

The Roadmap to **Enterprise Business Agility**

Leaning into People, Practices, and Technology to Gain
Resilience and Self-Reliance



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The Roadmap to Enterprise Business Agility: Leaning into People, Practices, and Technology to Gain Resilience and Self-Reliance

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Business Agility: Driving Customer Value in the Face of Disruption

The [Business Agility Institute](#), a global research and advocacy organization, defines the concept of business agility as, “a set of organizational capabilities, behaviors, and ways of working that affords your business freedom, flexibility, and resilience to achieve its purpose. No matter what the future brings.” While the concept of business agility was well established years before COVID-19 upended the world, the pandemic brought the notion into sharper focus and drove organizations of all sizes to formalize and advance initiatives around agility and change.

As business agility initiatives mature, the concept is evolving, and companies are seeking to expand beyond simply responding to unanticipated upheaval to addressing opportunities and challenges. To do this, they require greater self-reliance—the self-awareness and capability to identify and accept change into all aspects of the organization’s people, practices, and technology, so that accounting for it becomes second nature.

In our consulting practice at Isos Technology, we have the privilege of going into hundreds of companies of all sizes each year and working with them not only to solve today’s business problems, but partner with them in looking down the innovation curve and establishing a solid foundation for meeting their long-term strategic

goals. In doing so, we use a proprietary framework we refer to as the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™** to help organizations develop maturity around three key mechanisms that drive efficiency, evolutionary growth, and innovation, and ultimately help them gain agility and resilience. One of these mechanisms is technology, which serves as a foundation for the other two mechanisms—practices and people.

An important distinction of the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™** framework is teaching organizations to become self-reliant, so that when faced with a challenge or decision point, they are able to self-diagnose and identify the correct mechanism—or set of mechanisms, since they are deeply interrelated—to lean into, in order to respond in accordance with their stated values and goals (i.e., in a resilient manner).

In this whitepaper, we introduce the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™**, then define and explore people, practices, and technology as the underpinnings of business agility.

The Three Keys to Agility: People, Practices, and Technology

In broad terms, **there are three primary mechanisms that organizations can lean into to deliver customer value, drive growth, and respond to disruptive events: people, practices, and technology.**

While we will define each mechanism in much greater depth, the people mechanism is centered around organizational culture, values, and behaviors, the practices mechanism is centered around ensuring that processes are built with customer value and accountability in mind, and the technology mechanism is centered around underlying platforms of tools that enable practices and people.

Each mechanism drives a different type of impact or outcome and can be used to address different types of issues. The three are not wholly

independent of each other. Rather, they are inextricably linked, and when combined to varying degrees, their impact is enhanced and more targeted. At Isos Technology, we refer to this set of mechanisms and the various ways of combining them to drive outcomes as the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™**. (Fig.1)



As you can see in Fig. 1, technology is intentionally positioned at the bottom of the triangle to represent that it is a foundational enabler of both people and practices. Leaning into technology tends to be relatively less complex and require a lower level of effort compared to practices and people. Although technology can be a valuable driver of change, especially around gaining efficiencies, relying on this mechanism alone is less likely to drive the type of transformational impact that leaning into practices and people does. It is common with the technology mechanism for organizations to hit a plateau at which tools cannot give them more benefit toward their strategic goals.

Practices and people are positioned on the sides of the triangle, and the two lines representing them are of equal length—a requirement in an isosceles triangle. Practices and people are often more challenging concepts for organizations to apply and more complex levers to pull. While they may not require a greater investment in terms of dollars, they certainly require a greater investment in terms of effort. However, it can be well worth doing so due to their ability to drive the most rewarding, long-term, and sustainable effects.

An Integrated System to Drive Focused Change

Rather than looking at each of the three very different approaches that comprise the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™** independently, and/or leaning into just one side of the triangle, **companies are better served by looking at and addressing technology, practices, and people holistically, as an integrated system to drive focused change.** In the right combination, these approaches can increase business efficiency, accelerate product and service evolution, and even power innovation. It is important to note, though, that there is no universal solution. The answer—what to lean into and when—is going to be different for every company and in every situation, and because of this, it is necessary to have proficiency in all three.

Building Proficiency in All Three Mechanisms

Every organization has a go-to, a mechanism or set of mechanisms that they most frequently rely on when problems present themselves. Equally common, in a single company, each department, division, and work group will have their own set of go-tos. These are typically **default mechanisms—strengths or skill sets where there is a level of expertise and/or comfort.** While leaning into a go-to mechanism to overcome a challenge can lead to incremental improvement, it is rarely a formula for long-term success. An organization's mechanism of choice may not always support true business agility and may not be the best option for driving customer value.

What, then, is the answer?

To respond to ongoing disruption in an agile, resilient manner, businesses must first understand the current shape of their triangle—baseline their skill set—and whether they are primarily technology-, practices-, or people-focused. Then, they must invest in developing the areas in which they are deficient, as well as in developing a proficiency around self-diagnosis: rapidly and efficiently identifying issues and determining which mechanism or set of mechanisms to apply to it, rather than consistently leaning into a default behavior. The goal is proficiency in all three mechanisms, with the self-awareness to understand their natural tendencies, the skills to analyze the information at hand to make informed decisions about how to address a given situation, and the flexibility to lean into the area(s) that will drive the best outcomes. It is a process of continuous self-evaluation and improvement, and with time, training, and practice, the organization should become increasingly skilled and disciplined in diagnosing and addressing its issues.

In the next three sections of this whitepaper, we will explore each mechanism—technology, practices, and people—as well as common pitfalls associated with them, in greater detail.

The Technology Mechanism

At Isos Technology, we intentionally use the term **technology versus tools** in the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™** for this reason: technology speaks to a focus on foundational, underlying, integrated platforms and/or systems that support cross-functional people- and practice-focused activities like collaboration and transparency. When the right technology is in place and it is operating as it should, people are able to focus on their core contributions—the higher-level thinking and activities that drive organizational success. The technology ceases to be the focus: instead, it fades into the background and people focus on value-add activities.



Tools, on the other hand, are point solutions for solving problems that are narrower in scope. They lack an overarching strategy for connecting teams and individuals through cross-functional practices. When there is a focus on individual tools versus an underlying platform and/or system, a host of problems can emerge: too many tools are implemented, resulting in bloat; the tools dictate rigid processes that don't serve organizational goals; people are siloed and can't collaborate; there is no visibility into work being done and no way to report on it; and there is no insight into dependencies and no way to be accountable for them or resolve issues associated with them. In some cases, a whole ecosystem develops around maintaining the tools, integrating them, and pulling information out of them. The company is focused on maintaining tools, adhering to the rigid processes they dictate, and on work that doesn't drive value.

Simply put, tools obfuscate. Technology drives insights.

Technology in Practice: How Technology Drives Organizational Agility



Leaning into the technology mechanism is perhaps the most straightforward maneuver to execute, and it can drive significant efficiency-focused value by saving time, automating manual processes, and reducing the potential for error. Beyond efficiency, technology drives collaboration and increases visibility into work being done. While it can enable teams across large organizations to work in a similar manner—an aspect of governance—it should allow for flexibility or strategic departure from this as needed.

Perhaps most importantly, **the right technology can be a source of information and insights that enable people to challenge their assumptions and beliefs. As a result, practices can be refined and better decisions can be made about how to respond to issues in ways that truly drive value. This is, essentially, the definition of being self-reliant—it is the adoption of an agile mindset and agility practices.**

At Isos Technology, an important part of our overarching service offering is focused on implementing and optimizing Atlassian tools (in addition to providing Agile Services), so we will now turn to the Atlassian platform for an example of how technology can support people and practices in ways that enable resiliency and drive value.

DevOps is a set of practices used in which software development teams and operations teams work closely together, rather than in silos, to drive customer value by technically orchestrating the delivery of features and enhancements to market faster, with fewer issues, and at a lower cost. More companies than ever are adopting DevOps, and as these companies become increasingly effective at it, the volume of software releases skyrockets. While the focus is on minimizing issues, the sheer volume does sometimes drive an overall increase in issues. The challenge that companies face is that the IT Service Management (ITSM) teams who handle the service desk, and are therefore in a position to capture information about these issues, are often siloed from the DevOps teams who need to address the issues, due to disparate tools.

With a technology platform like Atlassian, which takes an “open DevOps” approach, not only are Atlassian's own tools already fully integrated, but the system is also designed so that third-party tools can be easily integrated. That way, teams can choose the tools that best serve them without sacrificing the visibility they need to collaborate cross-functionally. A good example of this comes from DevOps and ITSM. When the technology that teams use in various aspects of their distinct work is integrated, information captured by the ITSM team can seamlessly be made available to the DevOps team, who can then have the ability to refine their practices and respond to disruption in ways that drive customer value—which is, once again, a key aspect of self-reliance.



A Common Technology Trap: Over-Reliance on Tools

By and large one of the most common technology traps we come across is an over-reliance on tools, especially individual point solutions that do not rise to the level of platforms. Because tools are visible, accessible, and often easier to obtain budget for than larger or less clearly defined practice- and people-focused initiatives, there is a tendency to hyper-focus on this side of the triangle to the exclusion of the other two. There is also a common misconception that bringing in tools—and sometimes even a whole technology platform—will eliminate the need to address people and practice issues.

In our consulting practice at Isos Technology, we see time and again organizations that select a tool, implement it, and teach their team to use it, with the belief that this will address the people and practices sides of the triangle. It is a choice that completely inhibits responding in a self-reliant manner. Instead, it is positioning the tool as the authority for how the company solves an issue or manipulates its practices to be “best in class,” rather than challenging the thinking that caused the issue, and using the tool as a foundational enabler of people and processes to overcome it.

Another challenge with this is that technology, while foundational, will only take an organization so far. Technology in and of itself doesn't really drive change—it is the decisions people make and the practices they refine based on the information gathered in technology platforms that drives change. Healthy practices and people need to be layered on top of technology to truly unlock the innovation curve.

A good example of this is transparency. Certainly, technology can make work more visible, but if the company does not have a culture (a people-related issue) that makes it safe for people to expose issues related to work, seek help, and/or fail, then they may struggle with adoption of the technology and ongoing obfuscation.

The Practices Mechanism

At Isos Technology, we intentionally focus on **practices versus processes** in the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™**. This is more than a nuance—there are important differences between the two. Practices are overarching and/or higher-level approaches guided by shared values that drive toward a specific goal. They are, essentially, agreements about how people work together that serve as connective tissue between organizational values and people. Practices are flexible—a necessity when an organization is seeking to achieve business agility.

Processes, on the other hand, are prescriptive steps people must take in order to drive a specific output. They encompass governance policies and detailed workflows that dictate how people will get work done, what nomenclature will be used, how information will be documented, shared, and reported on. As such, they are typically more rigid than practices.

It is also important to note that there is a time and a place for both, as well as a hierarchy to them—practices should guide and/or inform processes.

Using Practices to Drive Organizational Success

Practices enable people to identify the most effective strategy to help them achieve a long-term goal or overcome an emergent issue. For example, in agile organizations, decisions that are not strategic in nature are made in a decentralized rather than hierarchical way—the decision is pushed to where the knowledge is, and the person closest to the issue determines how to address it. This is, in a nutshell, a practice. However, the repeatable steps that person takes to resolve the issue are a process.

For practices to be effective, organizations must codify them—put into words what people understand implicitly and make sure those practices are explicit. Codifying practices, essentially creating a shared understanding of



them, presents the opportunity for organizations to explore the thinking behind the practice so that they genuinely drive the desired results. When codifying practices, organizations—or more specifically the team within the organization that is engaged in the practice—should take the opportunity to explore how it enables them to do their best, or how it prevents them from doing their best. Many organizations find it valuable to use an agile framework to support this process, but it is not an imperative and comes with some potential pitfalls which we will explore in the next section.

When practices are working well, people are guided by values—they understand what the objective is, what their role and responsibilities are in achieving it (and how others contribute to it as well), and what must be done and by when. They know what information they need to share so others can do their jobs, and when and how to communicate about issues. As a result, they are better able to work autonomously and make value-informed decisions that drive results. Friction is reduced and the organization becomes a better place for people to thrive.

Further, if the technology mechanism is working as it should, it works in concert with the practices mechanism to drive a virtuous cycle: the tools can be used to gather insights that enable changes to practices that drive better organizational results. For example, many organizations struggle both to see and manage dependencies between teams. Jira Align is an incredibly useful tool for helping organizations map dependencies, but it does not, in and of itself, solve roadblocks. For that, companies must turn to people and processes. In the short term, people have to come together, have

conversations, and come to agreements about how to move forward. Again, this is enabled by a tool like Jira Align, which supports conversational flow required by two or more teams to commit to a request their work depends on (as opposed to Jira Software where work items are simply linked together). Long term, they have the opportunity to assess whether their organizational structure and practices are driving too many complex dependencies. These can then be addressed by restructuring teams to incorporate all the needed skills on each team to deliver value, which will minimize dependencies.

A Common Practices Trap: Over-Reliance on Agile Frameworks

Similar to technology, there are pitfalls associated with over-reliance on practices, which often manifest as an oversimplification of agile adoption and/or the perception that all that is needed to become an agile organization is to implement an agile framework. It is important to understand that agile frameworks like SAFe®, LeSS, Scrum@Scale, DAD, and others, when well-understood and thoughtfully applied, can be incredibly valuable. However, without adoption of the underlying mindset or the rationale behind the framework, they do not necessarily get at the root cause of issues or solve problems. Sometimes, in fact, organizations simply adopt the vocabulary of the framework, without integrating the mindset. In these instances, the framework becomes no more than a tool—it might further shed light on already apparent issues, but as we've pointed out, tools do not solve problems. Frameworks used as tools do not guide people in changing processes.

It is understandable that well-intentioned organizations might be drawn to the documentation and roadmaps that frameworks offer—they are a treasure trove of information—but they are not prescriptive methodologies, and it's the application of that information that really matters. Simply adhering to a prescribed set of processes can be a way of abdicating responsibility, which is the antithesis of self-reliance—teams may look productive, they may use new terminology for old practices, but it doesn't necessarily signify change. In some cases, particularly where a more people-focused issue like acceptance of failure has not



been addressed, it can foster a mindset that if things go wrong, the system is to blame, and this reinforces a lack of accountability.

For framework-informed practices to be effective, an organization must take responsibility for how they are adopted—not just that they are implemented. Frameworks are a starting point, but they are not necessarily the end goal. Based on an organization's unique circumstances and needs, stakeholders will need to selectively make decisions about what to apply and how to apply it, and may even apply things that sit outside the framework. **Using the “why” behind the framework, and guided by their own purpose and values, companies can choose a set of practices to implement in order to drive focused change.** Of course, like all things agile, this is intended to be an iterative process with no fixed endpoint, because in business, as we all know, nothing is stagnant and what works today may not serve tomorrow.

Rather than allowing the framework to serve as an authority figure, the goal with framework-informed practices is to become your own authority. It's an important nuance: by positioning the framework as the authority figure, it holds the power and responsibility for the outcome, enabling people to choose to stop thinking critically about it and setting the stage for the aforementioned abdication of responsibility. By positioning people within the organization as the authority, they necessarily must take responsibility for how the framework is implemented and for the outcomes, which is a critical step on the path toward self-reliance.

It is interesting to note that in the agile community, a divide has developed among those who favor frameworks and those who are against them. At Isos Technology, we hold a more agnostic view—the **frameworks themselves are full of positive intent, but it is the responsibility of the organization and the people within it to see that they are thoughtfully adopted.**

People are the authority. Not the framework.

The People Mechanism

When we refer to the people mechanism as it relates to the **Isosceles Agility Triangle™**, we are speaking broadly about all things culture-related, including values, mindset, and behaviors. Leaning into the people mechanism is perhaps the most challenging maneuver to execute, but it also has the greatest potential to drive value and evolutionary growth. Think of it this way: every organization is a collection of people, and everything those people do should be driving customer value, which ultimately drives business agility and long-term organizational success. It follows then, that for any company looking to achieve results, supporting people should be the top priority.

In an organization with a healthy people mechanism, people are aligned around shared values, focused on the customer, and motivated by purposeful work. They prioritize effectiveness (doing what is most likely to help the company achieve its goals) over efficiency, even though being effective may be more challenging. People throughout the organization have the foundational knowledge they need to work autonomously, make informed decisions, and generate new ideas. They take calculated risks, and if those risks do not pay off as expected, it is a safe place for them to struggle, fail, and learn.

Perhaps the most important hallmark of a healthy people mechanism—especially when working holistically with healthy practice and technology mechanisms—is the pragmatic acceptance of change. Change is a constant, and when it happens, an organization must be able to integrate it into its culture, address it in its practices, and account for it in its technology. The ability to do this is the underpinning of resiliency and longevity, and organizations that can achieve this will still be thriving in 10 to 20 years. It is an unfortunate truth, however, that not everyone is able or willing to adapt to change, and there will be people who choose to leave an organization rather than embrace it.



Leadership and a Purposeful Focus on Culture

A healthy people mechanism starts with leadership. We specifically use the term leadership, versus management, for this reason: leadership is expansive and effectiveness-focused, while management is typically prescriptive, hierarchical, and efficiency-focused. Historically speaking, the focus of work has been on driving efficiency by managing risk and reducing variability—it was central to Henry Ford's advancement of the assembly line model. Healthy management practices have their place, and efficiency is important, but leadership and calculated risks are what drive evolutionary change and innovation.

For an organization to have a healthy people mechanism, leadership must take a proactive and purposeful approach to developing the culture they want. Culture isn't just what actions and behaviors you embrace. It's everything else that you allow to happen. Not speaking up when you see something is tantamount to endorsing it. For example, by not addressing micromanagement, it becomes an inherent part of the culture.

The complexity of bringing a healthy culture to life cannot be understated. Of all the things leadership must do, one of the most important is to prioritize customer value, ensuring it is always top of mind and informs both decisions and behaviors. In practice, this might look like shifting how leadership holds teams accountable: moving from accountability for hitting forecasts to accountability for delivering customer value.

It also entails establishing the desired cultural characteristics, codifying them, and modeling them. While every organization will need to define the culture that best supports its people in their efforts to drive customer value, in our practice at Isos Technology, we have found several core behaviors that leadership can model to help drive success. These include moving from a top-down decision-making model to a decentralized model for decisions that are made frequently and are not strategic in nature, establishing a learning culture in which coaching is supported and embraced at every level, and cultivating safe and healthy practices around giving and receiving feedback.

- **Decentralized decision-making:** In many cases, becoming more agile, resilient, and self-reliant means moving from a hierarchical and authoritative decision-making model to one of empowerment, but it is important to understand when this is appropriate. Strategic decisions, with long-ranging impact, tied to the course of direction of the company, should be centralized, but most other decisions can be delegated to the team or person with the domain expertise to make it.
- **A learning culture:** Being agile, resilient, and self-reliant means being able to adapt to change on an ongoing basis. To do that, organizations must embrace continuous learning. Not only do companies need to fund and support ongoing coaching and training for all employees, members of the leadership team also need to actively participate in it, both for their own development and to lead by example.
- **Giving and receiving feedback:** Agility, resiliency, and self-reliance all require continuous improvement, and feedback loops are an important part of that. Organizations that want to create a culture in which it is safe to give and accept feedback must again lead by example. One of the best ways to get feedback is to start asking for it, acknowledge it when it's given, and respond to it when appropriate, in order to close the feedback loop.

While we've covered these three concepts briefly here, we explore them in depth in our companion whitepaper, [Leading Through Change: the C-Suite's Role in Enterprise Agile Transformation](#).

Practices and technology are both critical to supporting people, and it is leadership's responsibility to enable this to happen. For example, for an organization to be able to lean into people to solve an issue, they need to be able to have open, ongoing, and blame-free conversations around it. While the ability to speak candidly about problems is culture-related, regular practices like taking actions on the improvements suggested in retrospective meetings support it. Technology, for its part, provides people with a means for collaboration and transparency, and creates shared understanding.



A Common People Pitfall: Maintaining Outdated Practices that Reinforce Old Behaviors

While a purposeful approach to culture modeled by leadership is a great way to start, to truly drive change, desired behaviors must cascade throughout every corner of the organization. A common pitfall that we encounter in our consulting practice at Isos is leaving in place outdated practices, processes, and even the more tactical, human resources-focused procedures that inadvertently reinforce outdated, undesirable behaviors. While, in this whitepaper, we tend to focus more on the practices related to how work gets done, organizations are best served by taking a beginning-to-end approach, starting with the hiring process, all the way through the way employees are evaluated, compensated, and given bonuses when goals are reached.

It is important that organizations begin hiring people who have the necessary mindset to help the company prioritize value. Further, roles must be structured and job requisitions must be rewritten, goals must be revised, and compensation and incentives must be reframed in support of outcomes vs. outputs.

Coaching: A Step Toward Self-Reliance

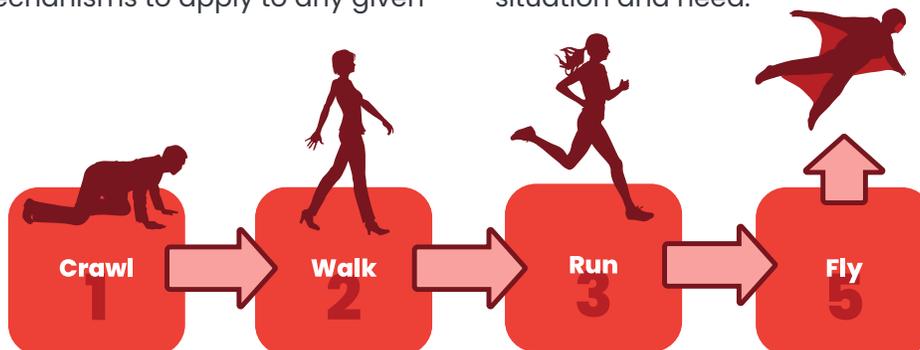
At Isos Technology, it's our belief that achieving business agility entails becoming more resilient, as well as more self-reliant, so it's our goal in working with organizations to teach them how to self-diagnose and identify the best solution or combination of mechanisms to apply to any given

situation. By working with external experts, often referred to as coaches, organizations can develop mastery in each mechanism.

We use a four-step process to help our clients gain business agility and achieve self-reliance. The process features a crawl, walk, run, fly approach:

- 1. Crawl:** In the crawl phase, the external expert serves as a teacher by introducing and explaining concepts, demonstrating new skills, and providing hands-on, tactical training.
- 2. Walk:** In the walk phase, the external expert serves as a facilitator, providing structure and support, but the organization takes an active role in leading the process.
- 3. Run:** In the run phase, the external expert serves as a mentor, providing suggestions informed by experience, but the organization becomes the authority and moves forward on its own.
- 4. Fly:** In the fly phase, the external expert serves as a coach, asking the right questions to enable the organization, which is primarily self-reliant, to determine the best course of action.

While in the process outlined above we have aligned crawling with teaching, walking with facilitating, running with mentoring, and flying with coaching, it is important to note that at any step, the type of guidance the external expert provides (teaching, facilitating, mentoring, or coaching) may vary depending on the situation and the organization's, team's, or individual's needs and learning style. Further, the process is not always linear—companies will have relative strengths and weaknesses and need different types and depths of guidance. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; instead, the external expert must flex to meet the situation and need.



About Isos Technology

Isos Technology accelerates the innovation curve for companies that are changing the world. Since 2005, we've partnered with organizations of all sizes to help them tackle tough business challenges and achieve their strategic goals. As a premier Atlassian Platinum and Enterprise Solution Partner, we have a strong foundation in helping organizations get the most value out of their technology tools, and developing practices and people to drive efficiency, growth, agility, and resilience. We're dedicated to the long-term success of our customers, and have supported hundreds of organizations throughout their ITSM, Cloud, DevOps, and Agile transformation journeys. For more information, visit isostech.com.



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