

SURVIVAL BY FLEXIBILITY: MAKING ADAPTATION THE PLAN, NOT THE REACTION

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AGILE MEDIA ORGANISATIONS

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The guide is designed for small and medium-sized media organisations looking to learn how to turn adaptability into a deliberate strategy rather than a reaction to crisis. Drawing on the author's experience as Editorial Director of PressOne and her leadership through a period of transformation, the guide combines narrative case study with actionable frameworks.

[PressOne](#) is an independent media outlet from Romania, launched in 2015. It specialises in long-form, in-depth journalism, investigative reporting, multimedia projects, explainers and analysis. With a current team of 15 staff and five current contributors, PressOne covers social issues, geopolitics and the environment, as well as the everyday lives and struggles of the Romanians.

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Who is this for?

This guide is for small and medium-sized newsrooms that feel like they are running out of breath—moving fast, but stuck in survival mode. The ones with little margin for error, where every decision, from hiring a reporter to chasing a grant, could tip the balance. It is also for teams that sense the old ways no longer work, yet remain committed to public-interest journalism, even as they face the hard truth that mission alone won't pay the bills or fix broken workflows.

For many organisations, change happens only at a breaking point—when money runs out, suddenly appears, or the ground shifts beneath them. But what if adaptation was not a last resort, but a core tool for sustainability? What follows is a set of practical ways to turn uncertainty into value, spot solutions where none seem obvious, and, when pushed, land on your feet—smarter, faster, and more resilient.

STEP 1. UNDERSTAND WHO YOU ARE

We all tell ourselves that being a journalist is self-explanatory. Good journalism serves public interest. We are here to write good stories. Expose corruption and abuse and serve democracy.

But what sets you apart from other quality media outlets, who are also serving public interest?

If you cannot state this clearly, your team will struggle to prioritise, and your audience will struggle to understand why you matter.

Clarify what you do, how you do it, and for whom

If you cannot explain this in simple language, your team will not be aligned, and your audience will not understand you. Ambiguity at this level creates confusion everywhere else.

TO DO: Articulate a value proposition

Try a more elaborate version:

We help **[target audience]** who struggle with **[problem]** by offering **[media product]**, a **[type of outlet]** that gives them **[main benefit]**. What sets us apart is **[difference]**.

Or a simpler one:

We help **[target audience]** get **[main benefit]** by **[how we uniquely do it]**.

[\(Learn more about value proposition in this IMS guide\)](#)

Map your reality

Map your people, your workflows, your financial situation, your audience data, and your organisational culture. Conduct a brutally honest inventory of your strengths and weaknesses.

TO DO: Do a [SWOT analysis \(list your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats\)](#) to better understand who you are as an outlet; what you're genuinely good at, where you struggle, where you can grow, and what could undermine you, so you can define yourself with clarity instead of guesswork.

Insight from PressOne: Strong identity as adaptation driver

PressOne was founded with a clear identity: independent, values-driven journalism, protected from commercial and political pressure. In the first five years, it operated with full editorial freedom, thanks to a single private investor who never interfered in content decisions or pressured any revenue generation.

When that funding disappeared, the newsroom faced a financial crisis, but not an identity crisis. The mission was already clear.

That clarity allowed PressOne to diversify revenue without compromising editorial standards. The core remained public-interest journalism, but new funding models were built around it, not instead of it. We didn't ask, "What kind of outlet should we become?" We asked, "How do we fund who we already are?"

Identity became the anchor that made adaptation possible.

KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) are not the same thing as "impact". Define what success looks like to you

Why are you doing this? Growth? Sustainability? Impact? Audience trust? Revenue? Decide in advance what success means and how you will measure it. If you don't define success upfront, you won't recognise it, and you won't know when to adjust course.

KPIs measure performance against targets, but they don't necessarily show whether you have created real, meaningful change. Impact is the **real-world change** that happens because of what you did.

A simple way to think about it:

- **KPIs = Did it perform?**
- **Impact = Did it matter?**

TO DO: Write down what are the real-world indicators that your work matters to people. Then decide which data you need to collect to prove those changes are actually happening, not just that your content is being consumed.

[*Learn more about impact in the IMS Impact Framework for Media Projects Toolkit*](#)

Know the difference between a strategy and a plan

A plan is a list of actions. A strategy is a set of choices about where you will compete and how you will win. You build a strategy by making deliberate choices about who you serve, what unique value you offer them, and what you will intentionally NOT do.

TO DO: Write down three things you will stop doing or refuse to pursue in order to stay focused on one thing that you are intentionally pursuing.

Insights from PressOne: Strategies and Plans

When PressOne's sole funder decided to step away during the pandemic, the goal became simple and urgent: become financially self-sustainable while preserving editorial independence.

Strategically, that meant securing grants and using them to build additional revenue streams that would prove sustainable in the long run.

The plans on how to actually do that, however, changed repeatedly. In the following years, grants were secured and lost. Different types of reader revenue campaigns were launched, with varying

results. Advertising models were tested. Content packaging changed. Different approaches to distribution (social media, newsletters) were tested.

The strategic goal never changed. The tactics did, however, and quite often.

Know your audience

What does your audience look like? Imagine them as real people. What would be their names, ages, or jobs? What do they wish for? What do they worry about? How do they speak and what do they say when they're discussing over dinner or drinks with friends and family?

This is called a *persona*: a realistic, research-based profile of a typical reader or user. Personas force you to move beyond the vague idea of "the general public" and think about specific people with real needs.

To build personas, analyse your data (analytics, subscriptions, surveys) and combine it with qualitative insight from interviews, conversations, and user feedback.

Or just imagine: who is your reader? And who would you like them to be?

[\(Learn more about audience research in this step by step IMS guide\)](#)

TO DO: Define two to four clear profiles that reflect your strategic priorities.

Insights from PressOne: Younger Readers, Older Readers

In 2022, PressOne realized its audience skewed heavily over 40, with limited engagement from younger readers. At the same time, social media reach was collapsing due to algorithm changes.

Instead of blaming platforms, the newsroom reassessed its audience strategy. Young team members were trained and empowered to lead Instagram and TikTok. Formats shifted and distribution expanded, reaching younger audiences and raising brand awareness.

Simultaneously, reader revenue campaigns became tied to impactful reporting, reinforcing value and trust. Understanding who we were reaching, and who we weren't changed both editorial and financial outcomes.

STEP 2. CREATE AN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE THAT EMBRACES CHANGE

Organisational culture can be defined as the set of:

- values
- behaviours
- beliefs
- norms

that are specific to an organisation.

It is, in essence, “how things are done around here.” It’s the stories people tell about their work, how they behave when no one is watching, shared assumptions about what matters and what doesn’t, what gets rewarded and what gets punished. Culture shows up in how decisions are made, how conflict is handled, and how people communicate.

Culture is difficult to change because changing it means asking people to change their values, their expectations, and sometimes even part of their identity.

That is why culture can become either:

- a **competitive advantage** — when it supports strategy
- or a **structural obstacle** — when it undermines it

As the famous phrase goes: “*Culture eats strategy for breakfast.*”

Example:

If your strategy is to dominate the daily agenda, but your culture is built around slow, long-form journalism, you will miss the news cycle or burn out your team trying to operate against your own instincts.

Identify your culture, the cultural traits that must shift for your objectives to succeed, then change it deliberately.

An organisation must align its culture and structure so they work together to build the capabilities required by its strategy.

The Four Major Types of Organisational Culture

A widely used framework identifies four dominant culture types, based on two axes:

- Flexibility vs. Stability
- Internal Focus vs. External Focus

1. Clan Culture (“Collaborate”)

This culture feels like an extended family. It prioritises people, belonging, and internal cohesion. In media organisations, this often appears in small, mission-driven newsrooms where relationships and shared values matter deeply.

- Mentoring leadership
- Strong sense of community
- Participation and teamwork
- Loyalty and long-term commitment
- Informality
- Emphasis on consensus

Strengths: high trust, strong morale, collaboration.

Risks: avoidance of conflict, slow decision-making, difficulty scaling.

2. Adhocracy Culture (“Create”)

This culture thrives on experimentation and disruption. It is common in digital-first, for profit media startups.

- Dynamic and entrepreneurial
- Risk-taking
- Rapid change
- Innovation and creativity
- Flexible structures
- Power is decentralised

Strengths: innovation, adaptability, product creativity.

Risks: chaos, burnout, lack of discipline, inconsistency.

3. Hierarchy Culture (“Control”)

This culture values order and control. It is common in legacy media organisations with long institutional histories.

- Structure and clear procedures
- Formal rules and policies
- Stability and efficiency
- Clear reporting lines
- Coordination and predictability

Strengths: reliability, risk management, consistency.

Risks: bureaucracy, slow adaptation, resistance to change.

4. Market Culture (“Compete”)

This culture defines success in terms of measurable outcomes: revenue, traffic, growth, rankings.

- Results-oriented
- Competitive
- Strong focus on goals and targets
- External focus (audience, advertisers, market share)
- Productivity and performance
- Tough leadership

Strengths: performance, accountability, commercial focus.

Risks: internal competition, short-termism, erosion of editorial values.

No culture is inherently “good” or “bad.” It is only effective or ineffective relative to strategy.

Insights from PressOne: Culture Change

For years, PressOne was known primarily for long-form, in-depth journalism. Slow investigations, carefully crafted analyses and deep, multimedia reporting that took time. That identity was a strength, but it also became a limitation.

As the public conversation accelerated and attention cycles shortened, we faced a hard truth: we were often right, but we were late. We didn’t abandon long-form journalism, but we needed to change the rhythm of the newsroom.

In 2023, we began generating our own daily news. We added explainers aligned with the public agenda. We moved faster, but without becoming a breaking-news outlet.

This required more than new formats, it required a complete cultural shift.

Journalists who were used to spending weeks on a story had to learn to publish in hours when needed. Or break their investigations into chapters they were following up on. We had to accept that not every piece would be monumental, some would simply be necessary.

At the same time, we moved aggressively into video. For a text-based newsroom, this was not just a minor adjustment, it meant learning to think visually, producing fast reels for social media, training reporters who had never been on camera. Rethinking storytelling entirely.

Some resisted at first. But gradually, the culture evolved. It took six months for the changes to be visible in the workflow and for the workflow to gain ease - and it’s still a work in progress. We didn’t become a different newsroom, but a newsroom capable of operating at multiple speeds.

TO DO:

With your unique value proposition in front of you, write down what we need to be exceptionally good at to get there, what we currently have, and how we can close the gap?

The end result could look like this:

1. Strategic Objective	2. Required Capability	3. Cultural Reality	4. Gap
<i>Launch a daily news format</i>	<i>Publishing fast, iterating on the go</i>	<i>We value depth; speed feels like compromise</i>	<i>No workflow or permission structure for quick publishing</i>
<i>Grow paid subscriptions</i>	<i>Understanding audience needs, direct communication</i>	<i>We focus on the work, not the reader relationship</i>	<i>No one owns audience development; it's no one's job</i>
<i>Expand into video</i>	<i>Visual storytelling, technical video knowledge</i>	<i>Text-first identity; video seen as "not real journalism"</i>	<i>Skills gap + cultural resistance</i>

With the list of identified capabilities in front of you, ask everyone in your team to write down:

- 3 dominant values / behaviours / beliefs / norms in your newsroom right now
- 3 stories that people tell about “how things really work”?
- 3 actions that get rewarded
- 3 actions that get discouraged

Are these patterns aligned with the capabilities your strategy requires? Discuss with your team.

If yes, congratulations!

If not, here are a few steps for pursuing a culture change:

1. **Name what needs to change** — specific and behavioural, not vague ("we need to be more agile" means nothing; "we need to publish within 4 hours of a major story breaking" means something).
2. **Model it from the top** — leadership behaviour is the loudest cultural signal. Invite a respected senior journalist — not a manager — to champion the new approach.
3. **Reward the new behaviour early and visibly** — even small examples.
4. **Create structures that make the new behaviour easier** — roles, workflows, permissions.
5. **Allow experimentation without penalty** — psychological safety is not a luxury, it's a prerequisite for change.
6. **Be patient and repetitive** — culture doesn't shift from a single workshop or discussion. It can take months, even years. In fact, it might never end.

STEP 3. BUILD FLEXIBLE STRUCTURES THAT TURN CHANGE INTO GROWTH

Structure is important — whether in a small or big newsroom. Clear roles, workflows, and communication channels prevent confusion, reduce friction, and protect people from burnout.

But structure is not meant to cage people, it is meant to protect them. And over-structuring kills autonomy and discourages initiative.

The “Just Enough” Rule

Design systems that empower people, with coordination in mind, not control.

- Define roles clearly.
- Establish simple workflows.
- Make communication predictable (weekly calls sound boring, but they can be necessary).
- Allow people to do the work that complements their strengths, don't force them into roles that don't match them.

Make change permanent

Build processes that assume change will happen:

- Rotate responsibilities naturally.
- Encourage skill-sharing across desks.
- Train people horizontally, not only vertically. Better yet, train them to train each other.

Clear roles reduce confusion, but allowing movement between them keeps the organization dynamic, it is more cost-effective and enhances skills.

Expand capacity without expanding payroll

Build modular capacity.

Bring in:

- Freelance journalists for specialized reporting.
- Contributors who have something to say for op-eds with unique perspectives.
- Independent experts for technical depth.

Collaborations allow you to scale impact without locking in permanent costs.

Think of this as **modular journalism**: assemble the right team for every project (editorial or commercial). The team has an inhouse project manager and a team of freelance experts, journalists and other types of contributors.

Insights from PressOne: Stepping Down, Stepping Sideways

By 2023–2024, PressOne had more people, more output, more momentum, and suddenly, confusion. Overlapping roles, duplicated work and then burnout.

I was still acting as journalist and manager at the same time, but it wasn't sustainable.

So we added a clear, but light structure: we defined roles and clearer workflows, and I stepped away from editorial work entirely to focus on management and strategy. Senior journalists concentrated on investigations, and younger ones handled daily coverage and social media. But we allowed people to move flexibly between roles: we didn't see roles as fixed identities, but responses to need.

The newsroom felt lighter almost immediately.

In 2025, grant revenue suddenly declined - just as our social reach crossed one million.

So the plan changed again: we restructured. In order to protect the core team and valuable journalism, we created satellite projects: lighter, monetizable formats aligned with our values. These were supported by freelance teams, with in-house project managers. The core newsroom remained focused on public-interest journalism.

The result was a layered system: a protected center and flexible outer edges. It allowed us to generate revenue without distorting our public interest mission.

However, freelancers are not just emergency substitutes. They are part of our team and we treat them as such: they are free to come into the office whenever they want. They are a part of the newsroom's life. They are invited to events, appear in all the pictures, are included in cross-border projects, and offered opportunities as they arise.

Use networks as force multipliers

Cross-newsroom / Cross-border collaboration is a strategic infrastructure.

Networks allow newsrooms to:

- Apply for grant funding together with other media outlets.
- Encourage knowledge sharing and enhance the teams' skills with low costs.
- Expand reach and visibility.
- Access opportunities that would be inaccessible alone.

Treat partnerships with other newsrooms, journalism associations and other professional associations, or research institutions, as strategic tools, not symbolic gestures. Strong networks multiply capacity without multiplying fixed expenses.

Insights from PressOne: Networks as Force Multipliers

PressOne European connections changed everything. Starting in 2021, when we became [Civitates](#) grantees, we began building relationships with the other organizations in the program—an early step that showed us how valuable these connections could be for sharing knowledge and opening up new opportunities. Through journalism networks ([EDJNet](#)), conferences, cross-border collaborations ([TEFI](#)), and certifications ([like the JTI certification](#)), we gained money, perspective, knowledge and legitimacy.

Those relationships opened doors we couldn't have accessed alone.

Grow your own talent

Do not default to hiring every time a skill gap appears. Build it internally. Invest in:

- Training
- Mentorship
- Cross-training (one potential advantage of being part of various networks and multi-newsroom projects)
- Structured internships

Developing people from within costs less than constant recruitment and builds something more valuable than capacity: loyalty. Training someone internally also creates ownership. People who grow inside the newsroom tend to take responsibility for its future.

Insights from PressOne: Training Broadly

At PressOne we made a deliberate decision not to create narrow specialists too early. Instead, we trained broadly. Social media natives learned journalism skills. Reporters learned video. Editors understood distribution. The whole team was exposed to international best practices.

It made us slower in the beginning. But when platforms shifted, or when we needed to launch something new, the skills were already in the room.

A sandbox approach to innovation

A “sandbox” is a structured, low-risk environment where journalists, editors, and product teams can experiment with new formats, workflows, technologies, or storytelling approaches, without the pressure of immediate commercial success or reputational risk. It's a game, at its core. It's asking people: “Do you have an idea? Do it!”

But it needs:

- Clear boundaries: experiments operate within defined limits - budget, timeline, platform etc.
- Psychological safety: trying something new will not harm someone's career if it fails. Failure is treated as data.

A sandbox approach strengthens people by:

- Enabling junior staff to lead pilot projects
- Building product thinking within editorial teams
- Developing internal entrepreneurs

The result is a cultural shift. People stop seeing themselves as task executors and start acting as problem solvers.

Insights from PressOne: The Sandbox Approach

We didn't use the word "sandbox," but we created one. Team members were allowed to experiment with TikTok and Instagram (with minimal oversight), but also, editorially, to pick the stories that they wanted to tell and the means to tell them. New formats and ideas were tested carefully. Not everything worked. But experimentation didn't threaten the core newsroom. It was contained and intentional.

CONCLUSION

Survival by flexibility doesn't mean losing your identity. It means building an organisation that can hold its values steady while changing how it operates.

This is harder than it sounds. In small newsrooms especially, identity and method get tangled together and the way you have always done things starts to feel like *who you are*. Letting go of a workflow, a format, or a revenue model can feel like a betrayal of the mission. It's not always the case.

The newsrooms that survive are not the ones with the best strategy. They are the ones that can adapt strategy, repeatedly, without losing themselves. That capacity doesn't come from having the right plan in place. It comes from knowing, clearly and collectively, what you're not willing to change, and being willing to question everything else.

That clarity is what this guide aims to offer. That clarity is what this guide tries to be about. The goal isn't to stop feeling the pressure, it's to get good enough at navigating it that it stops making your decisions for you.

About the author

Ioana Epure is an international multimedia journalist and Editorial Director of [PressOne](#) (independent Romanian media outlet), with over a decade of experience in reporting, media management, and cross-border projects, and almost another decade of freelancing and entrepreneurship in the creative industries.

Originally from Romania and currently based in Athens, she has contributed as a reporter and photojournalist for various outlets and organizations, including Vice, Bloomberg News, WELT or UNHCR, covering migration, displacement, and social issues all over Europe. She has also collaborated with the Center for Sustainable Media in Budapest and mentored for DW Akademie. She is also the founder of [The Lost Expat Digest](#), a newsletter curating Greek news and social reality for expatriates, and a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at Panteion University, researching migration and urban transformation in Athens.