Administration and NGOs

For several years now, agility has been the number one trend in organizational design. The whole world is talking and writing about agility. One interesting question is whether or not agile methods such as SCRUM, Design Thinking or OKR can actually be applied unchanged to administration and NGOs.

by Günter Kradischnig

In what form would agility have to be adjusted, expanded or even restricted? ICG experts have been thinking about these questions for years and have developed an agile administration model.

There are not many examples of agile public organizations. Does that indicate that agility is a model not suitable for the public sector? If we only look at negative manifestations such as cultures of mistrust, intolerance towards errors and the predominance of bureaucratic principles, it would hardly be surprising. Maybe, however, we simply lack methods and tools for transferring this model to the realm of administration. Early attempts at successfully implementing agile methods can be found in the Swedish city of Ängelholm, which has been a much-cited and -visited example of agile administration for many years. More recent attempts have been made in German municipalities such as Heidelberg and Karlsruhe.

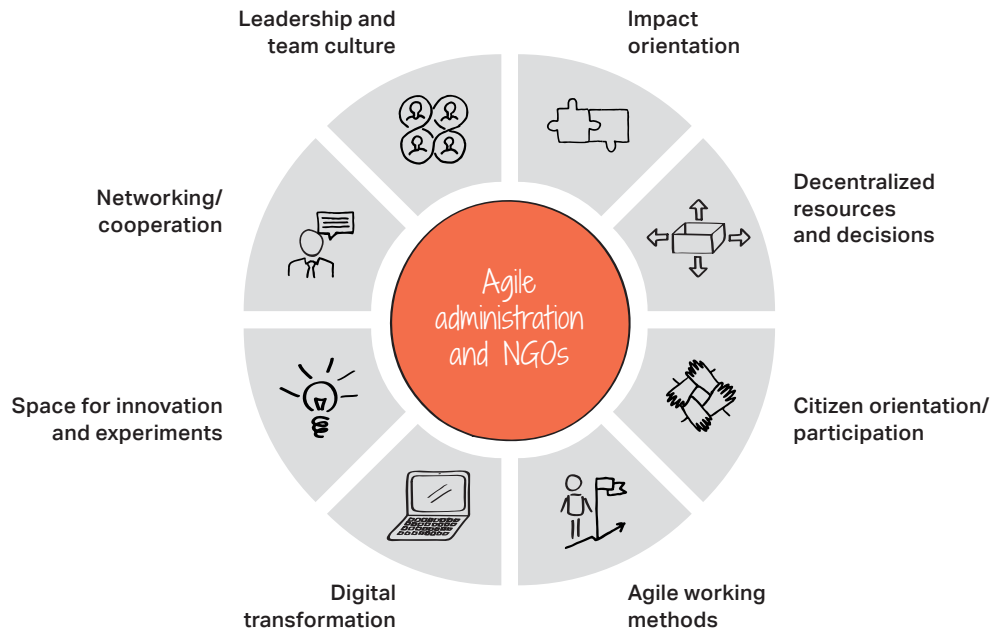### Agile administration must-haves

All of these pioneers share certain essential elements of agile organizations. They use new and far-reaching participation models. They successfully utilize agile work methods such as Kanban boards, SCRUM, Design Thinking and the like as well as agile principles in their projects. They also rely on far-reaching approaches towards digital transformation in administration. Now, is agility the new messiah that will succeed paradigms such as New Public Management and Good Governance? Will it make all approaches of these movements – that haven't been broadly implemented so far anyway – obsolete? Probably not, since many of these methods have proven their worth in practical use within administrative organizations and have been consistently well received. For several reasons, however, many of them were not used for long or ever comprehensively rolled out. Yet using only a few agile methods and innovative participation models alone will not be enough to strike the organizations' nerve and initiate extensive change.

The ICG model

With this in mind, our model describes an (ideal) target state. It also aims to serve as an orientation for administrative developments in the sense of a desired vision for the future. It combines proven elements from previous reform models that haven't been implemented sufficiently with agile principles. When it comes to holistic change processes, all elements should be reviewed for their usefulness and purpose for the respective orga-

The ICG-agility-model for public administration and NGOs

Leadership and
team culture

Impact
orientation

Networking/
cooperation

Decentralized
resources
and decisions

Agile
administration
and NGOs

Space for innovation
and experiments

Citizen orientation/
participation

Digital
transformation

Agile working
methods

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nization and could be applied in the context of a transformation process lasting several years (see illustration).

Impact orientation
Agile control starts with transparency in the sense of the wide availability of all required information. In an age of widely available communication technology, this is more about basic values than major organizational measures. Apart from aiming for impact targets, an organization above all else needs to leave behind the ambition to check all individual cases without exception. A cycle consisting of target definition, planning and regulation of implementation and (self) control serves as the central element of modern agile control. Self-control replaces excessive review and control.

Decentralized resources and decisions
According to evaluations, consistently shifting decisions, competences and responsibilities to the (leadership) base of an organization has shown that decentralized units reach their goals with less funding and higher management and employee satisfaction. It goes without saying that this requires adequate framework conditions such as target and performance agreements, functioning controlling and correspond-

ing organizational and quality standards. Global budgeting can safely be called the crown jewel of decentralized resources and decisions.

Citizen orientation/participation
As mentioned above, this element is at the core of all known agility models for administrative organizations. Examples include situational arenas in Ängelholm or the IQ (innovativ und quer – literally »innovative and unconventional«) workshops in Karlsruhe. The systematic involvement of the population and civil society into solution finding is also facilitated and promoted by the use of digital communication possibilities (see digital public forums, etc.).

Agile working methods
A suitable application of agile work methods increases the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative action in various ways. On the one hand it's through methods such as Design Thinking that are aimed at boosting creativity and idea generation as well as exploration and experimentation. SCRUM and working with sprints are two ways to improve development and implementation speed. The quality of meetings can be enhanced by means of timeboxing, agile moderation and the consent method of decision-making. Kanban ▶

boards, daily/weekly stand-ups, review and retrospective significantly contribute to improving communication and cooperation.

Digital transformation

Arguably, digitalization currently has the strongest impact on administrative development, both internally (ELAK – electronic file management/electronic workflow) and externally (E-government). Principles applied all across Europe such as once-only or digital-by-default promote and require a paradigm shift in communication and process design.

Space for innovation and experiments

This field is hardly a core skill of public institutions. And yet: Agile Project Management as well as modern approaches such as Design Thinking and the like create a sound foundation for solution finding outside of everyday business and standard routines. Opportunities present themselves left, right and center – the refugee crisis from a few years ago comes to mind as one example.

Networking/cooperation

In this field, approaches such as administrative cooperation, cross-sector cooperation/teams and shared services have been making a name for themselves in recent years. Such new forms of cooperation between administrative organizations as well as between them and external stakeholders increasingly prove their worth in the context of solving complex issues as well as budget problems and improve the quality of problem solution and result acceptance.

Leadership and team culture

Leadership in agile organizations is all about more support, coaching and the increased provision of optimal framework conditions. Commands and instructions remain ineffective. Clear target agreements and corresponding leeway inspire individual responsibility and self-control at all levels. Team targets and team responsibility gain in importance and replace »lone wolf« experts in complex environments. Professional HR management supports these developments; performance-oriented, innovative remuneration models and career paths as well as professional feedback processes are becoming increasingly important.

Agility for NGOs? Sure!

Due to an increasingly volatile and complex environment as well as the trend towards digitalization – which no organization can get around – NGOs are facing new challenges, too. These require a more agile approach with regards to both structures and processes. The prime example of Buurtzog (see page 137) serves as proof of the associated positive effects. In the Netherlands, the entire care section of the outpatient nursing service is administrated using agile methods. Self-managed and self-responsible teams serve their clients in individual care settings. There is no conventional leadership; the roles within the teams change regularly. Their numbers prove their success. And patients as well as care personnel are significantly happier than before. by Maria Laura Bono

Agility as a means for transformation

Coming back to our introductory question, the answer is therefore clear: Agile methods are more than suitable for the public sector. What we are lacking is a clear (political) vision regarding this model. This would require commitment from political and administrative managers and the consistent implementation of accepted principles of change management. Or: the success of such a transformation process is not primarily decided by the content and goals but much more by process, communication and individual change support like training and coaching. Is a revolutionary approach the only effective way of implementing agility? Not necessarily, as practical experience shows. Even the implementation of individual aspects of our model can support administrative organizations and NGOs with being better prepared for a dynamic environment. ●

Recommended reading

»Adventure Change Management: Practical tips for all those who want to make a difference«
Manfred Höfler, Dietmar Bodingbauer, Hubert Dolleschall, Franz Schwarenthorer et al.; Frankfurter Allgemeine Buch; 2018