



THE SECRET TO SUCCESSFUL INNOVATION; MANAGING SYNCHRONICITY

Managing synchronicity improves the performance of agile teams that want to discover new or disruptive business opportunities and value.

Introduction

In the past 150 years, there have been ample examples of how innovations did not follow a predictable, linear path but instead seemed to have made unpredictable leaps forward. One year before the invention of the airplane, it could not have been predicted if mankind would ever fly, not even by the Wright brothers. And no one could have predicted how the aviation industry would develop over time once the airplane was invented. At the beginning of the 20th century, in the time following the invention of the airplane, new districts in London were planned around the idea that in the near future all citizens would own a private airplane. Looking back, we can all agree reality unfolded quite differently.

A more recent example is the introduction of the smart phone and its impact on our world in countless unforeseeable ways. Disruptive innovations, including disruptive business models, have had a Life, Society or Business impact that most of us, and probably even the innovators themselves, never could have foreseen.

What makes disruptive innovations fundamentally unpredictable is that these innovations shape reality as much as they respond to it. This article argues that it requires a special kind of mindset to be a disruptive innovator.

Jung's Theory of Synchronicity

As a psychotherapist, Jung encountered countless instances of clients who had experienced "meaningful coincidences." These were situations where no causal connection between two events could be identified, yet the connection between these seemingly unrelated events seemed, from the individual's perspective, too meaningful to be considered "just a coincidence." These "meaningful coincidences" often triggered insights and breakthroughs in the therapy for these clients.

Jung created a model of synchronicity and described it as "the coincidence of a psychic state in the observer with a simultaneous, objective, external event that corresponds to the psychic state or content, where there is no evidence of a causal connection between the psychic state and the external event, and where, considering the psychic relativity of space and time, such a connection is not even conceivable."

An illustration of a meaningful coincidence, or synchronicity, is the story of a man who would usually go to work by car. However, this particular morning he decides to go by train, because for some reason his car would not start. On the train he gets into a conversation with a stranger sitting across from him. The stranger shares something that is unexpectedly relevant and could be used to solve a persistent problem at the office, which had been on his mind for months.

Synchronicity is different from serendipity. Serendipity is finding something of value not sought for. For example, the discovery of Viagra and penicillin. A synchronistic event is given meaning by the mindset that perceives it as it occurs.

Synchronicity applied in Business Agility

Innovations and the process of inventing are essential for organizational growth and longevity. Brilliant craftsmen, inventive strategies, or leaders with great foresight can lead to exceptional innovations. However, it is also known that many have tried and not succeeded in innovating. As the examples have shown, the process of innovation does not always have a clear causal path, and one might even say that for real disruptive innovations the path, and how much of it was the result of meaningful connections, can never be predicted, and only be seen afterwards. For example, how many times have we read about scientists or engineers who solved a persistent problem in their sleep? This makes a strong case for the benefits of sleeping on the job.

For an agile and adaptive network of motivated individuals or teams, knowing when to step out of the currently explored path, is considered a core competence in staying ahead of the game. This is an interesting viewpoint, but it can often be difficult to achieve. One of the reasons for this difficulty is that in the IT world, we are mostly trained in methods and techniques with clear causal paths. Getting off the known path often means letting go of clear causal, linear, thinking. Doing so as a team and thereby looking beyond the team's own goals, professions, and measurable connections with the work of other teams, that is when the magic happens. Innovation and inspiration do not start with causal thinking but with out-of-the-box thinking.

While studying Jung's theory, we noticed similarities with organizational and digital transformations we managed in the past with the goal of achieving more business agility. "Business Agility is the ability to compete and thrive in the digital age by quickly responding to market changes and emerging opportunities with innovative, business solutions¹." Modern and innovative organizations continuously reinvent themselves. To become more efficient, resilient, and sustainable, they keep sailing uncharted waters to explore 'the unknown world' behind the horizon. By adopting a synchronicity mindset as part of their business agility, organizations can adapt to and embrace the spontaneous effects that appear when meaningful connections occur by coincidence.

Meaningful connections can be made between our neurons as well as between people. Sometimes we seem to meet exactly the right person at the right time and a persistent problem is miraculously resolved. Therefore, a key capability of mature, agile teams should be the frequent integration of the different perspectives coming from multiple mindsets (of everyone involved), into a new single and shared "purposeful" journey or destiny. Applying synchronicity (as well as applying cadence in cross domain/team planning) is a key mechanism needed for effectively navigating inherent uncertainty.

Conclusion

The road ahead cannot always be planned. This is even more true for disruptive innovations and transformations. By being open to the synchronicity mindset, unexpected windfall may come your way.

Following the above, there are three main actions that organizations can take to achieve a higher level of business agility.

1) Make room for the unexpected to arise

In all agile teams elements of Jung's theory and mechanisms of the psyche exist. There should be room in agile teams to allow for the unexpected to arise. Business Agility leaders must develop and nurture this in any single or multiple team context in order to create new business value coming from unexpected coalitions that follow their intrinsic motivation.

2) Manage synchronicity

Managing synchronicity is a delicate balance between allowing for the unexpected to arise and the need for control. Too much of either will not lead to transformation or disruptive innovation. It takes time for any leader or team to develop a good understanding of how to balance these two effectively. An iterative approach is by all means the best starting point.

3) Embrace transformational learning

Without a shared common mental state and meaningful new connection there is no new mission to discover next level IT/Digital/Business opportunities at the horizon. Synchronicity applied in transformations and in the agile process of continuous exploration delivers a Minimal Viable Organization (MVO). The MVO reflects the reached "next" shared mental state of the individuals and teams that are part of the organization involved in the transformation process.

Effective Business Agility is manifested in newly formed coalitions that are on a mission to discover and create *"the next level, digitally-enabled, business solution."*



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¹From: <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/business-agility/>

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