IN PRAISE OF INFLEXIBILITY

Is agility in SOA always a good thing? Graham Oakes has some doubts.

Graham Oakes: the focus on agility conveys an impression that you can avoid hard decisions

Agility has become the watchword of SOA. Most discussions about the subject seem to centre on ways of achieving greater agility, or on the benefits that this agility will bring.

The word conjures up all sorts of positive images – fleet-footed organisations that change direction in mid-stride in order to capture new opportunities. Who's going to argue for rigidity or inflexibility in the face of such images?

But what if I changed the phrasing? Given a choice between 'blowing in the wind' and 'steadfastness of purpose', which would you choose? For me, 'steadfastness of purpose' conjures up pictures of people with the strength of character to persevere and achieve their vision in the face of myriad adversities. Inflexibility by another name, really.

At one level, this is just rhetorical trickery. But at another level, the focus on agility creates real dangers for some organisations.

For a start, it conveys an impression that you can avoid hard decisions. Buy this ESB and you can reconfigure your systems any time you feel like it. No need to think hard about requirements or to face the political battles that defining and prioritising them brings.

I worked with an organisation that failed very publicly about five years ago. It had this syndrome in spades. When it finally, and very expensively, got to market, it had nothing distinctive to offer.

The focus on agility also gives the impression, to some onlookers at least, that infinite flexibility is possible. Adopt the right processes and the right tools, and you can always re-factor your systems in next to no time. So there's no need to spend a lot of time on design.

This just isn't true. Flexibility in one area comes from having rigidity in other areas to kick off from. Ask any gymnast.

Likewise, systems need stable points to build from. That's why most architects spend so much time thinking about principles – they define a company's points of stability.

In reality, successful organisations are prepared to make tough decisions. They define aspects of their products, operations and organisational core that they won't change, no matter what the analysts say.

Yet at the same time, they build mechanisms that help them to monitor the effect of their decisions, to recognise when they get them wrong, and to recover and learn. They manage to be simultaneously steadfast, watchful and agile.

Agility is good. So is steadfastness of purpose. Good architects don't focus on only one or the other – they engage in dialogues that help their organisations achieve the appropriate mix of both.

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