



# Agile Thinking for IT Teams

## ▼ Introduction

**With good reason, agility is a buzzword in the modern IT world.**

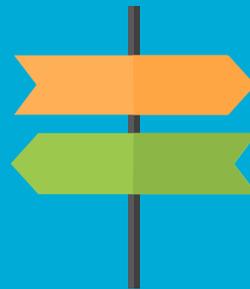
The unrelenting rate of change increases the pressure businesses feel to keep up. The IT department is tapped to provide the platform from which the business can adjust, adapt, and anticipate its next move. To be successful in that effort, IT professionals need to understand how to be agile as individuals, and how to operate as agile teams.

**What do we mean by agility?**

By not fully understanding the fundamental concept of agility, many IT leaders fail to develop agile individuals and teams. Leaders direct their teams to work faster while measuring time. However, speed alone is not agility. Rather, agility should be viewed as the ability to stop, change direction, and accelerate. All three actions are key to building agility within the IT department.



Stop



Change Direction



Accelerate

## ▼ Stop

**In today's world, stopping may be the most difficult part of achieving agility.**

IT culture is wired to take constant action with a tendency to reward employees based on the volume of tasks completed rather than recognizing vital tasks that directly impact organizational objectives. The IT professionals who do strategize which tasks to focus on risk being labeled as slow or indecisive.

In his book, *A More Beautiful Question*, Warren Berger argues that people need to stop taking constant action and start asking more questions. Specifically, leaders should ask why, what if, and how—in that order. Glossing over

or rushing through any one of these questions cheats an IT leader of the self-reflection needed to fully understand a problem, dream of a new possibility, and strategically plan for that possibility.

The former CEO of Steelcase, Jim Hackett, asked:

**“When did the balance between thinking and doing get out of equilibrium?”**

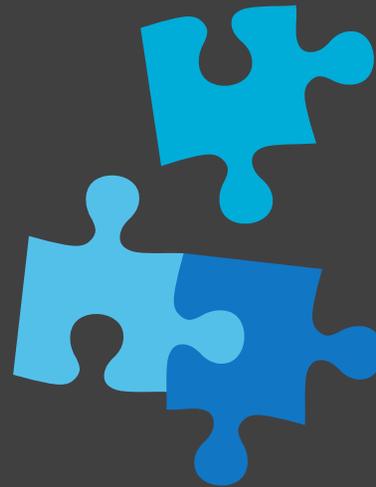
In recognition of the “over-celebration of getting things done,” Hackett used role modeling and formal courses to teach his team critical thinking, which played a large part in turning the company around.

## ▼ Stop

Ask yourself these questions:



What are you doing as an IT leader to encourage stopping?



What are you doing as an IT leader to train the discipline of critical thinking?



What are you doing as an IT leader to demonstrate the discipline of critical thinking?

## ▼ Change Direction

**While the first step for an agile IT department is to set clear expectations for an agile culture and mentality, the second step focuses on IT processes and infrastructure.**

Just as the design of a ship affects its ability to change directions, the design of the IT systems effectively determines an IT team's ability to change direction as needed.

One way to plan for quick directional changes is to build flexibility into the IT budget. As mentioned in our article [“Three Budget Challenges of IT Leaders,”](#) it is important to consider vendors who offer customization and cancellation options in their agreements. These vendors provide flexibility and allow IT

leaders to allocate resources to areas of need as they arise.

Another way to promote agility is the creation and implementation of a comprehensive “flexibility first” infrastructure and architecture plan. Many companies are equipping their plans with virtualization strategies that include public clouds, private clouds, hybrid clouds, and software-defined data centers.

These strategies allow new images and applications to be quickly spun up anywhere within the infrastructure instead of the slower model of building hosts. Similarly, Gartner advocates for the use of a bimodal IT approach that allows the organization to split itself in two modes of IT - one traditional and one agile - until it

has the capacity to move entirely to the agile mode.

Each company's strategic approach will require its own unique plan that takes into account the organization's objectives, size, structure, and needs.

Ultimately, to build the infrastructure that is able to adapt to change requires the right human capital. IT leaders must hire professionals with the capability to address change successfully. Each IT member is continually called upon to learn new systems, new modes of operation, and even new ways of thinking. Identifying current and future goals, implementing new solutions, and consistently delivering innovative service is the standard for an agile IT team.

## ▼ Change Direction

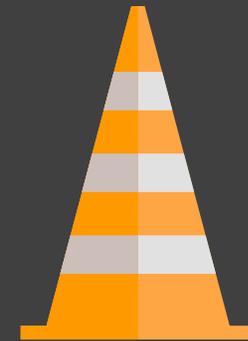
Ask yourself these questions:



Have you built flexibility into your budget?



Do you prioritize flexibility in your strategic infrastructure and application plans?



Is the ability to learn a non-negotiable in your hiring process?

## ▼ Accelerate

**The third step of an agile approach is helping the team reach full productivity or utilizing the benefits of a new technology as soon as possible.**

An important element of quick acceleration in IT is project management. There are many theories on how to approach it. IT teams may implement a “scrum” system, advocating for the use of short time frames called sprints during which deliverable projects are created and improved upon in subsequent sprints. Other teams use hybrid “agile” project management mentalities that utilize high levels of communication and

prioritization. Regardless of method, the key concept of batch processing is the same. People are most effective when they focus on only one task at a time. Project management should help employees narrow their focus to tackle one issue at a time.

Quick acceleration in IT also requires continuous improvement to help identify areas of any system that are not working well and make corrections to eliminate bottlenecks and waste. Since continuous improvement is an ongoing effort, each improvement builds on the last and creates exponential efficiency.

Six Sigma and Lean Production are two well-known approaches to continuous improvement for IT professionals.

The support of colleagues is another element that has a significant impact on acceleration. An IT leader will have access to the resources and information necessary to move quicker toward the goal with the backing of his colleagues. We address creating greater support and understanding in [“Five Ways CIOs Can Become Better Business Partners.”](#)

## ▼ Accelerate

Ask yourself these questions:



Does your project management system use batch processing?



As an IT leader, do you promote and support continuous improvement?



In what ways are you working to become a better business partner?

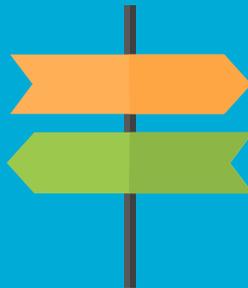
## ▼ Conclusion

**By building the platforms, IT teams add the capability for other departments to drive value and respond to changing business dynamics.**

IT is tasked with equipping the organization with the right systems and infrastructure to be able to respond to changing business demands effectively at every turn. Only by maximizing agility will IT leaders be able to keep pace with multiple challenges and implement the best technology solutions. Using the simple model of stop, change direction, and accelerate can help IT leaders empower their teams and their organizations to successfully engage with the constant change in our world.



Stop



Change Direction



Accelerate