



Agility as Lived Philosophy: Leadership, Culture and Constraint in Mexican EdTech

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Abstract

This study investigates whether Agile values, adaptability, collaboration, customer focus, and iterative learning, **are genuinely embedded in the leadership and organisational culture of Mexican education technology firms**, and whether these values support innovation and adaptability under systemic constraint. Agile is examined not as a toolkit of methods but as a cultural philosophy transmitted through leadership behaviours and routines, a perspective rarely applied to emerging-market contexts.

An exploratory qualitative design was adopted under an interpretivist stance.

Eight semi-structured interviews with senior leaders were conducted in Spanish and translated into English, then analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Five interconnected themes were identified: **courageous experimentation, adaptive scaffolds, human-centred resilience, impact-driven vision, and innovating within systemic rigidity.**

Findings demonstrate that Agile values are indeed embedded in leadership practices, cultural routines, and structural scaffolds. Leaders enacted transparency, autonomy with accountability, and curiosity-based learning rituals, echoing servant and ambidextrous leadership theories. Organisational resilience was reframed from endurance to care, while visions of equity and pedagogy anchored customer focus in legitimacy rather than market responsiveness. Yet, their impact was uneven, moderated by disciplinary divides, resource scarcity, and risk-averse educational ecosystems.

Theoretically, the study specifies mechanisms through which Agile values are enacted under constraint and refines a model linking leadership, psychological safety, Agile culture and outcomes, with contextual moderators and identity amplifiers. Practically, it highlights how EdTech leaders can institutionalise learning, calibrate scaffolds, balance autonomy with accountability and align identity with service. Broader implications include adaptive policy frameworks and inclusive innovation in resource-constrained environments.

1 Introduction

Adaptability has become the hallmark of organisational survival in turbulent times. Nowhere is this pressure more acute than in education technology, where firms must combine innovation with resilience in contexts marked by inequality and volatility. This project begins by situating Mexican EdTech within this global landscape, showing why it provides a critical lens for examining how Agile values travel beyond their origins in software development. By linking sectoral challenges with wider debates on leadership, organisational culture, and cross-cultural management, the study establishes its foundation: Agile is explored not as a toolkit of methods, but as a cultural philosophy whose relevance carries both theoretical and practical weight.

1.1 Context and Background

Organisational adaptability is no longer a desirable trait but a precondition for survival in a world of rapid technological change, shifting customer expectations, and heightened uncertainty. This is applicable in the education technology (EdTech) sector, where firms are expected to deliver scalable, inclusive learning solutions while navigating fluctuating regulatory frameworks, unequal access to digital infrastructure, and volatile funding environments.

In Mexico, EdTech organisations face compounded challenges: persistent socio-economic disparities, uneven technological adoption across regions, and fragmented policy support (INEE 2019; World Bank 2024). These pressures have created a strategic imperative for leadership models and organisational cultures able to foster innovation while navigating systemic constraints.

1.2 Agile as a Strategic Philosophy

Agile has gained prominence as an alternative approach to managing complexity. Although Agile originated as a software development methodology (Beck et al. 2001), it has progressively evolved into a broader strategic and cultural paradigm often described as *Business Agility* (Rigby, Sutherland and Takeuchi 2020; Doz and Kosonen 2010). This paradigm is grounded in principles such as decentralised decision-making, iterative learning, cross-functional collaboration, and responsiveness to emerging customer needs.

While Agile is increasingly cited as a route to dynamic capabilities and adaptive routines (Teece 2007; Denning 2018), its diffusion outside technology sectors has often been partial and superficial. Critics note that many organisations adopt its language and tools, such as Scrum and Kanban, without addressing the deeper cultural and leadership transformations required (Rigby et al. 2020). This gap between performative adoption

and genuine cultural embedding remains underexplored. This conflation of *doing Agile* with *being Agile*, reflects the persistent belief that tools or workflows alone can generate adaptability. Yet, as Denning (2018), Edmondson (1999), and Rigby et al. (2020) argue, without a shift in mindset and collective assumptions, agility risks remaining performative and short-lived.

1.3 The Research Problem

The central problem is that Agile is often reduced to a set of procedural tools rather than embraced as a cultural philosophy embedded in leadership and organisational life. This reduction is especially problematic in emerging markets, where resource constraints and entrenched hierarchies can stifle cultural transformation and make genuine agility difficult to sustain.

The Mexican EdTech sector illustrates this tension acutely. Rapid expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic saw over 30 million learners engage with digital platforms (World Bank 2024), yet the surge also exposed deep structural vulnerabilities: inadequate localisation, limited readiness for sustained digital transformation, and high turnover among senior leaders (OECD 2024). These conditions force a critical question: can Agile values operate as authentic cultural enablers of adaptability, or do they risk remaining largely performative in organisations that must innovate under pressure? Interrogating this question not only exposes a practical dilemma for Mexican EdTech leaders but also opens space for theoretical contributions to Agile, leadership, and cross-cultural management.

1.4 Theoretical and Practical Contribution

The originality of this research lies in using Mexican EdTech as a lens to interrogate Agile as a cultural philosophy embedded in leadership and organisational life, rather than a technical toolkit. This dual focus matters for both theory and practice, as it highlights how Agile values operate in contexts marked by volatility and constraint. The contributions can be considered across two levels:

- Theoretically, the study advances three domains: it extends Agile scholarship by reframing it as an organisational mindset (Denning 2018); it enriches leadership theory by showing how values are transmitted through servant (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995) and ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese and Bausch 2011); and it interrogates cross-cultural management by examining how Agile's collaborative ethos intersects with hierarchical traditions and socio-economic inequalities in Latin America.

- Practically, for EdTech leaders in Mexico, survival depends on reconciling innovation with systemic constraints. Insights from this study can inform leadership development, cultural practices, and strategies for sustaining resilience and inclusion under uncertainty. More broadly, the findings offer lessons for organisations in comparable contexts, demonstrating how Agile values may be adapted, resisted, or transformed outside the Global North.

By situating Agile in a context where volatility, inequality, and institutional friction are pronounced, the research enriches theory while offering actionable insights for practice.

1.5 Research Aim and Objectives

This project aims to evaluate whether and how Agile values are genuinely embedded in the leadership and organisational culture of Mexican EdTech firms, and whether these values support responses to innovation and adaptability challenges. Specifically, it pursues two interrelated objectives:

- Objective 1: To explore whether and how Agile values such as adaptability, collaboration, customer focus, and iterative learning are embedded in the leadership behaviours, organisational culture, and structural routines of EdTech organisations in Mexico.
- Objective 2: To assess whether and how these Agile-oriented values support organisational responses to key challenges, particularly adaptability and innovation, under conditions of uncertainty.

By interrogating these questions, this study contributes to the emerging literature that reconceptualises Agile not merely as a methodological toolkit but as a cultural and strategic capability. It also offers practical insights for EdTech leaders in Mexico and comparable contexts who must navigate the dual demands of innovation and resilience. More broadly, the project seeks to inform debates about the conditions under which Agile philosophy can take root beyond its origins, enriching understanding of what it means to cultivate genuinely adaptive organisations in environments marked by volatility and constraint.

In summary, this research asks not whether Agile “works” in Mexican EdTech, but how it is enacted, resisted, and transformed within contexts of volatility and constraint. By positioning agility as a cultural philosophy, the study contributes to debates on leadership, organisational culture, and cross-cultural management, while generating practical lessons for building inclusive innovation under pressure. This framing makes the research both urgent and distinctive, and it sets the stage for a critical engagement with scholarship on Agile, leadership, and organisational culture.

2 Literature review

This study explores Agile not merely as a set of methodologies but as a cultural philosophy and mindset. The focus is on values such as adaptability, collaboration, and iterative learning, and how these may manifest in the everyday practices of EdTech leaders and teams. Rather than assuming that implementing Agile tools automatically yields a more adaptive organization, the research examines how leaders themselves perceive, interpret, and embed Agile principles into their culture, behaviours, and routines.

While Rigby, Sutherland and Takeuchi's (2020) five-domain model of agile enterprise culture highlights agility as multi-dimensional, this study draws more specifically on leadership theories that explain how cultural values are transmitted: servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995), ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese and Bausch 2011), and scholarship on Agile as an organisational mindset (Denning 2018). The project therefore focuses on understanding how leaders act as cultural enablers of Agile values and whether these values support adaptability and innovation in the context of Mexican EdTech firms.

2.1 *Agile as a Philosophy and Cultural Mindset*

Agile originated in software development as a flexible approach prioritising "individuals and interactions over processes and tools" (Beck et al. 2001). However, its transformative potential lies less in specific frameworks than in cultivating a mindset of responsiveness, collaboration, and continuous learning (Denning 2018; Rigby, Sutherland and Noble 2020). Rigby et al. (2020) argue that "doing Agile" through mechanistic practices often fails when decoupled from "being Agile," a deeper orientation towards adaptability and customer-centricity.

Augner and Schermuly (2024) conceptualise the agile mindset as a distinct psychological construct: mental models enabling iterative experimentation, tolerance for ambiguity, and intrinsic motivation for improvement. Their empirical study found it significantly predicted both innovation and perceived adaptability. Conversely, Ozkan et al. (2023) show that many firms conflate Agile as a process with Agile as a cultural shift, leading to superficial implementation and limited value creation.

Transformation efforts frequently stall. A Boston Consulting Group survey of 127 global firms revealed that while most initiated Agile programmes, fewer than half achieved lasting cultural change, with the remainder creating only an "illusion of agility" by adopting rituals without deeper impact (Lenhard et al. 2024). This suggests that Agile

methodologies alone are not sufficient; without cultural internalisation, benefits may remain marginal.

Cultural context further shapes Agile's efficacy. Agile practices encourage openness and learning from mistakes, which may clash with high power-distance or short-term cultures. In Latin America, rigid hierarchies and a "firefighting" mindset have been reported to undermine empowerment and continuous improvement (Taylor, Otero and Maurizio 2025). Thus, distinguishing methodological Agile (tools and routines) from cultural Agile (a guiding ethos) is essential. For volatile environments such as Mexican EdTech, this research therefore examines whether Agile has been embedded as a lived philosophy rather than as surface-level process adoption (Doz and Kosonen 2010).

2.2 Leadership as the Catalyst for Embedding Agile Culture

Having established the importance of Agile as a cultural mindset, it is essential to consider how these values are transmitted throughout an organisation. Schein (2017) describes leaders as the architects of organisational culture, embedding and sustaining shared values. Kotter (2012) similarly emphasises that leadership behaviours set the tone for transformation. In Agile contexts, Denning (2018) stresses that leaders must model humility, openness, and experimentation if Agile values are to permeate everyday practice.

Two paradigms are especially relevant: servant leadership and ambidextrous leadership. Servant leadership prioritises empowering others (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995). Canavesi and Minelli (2021) find it correlates with knowledge sharing and innovation, while Zada et al. (2022) show it fosters psychological safety, enabling risk-taking and creativity. Ambidextrous leadership balances exploration and exploitation (Rosing, Frese and Bausch 2011). Empirical evidence demonstrates that such leaders sustain innovation in dynamic contexts by encouraging both divergent thinking and disciplined execution (Zacher and Rosing 2015).

However, leadership should not be idealised. Schillinger (2022) argues that Agile does not erase power hierarchies: without vigilance, rituals can reproduce inequality, masking domination behind participatory language. Mayer's observation that "the oppressed become the oppressors" illustrates how Agile can reinforce, rather than dismantle, toxic power patterns. Liu (2019) similarly critiques servant leadership as embedded in power relations influenced by gender, age, and class. Leaders must therefore not only espouse Agile values but actively dismantle entrenched hierarchies to embed genuine empowerment.

For Latin America, leadership must also adapt to local cultural norms. Historically paternalistic or hierarchical leadership can inhibit candid feedback and distributed decision-making, yet it may also reinforce Agile adoption if leaders leverage relational trust, a valued feature of Latin cultures. Taylor, Otero and Maurizio (2025) note that successful agility in the region requires balancing imported practices with local traditions. Investigating how Mexican EdTech leaders interpret and enact servant or ambidextrous leadership thus reveals whether these models genuinely enable agility in this context.

2.3 Organisational Culture, Psychological Safety, and Adaptability

Culture sets the stage for Agile's success or failure. Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking will not be punished (Edmondson 1999), is foundational. Denning (2018) suggests Agile rituals such as retrospectives reinforce openness and trust. Doz and Kosonen (2010) similarly argue that strategic agility, the capacity to reconfigure resources, depends on transparent communication and mutual trust.

The Agile Business Consortium (2023) reinforces this, identifying psychological safety as a precondition for continuous learning and responsiveness. Without safety, teams may comply superficially with Agile ceremonies but avoid true experimentation, thereby undermining innovation.

However, most scholarship on psychological safety derives from Western, innovation-rich contexts. In resource-constrained and hierarchical environments such as Mexican EdTech, psychological safety cannot be assumed. Employees may be reluctant to challenge authority or expose mistakes. It remains unclear whether Agile practices alone can foster such openness where it has not existed historically. This represents a critical empirical gap: the present research will assess whether leaders perceive Agile adoption to have created more open, learning-oriented cultures or whether structural and cultural barriers remain entrenched.

2.4 Agile Leadership and Organisational Innovation

Innovation is a second critical outcome associated with Agile culture. Dynamic capabilities theory (Teece 2007) argues that organisations must sense, seize, and reconfigure opportunities to innovate and adapt. Agile, with its cross-functional collaboration and rapid iteration, is often presented as enabling these capabilities. Denning (2018) observes that innovation becomes routine in Agile environments, while Rigby et al. (2020) report that firms embracing Agile mindsets outperform peers on innovation outcomes.

Yet the causal link is contested. Some organisations already predisposed to innovate may adopt Agile more readily, while others adopting it at scale encounter coordination failures or “innovation fatigue” (Ozkan et al. 2023). Teams with autonomy but lacking resources may generate ideas that never materialise. Partial adoption also undermines outcomes: when only certain departments become Agile, rigid non-Agile units can stifle innovation (Lenhard et al. 2024).

For Mexico, innovation barriers are well documented. OECD (2024) and INEE (2019) note that many organisations face infrastructure deficits, regulatory hurdles, and leadership skill gaps. Agile leadership may thus enable incremental improvements without overcoming systemic barriers. This study will explore whether leaders in Mexican EdTech perceive Agile culture as enabling tangible innovation, such as faster pivots or new pedagogical solutions, or whether external constraints dilute its impact.

2.5 EdTech Sector Dynamics: Digital Equity, Innovation, and Agility

The following section contextualises these theories within the Mexican EdTech sector and discusses sector-specific challenges related to innovation and digital equity. Selwyn (2012) describes EdTech as an environment shaped by the tension between social inclusion goals and commercial imperatives. OECD (2024) and INEE (2019) note that in Mexico, EdTech firms frequently encounter systemic barriers to scaling innovation, such as limited digital infrastructure, socioeconomic inequalities, and fragmented policy frameworks. As a result, even organisations with high technical proficiency may struggle to achieve sustainable growth.

Digital equity challenges suggest the need for organisational agility. For instance, adapting platforms to underserved communities often requires rapid product iteration and flexible business models. In this environment, adopting Agile mindsets could theoretically equip firms to manage competing demands for speed, equity, and scalability (Rigby, Sutherland and Noble 2020). Yet, there remains limited empirical evidence on whether Agile culture tangibly mitigates these challenges in emerging economies.

Therefore, situating this research within the Mexican EdTech sector offers an opportunity to assess Agile’s capacity to support innovation under constraints. This analysis not only contributes to theoretical debates about Agile in low-resource settings but also addresses pressing practical questions for leaders navigating digital equity pressures.

2.6 Connecting Agile Culture, Adaptability and Innovation

Having explored the dimensions of leadership, culture, and outcomes, it is essential to integrate them into a coherent account. Contemporary models (Rigby et al. 2020) emphasise Agile as an interconnected system in which leadership behaviours translate values into culture, enabling adaptability and innovation. Servant leadership fosters psychological safety, which sustains iterative experimentation, while ambidextrous leadership balances exploration with disciplined execution (Rosing et al. 2011; Zacher and Rosing 2015).

Building on Denning (2018), Schein (2017), and leadership scholarship, the conceptual model developed here proposes a pathway: leadership behaviours enact psychological safety through rituals and practice bundles, which cultivate an Agile culture of experimentation, curiosity, and care. This cultural orientation enables adaptive learning cycles and innovation. The pathway is moderated by contextual conditions particularly salient in Mexican EdTech: resource scarcity, client risk aversion, hierarchical traditions, and AI turbulence. Identity work, where firms frame themselves as “a type of learning,” amplifies legitimacy and impact.

Conceptual Model A – Ex Ante (Literature Review)

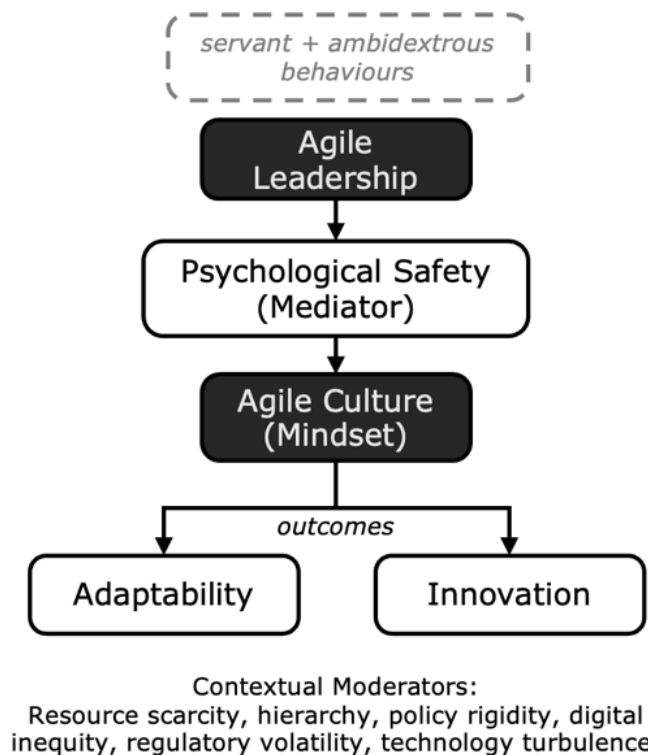


Figure 1. Conceptual model linking leadership, psychological safety, Agile culture.

At the same time, critical voices remind us that Agile is not a panacea: it fails when reduced to superficial practices or when deep-seated power structures remain unchallenged. This tension underscores why Agile must be studied as a lived cultural phenomenon rather than a toolkit. Yet much of the literature remains Global North-centric, leaving unanswered whether these dynamics hold under the uncertainty and constraint of contexts such as Mexican EdTech.

In summary, the literature demonstrates that Agile's effectiveness depends on leadership-driven cultural embedding, but it also exposes unresolved tensions around context, power, and sustainability. This study addresses these gaps by empirically testing the proposed conceptual framework in Mexican EdTech, asking whether leaders do indeed act as cultural enablers of Agile values and whether, in their view, those values enhance adaptability and innovation.

3 Research methods

The methodological choices underpinning this project were designed to capture how Agile values are lived and interpreted within the cultural and leadership practices of Mexican EdTech firms. In line with Saunders et al.'s (2019) Research Onion, the chapter progresses from philosophical foundations through strategy, design, and data collection to analysis, ethics, and reflexivity. The overall aim is to demonstrate coherence, rigour, and transparency, while acknowledging the limits and situated nature of qualitative inquiry.

3.1 *Research Philosophy and Approach*

This study adopted an interpretivist philosophical stance, reflecting the view that organisational culture and leadership are socially constructed and best understood through subjective meanings. Ontologically, the study is relativist, recognising multiple co-existing realities within organisations. Epistemologically, the stance is constructionist, where knowledge is generated through interaction between researcher and participant (Bryman, 2016).

According to Saunders et al. (2019), such philosophical positioning is consistent with qualitative inquiry, which privileges depth and meaning over measurement. This orientation was particularly suitable given the exploratory aim of the study: to understand how Agile values are interpreted and enacted in Mexican EdTech organisations, a phenomenon under-researched in this context and therefore requiring interpretive depth rather than measurement.

3.2 *Research Strategy and Design*

Building on this interpretivist orientation, the research strategy adopted an exploratory qualitative design, appropriate where theoretical frameworks are emergent and contextual insights are central (Saunders et al. 2019). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method. As Kvale (2007) explains, interviews constitute "professional conversations," enabling participants to articulate experiences in their own terms while allowing the researcher to probe further.

The design also drew on the Honeycomb Model, which stresses coherence between aims, philosophy, data collection, and analysis (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2019) thereby strengthening methodological coherence.

3.3 *Data Collection Methods*

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior leaders and managers from EdTech organisations in Mexico. All interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams, lasted 30–45 minutes, and were recorded with informed consent (Appendices B–D).

The interview protocol was designed to explore leadership values, organisational culture, adaptability, and innovation. While inspired by the five-domain model of Agile enterprise culture (Rigby, Sutherland and Noble 2020), the questions avoided jargon to elicit authentic responses in participants' own idioms.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish. Auto-generated Microsoft Teams transcripts were exported, translated into English via Microsoft Word, and then subjected to rigorous manual cleaning. This process preserved meaning and tone, removed filler words, anonymised identifiers, and retained the full question-and-answer structure.

Conducting interviews in Spanish respected participants' linguistic context, while translation into English was carefully managed to preserve nuance and minimise interpretive loss. As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise, qualitative data requires careful preparation to preserve richness and ensure fitness for thematic analysis. Full transcripts are included in the Appendix F as an audit trail.

3.4 *Sampling and Access*

The unit of analysis was the individual leader, defined broadly as any actor influencing organisational culture, decision-making, or strategic direction. The purposive sampling ensured that participants were positioned to speak directly to how leadership values and cultural practices shape organisational responses to uncertainty, which is central to the research aim. Recruitment was achieved through professional networks, LinkedIn, and referrals.

The final sample included leaders from four organisations (two startups and two small-sized firms), providing variation in organisational maturity and scale. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) argue that 6–12 interviews are generally sufficient to reach thematic saturation in homogenous groups; in this study, saturation was judged at eight interviews.

Nevertheless, the sample has limits. It does not capture the full diversity of Mexico's EdTech ecosystem, particularly larger, enterprises or public institutions. This inevitably constrains transferability, yet it reflects a deliberate trade-off: prioritising depth and contextual richness over breadth (Saunders et al. 2019).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). RTA was chosen because it provides a structured six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing, defining, reporting, while allowing recursive movement between phases. Thematic Analysis is compatible with a constructionist epistemology, recognising that themes are co-produced by researcher and participant rather than simply discovered as objective facts.

This recursive approach facilitated the identification of cultural indicators, value patterns, contradictions, and discursive tensions, balancing deductive attention to Agile constructs with inductive openness to emergent themes. Finally, cultural sensitivity was prioritised, recognising that participants might describe Agile-aligned practices in ways not explicitly labelled as such.

According to Braun and Clarke (2019), the reflexive element of RTA requires researchers to acknowledge how their positionality shapes theme development. In this study, reflexivity was central to managing the interpretive process. RTA has limitations, it is not designed to provide quantifiable measures of prevalence, and findings are not generalisable. Moreover, translation may have introduced subtle shifts in meaning despite careful cleaning. As Miles et al. (2019) caution, qualitative analysis is always a matter of interpretive judgement. By documenting the process transparently and retaining tensions in the data, rigour was strengthened.

The final analysis produced five themes: courageous experimentation, human-centred resilience, mission of inclusion, real-world learning, and institutional constraints, which are presented in the Findings section. A thematic data structure table (Appendix H) are included making visible the interpretive journey from raw data to analytical insight.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was secured through the Nottingham Business School. The research conformed to NTU's guidelines and the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant autonomy. Participants received an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, rights, and data handling (Appendices B-D). Consent was obtained before interviews. All identifiers were removed in transcripts, and pseudonyms applied. Data were stored securely on NTU OneDrive.

Ethical rigour was treated not only as a procedural requirement but as a methodological principle that enhanced trustworthiness and credibility. By ensuring informed consent, secure data handling, and cultural sensitivity, the study sought to respect participants as co-constructors of knowledge rather than mere data sources.

4 Findings

Data from eight semi-structured interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The process involved iterative movement between familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition and writing, supported by systematic handling of transcripts. The aim was to identify patterned meanings across participants while retaining the richness of individual voices.

4.1 Overview

Across the dataset, participants depicted organisations navigating the tensions of educational ambition, technological flux and systemic constraint. The analysis identified five interconnected themes: courageous experimentation under uncertainty; structure as a scaffold that accelerates; human-centred learning and organisational resilience; impact-driven vision and pedagogical identity; and innovating against the grain of a rigid system. These themes highlight a distinctive pattern: leaders positioned their organisations not simply as firms but as pedagogical actors, blending entrepreneurial agility with educational values. This contribution goes beyond confirming existing notions of agility by showing how Mexican EdTech embeds cultural and pedagogical commitments into strategic practice; an originality that distinguishes this study from predominantly tool-focused accounts in the literature.

4.2 Theme 1. Courageous Experimentation under Uncertainty

A defining pattern was the normalisation of experimentation, despite uncertain outcomes. Participants valorised decisiveness in ambiguity: *"Be bold, it may not work but we should try."* (Participant F). Experimentation was disciplined through mini-hackathons, experiment registers, and iterative onboarding redesigns.

Leaders described feeling comfortable with risks so long as initiatives were strategically aligned. They reported deliberately opening spaces for dialogue and co-creation, encouraging teams to brainstorm and detail project ideas collaboratively. Transparency was framed not as reporting metrics but as opening the decision-making process to scrutiny: *"They should know exactly what is happening... through communication."* (Participant C). In this framing, missteps were not only tolerated but actively valued as necessary steps towards eventual success.

Errors were reframed as data. Rather than a signal of failure, mistakes were viewed as markers of progress: *"The most valuable thing is making mistakes... every error brings you closer to a yes."* (Participant A). Criticism was also welcomed as a generative force: *"Let's celebrate the critics, they are the only ones who dare to say what was missing."* (Participant D).

Participants also highlighted differences across professional backgrounds. Technical and engineering profiles were seen as more naturally inclined to trialling ideas, given the experimental nature of their fields, while those in pedagogy or educational roles often required more theoretical grounding before engaging in risk-taking. As one participant reflected, younger staff tended to be “more daring” until they accumulated “professional wounds,” pointing to how risk appetite is both cultural and biographical.

Taken together, these accounts portray experimentation as a form of disciplined opportunism: decide, test, learn, and iterate, within the bounds of organisational goals. While appetite for experimentation is unevenly distributed across roles and generations, leaders consistently framed it as a cornerstone of adaptive capacity, where failure serves as both a learning mechanism and a driver of cultural resilience.

4.3 Theme 2. Structure as a Scaffold that Accelerates

Contrary to the common assumption that formalisation suppresses creativity, participants described lightweight structures as scaffolds that accelerate innovation. As one leader framed it: *“Autonomy with accountability: do it whenever you want... but document the path.”* (Participant B). Frameworks were pragmatically adapted to context, with participants emphasising flexibility over rigid application. For example, the well-known Design Sprint was remodelled: *“We adapted the Design Sprint: two weeks of research and then a hackathon day.”* (Participant F).

Similarly, values were operationalised through rituals that embedded abstract principles into everyday practices: *“The methodology works like a cascade... transforming values into rituals.”* (Participant C). Documentation and feedback tools made processes legible and distributed across small teams. Instead of formal retrospectives, leaders relied on immediate feedback in the flow of work: *“No retrospectives, more like immediate feedback in the flow.”* (Participant A).

These scaffolds served multiple functions: they provided shared legibility across teams, distributed responsibility more evenly, and conserved time. Leaders consistently highlighted the tension between day-to-day operational demands and the pursuit of innovation, acknowledging the challenge of maintaining both simultaneously. Several suggested that stronger structural mechanisms in operations could help relieve this tension by creating a foundation from which innovation could scale more sustainably.

A recurrent hypothesis was that formalising certain processes might enable automation, thereby freeing human capacity for higher-value, fast-paced activities in response to market dynamics. In this sense, minimal yet deliberate structures were not perceived as constraints but as accelerators, helping leaders to balance openness to new ideas with

discipline in execution. The accounts illustrate how structure, when framed as adaptive scaffolding, can reconcile operational stability with innovative momentum.

4.4 Theme 3. Human-Centred Learning and Organisational Resilience

Experimentation in these organisations was consistently underpinned by an ethic of empathy, curiosity, and resilience. Leaders described these as guiding pillars such as: "...*empathy, critical thinking and technology.*" (Participant F). Resilience was not framed as endurance alone but as caring attentiveness to people's limits: "*Instil resilience... recognise fatigue, inspire without burning people out.*" (Participant E).

Crucially, participants extended these practices beyond internal teams to the wider educational ecosystem. Learners, educators, and partners were invited into spaces where failure was normalised as part of the co-creation process: "*We want your child to fail here... so they learn to stand up again.*" (Participant H). This orientation blurred the boundary between inside and outside the organisation, creating a consistent ethic of care and experimentation across stakeholders.

Curiosity was operationalised as both a criterion for task allocation and as a collective expectation: "*What interests you? ... then you dive into that fully.*" (Participant C). Weekly rituals reinforced learning as an organisational norm: "*Each week we ask, 'what did you learn?' and everyone shares.*" (Participant E). Leaders emphasised that internal curiosity must mirror external sensitivity to market shifts: if employees were not learning something new in their role, leaders believed the organisation was failing to adapt.

This theme therefore reframes resilience not as stoicism, nor psychological safety as a one-off condition, but as a human-centred practice woven into routines, task allocation, and stakeholder engagement. Leaders sought to connect individual passion and skills with business strategy while bridging internal development and external demands. In doing so, they cultivated learning organisations that paired bold experimentation with care, ensuring that agility was sustainable and inclusive across the EdTech ecosystem.

4.5 Theme 4. Impact-Driven Vision and Pedagogical Identity

Across the interviews, leaders described their ambitions in terms that exceeded business growth, consistently framing impact as their central motivation. Expansion was not only about scale but about access and equity: "*We want to touch many more lives... reaching those not served for economic or systemic reasons.*" (Participant F). Future visions were repeatedly tethered to inclusion, with growth understood as a way of strengthening public systems and extending opportunities to groups traditionally excluded from quality education.

Participants emphasised that leadership was inseparable from service, often describing their example as “contagious.” Service was also understood as enabling ideas generated from below rather than directing from above: *“People propose ideas from below... leadership guides them so they are realised in service.”* (Participant B). They stressed that those working with them must share a passion for the mission: believing in the purpose was what sustained curiosity, eased risk-taking, and enabled innovation. As one leader put it, they wanted their organisation to be recognised not merely as a firm but as *“a type of learning, not just a company.”* (Participant F).

This values-driven orientation also shaped pedagogy itself. Rather than positioning theory as a starting point, leaders framed pedagogy as beginning from learners’ realities, equipping them with tools to explore the world: *“Understand reality through academic tools... the ultimate aim is to discover the world, not just know the topics.”* (Participant G). In this way, experimentation was not only a managerial practice but also a pedagogical stance, prioritising flexibility, adaptability, and learner agency.

Finally, participants highlighted how vision and impact were collective endeavours, sustained by partnerships and collaborations across the EdTech ecosystem. By anchoring bold ambitions in shared values and pedagogical practice, leaders sought to build organisations that were simultaneously market-relevant, socially responsible, and educationally transformative.

4.6 Theme 5. Innovating Against the Grain of a Rigid System

Innovation in the EdTech sector unfolded within clear systemic limits. Participants repeatedly cited the rigidity and risk-aversion of traditional schools as major barriers: *“Schools are very averse to mistakes... they are not willing to fail.”* (Participant H). Resource scarcity further constrained ambition: *“What should have taken one month ended up taking three.”* (Participant D). The demands of remote, bicultural teams also introduced coordination challenges: *“Remote team... cultural nuances... leadership has to adapt.”* (Participant G).

Yet these constraints were not experienced as paralysing. Instead, leaders reframed them as drivers of adaptation, resilience, and identity-building. Technological turbulence, especially the rapid emergence of AI, was seen as both a threat and an opportunity: *“AI is changing exponentially... we must position ourselves, see threats and opportunities.”* (Participant G). Critical thinking was positioned as a defence against digital overload: *“Critical thinking is increasingly essential, to combat doom-scrolling habits.”* (Participant E).

What emerged was a picture of leaders working against the grain of a divided and sometimes “extremist” educational market. On one side stood the traditional educational system, rigid and resistant to mistakes; on the other, a handful of disruptive actors seeking to democratise access, promote freedom of thought, and cultivate decision-making skills. Participants often articulated utopian visions of education, imagining ecosystems where knowledge was not merely transmitted but used to help learners understand and interact critically with the world.

This duality: disruption within systemic rigidity, shaped their strategies. Leaders acknowledged that to achieve impact they needed to embed themselves within established “monsters” of public and higher education, while simultaneously presenting their innovations as reliable and credible to stakeholders such as universities, parents, and learners. The balancing act was clear: to be taken seriously, they had to appear trustworthy; to make a difference, they had to remain disruptive.

In this way, constraints were paradoxically generative. Far from dampening innovation, systemic obstacles sharpened leaders’ sense of purpose, demanding bold visions tethered to critical pedagogy, inclusion, and organisational credibility.

4.7 Inter-Theme Dynamics

The interdependence of themes was striking. Experimentation (Theme 1) relied on scaffolds (Theme 2), tempered by care (Theme 3), steered by vision (Theme 4), and tested against systemic rigidity (Theme 5). Leadership acted as connective tissue, safeguarding autonomy, legitimising critique, and enacting purpose collectively.

Importantly, tensions were not fully resolved. The very structures that enabled experimentation risked sliding into rigidity; visions of impact clashed with resource scarcity; and care sometimes slowed decision-making. These frictions complicate linear accounts of “Agile success,” suggesting instead a dynamic equilibrium where agility is constantly negotiated rather than achieved. Reflexively, my analysis may incline towards highlighting coherence, yet contradictions within participants’ accounts show that agility here is fragile, contingent, and unfinished.

4.8 Researcher Reflexivity

Following Braun and Clarke’s reflexive approach, I acknowledge how my positionality shaped the analysis. My professional background in EdTech attuned me to patterns of leadership, care and inclusion. To counterbalance this, I deliberately sought disconfirming evidence, such as frustration with repeated failures and uneven risk appetites, retaining them within themes rather than smoothing them out. This reflexive

stance treats subjectivity not as bias but as analytic resource, supporting a transparent and critical interpretation.

In sum, Mexican EdTech leaders are constructing cultures where experimentation is disciplined, structures are enabling, resilience is human-centred, visions are impact-driven, and innovation emerges despite systemic rigidity. Agility here is not an abstract toolkit but a lived cultural practice, integrating learning, inclusion, and service. The originality of this study lies in showing how agility becomes pedagogical, how educational identity anchors adaptive strategy. This contribution reframes agility beyond managerial discourse, positioning it as an educationally infused philosophy with implications for both organisational practice and theory.

5 Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to the research objectives and the conceptual terrain mapped in the literature review. The analysis evaluates whether Agile values are genuinely embedded in Mexican EdTech leadership and culture, and whether these values support adaptability and innovation under conditions of constraint. By engaging critically with existing scholarship and refining the conceptual model, the discussion shows how agility emerges not as a toolkit of methods but as a lived cultural philosophy continually negotiated in practice.

5.1 *Embedding Agile Values in Leadership, Culture and Routines*

The findings demonstrate that Agile values are embedded across leadership behaviours, organisational culture, and routines, but unevenly and not without tension. Leaders modelled transparency and decisive action in ambiguity, positioning themselves in service to the team. They also translated values into micro-practices: weekly learning rituals, curiosity-based task allocation, immediate feedback, and autonomy with accountability. These patterns extend servant leadership's emphasis on empowerment and stewardship (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995) and operationalise ambidextrous leadership's opening-closing cycle of exploration and disciplined delivery (Rosing, Frese and Bausch 2011; Zacher and Rosing 2015). They corroborate Schein's portrayal of leaders as culture architects who embed values through what they attend to and reward (Schein 2017), while echoing Kotter's claim that leadership behaviours anchor transformation (Kotter 2012).

Reflexively, my own professional familiarity with Agile discourse may have predisposed me to notice enabling routines over coercive uses. To counter this, I treated claims of transparency and care as insufficient unless corroborated by observable practices. Even so, participants' accounts suggest that leaders are not symbolic figureheads but sense makers, translating turbulence into shared meaning and manageable action.

Embedding was, however, uneven. Technical staff embraced iteration, while pedagogical staff sought stronger validation before committing. This raises a fundamental question: does caution protect educational integrity, or does it stifle innovation? If unmanaged, disciplinary divides risk hardening into silos or struggles for epistemic legitimacy; if bridged, they can generate pluralism that enriches innovation. This nuance extends critiques that Agile rituals can mask inequality or privilege certain voices (Schillinger 2022; Liu 2019), showing that vigilance is required not only against hierarchy but also against disciplinary pride.

5.2 *Agile Values Supporting Adaptability and Innovation*

Objective 2 examined whether Agile values support adaptability and innovation. The evidence suggests a qualified yes, but with important caveats.

Lightweight structures operated as scaffolds that reconciled creativity with accountability, challenging the assumption that structure suppresses agility (Rigby et al. 2020). Participants treated frameworks as provisional and revisable, accelerating rather than freezing innovation. Yet a counter-voice emerged: some leaders admitted that documenting experiments added administrative burden, hinting at the risk of scaffolds ossifying into bureaucracy.

Resilience was consistently framed as human-centred. Leaders practised stewardship of energy, empathy for fatigue, and rituals that institutionalised curiosity. These behaviours embody servant leadership's ethic of care (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995) and align with findings that servant leadership fosters psychological safety (Zada et al. 2022). Ambidextrous leadership was evident in disciplined alternation between exploration and delivery (Rosing et al. 2011). However, care itself brought tension: attending to wellbeing slowed decision-making, forcing leaders to balance speed with sustainability.

External rigidity sharpened these dynamics. Conservative schools, fragmented policy, and resource scarcity forced organisations into dual strategies of conformity and disruption (Theme 5). Leaders sought credibility with established institutions while maintaining a disruptive pedagogical stance. This extends Selwyn's (2012) analysis of EdTech's tension between inclusion and commercial pressures by showing that constraints can crystallise purpose and legitimacy. Yet rigidity was not purely generative: several participants spoke of exhaustion when delays stretched projects for months. Innovation was thus both enabled and burdened by context—reframed not only as product development but as pedagogy anchored in equity and agency.

5.3 *Cross-Cutting Themes*

Four patterns cut across objectives, each marked by paradox rather than resolution, these position agility not as a toolkit but as a cultural ecosystem where values, behaviours, and structures are mutually reinforcing.

5.3.1 Experimentation through Scaffolds of Accountability

Adaptability thrived only when experimentation was tethered to lightweight structures that provided accountability without suffocating autonomy. Leaders framed practices such as experiment registers, adapted Design Sprints, and time-boxing as scaffolds that made risk-taking legible and repeatable. This challenges the dichotomy often drawn in

the literature between structure as constraint and agility as freedom (Rigby et al. 2020). Instead, participants highlighted that structures, when deliberately provisional, accelerate innovation by preventing drift and conserving energy. The implication is that adaptability in EdTech requires not an absence of structure but the continuous calibration of scaffolds to context, a nuance underdeveloped in mainstream Agile scholarship where structure is too often equated with bureaucracy.

5.3.2 Resilience as Care, Not Stoicism

Collaboration was redefined not through heroic endurance but through practices of care and attentiveness to limits. Rituals such as weekly “what did you learn?” prompts, curiosity-based allocation, and non-punitive responses to error positioned resilience as an ethic of collective wellbeing rather than individual toughness. This interpretation contrasts with dominant leadership narratives that equate resilience with grit and persistence (Denning 2018) and instead aligns with servant leadership’s emphasis on stewardship and empathy (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1995). In high power-distance contexts, framing resilience as care is politically significant: it redistributes authority by legitimising vulnerability as a collaborative resource.

5.3.3 Vision as Pedagogical Identity and Legitimacy

Customer focus was anchored in visions that framed organisations not merely as firms but as “a type of learning.” Leaders consistently articulated equity, inclusion, and pedagogical transformation as their primary horizon, translating business growth into educational legitimacy. This emphasis challenges the narrow framing of customer focus as market responsiveness alone, common in Agile literature (Rigby et al. 2020), by situating customers as learners embedded in systems of inequality (Selwyn 2012). The critical contribution here is that identity work, framing the firm as pedagogy, functions both as a compass for decision-making and as a legitimacy strategy in conservative ecosystems. In contrast to studies that portray vision as inspirational rhetoric, this research shows how vision operates as a strategic amplifier, converting values into institutional credibility and enabling risk-taking in environments otherwise hostile to experimentation.

5.3.4 Systemic Rigidity as a Catalyst for Innovation

Iterative learning gained traction not in spite of systemic rigidity but through the creative negotiation of constraints. Leaders navigated client risk-aversion, regulatory inertia, and technological turbulence by adopting dual strategies of credibility and disruption. Such accounts complicate the assumption in dynamic capabilities theory that external turbulence primarily undermines adaptability (Teece 2007). Instead, the findings suggest

that systemic barriers can sharpen learning cycles by forcing organisations to sense, seize, and reconfigure with unusual precision. At the same time, the cost of such negotiation should not be romanticised: constraints slow implementation and increase cognitive burden, echoing cautions about the “illusion of agility” when structural barriers outpace cultural embedding (Ozkan et al. 2023; Lenhard et al. 2024). The paradox is that rigidity generates adaptive pressure, yet without systemic reform its effect risks being episodic rather than transformative.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

The study advances theory in four ways. First, it supports scholarship that Agile is most effective when embedded as a philosophy rather than as a toolkit (Denning 2018; Augner and Schermuly 2024). Second, it deepens leadership theory by demonstrating how servant and ambidextrous leadership converge under constraint, enabling humility and care to coexist with disciplined sensemaking. Third, it reframes psychological safety as a ritualised practice rather than a latent climate, linking Edmondson’s (1999) concept to strategic agility where safety must be continually enacted (Doz and Kosonen 2010; Agile Business Consortium 2023). Fourth, it extends dynamic capabilities theory (Teece 2007) by introducing contextual moderators, AI turbulence, generational heterogeneity in risk appetite, and client aversion to risk, that condition whether Agile routines compress decision cycles or degrade into performative rituals (Ozkan et al. 2023; Lenhard et al. 2024). Finally, the study adds an underexplored dimension: pedagogical innovation as an outcome of Agile culture. By showing how learner agency and equity are enhanced through Agile routines, the research widens the scope of what counts as innovation in Agile literature (Selwyn 2012; OECD 2024; INEE 2019).

5.5 Practical Implications

For EdTech leaders, four paradoxical levers stand out. First, institutionalise learning by maintaining experiment registers, weekly learning prompts, and immediate feedback to keep knowledge circulating. Second, build scaffolds as provisional frameworks that accelerate innovation without freezing it into bureaucracy. Third, align task allocation to curiosity to fuel exploration and reduce fatigue. Fourth, perform care deliberately by recognising limits, naming empathy as a pillar, and monitoring energy as closely as outcomes.

These implications caution against treating Agile routines as universally beneficial. Without reflexive review, they risk becoming burdensome rituals or rhetorical veneers rather than enablers of adaptability.

5.6 Refinements to the Conceptual Framework

The original model depicted a linear flow: leadership → psychological safety → Agile culture → adaptability and innovation, moderated by context.

The findings require refinement (Appendix A):

Conceptual Model B — Refined (Ex Post, Findings + Discussion)

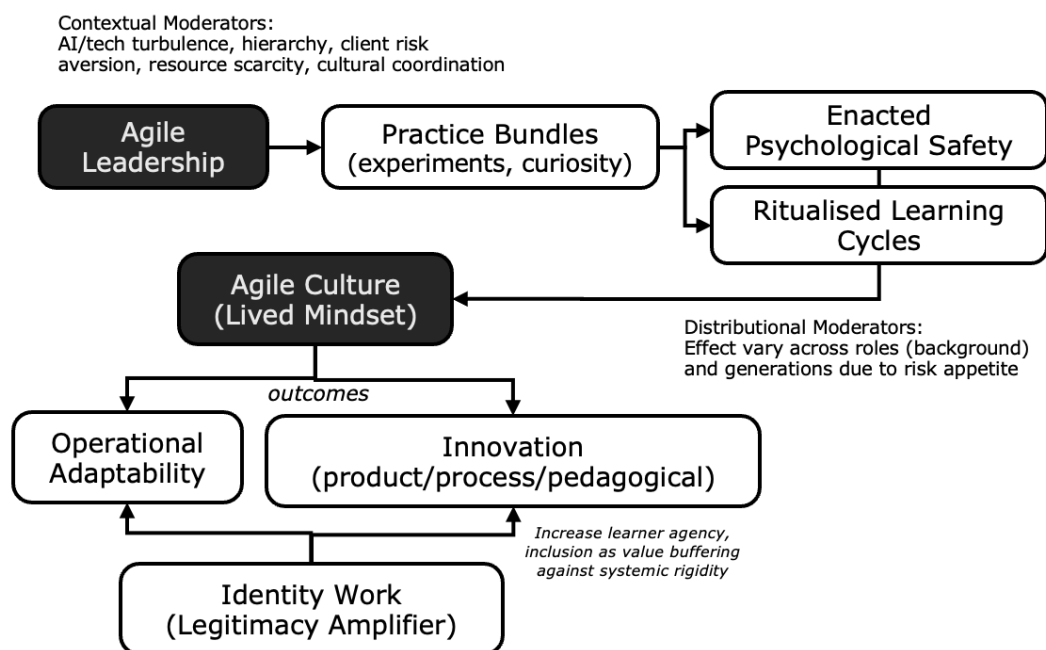


Figure 2. Refined conceptual model after Findings + Discussion

- Mechanisms: Leadership shapes culture through practice bundles, rituals, and curiosity-based allocation; safety is enacted, not assumed.
- Distribution: Risk appetite varies across roles and generations; culture is unevenly absorbed.
- Context: Moderators include AI turbulence, client risk aversion, bicultural coordination, and resource scarcity.
- Amplifiers: Identity work, framing the firm as “a type of learning,” translates culture into legitimacy.

These refinements render the framework more operational and contextually grounded, extending its relevance to emerging-market EdTech.

Agile values in Mexican EdTech are embedded in leadership behaviours, cultural routines, and adaptive structures, though unevenly and contested across roles. They support adaptability and innovation, but only within paradoxes of constraint. Scaffolds accelerate experimentation yet risk bureaucratisation; care protects wellbeing yet slows speed; pedagogical identity legitimises innovation yet risks rhetorical drift; systemic rigidity sharpens reflexivity yet suffocates capacity.

The study enriches Agile, leadership, and cross-cultural management scholarship by specifying mechanisms, moderators, and amplifiers that shape how agility is enacted. It demonstrates that agility is not a set of tools but a fragile cultural ecosystem: leaders modelling transparency and care, scaffolds that accelerate but must remain provisional, and identities anchored in pedagogy and service. Reflexively, my interpretation foregrounds care and inclusion as enablers, but participants' frustrations remind us of that agility here is fragile, contested, and unfinished. This is its originality: agility in Mexican EdTech is not equilibrium but ongoing negotiation, promising, partial, and continually at risk of erosion.

6 Recommendations and Conclusion

This study confirms that Agile values are present in Mexican EdTech leadership and culture, but their impact is moderated by structural and cultural constraints.

Adaptability, collaboration, customer focus, and iterative learning are enacted as lived practices, yet they are uneven, contested, and shaped by scarcity, epistemic divides, and systemic rigidity. Recommendations are framed around these four values, integrating theoretical insights, empirical evidence, and reflexive interpretation.

6.1 *Recommendations for Practice and Research*

6.1.1 Adaptability: Design Without Slipping into Bureaucracy

Structures should be treated as scaffolds provisional, enabling, and continuously reviewable. Practices such as experiment registers, adapted sprint formats, and immediate feedback loops accelerate learning when kept lightweight. The risk lies in ossification: once scaffolds are treated as permanent fixtures, agility collapses into bureaucracy. Leaders must therefore normalise periodic “unbuilding,” revisiting practices before they harden into control.

For research, this raises critical questions about when scaffolds cross the line into bureaucratic ritual, and how organisations can institutionalise impermanence without undermining continuity.

6.1.2 Collaboration: Transform Tensions into Synergy

Collaboration was hindered by disciplinary divides: technical staff valorised trial-and-error, pedagogical staff demanded validation. This divergence can be destructive, but also generative if channelled into joint problem-solving. Leaders should therefore create cross-functional forums that institutionalise dialogue rather than tokenise inclusion. Collaboration must move beyond coexistence towards integration, where pedagogy tempers technology without paralysing it.

For research, the question is which approach, multidisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or interdisciplinary, could best enable innovation in education technology, and under what conditions these approaches collapse into silos or professional turf wars.

6.1.3 Customer Focus: Reframe Service as Pedagogical Identity

In Mexican EdTech, customer focus cannot be reduced to market responsiveness.

Organisational legitimacy comes from being recognised as “a type of learning,” where service to learners and educators anchors trust in risk-averse environments. Leaders should embed pedagogical purpose into rituals, mission statements, and communication, so day-to-day experimentation is consistently tethered to equity and inclusion.

A counter-risk must be noted: framing customer focus too narrowly as market responsiveness risks eroding pedagogical identity. Policy actors can mitigate this by rewarding innovations that advance learner agency and social impact, not only commercial success.

6.1.4 Iterative Learning: Rigidity as a Catalyst for Change

Systemic rigidity, institutional conservatism, client scepticism, paradoxically sharpened iterative learning cycles. Leaders positioned themselves as trustworthy while still experimenting at the margins. Yet rigidity is double-edged: it catalyses sharper reflection but also caps the horizon of possible change. Firms should stage low-stakes trials in high-risk environments, and share lessons publicly to normalise error as tuition. Research must push further: can organisational agility reshape cultural perceptions of education in Mexico, or does meaningful innovation require systemic reform in public education and governance first?

6.2 *Conclusions*

Agility in Mexican EdTech is not ceremonial adoption but lived philosophy. It manifests in scaffolds that accelerate experimentation without hardening into bureaucracy, in collaboration that reframes disciplinary divides as sites of dialogue, in visions that anchor customer focus in pedagogical service, and in iterative learning sharpened, but also constrained, by systemic rigidity. These values are revealed not as static ideals but as contested, negotiated practices.

For leaders, the challenge is to make values visible through consistent rituals without allowing them to ossify. For policymakers, the task is to craft enabling conditions where experimentation is not penalised but rewarded. For researchers, the opportunity lies in interrogating when and how Agile values become resilient enough to reshape not only organisations but the wider educational ecosystem. Reflexively, my own engagement with EdTech influenced my focus on care, inclusion, and identity as enablers of agility; recognising this positionality underscores that agility is not a neutral construct but a cultural and political practice.

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