

TARKENTON

# IDEAS AT WORK

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## Going Outside the Road Map

### Takeaways

- Follow the core principles of agile planning
- Establish regular feedback loops
- Review your existing best practices

After my 18 years in the NFL, I'm no stranger to game plans changing. Every game that I played, we had a specific plan based on our opponent and what we wanted to do each week. But the adjustments weren't just game to game – once we kicked off, we adjusted things quarter to quarter, drive to drive! The game plan was important, but we had to be ready to adapt based on reality.

Business is the same. You can and you should plan for your company. But in a world that is constantly evolving, you need to be open to change. One of my favorite sayings sums it up: "Reinvent yourself every day." Staying still is falling behind. Leaders need to stay open to change, because that's how we improve and grow.

What I've learned over my life is that you won't succeed if you ignore what's happening around you. Have a plan and do things with purpose, but be willing to adapt and go outside the plan when you need to. Like this article discusses, there are new, evolving ways to plan for your company.



*Jim Tarkenton*

# Going Outside the Road Map

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## Have you become a prisoner of your business plan?

Business leaders are increasingly at a crossroads: You face a scenario or challenge that your current business plan never anticipated, but you cannot afford to lose sight of your long-term goals. How do you go off road without driving off a cliff?

The most successful firms are adopting a new approach to project management and business development: Agile Planning, which emphasizes flexibility, iterative processes, constant feedback, and improvement. Agile Planning does not replace the need for long-term planning, but it does replace the rigid structure of older, traditional business plans that try to map out every step 2-3 years in advance.

Agile Planning requires leaders to be willing to go “off the road map” as they assess, understand, and pivot in an effort to reach long-term goals. Your ultimate goals may not change, but the path to get there may be quite different from the one you envision at the outset.



To be sure, business leaders have a healthy skepticism towards abandoning a business model that has historically (and profitably) worked. But when business plans developed a year ago – or even a few months ago – seem disconnected from today’s challenges, every leader needs a toolkit for adapting.

We all saw this firsthand during COVID. It was restaurants that pivoted to take-out only orders; product-driven stores that created order, pay, and pick-up in the parking lot marketplaces; or the explosion of food trucks as THE restaurant, not the assist to the restaurant. Necessity forced innovation, and businesses survived. Many of these changes have persisted, and even continued to grow, with people sometimes preferring the innovation born out of crisis.

## Agile Planning in Real Time

Now that businesses are not in crisis as they were three years ago, how do you stay nimble as an organization?

Here are the core principles of Agile Planning we follow at Tarkenton (and recommend to our clients) in order to help your team navigate change when your team needs to go off the road map:



- **Define the Win:** Clearly articulate the objective or outcome you aim to achieve with ALL stakeholders and team members.
- **Do the Homework:** Gather insights from industry experts, market analysis, or case studies to understand the potential outcomes. Having a strong knowledge base will instill confidence and provide a firm foundation for decision-making.
- **Plan It:** Define key milestones, activities, and resources required to achieve the objective. Break down the plan into manageable tasks and set clear timelines.
- **Talk It:** Establish agreed upon communication protocols and follow through consistently.
- **Test and Iterate:** Implement quick tests or pilots to validate assumptions, gather feedback, and make necessary adjustments along the way.
- **Champion Learning:** Embrace the fact that a detour will likely involve uncertainties and unexpected outcomes. As an iterative process unfolds, the word “failure” should be replaced by “learning.”
- **Celebrate Every Win:** If you don't tell others the good news, they won't know, because they won't ask. It's human nature, as most of us are more attracted to the “bad news” than “good news.” Acknowledge the progress you've made, milestones you've achieved, and valuable insights you've gained.

Once the mindset changes from relying on a single fixed plan to pivoting to Agility, you begin imagining different scenarios. Planning involves developing multiple solutions based on different assumptions and potential outcomes. Putting your team in the mindset of, “If this, then that...,” spurs ingenuity, creativity, and curiosity.



## Mind the Scoreboard

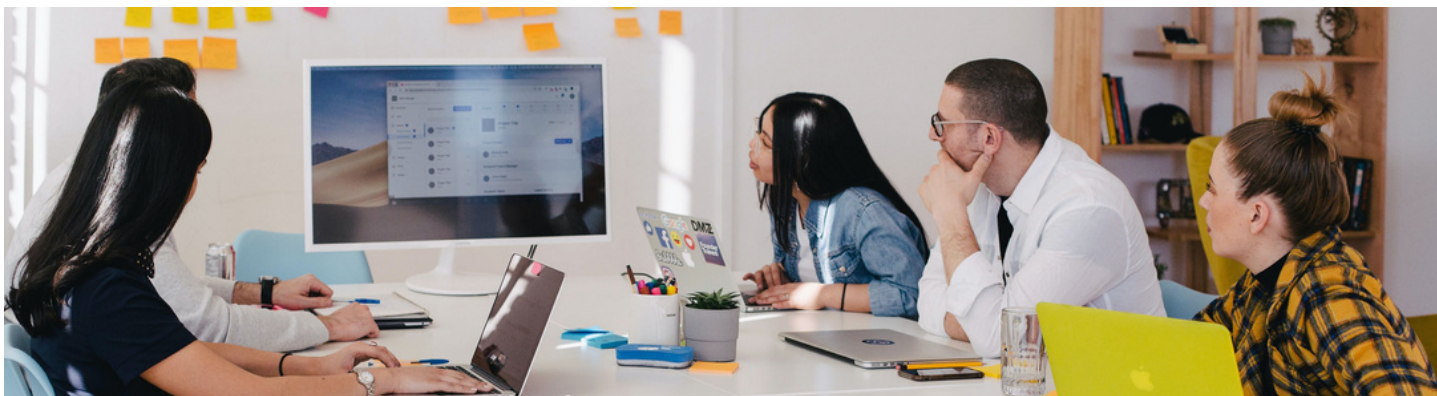
You don't want to have ideas just for the sake of ideas, though. Minding the scoreboard is an absolute necessity for success. Establishing regular data analysis and feedback loops helps businesses stay proactive, agile, and accountable.

Once you have a systematic way to track if the new roadmap is successful, businesses can leverage automation tools, data analytics, and artificial intelligence. This will streamline processes, gather real-time insights, and help make informed decisions. A way to measure benchmarks will give everyone confidence in the new direction.

## Making the Best of “Best Practices”

Today, it is the company that envisions a world beyond “best practices” that is able to grab unforeseen opportunities. Best practices don't need to be abandoned, but they also should not be made into a straight-jacket on creative solutions and alternate paths to the goal. When approached as the final word, “best practices” stifle innovation and continuous improvement.

Successful teams view best practices as a starting line, not the finish line. They exist (rightfully so) to promote and facilitate process efficiencies, risk mitigation, compliance, benchmarking, etc. However, best practices should always be met (and received) with a healthy dose of critical review. Existing best practices should be regularly scrutinized as they are not universal solutions. They need to be contextualized to fit the specific circumstances, objectives, and challenges of each business.





Some corporate cultures are trapped in a “Heritage” mindset, where employees are told (explicitly or implicitly), “Give Me Best Practices or Give Me Death.” Heritage culture tends to be formal and hierarchical, discouraging a diversity of ideas, opinions, experiences, and arguments. They tend to be reliant on scope and power to succeed versus relying on mobility and speed.

If you detect signs of a Heritage mindset in your own organization, it's time to embrace change. Even if you just start with a small skunkworks project, challenge yourself to go off the road map when the existing plan has you stuck in the mud.

As you embrace this change, you will witness a burgeoning excitement within your team. You are fostering an environment where employees are encouraged to learn, experiment, and share knowledge. This inspires them to acquire new skills, stay updated with industry trends, and generate innovative solutions to emerging challenges. Teams who are encouraged to adopt Agile Planning, who are free to challenge Best Practices, are exponentially more productive and more effective.

As a company leader, you can take this win and develop strategic partnerships with complementary organizations that enhance agility and provide access to additional resources and expertise.

If you don't know how to take the first steps towards implementing an Agile Planning approach, a true outsider may be the missing link. An outside perspective can bring fresh a fresh outlook, industry (and industry-adjacent) expertise, and access to extensive networks both inside and outside of the industry. This deep bench of resources, combined with a fresh perspective, can ensure that when you go off the road map, you are still on the path to success.



**By: Will Adams**  
**President, Tarkenton**

*Will Adams works directly with Tarkenton's partners to identify and understand their organizational needs. He then assembles a cross-functional team to develop and deliver the solutions to meet the needs of the partner. Since joining Tarkenton in 2010, Will has helped develop new partnerships, plan strategic growth initiatives, and mentor organizational leaders.*