

BPM and Lean Peter Matthijssen

## Improving Agility - Step Back to move Forward

On one side of the seesaw there is the customer. On the other side of the seesaw there is an employee, serving the customer 'in real time'. To optimally fulfill the needs of the customer we need balance. This turns out to be quite a challenge...



My name is Peter Matthijssen and I am a consultant and trainer in the field of BPM and Lean management. I am driven by a passion for organizational performance and improvement. As a Lean consultant I am always focused on value. In today's environment many organizations are having a hard time successfully creating sustainable value. The conditions in terms of customer needs, technology and legislation continuously change. Business agility is crucial to survive; there is an urge for organizations to improve, organize and guarantee this agility. However, for many of these organizations becoming more agile is challenging. Often, the more they try to manage, organize, control and guarantee agility, the less agile they actually become. In my opinion this is all about the nature of agility. I am convinced that in order to build a strategic capability for agility 'at large', organizations also require agility and flexibility 'in small' (day-to-day work). Agility is something that you need to support, but shouldn't (over)organize. Let's see how this works on a seesaw.

## Round 1: controlling agility

The customer and employee are standing on the seesaw. To find balance the employee has to move. However, this employee doesn't have the authority to make these movements by himself; in our professionally managed organizations he needs to live up to standards and guidelines. The manager is in control. He defines the movements of the employee in terms of inches and direction. Of course, the employee is willing to do exactly what he is ordered to do, since his performance is measured and rewarded based on internal controls.

It turns out to be impossible to find balance. Especially when the customer also starts to move (representing changing customer needs). The employee is not really interested in serving the customer (finding balance); he just does what he is ordered to do. Waiting for directions, the employee is always just a bit too late to find balance.

What can we learn? This exercise illustrates that a command and control structure won't work when agility is required. Command and control refers to top-down; functional design; standards and rules; decision-making separated from work and extrinsic motivation. In a new style environment, with direct customer interaction, command and control won't do the trick. Let's try something else.

## Round 2: total freedom

Do we need management? Let's try the same seesaw exercise without the manager. It's just about the customer and the employee. This new setup gives total freedom to the employee to make his movements. He can focus on the customer and this way directly react to customer movements.

The interaction between customer and employee makes the 'time-lag' in movements smaller; it enables the employee to respond more quickly. However, finding balance is still hard in this second round. The employee is continuously trying to get his position right 'in the moment', but can't really anticipate on the next customer move. What can we learn? This exercise illustrates that freedom for employees to react and to do the 'right thing in the moment' does improve performance, compared to a command and control system. However, we still have a reacting system. Freedom without any guidance and support doesn't optimally support agile business.

## Round 3: supporting agility

In this third round we change the roles a little. We still have our employee and customer on the seesaw. Just as in round 2 the employee is in the lead of the movements. However, in this round our manager is also in play again, but this time in a supporting role. The manager stands next to the seesaw and can physically support the employee. He can correct movements by applying small forces to help the employee to find balance.



Supported by the manager we now actually find balance! Even when the customer moves it turns out to be quite easy for the employee to find and hold balance. The stress level of the employee drops and together with his manager he can anticipate the next customer move. Maybe they can even try to attract the customer and reduce the distance, making it even easier to find and hold balance.

What can we learn? Today's environments require organizations to be flexible and agile. Next to long-term strategic planning (Where do we want to go? What is our North Star?) organizations also need to respond to and learn from the changes that they deal with every day. These changes don't occur in the boardroom first; the employees in the front line have to deal with changes every day. It is here where we need flexibility and creativity to do the right thing 'in the moment'. This might feel as a **step back in** terms of control, but is necessary **to move forward** in terms of agility. Strategic agility requires organizations to smartly value the many small changes, learn from them and use them to adjust the route to their North Star!

I use this seesaw exercise quite a lot in workshops and trainings. Thankfully, so far the seesaw hasn't collapsed and nobody got hurt yet. The exercise makes participants feel how hard it is to find balance, especially when they are not supported and distracted by rules and guidelines. The exercise is fun, but also provides some very valuable lessons. If we make the 'game' simpler (fewer rules and less control), and reduce the stress level (support), the attention can be focused on customer value and performance will improve dramatically.

Good luck finding balance in your organization!

## Author



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Peter Matthijssen is managing consultant and trainer at BiZZdesign. As a Lean Six Sigma black belt and Business Process Management (BPM) expert, he build change capabilities in organizations around the globe. With his Master degree in Industrial Engineering & Management (University of Twente) and over 15 years of experience in the field, he helps organizations in private and public sector to work smarter and get better results from their processes. Peter is the author of numerous books and publications on BPM and Lean management, for example 'Thinking in processes' [2011] and 'Working with Lean' [2013]. He speaks on a regular basis on international conferences on business design and change like IRM-UK and Building Business Capability.