THE **AGILE** LEADERSHIP DIFFERENCE

What Is Agile Leadership?

Today's organizations face a wide array of challenges on multiple fronts. The days of static, monolithic companies relying on tried and true business practices to carry them into the future are long gone. To be successful in the fast-paced global economy of the 21st century, companies must anticipate shifting market needs and respond to rapidly changing circumstances.
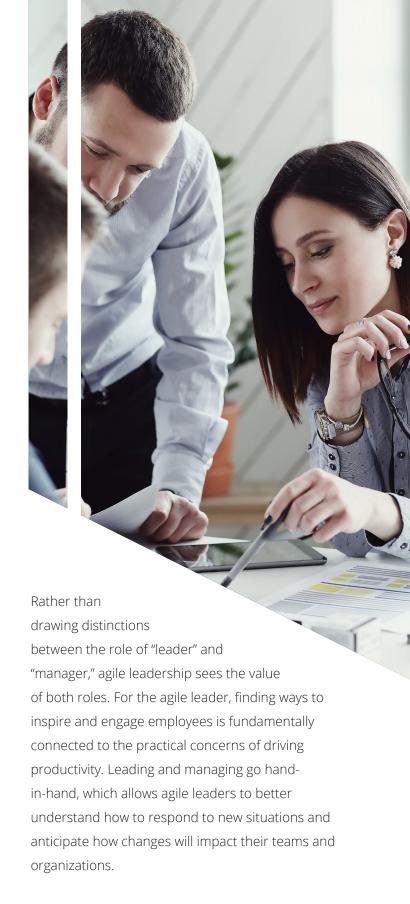
Meeting these challenges will require a new approach to leadership. Organizations that continue to promote leaders primarily on the basis of tenure or technical expertise will find it difficult to balance the key business elements for sustained success. What they really need are agile leaders.

Is Agile Leadership Just the Latest Leadership "Fad"?

The leadership development industry has created quite a few fads over the years. Many of them sweep through organizational thinking for a period of time before being replaced by the latest series of bestselling books on leadership. In many cases, these fads capture people's attention, but they eventually burn out and are replaced by the next big idea.

Agile leadership is different, partly because it's not a new idea at all. The notion that effective leaders must be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and balance diverse organizational needs is a universal one that successful companies have been doing for many years, even when they didn't have a name for it.

Many leadership trends get hung up on leadership styles or focus on the specific successes of one leader or organization. Agile leadership recognizes that one style doesn't fit all situations. It is a mindset that allows leaders to react to unique circumstances and respond effectively.

Rather than drawing distinctions between the role of "leader" and "manager," agile leadership sees the value of both roles. For the agile leader, finding ways to inspire and engage employees is fundamentally connected to the practical concerns of driving productivity. Leading and managing go hand-in-hand, which allows agile leaders to better understand how to respond to new situations and anticipate how changes will impact their teams and organizations.

Why Do Today's Companies Need Agile Leaders?

With technology breaking down barriers and connecting people and markets all over the world, today's organizations are operating in a fundamentally different environment. Employees and customers may be located on opposite sides of the world, and events in one market could have a ripple effect that influences another department in a sprawling multi-national company. Mergers and acquisitions continually reshape the playing board of the global economy, while social and political developments often bring unexpected pressures from multiple directions at any moment.

In such an unpredictable landscape, agile leaders are more important than ever.

The VUCA World

First introduced by the U.S. Army War College in 1987, the acronym VUCA was gradually adopted by the business world to refer to the inherent instability and unpredictability of the modern, multilateral world. Each letter represents a different kind of challenge today's organizations face: Volatility. Uncertainty. Complexity. Ambiguity.

→ Volatility

In a volatile situation, challenges are unexpected or situations are unstable. The causes of that instability, however, are easily identified and ample information is available to understand why things are happening and how to respond to them. A company dealing with disruption in its supply chain due to a natural disaster is in a volatile situation.

→ Uncertainty

When the cause of an event is known, but there isn't enough information to determine how to best proceed, the situation is uncertain. Without good data, it can be difficult to determine how to react to changes because the outcomes of actions are difficult to predict. A company trying to understand how a competitor's new product is shifting the marketplace is grappling with uncertainty.

→ Complexity

In complex situations, problems have many interrelated parts and multiple variables. The sheer volume of information needed to determine a course of action is difficult to manage, even though individual solutions may be easier to implement. An organization with operations in several countries, all with different political, economic, and cultural contexts, is trying to manage complexity.

→ Ambiguity

Organizations sometimes face situations where they have little information available to inform strategy and can't predict the outcome of their decisions. This is an ambiguous environment in which they must try to learn quickly in order to identify the best ways to proceed. A company entering an immature marketplace or introducing new products outside their existing competencies is confronting ambiguity.

Agile leaders have the flexibility needed to navigate the challenges of operating in a VUCA environment. Their ability to take in new information quickly and make the best decisions based on the information available allows them to execute strategy effectively in the face of unexpected challenges.

The Agile Leader

Far from applying a single, prescribed solution to every problem, agile leaders approach each situation with a fresh perspective. They seek to understand the context of a situation before gathering information to determine the optimal solution that balances the varied needs of an organization for maximum impact with minimal trade-offs.

Central to agile leadership is the ability to connect, adapt, and deliver. These three critical capabilities allow agile leaders to excel in a VUCA environment.

Connect

A leader's ability to inspire, influence, foster a collaborative environment, and exhibit behavior that sets the tone for organizational alignment and employee/stakeholder buy-in.

Adapt

A leader's ability to recognize changing dynamics and adjust rapidly to overcome challenges, re-imagine strategic direction, and propel transformation and innovation.

Deliver

A leader's ability to drive performance and generate consistent and reliable results by investing in the right accelerators, and cultivating high-performing teams committed to customer and shareholder value creation.

Put more simply, agile leadership is knowing what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

Connect

Agile leaders understand how to establish meaningful connections in the workplace before they can make an impact. Their ability to inspire, influence, and foster a collaborative environment is what helps set them apart from their peers. They exhibit leadership behaviors that set the tone for organizational alignment, which contributes to employee and stakeholder buy-in.

Part of what allows agile leaders to connect so effectively is their self-awareness. They understand their own emotions and motives, which makes it easier for them to keep their own personal biases in check and empathize with team members.

Agile leaders understand that simply dictating tasks to team members is not an effective means of achieving their goals. By connecting and empathizing with others, they learn what values inform their decisions and motivate their actions. This allows agile leaders to inspire their team more effectively as well as use influencing strategies to build commitment and buy-in.

Effective and innovative teams thrive on collaboration, but it can be challenging to build an environment where collaboration takes place if team leaders don't understand how to connect with others. Building relationships between team members and emphasizing open, honest communication helps agile leaders improve team performance to generate innovative solutions that companies need to drive sustained success.

Demonstrating personal integrity is also critically important for agile leaders. By acting with consistency, honoring commitments, and taking responsibility for actions and decisions, they take gradual steps toward building trust and support among their team members. When leaders are perceived to lack integrity, they will find it much more difficult to influence others and establish productive connections.

at various levels of the organization. Agile leaders know that applying the same strategies repeatedly without making adjustments based on the situation can severely undermine performance.

Not every initiative will work out the way the organization expects. While it's important to commit to a well-formulated strategy, clinging to an approach that's obviously not effective can be counterproductive. Agile leaders are able to determine when a direction isn't working, evaluate what needs to change, and implement a new strategy quickly.

Knowledge of how different elements of an organization interact allows agile leaders to identify opportunities for growth and change. They understand how a newly implemented strategy might impact different aspects of the organization, helping them to identify potential difficulties and account for them before they have the chance to develop. This is especially important in large organizations, where any action might produce various consequences in other departments, many of them unintended. For companies looking to push boundaries and reshape the way they do business, agile leaders are absolutely essential to developing and executing these transformations.
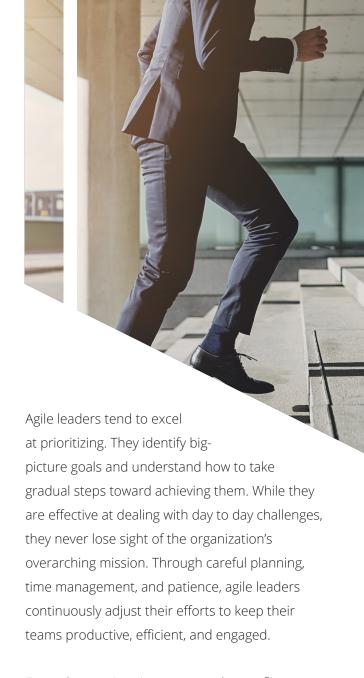
Understanding both contextual situations and organizational structures helps agile leaders make decisions that minimize trade-offs and account for both short and long-term goals. They learn to strike a balance between efficiency and innovation, often without complete or perfect information.

Adapt

An effective agile leader has the ability to recognize changing dynamics and adjust rapidly to overcome challenges, re-imagine strategic direction, and propel transformation and innovation. Situational awareness is a key competency in this area because it helps leaders understand how external and internal events can impact a company's effectiveness as well as affect the people involved

Deliver

While it's important for leaders to be able to connect with others and adapt to changing circumstances, they must ultimately be able to deliver positive results for their organizations. Effective agile leaders find ways to drive performance and generate consistent and reliable results by investing in the right accelerators, and cultivating high-performance teams committed to customer and shareholder value creation. In many ways, the ability to deliver is dependent on the other agile leadership competencies. The ability to connect and adapt puts them in a position to deliver, but unless they can follow through, their teams will have difficulty accomplishing their goals.

Agile leaders endeavor to create sustainable success over time, building foundations that put their organizations in position to meet existing challenges and prepare for the unforeseen circumstances of the future. This emphasis on deliverables and measurable results helps them focus their efforts and ensure that everything they do provides value to the organization.

With most organizations utilizing teams, including virtual and cross-functional teams, to accomplish key strategic initiatives, agile leaders need to excel at finding ways to get the most out of a team structure. Effective agile leaders understand that they are only as successful as their teams, and devote much of their time and energy to empowering others and building a team-based infrastructure that allows employees to be more productive, innovative, and efficient.

Agile leaders tend to excel at prioritizing. They identify big-picture goals and understand how to take gradual steps toward achieving them. While they are effective at dealing with day to day challenges, they never lose sight of the organization's overarching mission. Through careful planning, time management, and patience, agile leaders continuously adjust their efforts to keep their teams productive, efficient, and engaged.

From change situations to everyday conflict management, agile leaders continuously work to overcome challenges and deliver results. But far from following an established blueprint, they understand that every situation is different. In some instances, they may have to reallocate resources or delegate tasks to people they trust. In addition, without their ability to connect and adapt, they would not be able to build the trust and credibility to guide their teams through difficulties.

Building Agile Leaders

Knowing the value of agile leadership is one thing; making the decision to invest in finding and developing potential agile leaders is quite another. Organizations that make a commitment to developing agile leadership candidates first need to ensure their assessment process identifies the skills and characteristics that set agile leaders apart.

A robust assessment process can assess a candidate's potential to become an agile leader. Once prospective candidates are identified, providing ongoing feedback will help them create an awareness of how choices and behavior are impacted by leadership decisions. Directed programs that expand their understanding of how to influence others, manage accountability, build and sustain collaboration, and facilitate change readiness are also crucial to building the skills agile leaders will need to be successful.

Start Developing Your Agile Leaders Today

If your organization is ready to start identifying its high-potential leaders and enhancing their capabilities with agile leadership training, OnPoint Consulting is here to help. Our assessment and training programs are based on proven research and years of practical experience with leading organizations like AmeriGas, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, and Autodesk. Programs can be delivered in three ways—as face-to-face programs, virtual instructor-led programs (VILP), and as self-directed e-learning courses.

To learn more about OnPoint's agile leadership programs, or for help developing your own customized learning solution, contact us today.

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