

Case Study: APMG International Coronavirus meets Agility

In March 2020, like every business, APMG International needed to address the impact of COVID-19.



Richard Pharro, the founder and CEO of APMG, and the leadership team were concerned about the risks ahead. APMG International is a global company that accredits organizations to deliver training courses and consultancy services for a broad range of professional certification schemes. They have a diverse portfolio including internationally renowned solutions for Project, Business and Information & Technology Management, Cyber Security and Public-Private partnerships.

Key points

Challenges:

As of March 2020, in the short term, APMG's top priority was to protect employees' health while minimizing service disruptions and to support their commercial partners in delivering courses and organizing exams.

APMG found that increasing volatility, uncertainty, growing complexity, and ambiguous information (VUCA) created a business environment in which agile behavior and collaboration were more critical than ever, especially for

a company that works with different functions, expertise, geography, level, and cultures.

This was not a time to press ahead with "nice to have" initiatives or system-wide transformations. APMG reevaluated the priorities by suspending work on existing projects and focusing their efforts on the development of online services, digital marketing, and facilitating online courses and exams.

The Agile Way:

The challenges inherent to a VUCA environment require agile leadership and flexible organizations.

The principles of the Agile Manifesto were exemplified by APMG in response to the challenges.

Working in ways that make APMG employees happy and successful

Richard Pharro and his board identified the APMG top priorities and then communicated them to the international team, clients and partners, providing clear and regular information. The CEO of 26 years reflected, "Because so many employees around the globe were working from home, the potential for miscommunication was high. So, I had to make clear what our priorities were and, at the same time, project confidence, strength, and positivity amongst teams and employees." In fact, in that period most employees felt stressed, so it was important to be empathetic and humble by demonstrating virtues such as kindness, compassion, and care for colleagues. "We had to focus on balancing positive and factual information whilst not sugar-coating bad news, during our periodical staff briefings." These communications removed doubts, created stability by giving employees a blueprint for how to adapt and helped them work more calmly. Moreover, the creation of many Agile Teams reduced layers of control and approval, thereby speeding up work and increasing the teams' motivation.

Breaking large tasks into small steps and testing solutions with working models

APMG launched many Agile Teams: for social media management, learning platform development, video creation and more. Colleagues were invited to support one another and learn new skills in order to help others achieve results fast. This fostered huge cross-functional collaboration, promoting positive feelings of support and achievement. Teams were small and multidisciplinary, self-managing, and completely empowered. They worked closely



Screen shot of APMGs' Team call

with both external and internal stakeholders. The focus was on building employees' soft skills such as self-organizing, growth mindsets, adaptability, and capability to work collaboratively.

So, APMG, for instance, stepped up the development of an online training platform (ALP) to enable all their training partners to move their courses to online delivery. The ALP Agile Team launched the first version of the online platform within five weeks. It was made available, after appropriate training and testing, to APMG partners, so they could deliver and promote their courses online, at rapid pace. Five weeks later the enhanced functionality was launched, fully supported by the Agile Marketing Team (including interdepartmental colleagues across the globe), creating training videos to accelerate understanding and use of the ALP. According to the COO, Nick Houlton, "As a global business APMG saw the lockdown first in China and needed to provide partners with a safe, secure and professional teaching environment. This was and remains our vision for the APMG Learning Platform.

'We had to focus on balancing positive and factual information whilst not sugar-coating bad news, during our periodical staff briefings.'

- Richard Pharro

Smaller teams and compelling events are able to accelerate change, and this was no exception.”

In identifying the rapidly changing needs of APMG partners, the training community and candidates, APMG was able to provide support exactly where it was needed. Information was no longer available face to face, via conferences or networking events, and physical training could not take place. They created internal Agile Teams with colleagues volunteering from all departments internationally, and they allowed their partners access to their online marketing platforms including the website and social media channels in order that they could showcase and communicate important, informative and educational messaging. They continued to celebrate the success of those demonstrating resilience and commitment to learning during this time by commenting and sharing posts featuring their new qualifications and digital badges. Alicia Holbrook, Head of Marketing, underlines, “COVID-19 had an immediate impact on communication and marketing which accelerated our shift towards digital. In March, parts of the world were in lockdown; booking training courses was not a priority and our website visits dipped. Engagement was low, Training Organisations went into hibernation. Then something surprising happened. April saw an increase in web enquiries for training. May outperformed the previous year. Customers wanted training, and they wanted it virtually and immediately. Mindful that our customers were at different stages of their digital journeys, the leadership team shared the vision of onboarding as many training organisations as possible onto the APMG Learning Platform. We knew we needed specific skills, so we assessed our distribution of expertise and created dispersed agile teams to support corporate marketing as well as our customers across the globe. To create the agile teams we looked at skills levels and configured teams to take advantage of time-zone differences; as soon as one team headed-home, another team picked-up the work. APMG has strengthened its organisational agility and I know we can steer our way through another crisis.”

Great ideas coming from anywhere in the organization

APMG did exemplary work in involving employees to propose ideas to better help the partners in delivering online courses. The “psychological safety” created by the senior team resulted in enthusiastic support and engagement and a team spirit that enabled them to rapidly produce the Learning Platform. The ALP Agile Team, led by Nick Houlton, worked endless hours on the fly – all towards one simple goal and purpose. The new technology was simply built on open source software, to provide bespoke functionalities and purpose-driven outcomes to support the training community. It was a creative, bold initiative that also accepted failure as the team solved a series of unanticipated problems, small and large incrementally, along the way.

APMG welcomed the opinions of more employees, with a bottom-up approach, also used in the different Agile Teams, that led to more collaborative ways of developing hypotheses, better results, and greater confidence.

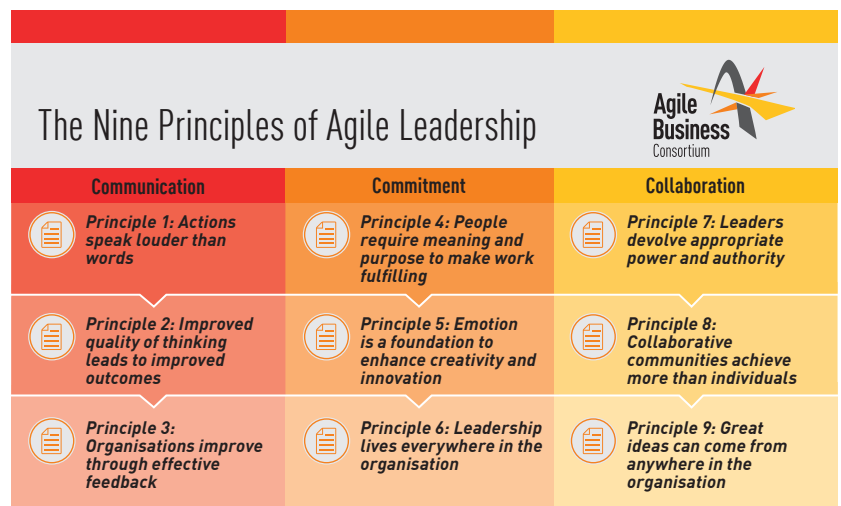
‘Mindful that our customers were at different stages of their digital journeys, the leadership team shared the vision of onboarding as many training organisations as possible onto the APMG Learning Platform.’

- Alicia Holbrook

Devolving appropriate power and authority while governing the alignment

All the Agile Teams worked differently from chain-of-command bureaucracies, but Richard Pharro wanted to face the challenge of managing the local autonomy (bottom-up) of the different Agile Teams in a way that was consistent with a broader framework represented by APMG’s goals, interdependencies, and strategic priorities of the company (top-down view).

APMG revisited its process and introduced routine meetings to create alignment between and within the different Agile Teams.



Extract from the Nine Principles of Agile Leadership, Agile Business Consortium



Collaboration

At local level, the Business Development Managers had been working using an agile approach, built around small and collaborative multidisciplinary teams including sales, marketing, accreditation, operations, finance. Regional teams focused on delivering continuous improvement of the customer experience, creating customer values faster, incorporating feedback on a regular basis, and adapting the course to deliver values on time. They were used to meeting partners in person, but after the lockdown in most countries all around the globe, they emphasized the need for collaboration with frequent calls and common plans shared with the customers.

At international level, APMG created different small cross-functional agile teams that collaborated remotely from the UK to Italy, from Germany to South Africa, from the USA to Poland and Australia. Connecting people across geographies and units doing similar work was helpful in identifying points where integrating different perspectives brought agile innovation. This multidisciplinary collaboration tackled higher-value problems. As Stephan Brendel, EMEA Regional Lead reports, "Despite the huge impact COVID-19 had on the business of our customers, we have also seen this as a business enabler like never before: new targets have been set and achieved followed by further iterations for new targets. We had daily standups during April

and then bi-weekly in May when we gained new confidence into business growth. We introduced a state-of-the-art learning system to our customers within weeks that complies with Learning Management System standards (LMS) that help to achieve a new level of interactive online learning. If we had planned this the traditional way, we would not have achieved half of what we did in the time. Using an agile approach with iterations and incorporated feedback made the difference. And we have all taken up new roles to support each other as a global team."

According to Estelle Hicks-Bennett, Marketing Manager, "APMG staff have collaborated widely and developed new skills such as presenting, interviewing, video recording and editing techniques. More of the global team have become engaged in contributing to marketing content. This has resulted in more publicity using rich media formats whilst exploiting the opportunities the social media and online platforms have to offer. The community has welcomed the new content which has been relevant, valuable and provided free guidance – we have been able to adapt and identify needs and information requirements real-time and share information – fast! Along with our newly created, bespoke virtual training platform, the new ways of working we have embraced are influencing our future focus and have, in fact, improved some of the services we are able to provide our partners in the future."

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- Estelle Hicks-Bennett

Conclusion:

Even though the current pandemic is surely the worst calamity that has affected every organization at the same time, it has also offered a series of unexpected challenges and opportunities for them to adapt their organization to become more agile and resilient, creating innovations to sense and adapt to a VUCA environment and ultimately prevail.

A VUCA world doesn't render the rules and the discipline of a strategy any less applicable; it raises the bar on the thinking discipline required to succeed with vision, understanding, clarity and agility.

According to Richard Pharro; "This was only possible due to our experienced, committed and innovative employees as only with the right people is anything possible." Although he adds, with a knowing smile, "Well, maybe not everything is possible."

'This was only possible due to our experienced, committed and innovative employees as only with the right people is anything possible.'

- Richard Pharro

How to find out more:

APMG International:

APMG International is a global examination institute which administers a range of professional management qualifications and supporting accreditation schemes to support individuals and organizations in key management disciplines, including; Programme & Project Management, IT Service Management and Cyber Security & Resilience.

Our portfolio of over 100 qualifications – which include AgilePM Practitioner, Business Relationship Management Professional, Change Management Practitioner and supporting training courses, are designed to equip individuals with best practice knowledge, tools and techniques to tackle key business objectives whilst improving efficiency and performance.

Learn more about APMG at: www.apmg-international.com

Agile Business Consortium:

The Agile Business Consortium is the leading not-for-profit professional body for promoting and enabling business agility worldwide. We work with partners and alliances to promote Agile practices, and to develop, curate and share Agile resources with the wider world. The direct descendent of the DSDM Consortium, we encourage an agnostic and client-centred approach to the use of Agile methods and frameworks.

We are the brains behind AgilePM®, AgileBA® and AgilePgM® and organise the longest running Agile Business Conference in the world. With the support of APMG International we have accredited over 300 training organisations worldwide and certified over 150,000 Agile Project Managers, Business Analysts and Programme Managers; and we're still growing.

Learn more about business agility and the Consortium at: www.agilebusiness.org



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