spending sometimes millions of pounds, and six months down the road you find out that it isn't going to work, but we can't stop it. So we've got to keep going and spend the money. That's the good thing about the experimental approach that I like: course changing, instead of blindly going in the wrong direction.

Adrian Reed: Yes, and I suppose also it's important not to get too wedded to a particular approach. So there's that humble ability to accept where we're going to might be wrong. It's an experiment and we're not politically committed to it. So we've got a really interesting question or comment from Lisa: What's your advice where you're agile, but you're dealing with third parties that aren't and that have a complex governance structure. I suppose that could equally be perhaps a team is agile, but the organisation has a governance structure which is almost anti-agile in some cases. Any tips?

Mick Brian: It's interesting, I did a course around lean change, and it was run by a guy, absolutely brilliant guy, Richard Atherton. He was talking about this on the course, because everyone loves to think that they're agile, or the organisation is agile. But when you get in there, you realise it's not. They want you to be doing this agile stuff, but when you then go to play it back, it's, "oh, no, we've got all these structures..." So he talks about playing back the agile stuff you may be doing in the background, but playing it back to them in the way that they understand. So you may be doing these things, these agile techniques and principles and using agile tools. But it's just how you play it back to fit in with the governance structure. I think another thing that happens is that people think that "Oh, I'm just going to go in there, and everything's going to be agile." And you know, you go back to what agile is, you go to the Agile Manifesto? It's about this mindset of wanting to work that way, and I don't think there's enough done around that before you start.

Adrian Reed: Really instilling that mindset, because it's far more than just the approach the methodology, isn't it? Lyn has submitted a comment: There is no certainty in mountains of paperwork and documentation other than it is probably wrong. Lyn goes on to say that she agrees that experimentation and feedback is your best approach.



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And that is true, isn't it? Documentation or communication serves a purpose. And documentation is a way of communicating, but documentation gets out of date very, very quickly. So it's that fine balancing act. So, Mick, are there any tools or techniques or canvases that you'd recommend in this whole conversation about agile change?

Mick Brian: If you go on to leancchange.org, Jason Little, and Richard runs the course I mentioned in the UK, there's loads of free stuff on there. There's excellent stuff relating to all different methodologies and all different models. It's curious as to why we think we've just got to stick to one and see it through like it's a linear thing. In reality you can pick and choose what's right for what you're actually doing. Take ADKAR, for instance, as part of a whole massive Prosci methodology, but you take AKDAR and just use it as on its own. So you've got the Cynefin framework, from Dave Snowden, he's a prolific guy. I'm not even going to pretend that I know it to the same level he does, what with him being a complexity scientist and stuff, but you can just look at the Cynefin model and you can think, when you're working in an agile way, most of the time you're working in a complex area. That's all about probing and then sensing what's going on and responding to the situation. So just knowing that little bit can help steering and help identify when we're working in the wrong way. Also my colleague and friend Will is really into sort of all the neuroscience stuff. Again, I've got an interest in it, but I'm not a neuroscientist. But you can take things like the SCARF model from the NeuroLeadership Institute. So with certainty, autonomy, how you relate to people, fairness, even using those things in an agile way, by the conversations people are having you can think about whether there are problems around their status, or they're not certain what's going on. And I've been using loads of empathy mapping in the work I've been doing. It doesn't just focus on the solution.

Adrian Reed: I think that's a really important point. A lot of what you've talked about there is focusing on problem and people and context and, for example, Cynefin (about sensemaking), about the complexity of the situation. This stuff is so important. If you were to drill what we've been talking about down to one or a couple of biggest tips or takeaways, what would you want people watching today to take away from this conversation?

Mick Brian: So working in change, that's my profession, is nothing to do with a tool or anything. Don't sit in the background as a change professional. This doesn't apply to everyone, obviously. But I think there's too many people sit in the background, and they're more worried about keeping the stakeholder map up to date and keeping the documentation up to date. Whereas if you're working in change, and you're working with or in an agile team, go to the stand ups, get involved in the retrospectives. I mean, how on earth are you really going to understand what's going on, if you as a change person, do not get involved in it? And you're sort of distant from the rest of the business? People just get tired with this: "Oh, what to change people do again?" You've got to get in there and actually prove that you're willing to do a bit of graft.



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Adrian Reed: Yeah, actually get some skin in the game. And even if it's not as much skin in the game, as it probably rarely will be as those affected by it, actually, developing the empathy with those people and taking the time and as you say. The administration, the document, the physical creation of the documents is probably less important than the conversations that have gone in to get the information to create whatever artefact it is. So Mick, we're nearly out of time. How can people find out more about you, more about the topic and more about CMC?

Mick Brian: You'll definitely [find me on LinkedIn](#), you'll find out about the [#irmBCT conference](#) on there, and the topic I'm talking about. The conference is going to be interactive, using Mural, showing what can be done in a distributed environment. Also, [CMC has a website too](#). By all means, if anybody wants a conversation, just drop me a line on LinkedIn.

Mick is delivering a half-day workshop on 17th May 2021 as part of the [#irmBCT Business Change and Transformation Conference](#). Mick's workshop is entitled 'Agile Change - Making change plans LEAN'.



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