



Learnings from a Year of Adaptively Managing Work in Washington State

Five Strategy Teams Embrace Change and Successfully Cross the Chasm of Despair

“Bringing Adaptive Teams to Washington helped us to invest deeply in both what we do and how we do it. Today we are more connected as a team and have a tested approach for supporting our strategies that will carry us to 2030 with the kind of results we knew we were capable of delivering.”

— James Schroeder, Director of Conservation in Washington

The Nature Conservancy’s Washington Business Unit set out a year ago on the ambitious journey to embrace a new way of working by adopting an [Adaptive Teams](#) approach across the Business Unit’s five conservation strategies. Over the year, both the Washington Business Unit and the Agility Lab experienced tangible culture shifts and broad, impactful learnings, which we will share in more detail in the pages of this article.

THE WASHINGTON BUSINESS UNIT COMPRISES MORE THAN 70 MEMBERS ON 5 STRATEGY TEAMS:

1. **Ecoforest Management Strategy (EFM)** led by Kyle Smith, Darcy Batura, Tonya Morrey
2. **Equitable Public Funding Access Strategy (EPFA)** led by Hannah Kett and Meredith Sibley
3. **Climate Policy and Implementation Strategy (CP+I)** led by Jamie Stroble, Justin Allegro, and Josh Rubenstein
4. **Supporting Indigenous Rights & Connections to Lands & Waters Strategy (SIRCLW)** led by Heather Cole and Matt Axling
5. **Caring for Lands and Waters Strategy (CLW)** led by Randi Shaw and Sarah Brunelle

Heading into December 2023, Washington strategy members were no strangers to overwhelming project lists, competing priorities, and the demand for regular context switching. To paint a picture: An individual conservationist might be actively contributing to 30 projects at a time, and those 30 are just a fraction of the 130-plus active projects the broader strategy might be responsible for — projects that carry reputational risk and which have critical conservation outcome potential.

Even if that one person were able to dedicate focus to one project one day at a time, it would still be a *full month* before they could revisit any given body of work. And that'd be the best-case scenario! The more accurate, lived experience of conservationists is that a month is filled with piecemeal progress, context switching across back-to-back-to-back video calls, and a background, constant tug to get into the field with partners.

It's no surprise that one of Washington's desired focus areas for the Adaptive Teams transformation included a specific focus on well-being — *folks were burning out*.



“As a strategy lead, it has often been overwhelming to develop new methods, schedule and facilitate meetings, motivate staff, and test new systems of working while also fulfilling primary responsibilities as a people and project manager. This sense of overwhelm has led to feelings of burnout and challenge to maintain a healthy work-life balance.”

— Kyle M. Smith, EFM Strategy Lead

This is, of course, a story that rings true far beyond Washington. As the climate and biodiversity crises have intensified over the last decade, The Nature Conservancy and other conservation organizations are expected to deliver immense and exceptional conservation solutions while navigating unprecedented, disruptive change. In these ever-evolving landscapes, a “plan-then-do” approach to conservation isn’t flexible or responsive enough to deliver the necessary solutions.

As shared in [Part One](#) of this two-part series, in late 2023 Washington's commitment to a new Strategic Framework brought a complete reorganization in how they would approach their conservation work. This change demanded more than just structural shifts — it also included partnering with The Agility Lab and a handful of coaches for the coming year to create and sustain a culture of adaptive management across the Business Unit. This would be a fundamental transformation in how strategy teams would work together, make decisions, and ultimately achieve their 2030 goals.



Read more about the Washington Business Unit's initial decision to move forward with The Agility Lab's Adaptive Teams approach to adaptively manage their five strategies in Part One.

[CHECK OUT THE ARTICLE.](#)

Fast-forward a year to today, and we see significant shifts in favor of adaptive management adoption and enhanced well-being, as highlighted in the below response trends from the Adaptive Teams Survey Data (collected from all Washington Business Unit members over the course of 2024 in March, August, and December):

Survey Question	Change Over Time
We have clear, shared goals for our conservation work	+10%
We de-prioritize or say no to work that does not align with our goals for impact	+31%
We make efficient, effective, transparent decisions	+25%
We regularly reflect on our progress and incorporate evidence to adapt our approach	+18%
I have trusting, respectful relationships with my colleagues in Washington	+18%
I feel confident that our work in Washington will lead to equitable conservation outcomes	+8%

The six rows above represent the primary benefits and measurable outcomes teams adopting the Adaptive Teams approach can expect. These represent key leverage points in a team's overall effectiveness and have a disproportionate impact on the team's ability to deliver on its strategies.

We consider a few percentage points change to be a strong signal — and a 31% change over an entire business unit to be very significant.



ADAPTIVE TEAMS

Adaptive Teams is an implementation approach we offer conservation teams navigating high degrees of uncertainty. It consists of foundational workshops, a series of recurring meeting formats, information management tools, and ongoing coaching by a specialized Agility Lab Adaptive Teams coach.

[VIEW PRICING & DETAILS →](#)

In addition to survey responses, The Agility Lab calculated some numbers* that help highlight the progress the Washington Strategies made in the latter half of the Adaptive Teams engagement (see chart below, left):

Key Concept	#	Why It Matters
Adaptively Manageable Theories of Change	7	By making ToCs adaptively manageable, strategies are improving the odds of achieving their outcomes.
Critical Assumptions ID'd within Strategies	72	By gathering evidence around key risks and uncertainties, strategies can better inform resource investment.
Quarterly Priorities ID'd and Progressed	203 (August - December)	Strategies are choosing the work that most significantly contributes to moving the strategy forward.
Deliberate Pause, Pivot, Persevere, and Expand Adjustments Shared at Quarterly Prioritization Gathering	122 (August - December)	Strategies are moving beyond talking and speculating to taking direct action based on learnings to further strategy impact.
Celebrations Shared at Quarterly Prioritization Gathering	368 (August - December)	Taking time to acknowledge all of the incredible work and contributions happening across WA increases the general sense of connection and well-being.
<p>* There are many important concepts that aren't necessarily calculable, but which strongly contribute to the overall bend toward greater well-being and organizational efficacy, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laughs shared with colleagues and partners • Feelings of understanding and clarity the "why" of the work • Moments of feeling connected to larger purpose and sense of pride • Amount of hidden work and responsibilities revealed • Difficult conversations approached with care • Hours spent walking lands and shorelines 		

While these numbers are remarkable and helpful in illustrating the arc of change in Washington, they are only part of the larger story.

Washington Strategy Teams have undergone a culture and process shift that is both visible in numbers and tangible in the way that strategy teams are working.

They are making consistent progress on their 2030 goals while also honoring the need to move at the speed of trust with partners and understand critical assumptions underpinning their work.

Strategy Teams have become more comfortable with active learning, regularly reflecting on what is — and, perhaps more importantly — what *isn't* working. And, they are making timely, evidence-informed adjustments and saying "no" to work that falls outside the scope of their strategy.

As the first full Business Unit-wide implementation of Adaptive Teams, Washington's experience is a model for other parts of the organization to follow.

Review the [Recommended Path Forward](#) in Washington to understand how the Strategy Teams will independently continue their Adaptive Teams' work.



“Participating in the Adaptive Teams rollout this past year in Washington has been a career highlight for me. It is my fervent hope that this work can provide a model for future organizational change across The Nature Conservancy and beyond.”

— Emma Ruffin Kuhn, Program Director, The Agility Lab

Key Takeaways from Washington Business Unit

Below are some of the key “unlocking” learnings uncovered by Strategy Teams, Washington Leadership, and The Agility Lab that we hope can serve others seeking to take an Adaptive Management approach to conservation.

Ensure Theories of Change are adaptively manageable.

Creating a Theory of Change is critical when setting up a successful strategy. *What are we actually trying to do, and how do we imagine this work will get done?* These are questions that should be asked and answered from the get-go. What commonly happens, though, is that Strategy Teams invest substantial time in creating a shiny, robust Theory of Change that doesn’t actually get put to work.

Washington Strategy Teams worked with coaches to “untangle and refresh” their existing Theories of Change as a part of the Adaptive Teams process, and it’s paying off. One of the most important components of making a Theory of Change actionable is identifying the underpinning, embedded assumptions (“what do we assume must be true in order to get from Strategic Approach A to Outcome B?”) and then noting what near-term signals the team could look for that quarter to let the Strategy Team know they’re on the right track.

Once a Strategy Team has an adaptively manageable Theory of Change in place (CbD [Module Template](#)), they can conduct a “Pause, Pivot, Expand (PPE)” session where they reflect on learnings and adjust accordingly. This is a key unlocking component for Strategy Leads and Managers to make evidence-informed decisions about the future regarding their strategy, particularly enabling them to make the often challenging decision to say “no” or “not right now” to work that is out of scope.

Make work explicit!

Adaptive Teams thrive when they embrace transparency and ruthless prioritization. To center those two practices, strategies and coaches need clarity on the full suite of work in motion and who is doing what.

Turns out, The Washington Strategy Team Members were doing a lot of *hidden*, implicit work and were subsequently experiencing mounting individual and collective stress. Though it was a meaningful time commitment, making all active work visible was critical and resulted in a response across strategies of both overwhelm and relief. Overwhelm at the amount of work underway and relief in the more holistic understanding of what was contributing to individual overwhelm. From here, Strategy Teams could center their most urgent and important work and defray the rest by saying “not yet” or “not now.” Learn more about the perils of “secondary work” [here](#).

Prioritize the “Big Rocks.”

Of course, the relief of making hidden work visible is tempered by the limited ability to actually reduce the workload burden on Strategy Team Members.

Ecological Forest Management (EFM) Strategy Lead Kyle Smith helped to make the prioritization process more concrete when he demoed a jar filled with water, pinecones, rocks, gravel, and other odds and ends. His interpretation of the more traditional [“Big Rocks” framework](#) (check out this 2-minute [video overview](#)) was a demonstration that resonated with his fellow conservationists, ultimately shaping the narrative for prioritization across Washington.

Example prompts: *What work is both important and urgent this week/month/quarter? (5-7 of those will be your Big Rocks).*

- *Which Rock will you be contributing to this week/month/quarter?*
- *How will you contribute?*
- *Is this Rock dependent on others outside this strategy to move it forward? Etc.*

A NOTE ON TIMESLICING

Timeslicing (where an individual is working on 3-plus projects concurrently) was and continues to be the number one limitation to successful Adaptive Teams rollout in Washington. It is a significant thief of progress, making it challenging to schedule work blocks and get the focus of Strategy Team Members. The value of durable, focused Strategy Teams cannot be overstated and is a critical highlight from this year-long engagement. A study of knowledge workers found that teams with fully dedicated members are almost two times more productive than teams made up of time-sliced members.

[**REVIEW OUR GUIDE ON ACTIONABLE STEPS TO ADDRESS TIMESLICING.**](#)

Work blocks work!

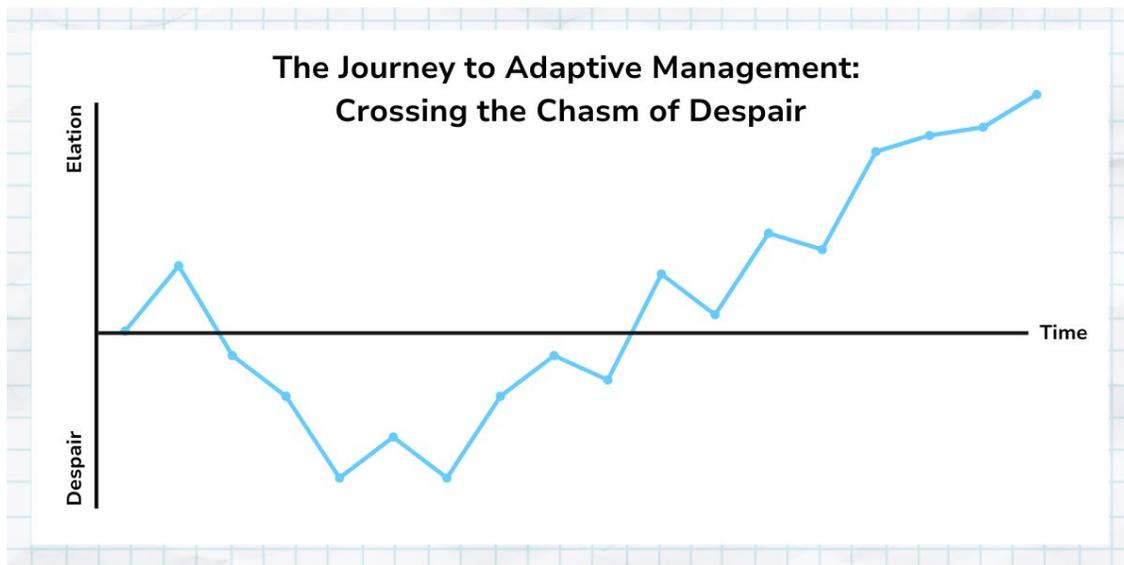
A work block is a semi-structured, recurring 90-minute (or longer) meeting for focused team collaboration. Strategy Teams initially resisted regular work blocks — who wants a long meeting on the calendar?! — but the working format ultimately proved critical for consistent progress. The sessions focused on ensuring team alignment and taking real-time action on priority work, clearing blockers, and discussing emergent opportunities. [See The Agility Lab's work block guidance here.](#)

“The Equitable Public Funding Access (EPFA) Strategy work blocks have been incredibly helpful and make it possible for real-time, full-team collaboration that is necessary to move specific projects forward, such as our strategy's Equity Framework. I feel really positive about the work we've accomplished during these sessions.”

— Meredith Sibley, EPFA Strategy Manager

The “messy middle” is real and change management takes time.

For the Strategy Leads and Managers, the new Strategic Framework and Adaptive Teams transformation meant not only shifting into new strategy configurations, but also adopting entirely new ways of working while maintaining existing and inherited commitments and relationships. The complexity of successfully doing either of those things alone is significant, let alone undertaking those shifts in tandem! When survey results showed Strategy Team Members were struggling with the weight and rate of change, Washington leadership played a critical role in continuing to provide organizational support and grounding in the commitment to seeing the Adaptive Teams process through.



Strategy Teams did, ultimately, move through the challenging “chasm of despair.” The reality is that change management takes time, and a collective culture shift requires muscle memory that can only be built through steadfast repetition. It’s important to keep the humanity, complexity, and sensitivity that change demands top of mind as strategy teams do the work while changing how they work.

Having Strategy Team Members conduct regular, lightweight retrospectives to assess their performance proved fruitful. They asked themselves, “*What went well this past month? What didn’t go so well? What advice might we give our future selves?*”

The Adaptive Teams process is not “one-size-fits-all.”

Each of the five strategies in Washington proved to be unique in size, shape, scope, and certainty, and subsequently required thoughtful, bespoke support from The Agility Lab’s Adaptive Teams coaches.

“Even as we had a set of tested and curated tools available to us from the Agility Lab, we realized fairly quickly that each team would need to follow its own adoption arc and cadence. Does this take more time? Probably, BUT it is definitely more sustainable in the long run. ”

— Namrata Mundhra, Adaptive Teams Coach

While the week-to-week processes were right-sized to serve the individual strategies, all Strategy Teams were aligned in their collective preparation for Business Unit-wide Quarterly Prioritization gatherings.

These gatherings provide a regular heartbeat where Strategy Teams are held accountable to celebrate progress; align around key priorities for the coming quarter; raise challenges, roadblocks, and dependencies; and, finally, highlight the evidence-informed “pause, pivot, persevere, and expand” decisions made about conservation work over the preceding three months.

See Agility Lab General Quarterly Templates here ([Mural](#), [Miro](#)).



Glean more takeaways from our year-long engagement with the Washington Business Unit.

[READ THE FINAL LIST OF LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WASHINGTON.](#)

Let’s collaborate.

Take two minutes to let us know about your project and we’ll be in touch to explore how we might work together.

[LEARN MORE & CONTACT US →](#)