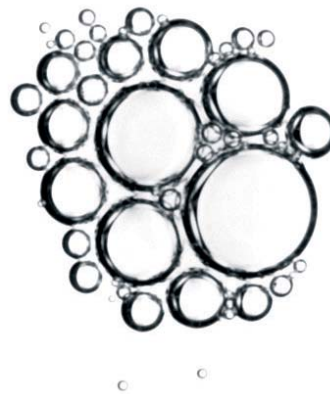


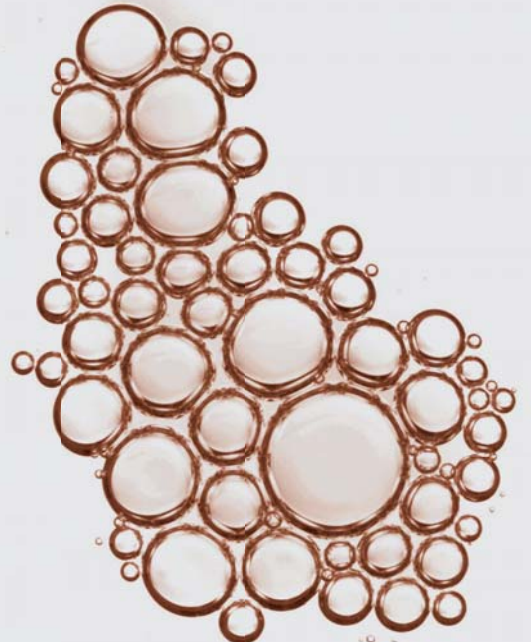
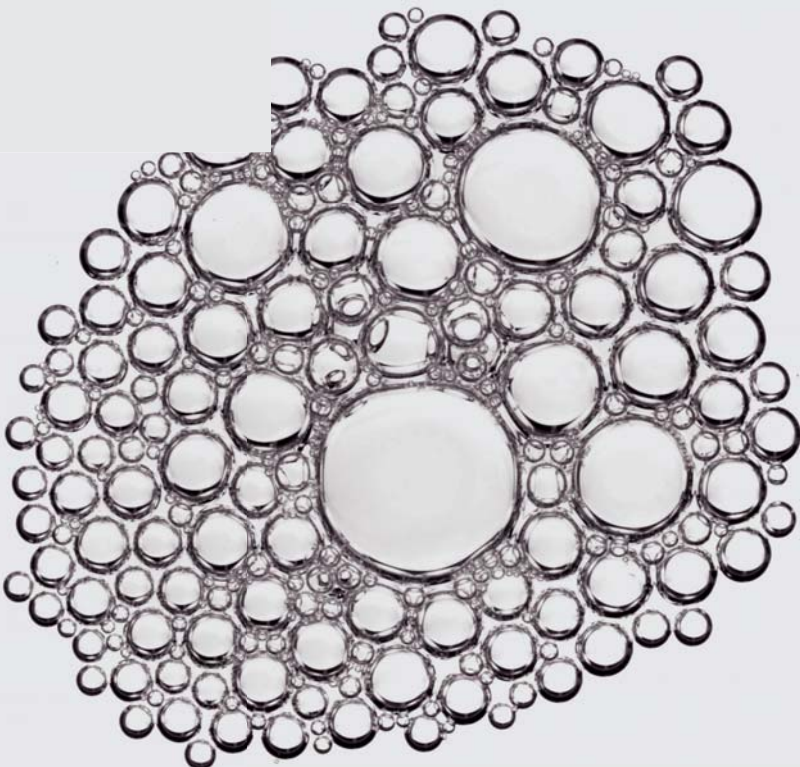
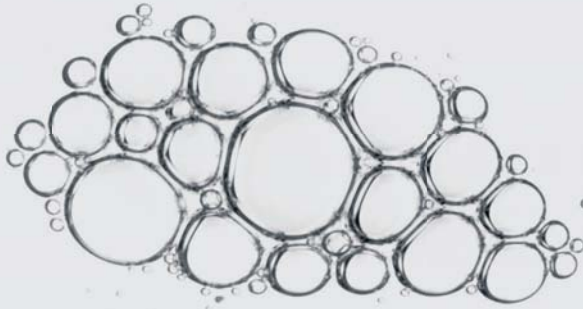
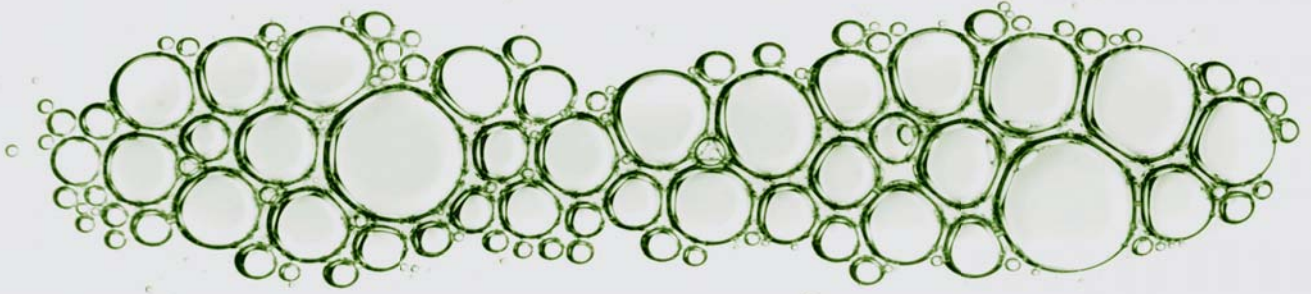
# Agile Islands

---

Starting a transformation journey within your company

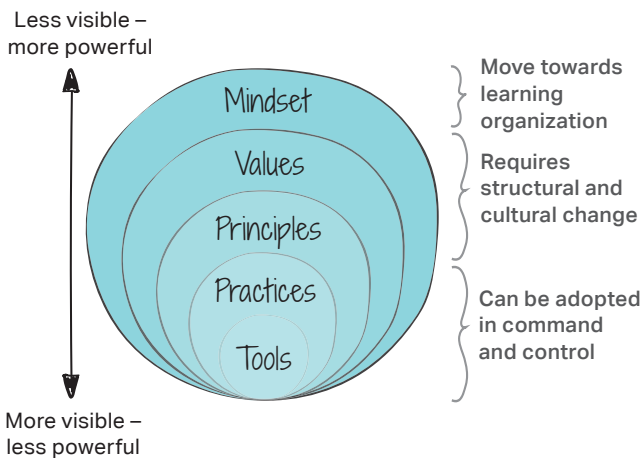


It is often a very long way to transform enterprise culture towards agile. As a result, many companies just start agile working without a big change in company culture. With the right setup, this might work out pretty well. Agile bubbles or agile islands within the company can be good fields for piloting and gaining experience. by Klaus Birkbauer and Thomas Mandl



»Building agile islands or bubbles within your company can be a good piloting and learning field.«

In recent years, the word agile has taken on many meanings and been used in multiple contexts. Some definitions focus on different methodologies for getting projects done, but agile as a whole is much more than that. For lasting success, it is important to understand the different layers as well as the challenges and power of an agile mindset. Let's peel the Agile Onion (based on AWA, Simon Powers):



**Doing agile – tools and practices as an entry point**

Many organizations start their agile journey by implementing tools and processes, often tools for managing the work backlog. Alternatively, they set up a process in which teams start doing a daily stand-up or weekly planning session. These tools and processes are frequently part of practices (frameworks, methodologies) like SCRUM or Kanban. Using these tools, processes and practices is a great start to an agile journey. But it shouldn't be the end state.

**Living agile – new principles and values transforming the culture**

Agile is much more about people than processes. The main value lies in the cultural shift that develops individual core competencies to be adaptive, transparent, collaborative and responsive. Even with a lot of agile practice, organizations often fail by dealing with complexity. Changing the company culture is generally one of the harder parts. The true possibilities of agile appear when an organization focuses on the underlying principles and values. Agile transformation is about establishing a culture that fosters open communication and collaboration between business and technical people across the enterprise. It relies on continuous improvement through inspection and adaptation, and a culture of transparency and accountability.

**Being agile – embracing the agile mindset**

This desired mindset seems to be a mythical abstract quality that is hard to define and often glossed over in agile discussions. The onion model shows it as the most powerful layer to gain agility. But what does this really mean? The mindset can be defined by three major beliefs:

**The complexity belief**

Many of the challenges we face are complex adaptive problems. By trying to solve these problems, we change the nature of the problem itself. As an implication to the complexity belief, an attribute of complex adaptive problems is that the end solution is not predictable at the outset. Or in practical terms: the business will not follow a plan.

### The people belief

Individuals are both independent from and dependent on their teams and organizations. Human beings are interdependent. Given the right environment (safety, respect, diversity and inclusion) and a motivating purpose, it is possible for trust and self-organization to arise. For this to happen, it is necessary to treat everyone with unconditional positive regard.

### The proactive belief

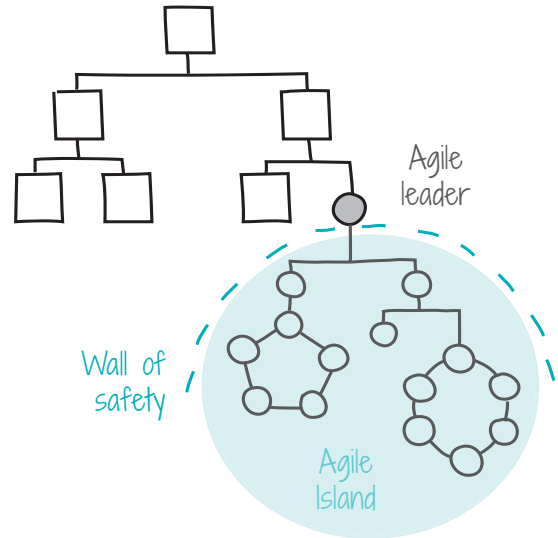
Proactivity is the relentless pursuit of improvement. This belief is derived from and a consequence of the other two beliefs. »Fail fast – learn fast« is an integrated part of this belief.

## Every journey starts with a first step

There are different starting points to become a more agile enterprise. You can achieve it bottom-up by scaling up agile doing. For software development, there are some well-defined frameworks for scaling beyond a single team, like Large-Scale SCRUM. Outside the software development industry, these scaling models are often quite unknown. Another entry point can be a charismatic leader, who tries to apply his or her (radical) agile mindset throughout the whole organization. Mindset-driven agile organizational models like Spotify's tribe structure, Holacracy's consent and role principles or Sociocracy 3.0 are very much dependent on the level of trust and »level 5« leadership – self-realizing leaders. Therefore, it is promising in many cases to start within the organization with Agile Islands or bubbles.

## Agile Islands – piloting fields for enterprise agility

You will hardly find an »agile only« organization; there will always be the need to manage the link to the non-agile/hierarchical world. This might be the link to accounting and legal systems/requirements, to your supervisory board, to suppliers and customers, or even to different regional setups within your enterprise. This happens as soon as you change to an agile framework in one country but not in all of your regional setups at the same time. Building Agile Islands or bubbles within your company can be a good piloting and learning field.



## Managing a wall of safety to protect the agile team culture

There is a lot of outside pressure on the Agile Islands. Company rules and regulations like reward systems, performance reports, working hours, but also time and result pressure and many invisible effects of old company culture could interfere with the teams inside the island. The most challenging and important task for the agile leader is to build a wall of safety for the Agile Island and the teams working in this mode of trust, accountability and self-steering. The wall of safety ensures agile team culture on Agile Islands and prevents non-agile worlds from confusion and misunderstanding.

## Dealing with complexity as a main driver for agile structures

How can you find the piloting field for your transformation process? Agile Islands often emerge driven by business needs and leaders with the right agile mindset. In many cases, this is extremely fragile in a hierarchical environment. The first step is to identify the fields with the most volatile, unpredictable and complex business environments, suffering the most from a hierarchical mindset. Make sure people in this area are ready to work based on trust, transparency and accountability. Empower an agile leader with the right agile mindset to build a wall of safety around the agile island. Do that, and you have already started the journey to reach the first Agile Island. ●