

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

ABSTRACT: 279 words

The journey in developing an agile approach to Business Continuity (BC) began with a Fortune 200 company and its struggle to maintain an effective continuity program. Like so many organizations, there were few resources available to support the program and organizational leaders viewed the process with angst and as providing little value. There needed to be a better approach.

The Adaptive BC Principles developed by Lindstedt and Armour provided a new way to think about and prioritize the resources invested by the organization for preparedness. In short, they encouraged a focus on improving recovery capabilities and away from the traditional document-heavy, compliance-centric approach.

The Agile BC approach described in this article takes a system-of-systems concept, and applies the Agile methodology, a lightweight, iterative, and incremental approach to developing recovery capabilities. Using a Scrum framework, each Function (e.g., the lowest level organizational unit with responsibility for a process) maintains a Sprint Backlog (all the Function's processes to be worked on) and executes a Sprint process to work through the backlog incrementally. Each Function essentially executes its own BC Management (BCM) system. The organization's enterprise program is an umbrella system consisting of all the independent Functions' BCM systems – a system-of-systems. Agile BC can be adopted and scaled within an organization with the BCM program focusing on onboarding, mentoring, and supporting the Functions who have accountability and responsibility for the recovery of their processes.

This article walks through the components of an Agile BC program, onboarding of Functions, the basic Agile BCM program processes, and how to put BC and other protective disciplines together to deliver continuous Agile Operational Resiliency (AOR).

ABOUT: 78 words

Bruce McIndoe, President McIndoe Risk Advisory. Four decades in intelligence, security, risk, operational resiliency. McIndoe Risk Advisory helps enterprise leaders achieve Agile Operational Resiliency™ to maintain productivity and grow through the most difficult challenges. We work with global clients to adopt a predictive, proactive posture to threats by leveraging our Continuous Risk Management Model and harnessing leading edge technologies.

KEYWORDS: agile business continuity, operational resiliency, adaptive business continuity, business continuity management

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Where We Started – A Failed Traditional BC Program

The overall focus of Business Continuity (BC) is to contribute to an organization's resilience by ensuring its readiness to maintain essential functions after a disruption or disaster and support the organization's recovery to normal operations within the time and scope defined by management.

The first attempt to globally standardize the language and best practices of BC was captured in ISO 22301:2012.¹ This body of knowledge was written by leading business continuity experts and guides organizations in adapting to internal and external threats and helps them in establishing an effective business strategy for building organizational resilience. As an international standard, it has been subject to modification. The latest version is "ISO 22301:2019 Security and resilience — Business continuity management systems — Requirements."²

While the ISO 22301 standard was a good start, many organizations and a growing number of practitioners have recently questioned the value and expressed frustration with the tediousness of these practices. If an organization has a BC program, it is typically the responsibility of one or a few people. The BC effort often revolves around "checking the box" on specific documents required by the standard. These documents are filed away and rarely referenced again, even in the face of a disruption or disaster. Usually, the documents are only uncovered when the BC manager signals it's time to update them. This top-down, compliance approach to BC has resulted in begrudging organizational engagement, questionable value in the time spent, and little focus on actual capabilities to recover essential functions.

An Evolution of the Discipline – Adaptive Business Continuity

To address this situation, in September 2015, business continuity experts Dr. David Lindstedt and Mark Armour launched the Continuity 2.0 Manifesto (now termed The Adaptive BC Manifesto).³

Lindstedt and Armour define Adaptive Business Continuity as, "An approach to continuously improve an organization's recovery capabilities, with a focus on the continued delivery of services, following an unexpected unavailability of people and/or resources."⁴

As their work further developed in response to industry feedback, they compiled their findings into a groundbreaking book, "Adaptive Business Continuity: A New Approach", in 2017.⁵ The book was intended to show how adaptive BC differs from traditional BC and argued that traditional BC methodology had become stagnant: "It has made only small incremental adjustments, focusing increasingly on compliance and regulations of improvements to organizational readiness. This has led to a progressively untenable state

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

of ineffectual practice, executive disinterest, and an inability to demonstrate the value of continuity programs and practitioners.”⁶

In its very first chapter, “Demolition”, the authors stated, “We believe several specific BC practices in traditional BC are ineffective and should be dismissed.” One of these practices was an over-reliance on documentation, which concentrated on writing and capturing lengthy recovery plans, inventory, and checklists, etc. The authors encouraged practitioners to move away from a document centric approach to one in which the continuous improvement of recovery capabilities was emphasized -- where personnel responsible for a given function would be trained to quickly respond to disruptions, rather than trying to find and then apply lengthy, written-out instructions in time of need.

The Adaptive Business Continuity Principles

The following 10 Adaptive BC Principles, developed by Lindstedt and Armour, provide an alternative approach to “standard” continuity planning. The Adaptive approach transforms or eliminates many traditional activities of BC. These 10 principles, along with the Agile BC approach to each, seek to guide the continuous improvement of an organization's continuity capabilities.⁷

1. Principle: Deliver Continuous Value

Approach: Organizations direct the work according to needs and culture; Practitioners provide frequent, shorter-term, deliverables.

2. Principle: Document only for mnemonics (memory)

Approach: Create documents only if they are needed for organizations to support the program or use as a quick reminder or reference during disasters.

3. Principle: Employ time as a restriction, not a target

Approach: Recovery time targets are often impossible and inaccurate. Instead, seek to understand time-based restrictions.

4. Principle: Engage at many levels within the organization

Approach: Practitioners will consciously engage many people at many levels of the organization focusing on those that have responsibility and accountability for a process

5. Principle: Exercise for improvement not for testing

Approach: Organizational teams participate in exercises to practice and improve response and recovery capabilities, not to see whether they can follow instructions or pass a test.

6. Principle: Learn the business

Approach: Practitioners strive to understand the mission, culture and operations of individual organizational areas and help them implement and sustain their BCM efforts.

7. Principle: Measure and benchmark

Approach: Practitioners and customers measure preparedness and recoverability.

8. Principle: Obtain incremental direction from leadership

Approach: Practitioners seek iterative direction from individual executives only as needed to take next steps.

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

9. Principle: Omit Risk Assessments and Business Impact Analyses

Approach: Omit making a major effort around a singular risk assessment or developing a BIA document. Rather, integrate risk assessments and capturing organization impact information throughout the BC process.

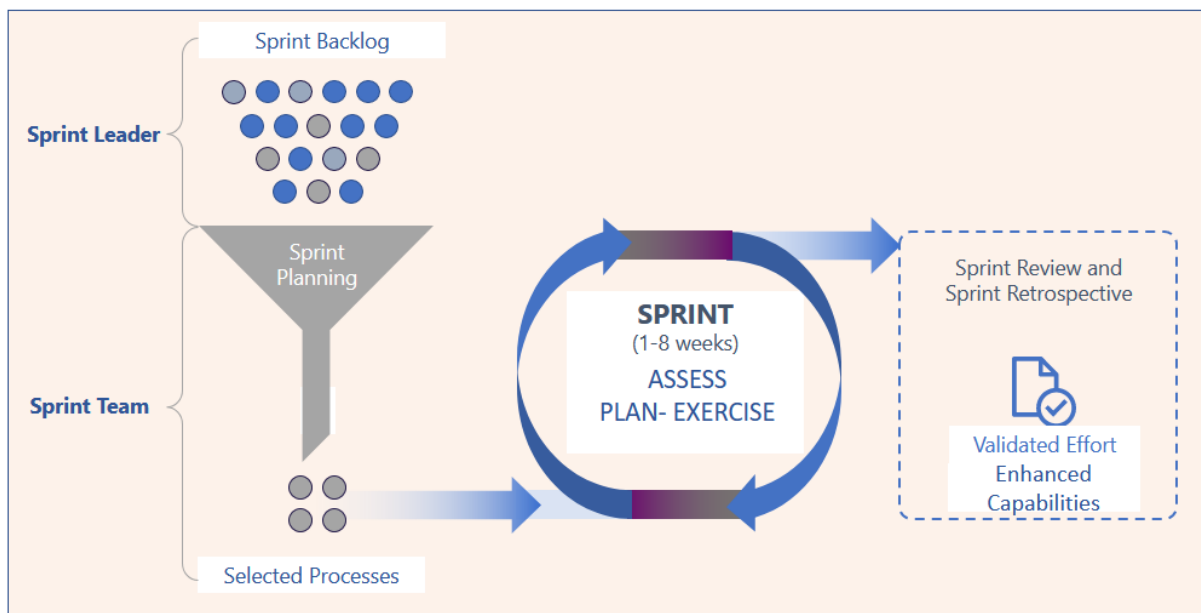
10. Principle: Prepare for effects not causes

Approach: Do not try to prepare for individual threats; focus on improving response and recovery capabilities for the loss of people, locations, and resources.

Applying the Agile Methodology to the Adaptive Principles

The Adaptive Principles worked well as tenets but lacked a simple execution framework. Such a framework is needed to apply the Adaptive Principles across the organization in a consistent and scalable way. Agile BC provides this execution framework, applying the Agile Methodology and Scrum process to the core business continuity management processes while adhering to the Adaptive BC Principles.

The Agile methodology is a way to manage a project by breaking up the whole into incremental phases. Each phase involves constant collaboration with the stakeholders and continuous improvement by the team. In Scrum, this incremental phase is called a Sprint. This approach allows teams to work on pressing items with high value more quickly, rather than attempting to “fix” everything all at once. The goal is to deliver continuous value to the organization. Figure 1 depicts a typical Scrum process that we will be applying at both the Function and the BC Program level.



Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

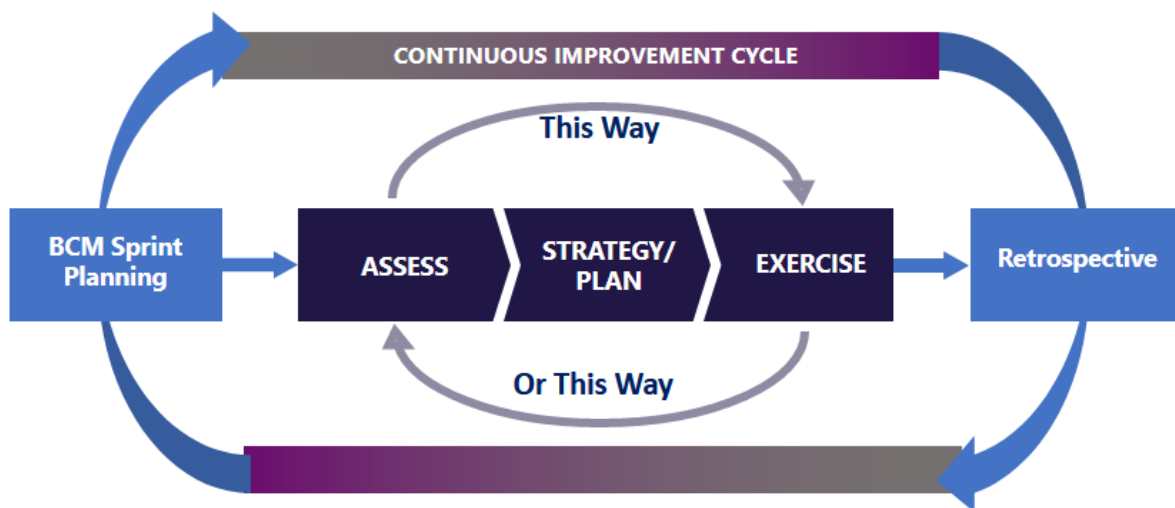
Figure 1 - Applying Agile and Scrum to the Basic Continuity Process

The Sprint Backlog consists of all the work yet to be accomplished at the Function or Program level. The Function Sprint Backlog consists of all the Function's processes that have not been through the planning cycle or process efforts that need to be refreshed. The Program Sprint Backlog consists of all the Functions that have not been on-boarded to the Agile BC Program or need review.

Function Sprint Planning involves prioritizing what process or processes in the Function's Sprint Backlog will be addressed in the upcoming Sprint. This selection is a mini risk assessment to determine which processes will be prioritized, given limited resources. At the BCM Program level, a high-level risk assessment (RA) and impact analysis are conducted to prioritize the on-boarding of Functions and their selection of a critical process for the BCM Program Sprint. This process is described in more detail in the Agile BCM Program Sprint section below.

The Sprint is executed through its activities to completion. At that point, a Sprint Review is conducted to assess demonstrated capabilities and learnings that should be addressed. Following the review, a Sprint Retrospective is conducted to address improvement of the process.

Figure 2 depicts the Agile BC Sprint Process for a Function and highlights the three key activities. These activities are Assess, Strategy/Plan, and Exercise. As depicted in the diagram, a Sprint Team may choose to start with either the Assess or the Exercise activity. Starting the Sprint with an exercise is a great way to get the Sprint Team involved, exposed to the terminology, and experience likely recovery issues in order to align everyone on the need for additional planning efforts.



Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Figure 2 – The Agile BC Function Level Sprint Process and Activities

The Assess activity can apply to the Function as a whole or to a specific process. At the Function level, this activity will include a high-level risk assessment and the collection of organizational impact information for the Function that is tied to the achievement of organizational objectives. The information gathered during this activity is captured in spreadsheets for reference rather than formal reports. At the process level, this assessment is focused on criticality, inputs/outputs, interdependencies, recovery resources needed, etc.

For the Strategy/Plan activity at the Function level, the focus is on documenting the Recovery Strategy for the loss of people, locations, supply and information and any recovery resources needed. (This important document is described in more detail in the Agile BCM Program Sprint section below.) At the Function's process level, this is the collection or development of recovery aids such as checklists, basic procedures, or even a playbook. Remember, document only for mnemonics (memory).

Finally, the Exercise activity is executed at the process level to improve capabilities and identify opportunities for improvement. The difference from a more traditional exercise is to focus more on learning and enhancing capabilities versus testing or validating documents. The key outputs are understanding what recovery resources are needed, uncovering interdependencies, and developing an improvement plan. At the Function level, the Exercise activity can be used to validate the Function's Recovery Strategy and highlight the need for any recovery resource investments. Collaboration and joint exercising with upstream and downstream Functions or external partners is very important to help ensure end-to-end process recovery capabilities and resiliency. This collaboration can be promoted at the BCM Program level or organically by the Functions.

The duration of a sprint depends on several factors such as the resources available, the Function(s) selected, and the activities to accomplish. For example, a sprint could be accomplished in one week if a Function is only conducting an Exercise activity and Sprint Retrospective for a specific process. The exercise itself typically would be limited to 60 to 90 minutes to keep it lightweight and easier to schedule. This approach limits the time invested while delivering value to the organization and enhancing the team's capabilities. More typically, a sprint would allocate 6 to 8 weeks of calendar time to work through all three activities along with the Sprint Review and Sprint Retrospective.

The Agile BC Program – Engaging All in Continuous Improvement

With the goal of engaging at many levels within the organization, Agile BC applies a System-of-Systems (SoS) approach to manage the complexity and to scale a BCM

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Program for any size of organization. The BCM Program onboards and supports Functions that manage their own internal BCM system.

A system-of-systems is defined as “the viewing of multiple, dispersed, independent systems in context as part of a larger, more complex system.”⁸ This SoS approach to implementing a continuity program results in several benefits:

- It ensures broader resilience awareness throughout the organization
- It establishes a common BC framework and language that builds a deeper bench of execution and recovery capabilities, making the overall enterprise more resilient
- It ensures that Function leaders focus on ensuring an appropriate level of resilience for their organizational processes
- It builds depth and enhances the quality of BC execution capabilities
- It delivers continuous value and tangibly improves recovery capabilities

The Agile BCM Program Sprint

Figure 3 depicts the Scrum approach applied at the Business Continuity Management (BCM) Program level. The BCM Program Sprint Planning focuses on getting the BCM Program flywheel going and keeping it going over time. The Program Retrospective, like the Function’s Sprint Retrospective, should be conducted to get feedback from the Functions engaged and improve the overall Agile BC program and processes.

The initial BCM Program Sprint Backlog consists of all the organization’s Functions that have critical or essential processes. As the program matures, all the organization’s Functions, with underlying processes, would be included in the backlog. For the BCM Program Sprint Planning, the BCM team works with the organization to select the first set of Functions to be included in BCM Program Sprint 1.

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

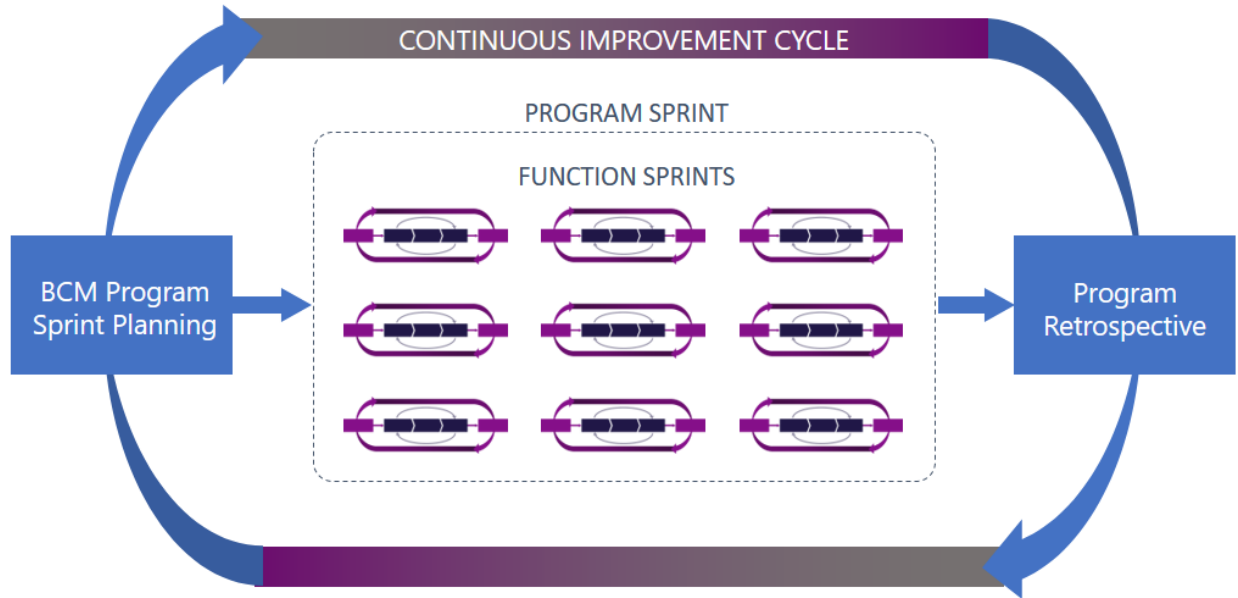


Figure 3 – The Agile BCM Program Sprint consisting of multiple Function Sprints

The following steps are a reasonable, high-level approach, for an organization to determine where to start. That is, what Functions and their associated critical or essential process should be selected first. A variation of this approach can be applied to subsequent BCM Program Sprints.

1. Start with senior leadership and ask, “What are your Top 3 Organizational Objectives?”
2. For each of the top Organizational Objectives, ask leadership, “What are the Top 3 critical Functions needed to support each Organizational Objective?”
3. For each Function, ask the Function Leader, “What are your Top 3 critical or essential processes?”
4. You now have an initial BCM Program Backlog consisting of 9 Functions and 27 processes.
5. For the initial sprint, you may want to limit your scope to the top 6 Functions. Working with the Function Leaders, have them each select their highest priority process. At the end of your Sprint Planning, you should have 6 to 9 Functions with one critical or essential process each for BCM Program Sprint 1.

On a side note, it is a good idea to number the BCM Program sprints. Over time, we have found that the Function Leaders and teams like to talk about what program sprint they went through. The lower the number, the more prestigious it felt as early adopters.

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

The BCM Program Sprint involves training Function leaders in the Agile BC process and expectations. Then, guiding each Function Leader through their first Function’s sprint – Assess, Plan, and Exercise - with the Function Sprint Team and participating in the Function Sprint Retrospective. The goal is to have the Function leader independently cycle through all the remaining Function processes. As the program matures, the BCM Program sprint will include Functions that have been previously onboarded. This is the case when there is a new Function leader and/or the Function team would like guidance from the BCM Program team by going through a Program Sprint again.

A critical element of the onboarding of a Function is working with the Function Leader to develop and document the Function’s Recovery Strategy. This document, typically fewer than 10 pages, outlines the Function’s strategy to recover from the loss of people, locations, and things. Anyone in the organization should be able to read this document and quickly understand the recovery strategy and what may be required to recover from any of these losses. This effort will also help the Function Leader select and prioritize business processes for future Function sprints.

The Importance of Lightweight “Plans”

One challenge is getting past the expectation that there should be a monolithic, organizational BC plan that can be approved by management and filed away. In an Agile BC program, the organization’s BC plan is a collection of BC-related documents and other artifacts organized by Function in a repository. If implemented in a shared file system or collaboration tool, it is easier to find the information if the file structure follows the organizational structure or hierarchy. There should be two BCM Program files required for each Function. These are the Function Recovery Strategy document and the BCM Summary Data, following a standard template format. The Function’s BCM Summary Data (e.g., workbook/spreadsheet) is also used as input to the BCM Program Dashboard and reporting. Other associated mnemonics (e.g., lightweight checklists and procedures) for the Function should be collected and managed in this common repository for easy access and management.

This distributed data management approach allows each Function to independently update their BCM information as needed. Likewise, if a Function has an upstream and/or downstream partner, they can easily access their associated folders, read the recovery strategies, and see if they are comfortable with the approach taken. If not, they can collaborate with the partner, including external vendors, to coordinate strategies as well as create joint exercises to improve the organization’s end-to-end recovery capabilities.

Significant Agile BCM Program Support Components

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

When implementing a comprehensive Agile BCM System, several support components are desirable to reduce effort and increase productivity. These help with the repetitive on-boarding of new Functions and Function Leaders, provide guidance for each of the sprint BC activities, make templates available, and standardized the Function BCM Summary Data for the BCM Program Dashboard. Each of these components are described in more detail below.

- **The Agile BC Training Course** is intended for the Function Leaders and assists them in executing Function level sprints and satisfying BCM program data reporting needs. Training consists of five modules (for total of 2 hours): Agile BCM Program Overview, Conducting the Assess Workshop, Conducting the Strategy/Plan Workshop, Conducting the Exercise Workshop, and the BCM Program responsibilities of Function Leaders.
- **Guidelines** detail each BC activity and provide more in-depth explanations beyond the information contained in the training courses. These guidelines focus on what is expected for each of the activities and how each activity fits into the Agile BCM Program. The current set of guidelines includes:
 - Business Risk and Impact Assessment Guidelines (Assess),
 - Business Continuity Plan and Playbook Guidelines (Strategy/Plan), and
 - Business Continuity Test Plan and Report Guidelines (Exercise).
- **Templates** provide a starting point for each document or mnemonic, such as the Function Recovery Strategy, playbook, exercise plan, improvement plan, and Function BCM Summary Data spreadsheets (i.e., workbook). Each Function is encouraged to adapt these templates to their specific needs. However, the Function BCM Summary data format needs to be controlled at the BCM Program level to ensure consistency across all the Functions for analysis and reporting.
- **The Business Continuity Program Dashboard** was designed to answer two fundamental questions about the BCM program for the program management team and senior management:
 - **Execution Capability:** How prepared is the organization to recover from a major disruption or disaster for the critical business functions and processes needed to support the business? The dashboard provides three summaries: 1) Preparedness and Improving Capabilities (Functions with recovery strategies, critical process coverage, and exercises conducted), 2) Proactive Risk Monitoring, and 3) Program Effectiveness (actual performance against disruptions).
 - **Program Health:** How engaged are the organization's Functions and personnel in the BCM Program? The dashboard presents Organization Engagement (Total Functions and percent On-boarded and Total Critical Functions and percent On-boarded) and Continuous Learning (Function Leaders trained and Employees trained).

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Note: The dashboard was implemented using PowerBI and a script utilizing the BCM Program directory structure to aggregate the Function BCM Summary Data.

Putting it All Together – Agile Operational Resiliency

Implementing a business continuity management program based on the Agile Business Continuity Management System described here is just one component of an overall Agile Operational Resiliency (AOR) program needed to support an operationally resilient organization.

Depicted at the center of the AOR Program graphic (Figure 4 below) are the fundamental asset classes being protected. These assets include People, Sites (or Locations), Supply (all the Things needed by the organization) and Information along with the underlying processes that support achievement of organizational objectives.

A comprehensive AOR Program operates as a joint operation across the organization's protective disciplines aligned to the common mission of increasing the certainty of achieving the organization's objectives. The AOR Program graphic depicts the "Ring of Protection" (in yellow) that typically includes Security (physical & cyber), Information Technology (IT, including disaster recovery), Supply Risk Management, Human Resources (HR), Environmental Health & Safety (EHS), Emergency Management, and Crisis Management. Both HR and EHS are important partners in the protection of People.



Figure 4- A Comprehensive Agile Operational Resiliency Program

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Also depicted in the AOR Program graphic is the Continuous Risk Management Model (CRMM) in blue. This process model is the fundamental element of AOR and continuously cycles through five non-linear process steps:

1. **MONITOR** - Continuous threat awareness of the operating environment and the assessment of potential impact on the loss of people, supply, information and sites (locations). If there is likely impact, the relevant people will be notified and the Prepare step is taken to assess readiness or lean forward with preparedness. If there is a disruption, the Respond and Recover steps are executed immediately. In either case, the Learn step is executed to complete the cycle to improve capabilities.
2. **PREPARE** – the pre-incident actions taken by the organizational Functions or individuals range from awareness to mobilization, depending on the nature of the threat. For example, upcoming political protests in an operating location may only require awareness, whereas an impending hurricane may require some level of mobilization and preparation. If there is no immediate response needed, the Learn step is taken.
3. **RESPOND** – the actions taken by the organization in response to an incident, which can range from a localized issue to a major disruption. For example, a small fire in a facility resulting in a temporary loss of operations to a disaster impacting the organization's ability to deliver on some or all its value-generating organizational objectives.
4. **RECOVER** – the actions needed to recover from a loss of operations, starting with a minimum acceptable level of operational capabilities all the way to full operational capabilities. This is typically referred to as the return to Business as Usual (BAU).
5. **LEARN** – the actions taken to learn from either a potential loss or an actual loss in order to support the continuous improvement of the overall AOR program. All the protective disciplines involved in preparation or response/recovery should be included. While not all threats or incidents encountered will warrant the effort to execute this step, each should be considered with established thresholds. This is a critical step to continually validating the viability of the AOR program and improving the organization's operational resiliency capabilities.

The challenge for most organizations, especially smaller ones, is supporting a 24x7 continuously aware AOR program. The threat monitoring program can be outsourced, or technology can be acquired to notify appropriate people of a potential issue or an actual incident. Most organizations with facilities have some level of alarm monitoring for physical and fire protection. All these notification sources should be handled consistently and with prescribed escalation procedures for emergency and crisis management.

Agile Business Continuity – Building on the Adaptive Principles

Transforming BCM for the World Ahead

Organizations are facing an extended period of perma-crisis. This VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) will largely be driven by a new world order, climate change, resource scarcity, and significant technological advancements all at an escalating pace. It is imperative that we transform BC from a top-down compliance-oriented approach to an all-hands on deck continuous improvement approach. Process owners should have continuity as a mindset and a core skillset. The Agile BC approach presented here is a starting point to achieve this goal and one that should be adapted and improved over time through broader community collaboration.

At the BCM program level, practitioners should consider conducting cross collaboration activities by teaming with the other protective disciplines to synchronize efforts. Most importantly, these efforts should be tied directly to the value-generating organizational objectives set by the board and senior leadership. The goal of this multidisciplinary approach is to conduct a 360-degree operational risk assessment for each objective. Through this objective-centric risk management approach, the protective disciplines can more effectively communicate the value of their efforts in contributing to the certainty of achieving the organization's stated objectives. Likewise, investments made to mitigate specific risks or potential losses can be tied directly to one or more objectives. In time, this collective whole can reposition its role from protection and risk management to certainty management.

¹ ISO (2012), ISO 22301:2012 Societal security — Business continuity management systems — Requirements , revised 2019, <https://www.iso.org/standard/50038.html>

² ISO (2019), ISO 22301:2019 Security and resilience — Business continuity management systems — Requirements 'Resilience, available at <https://www.iso.org/standard/75106.html>

³ Continuity Central.com (2015), "Continuity2.0-A Manifesto", available at https://www.continuitycentral.com/Continuity2_0_v1_final.pdf

⁴ Ibid, page 1

⁵ Lindstedt, David and Mark Armour. Adaptive Business Continuity: A New Approach (Brookfield: Rothstein Publishing, 2017).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Adaptive BC (2023), 'Adaptive Business Continuity -Principles', available at [Principles \(adaptivebcp.org\)](https://www.adaptivebcp.org)

⁸ TechTarget Website, "Definition: System of Systems (SoS), Accessed April 2023, <https://www.techtarget.com/searcharchitecture/definition/system-of-systems-SoS>