

# Enterprise Agility: developing mental agility with Gazelle Partners

## TALKING AGILITY PODCAST EPISODE 7 TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to Talking Agility, a podcast from Accenture. Your host is Elitsa Nacheva.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** The face of change in the world of business has never been faster and it will never be this slow again. Change is hard for everyone, not just for the C-suite. This can be a frightening time for the workforce because let's be honest, we all know change is good, transformation is even better, but it's never easy and it takes time and it takes embracing uncertainty.

So how can leaders help employees to not just survive these interesting times, but to thrive in them? This is what we are going to be exploring in today's episode. My guests today are experts in a vital tool for dealing with change, which is mental agility. Nici Butchart and Anna Keeble are the co-founders of Gazelle Partners. They specialize in helping the workforce approach change with clarity and confidence and therefore optimize performance. We're going to talk about developing mental agility, explore the connection between how we think and how we work, and also looking to how we can establish a clear mind.

Nici, welcome to Talking Agility, it's a pleasure having you today.

**Nici Butchart:** Thank you Ellie, good to be speaking with you again.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** Thank you, and to kick us off, I know that you focus on empowering individuals in fast-paced, competitive environments to take charge of their well-being. And I say that because I previously worked with yourselves as part of an

initiative that was run by Accenture a couple of years ago, so I am first-hand familiar with the great work that you do. But could you briefly describe the work that you do with individuals and teams for the benefit of our listeners?

**Nici Butchart:** So, we optimize human performance in businesses, so we help business leaders take, I guess, a more human approach to transformation, so we're helping them to re-think how they, create cultures and rewire their organizations for the change that they're trying to create, whether that's about growth, team dynamics, mergers and acquisitions, building greater agility, whatever. And we do this through creating completely personalized well-being programs that show people, show individuals and teams, how to access a clear mind, and how to support that clarity with effective lifestyle choices that minimize chronic inflammation and therefore, reduce the amount of mental and physical disease.

These programs contain lots of—basically individuals go on a journey of many micro-changes and interventions across the different, across sort of nutrition, exercise, sleep, hydration and, critically, their state of mind, so this is a really, really fundamental backbone to all our programs.

And we run the programs either with individuals or we can build team programs, we also do lots of master classes and webinars. We work with people all around the world, we also do a lot of training advocates, so training-the-trainer type programs and more recently, we have built a hyper-personalized digital program in

partnership with a company called Cognition, and this is so that we can help businesses to optimize performance for this scale.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** And again, now you've been working with Accenture for a number of years now, and you're starting to do this kind of work with our financial services clients. I'll be really interested if you could share an example with us.

**Nici Butchart:** Yeah, we've been doing this work for quite a while, and we've had really great results, like 88 percent of people feel better able to deal with stress and challenging circumstances. Ninety-three percent have higher energy, 100 percent would recommend to colleagues, and Accenture has always been really impressed by the impact that we've had, and so they kept saying to us, "but we need something that we can roll out at bigger scale." And so we built a hyper-personalized digital well-being program and we are now starting to work with some financial services businesses in partnership with Accenture and our tech partners, Cognition. In the first instance we're taking a blended approach, so we're using our digital well-being program, but we're mixing it with in-person master classes that help leadership teams and advocates throughout the business to understand this different way of understanding your mind in order to optimize psychological safety, mental agility and performance.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** This is brilliant and I've really loved all the micro little steps that I have taken with you when I was doing the program, so, yeah I'm really glad to be speaking to you again.

Since we were talking about dealing with change and mental agility, my next question is around the biggest impediment or I guess the number one impediment as you seek a successful transformation that you have

observed from your interactions with individuals, with teams that have been going through the programs.

**Nici Butchart:** When we first started Gazelle, we thought we were going to be working with individuals on their nutrition and sorting out their breakfast, helping them build better exercise patterns, but what became really clear very early on was we were becoming a place where individuals could sort of vent their frustrations about what was going on. So we were very, very quickly getting to know the DNA of our clients and what was going on, what was, sort of, the pulse at the grassroots right up through the organization, so we work at every level.

But we seem to get a really good feel for what's going on and without doubt, the common theme that we see everywhere is that what gets in people's way and what gets in the way, therefore, of the aggregate change companies are trying to make is simply unhelpful, insecure thinking. And your research backs this up with the idea that 85 percent of transformation projects fail because of fear and anxiety, which is amazing to read that, because it's absolutely what we see, and I think what we're very used to looking at is how these things manifest as behavioral problems. Often businesses are looking at the behavioral problem, rather than the thinking that's at the root of that. The behavioral problem may be something like slow decision-making, inertia and lack of adoption of new processes, or leadership issues, or team dynamics, communication failure, but it's all coming from the unhelpful, insecure thinking that each individual is carrying around. Often we encourage business leaders to think about the idea that when we listen to our colleagues and to our clients from a state of mind that is fearful, anxious, stressed, what's happening when we problem-solve from an unsettled, distracted, insecure state of mind. How do things play

out? Can you really solve a problem from that place? And so, usually what happens is our ability to listen and to think and to execute change with a clear mind goes and we stop listening, we stop innovating and we stop being curious in a way, and so that's what we see a lot of.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** I think that is really interesting that you said that because in the latest State of Agile report from version one, which if our listeners, if they are interested, they can access online by simply Googling State of Agile report. It says that 71 percent of the respondents they surveyed cited that the ability to manage changing priorities is one of the main benefits of adopting agile, but actually, changing priorities can also be perceived as a disruptor on its own and it may be really hard to manage those changing priorities and the pace at which they're changing by some employees, which therefore contributes that insecure state of the mind. So I think that really resonates with me and I really see how the two things are connecting.

**Nici Butchart:** What's interesting though, is that our minds have an in-built system that gives us all infinite potential, gives us infinite ability to innovate and to be agile. It also gives us an innate ability to have psychological safety.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** Yes

**Nici Butchart:** It's interesting; even this debate looking at fast-paced, rapid environments, you know this is what we've set out to work in. We love working in these environments. But even the conversation, we're all assuming that the very fact that environments are fast paced etcetera means that it's inherently stressful, it's inherently anxiety inducing, it's inherently fearful. Actually, what we show people is that fear and anxiety look like they come from the circumstances outside of us, and because we all talk about how these environments

are really stressful and fearful and anxiety inducing, we carry on that perception, if that makes sense. But what we actually show people is that when you let go of the thinking, when you stop focusing on the thought that you're having about it being anxiety inducing, the feelings drop away. The feeling of anxiety, the feeling of fear, the feeling of stress drops away.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** I think that's actually really important for those of our listeners who are in an environment or in a team which is using agile ways of working and is trying to achieve an outcome really quickly, using agile methodologies and possibly feeling the pressure of the pace, I think that'll be really helpful just to recognize this is what is happening.

I do remember when we previously spoke that you said that if the mind is free, then you're agile. I think that's a really nice reminder as well.

My next question is just curiosity I guess in terms of what physically happens to us when we are fearful and anxious?

**Nici Butchart:** It starts with a thought. So we have a thought like, for example, this project might go wrong, this transformation might go wrong, what if X happens? I might lose my job, etcetera, etcetera. Everyone has their own version of this. If that thought flows by like a cloud in the blue sky it's fine, but when we hold that thought and we worry about it, that thought goes on to create a feeling and the feeling could be anxiety which could lead to panic attacks etcetera.

Our whole physiology then gets behind those thoughts and feelings and three things happen: our mood might go down, which leads to depression, irritability, disengagement; our tension might go up, which leads to anxiety and panic attacks; or, the body might begin to malfunction, so

that's when you get things like insomnia, memory loss, migraines, hyper pressure. I mean, so many things, and then many of these physical things lead to chronic inflammation which actually gives us a greater propensity for mental disease.

So that's what's happening when we have anxiety and fear. In a way these are all signs that—they're like warning signs—so the body is trying to tell us, "look, you're misusing thought. You're innocently misusing thought and it's leading to this, that and the other." So a panic attack is a really, really clever system in the body warning you that something's not right for you. And so, when we understand that our feelings come from our thoughts and not from the circumstances around us, somehow those feelings become easier to deal with.

I remember somebody once saying to me they're just one thought thin and suddenly they look a lot less frightening or powerful. What we find is that as soon as we're not actively focusing on our thoughts, then the uncomfortable feelings go away. So as soon as we're no longer saying, "I might lose my job, blah blah blah," the uncomfortable fear and anxiety actually lessen and our minds then default to this more innate, natural, easy state and that's where we have confidence, we have agility, we have intelligence, we have all these things that go with it, and we have that psychological safety.

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**Elitsa Nacheva:** What would be a top tip that you would mention to deal with that kind of to like re-base line—if I can call it re-base line—that you can keep a line to your priorities in case you notice that you are falling in the trap of fearful and anxious thoughts?

**Nici Butchart:** In a nutshell, I'd say that the best thing you can do is trust that you have, that psychological safety and mental agility are available to you with absolutely no effort. Trust that when you have a clear mind, you get unlimited intelligence; you get unlimited creativity, clarity and a lot of ease as well.

A lot of our clients not only want freedom from anxiety and fear, not only do they want lots of high performance and intelligence and agility, they also want energy when they get home. They want to be able to show up for their families and their children and stuff like that. So the idea that this is easy and innate within us is really important.

On a really practical level, what trusting that means is three things: getting good at noticing your feeling state, so get really good at noticing, "ah, I'm a bit fearful at the moment. I think I'm feeling a bit agitated at the moment. I'm feeling really anxious right now." So, get good at noticing that because that will show you the invisible thinking that is going on for you at the moment, that is creating the experience you are therefore having.

And the second thing is get good at seeing how things play out from different states of mind. So, when you're, for example, running a team and you're trying to get them to execute transformation at rapid pace, what's the best way to get that out of them? And when you approach that yourself from an agitated state of mind going, "my reputation is on the line!" You've got a lot riding on it basically, you've got a lot of skin in the game and that brings with it basically a lot of thinking and that's going to be a filter for how you then lead.

The other thing is what happens when you do that same thing but from a state of ease. What happens when you stop and go, "let's just check in, everyone. How's everyone's state of mind?"

And then the third thing is as a leader to be willing to problem-solve by starting with your state of mind and getting your team to see that. Although this is very innate within us, it takes a little bit of unraveling because we've all been taught to use logic, especially in professional services and financial services. It's full of highly educated people who've been taught that their thinking and their logic is incredibly powerful. And it is, it's an incredibly creative resource for all of us, but somewhere along the way we get a bit lost in that, so we start to not know the difference between our ability to analyze data that's coming out of a tool that we're using versus getting wound up because of something that your colleague did or something. We start to lose—there's a grey area between them, basically.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** That resonates with me quite a bit because I think it will also, what you just said these three things will be really important for any one of our listeners who are leading agile teams, who are experiencing the uncertainty themselves, noticing the perhaps fearful fear and anxiousness amongst team members who may be struggling themselves with the pace of change. I think these three things that you highlight are really important to notice.

So having said that, how would you define mental agility, Nici?

**Nici Butchart:** I think psychological safety and mental agility are like opposite sides of the same coin. So they, when we get relief from psychological safety we also flow with mental agility. I think mental agility is about three things, it's about clarity, so our ability to be alert, effective and fast in a way that is about functioning optimally, not about haste, rather than foggy and slow, which we've all experienced.

The second thing is mental ease, so the ability to navigate situations, information change, with speed but with ease as well. As

opposed to someone who can navigate it all quickly, but is left drained and stressed at the end of it.

And then the third thing is around performance and intelligence. So, I think part of mental agility is the ability of an individual to think, learn, quickly absorb new information, systems, processes, get to grips with things very quickly. So there's something about clarity, there's something about ease and there's something about performance and intelligence in there.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** All these three things together they kind of contribute to the trust that I think is always an important part of the equation of establishing mental agility. Recently, not that recently but not that long ago either, there was the Davos gathering and we know that from the research that was done and discussed that the companies that built trust would create value for the business and for employees and Accenture's agility index actually shows that losing trust therefore has a disproportionate impact on competitiveness and on the perception of employees and how they feel on the ground.

So I think establishing the clarity and the mental ease and the performance intelligence also contributes to establishing that trust on the ground.

**Nici Butchart:** Yeah, in a way what that shows us is the more that we show up with nothing on our mind, the more present and available we are to the teams around us, to the change we're trying to bring about. Therefore the more we access intelligence, agility, and innovation and with ease. So in any moment, in a way, what our mind is doing is showing us our own version of reality, which is our thinking, so it's showing us what's on our mind, so when we're agitated it's showing us that we've got agitated thinking on our mind.

And the second thing is it's giving us more or less access to our potential. So, when we're attached to our thinking, the more we focus on our thinking, the less we access our potential. And so, I think how that relates to trust is that the more focused we are on our own personal thinking, however invisible it is, the less present we are to the people around us and therefore it's like there's a barrier between us and the people we want trust from.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** What is one thing that our listeners can do right now to shift their thinking towards a more agile way of working, Nici?

**Nici Butchart:** The main thing is to really trust that this is something that is innate within us. So, this is one of the things that especially our Type A clients who really want to fast-track along the curve on this, they want to sort of say, "this sounds brilliant, really, really helpful. What can I do to get ahead?" And the frustrating thing that is also really cool is that this is in-built within us. It's like in the same way that you cut your skin; your body has an in-built mechanism to heal that cut. Your mind has the same in-built mechanism to sort of auto-correct it. So trusting that it exists is really, really important.

I was actually listening to someone talk about this in the context of learning to fly a plane and they were saying, so this is in the context of people saying, "so what do I need to do?" and one of the frustrating things is that we don't—it's not about doing nothing, it's about doing less. So we need to get less time focusing on your thinking and that's about taking the hands off, basically. This guy was explaining, when you learn to fly a plane at some point you have to learn to stall a plane in the air and re-start it and he said, "you'll fall like 3,000 feet with the plane spinning." Sounds horrendous. What you have to learn is to completely let go of the controls. And when you let go, the—I don't

know what happens—it aerodynamically stable or something, it auto-corrects. But what it made me think of was I spent a year in the Alps when I was in my late teens and I did, in the summer, I did some abseiling and I remember spinning upside down on some ropes. I was literally in a tailspin just going—or head spin—thinking to myself, "how do I get out of this?" and panicking about "This is so dangerous! How am I going to get down?" and then I remembered what the guy who was leading us said, and he told us to lean back. Suddenly when I was listening to this flying story I remembered that actually when you're abseiling and you're spinning upside down, when you lean back you suddenly and bizarrely you let go and therefore and you stop trying to fix the situation you kind of elegantly revert to an upright position.

And that's a bit like this, you have to, you have to trust that it's going to work and you have to trust that there is this in-built mechanism and then you have to let go. And it's the letting go that people find really difficult. And so that's why we talk about get good at noticing that, get good at noticing your feeling state because that will show you an awful lot about what's on your mind and what will be most helpful for you to let go of and then, secondly, getting good at seeing how things play out. So when you're in a bad state-of-mind, and you try to do something, you try to problem solve, how does it play out? When you're in a good state-of-mind, and you try to problem solve, how does it play out?

There's a quote from Einstein which is something along the lines, I won't get it completely right, but it's something along the lines of, "you can't solve a problem from the same level of thinking that created it."

Often, when we let go of our thinking and we start to see how things play out when we approach them from a different state of mind, we start to see that when we're in a

difficult state of mind, when we have difficult, unsettled, insecure thinking on our mind, we see problems. And often what happens when we have a clear state of mind is we can actually no longer see the problem. And it doesn't mean that we are not fixing things, it's just that we see solutions, we have agility, we're able to be nimble and turn on a sixpence and we have access to some sort of greater intelligence beyond our personal intellect.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** I think that point around having a clear mind actually really brings me back to the fact that people will therefore see less barriers, and they're not going to fear failing fast in the pursuit of innovation. Which also ties brilliantly to a piece of new research which is coming out by Accenture in the next couple of days I think which we're going to share with our listeners, but it's definitely around that innovation mind set and how you can pursue that.

So I think that was really, really powerful and really helpful and I think I'll be doing this from now on and just taking a step back, leaning back and trying to have that clarity of mind. But I think that was just a brilliant conversation, Nici, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us about mental agility.

**Nici Butchart:** It's a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**Elitsa Nacheva:** There's no doubt that the speed of change at work is increasing and challenging and downright stressful to stay on top of it all, so I hope today's discussion provided some insight to help clear and focus your mind so you can meet tomorrow's challenges with mental agility.

I'd love to hear about your own strategies for developing a healthy and productive mind set for you and for your workforce. Please visit [Accenture.com/TalkingAgility](https://www.accenture.com/TalkingAgility), tell us what you think, share your feedback and

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I'm your host, Elitsa Nacheva, and I'll speak to you next time.