What is leadership agility?

Agile leaders realize that we live in an era of permanent change, a turbulent global environment that is complex, uncertain, and fiercely competitive. They know that these realities require them and their organizations to adapt again and again to constantly changing conditions. They have an intentional, proactive approach to change. They anticipate emerging threats and opportunities by continually scanning their organization's environment for new developments. They view the challenges they face with fresh eyes and a willingness to rethink past assumptions.

Agile leaders are creative thinkers with a deep sense of purpose. They actively engage diverse stakeholders, influencing and learning from them at the same time. Their ability to examine situations from multiple perspectives and to "connect the dots" between seemingly disparate issues allows them to generate novel strategic insights. As a result, their visions for the future are innovative, purposeful, and compelling.

Agile leaders have a broad repertoire of behaviors that allows them to rapidly adjust their leadership style to the demands of any given situation. They give appropriately balanced attention to short-term and long-term priorities, to top-down direction-setting and meaningful participation, and to fostering individual initiative and strong teamwork.

Agile leaders are resilient in responding to the difficulty and discomfort that change and uncertainty can bring. They seek feedback from multiple sources and use both mistakes and successes as fodder for continual learning and development. Finally, they are committed to creating agile teams and organizations and to helping those around them become more effective leaders.

Column by Chris Musselwhite

Strategic Leadership -- Achieving Agility

Having a good plan is compulsory, but knowing how and being able to respond to the unknown is the real goal and benefit of strategic leadership.

Many business leaders think being strategic means being the author of the company's plan for the future. No one would argue the value of a sound business plan but given what happens to the best laid plans of mice and men, experienced leaders know that planning is only the beginning.

Determine Where You Are

In reality, planning isn't even what you should do first. For any long-term plan to be successful, you must first be realistic about where you are today. This requires an honest assessment of strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities -- a step many organizations are loathe to do. The reason usually cited: time.

Taking time before jumping in requires patience -- a competency that many quick thinking and fast moving entrepreneurs don't naturally exercise. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, since many entrepreneurs are successful because of their impatience. Their skill is in seeing opportunity and jumping quickly to take advantage of it. Not afraid of risks, they get to their desired result more quickly than their counterparts; often a critical reason behind market dominance.

Still, leading strategically requires time for reflection and the ability to realistically asses where you are. With this information, you can most accurately define your destination and chart the course that will take you there.

Define Your Mission and Direction

A clear understanding of where you are must be balanced by a clear picture of where you need or want to go. Where you want to go is your company's mission. According to the first quadrant of the Denison Culture Model, created by Denison Consulting, based in Ann Arbor, MI, an organization's mission includes the company's vision, long-range direction and short-term goals.

An organization without a mission is like a sailboat without a rudder -- it just goes where the wind (or the marketplace) blows. To define your mission and give your company its direction, you must focus externally, which is usually easy for the risk-taking, fast moving entrepreneur.

Leading strategically includes defining your organization's mission. This requires a keen understanding of the marketplace and your reason for being in business. With a clearly defined mission, you give your organization its rudder.

Engage Others and Foster High Involvement

While a clear vision is critical, you cannot make it happen by yourself. Once you've set the course, you must focus internally to engage others whose involvement you will need to successfully make the journey. This second quadrant of the Denison Culture Model includes engaging employees, empowering them to do their jobs and insuring that they have the skills and resources they need.

While the tactical side of these characteristics may be delegated to HR, leadership must first realize their importance and create a corporate culture that supports and values engagement from others.

Leading strategically must include engaging others. This requires articulate communication of your company's mission and a corporate culture that fosters ownership with high involvement across departments, divisions and the entire organization.

Coordinate Systems and Processes to Ensure Consistency

Strong commitment without good coordination and integration can lead to chaos. In order to support high involvement across your organization, you need to coordinate the systems and processes that enable people to work together in a consistent manner. The third quadrant of the Denison Culture model emphasizes integration and coordination of effort and the core values needed for consistency across the organization.

Leading strategically for consistency requires the effective coordination of internal systems and processes. When these systems are in place, people in disparate departments, facilities and geographic locations can successfully work together to repeatedly recreate the quality products and services that make the company successful.

Managing Internal and External Tensions to Create Adaptability

Even the best of systems can result in inflexibility. The critical fourth quadrant of The Denison Culture Model focuses on the organizational characteristics necessary for adaptability. Adaptability is the result of successfully managing the internal and external tensions that naturally arise between the need for flexibility in the marketplace and consistency in the organization.

According to Denison, ensuring adaptability means your organization must be proficient at knowing your customers and market, learning from experience and creating necessary change. To be adaptable, you must have the internal systems and high involvement necessary to be agile enough in the face of change to maintain your customer focus and accomplish your mission.

Leading strategically for adaptability is knowing when and how to deviate from the plan and having an organization that is stable yet flexible enough to successfully maneuver through the change and still reach the desired destination.

The Challenge: Doing It all Well

Given the range of focus required to lead your company strategically, the biggest challenge for most entrepreneurs is doing it all well. The entrepreneur who is great at reading the marketplace, seizing opportunities and setting good direction is naturally externally focused. They know where they want to be and are comfortable changing course in order to get there. These types of entrepreneurs are very flexible and may think that, like them, their organizations are agile.

Unfortunately, this entrepreneur is probably not as internally focused as he or she needs to be. As a result, they may lack the ability or interest to expose organizational threats and weaknesses. The externally focused leader often underestimates the impact of fostering high involvement or establishing the processes and systems that are necessary to create the stability an organization needs to achieve consistency.

Without stability and consistency a company will not be able to deliver on the opportunities created by an outward focus on the market place. Instead of leading strategically, the externally focused entrepreneur can be perceived as a "fly by the seat of your pants leader," which is definitely not the path to sustainable growth.

On the flipside, the leader who over-focuses on current reality can become too internally focused. They are usually great at fostering involvement and establishing consistent systems but they may be too rigid to be able to respond quickly enough to changes in the market.

The bottom line is that not many of us are good at everything. Be honest about your own strengths and weaknesses. Seek personal development to become better where you can and hire to compensate for areas where you can't.

Conclusion

The ability to lead with a balanced internal and external focus is at the heart of leading strategically. When the resulting opposing tensions are managed successfully, you encourage the adaptability that makes your organization agile. Agile companies have the ability to recognize and respond quickly to market demands without losing the consistency of quality and involvement that made them successful -- the hallmark of sustainable, successful organizations.

Three Levels of Leadership Agility

WRITTEN BY BILL JOINER

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New, in-depth research shows that people move through distinct stages or levels as they become more agile leaders. At each new level, managers gain new capacities that make it more natural for them to lead in an agile manner. This article outlines three levels of leadership agility and shows how managers at each level of agility lead projects, lead teams, and engage in pivotal conversations. It ends with a few pointers about ways to assess and develop your own level of leadership agility.

We live in a turbulent global economy that will continue to be shaped by two deep technical and business trends: accelerating change and increasing interdependence. In 2001, implicitly responding to these conditions, a group of seventeen IT professionals convened at Snowbird in Utah. Representing a variety of what were then called "light" software development methodologies (Adaptive Software Development, Crystal, DSDM, Extreme Programming, Feature-Driven Development, Pragmatic Programming, SCRUM, etc.), they created the *Manifesto for Agile Software Development*. Since then, agile methodologies have gained ever-increasing recognition and momentum, naturally raising the question: What kind of leadership is best suited for development teams using agile methods?

In our {sidebar id=1} extensively researched book, *Leadership Agility* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), my co-author Stephen Josephs and I provide several examples of agile IT managers, identifying the specific personal capacities and professional practices that make them agile leaders. Our book was not initially inspired by the agile software movement. Rather, our interest in agility grew out of decades of experience coaching, training, and consulting to leaders in all types of roles.

Leadership Agility was also inspired by our shared interest in stage-development psychology, a little-known field that may not initially seem that relevant to agile software development. But bear with me. Over many decades, research psychologists have mapped the stages by which adults develop, both cognitively and emotionally. These stages don't refer to age-related life eras, such as the mid-life crisis. Instead, at each new stage adults develop a more advanced set of capabilities for responding effectively to change and complexity. In other words, they become more *agile*.

For years, as Stephen and I used this perspective to guide our work with leaders, we noticed that managers who functioned at more advanced stages of personal development found it easier to adopt more agile and effective leadership practices. We also knew that research studies had found significant correlations between managers' developmental stages and various aspects of leadership effectiveness.

Levels of Leadership Agility
At about the time the Agile Manifesto was created, we launched a project to systematically research the relationship between five stages of adult development and leadership effectiveness. We discovered that, as managers grow through these stages, they develop five corresponding levels of leadership agility.

Figure 1 provides snapshot profiles of the first three levels: Expert, Achiever, and Catalyst. This article focuses on these levels partly because of space constraints, but also because the key leadership development challenge in today's businesses is to help Experts become Achievers and help Achievers become Catalysts. This chart shows how managers at each level conduct themselves in three "action arenas": leading projects, leading teams, and engaging in pivotal conversations. Note that each level of agility *includes and goes beyond* the skills and capacities developed at previous levels. Based on data collected from over 600 managers, percentages refer to research based estimates of the managers currently capable of functioning at each agility level.[1]

Level of Agility	View of Leadership	Leading Projects	Leading Teams	Engaging in Pivotal Conversations
Pre-Expert (~10%)				
Expert (~45%)	Tactical, problem-solving orientation. Believes that leaders are respected and followed because of their authority and expertise.	Best suited to lead projects designed to make incremental improvements, requiring little or no stakeholder involvement in order to be effective.	Supervisor more than a manager. Creates a group of individuals, not a team. Work with direct reports is mainly one-on-one. Too caught up in details to lead strategically.	Either strongly asserts opinions or holds back to accommodate others. Tends to avoid giving or requesting feedback.
Achiever (~35%)	Strategic, outcome orientation. Believes that leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives.	Aligns projects with larger business objectives. Finds ways to gain stakeholder buy-in and to modify project tactics as business requirements change.	Manages and motivates the team. Meetings to discuss key strategic or organizational issues are often orchestrated to try to gain buy-in to own views.	Predominantly assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Accepts or even initiates feedback, if helpful in achieving their desired outcomes.
Catalyst (~10%)	Visionary, facilitative orientation. Believes that leaders articulate an innovative, inspiring vision and bring together the right people to transform the vision into reality. Leaders empower others and actively facilitate their development.	Project leadership flows from a strong intention to promote a culture of teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that input increases the quality of decisions, not just buy-in.	Acts as a team leader and facilitator to create a highly participative team. Promotes open exchange of views on difficult issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development.	Balances and uses assertive and accommodative styles as needed. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactive in seeking and using feedback.

Figure 1: Quick Reference Guide to Three Levels of Leadership Agility

As the chart indicates, the Expert level of agility is best suited to traditional software development practices. Consistently effective leadership of agile teams requires growth to the Achiever level and, even better, to the Catalyst level of agility.

Leading Projects
Experts have a tactical, problem-solving orientation. Once the requirements of a project have been defined,

Experts tend to take them for granted, focusing on the technical tasks needed to meet these requirements. They prefer to avoid substantial engagement with stakeholders. If conflicts arise, they try to resolve them by relying on their authority or expertise. Overall, they're more comfortable leading projects (if any exist) where requirements remain relatively static over the life of the project.

Achievers retain the ability to focus on tactical issues, but they've also developed a strategic, outcome orientation that gives them the agility needed to adjust their projects as requirements change. Their attunement with business outcomes and their ability to understand cross-functional perspectives motivates Achievers to engage with stakeholders and align their projects with business objectives. They usually try to gain stakeholder buy-in to their projects by persuading them about its benefits, by accepting input consistent with project objectives, or both.

Catalysts can be tactical or strategic as needed, but they also have the capacity to pursue more visionary objectives that may take a decade or so to be fully realized. They're more comfortable responding to the uncertainty that attends continuous change, and they're more fully attuned to the human dimension of visionary initiatives. For example, a Catalyst perspective on the agile movement sees that, at its core, it's about creating organizational communities that value people, trust, respect, and collaboration.[2] They're likely to engage in genuine, proactive dialogue with a diverse set of key stakeholders, not simply to gain buy-in, but because they feel it will improve their decisions.

Leading Teams
Experts rarely create teams in the true sense of the word. They tend to work with direct reports one-on-one. Even in group meetings, they prefer information sharing and one-on-one interactions to team problem solving. They're often too caught up in technical details to lead their team in a strategic manner.

Achievers realize that their direct reports need to be managed, motivated and developed as a team. Their team meetings include discussion of important issues. However, they often orchestrate these meetings to gain buy-in to their own views, a critical limitation because this prevents teams from developing the self-organizing capabilities they need to be truly agile.

Catalysts retain the team leadership skills they developed at previous levels, but they usually find a dynamic balance between acting as a team leader and facilitator, thereby generating a higher level of participation and influence within the team. They believe that this creates a truly agile team that gets more effective results in dynamic business environments.

Overall, our research found that managers with higher agility levels do, in fact, develop teams that are more agile in responding to changing demands, engaging with stakeholders, creatively solving "ill-structured" problems, and learning from their experience.

Engaging in Pivotal Conversations
Pivotal conversations are direct person-to-person interactions that have a significant impact on project outcomes. When engaged in these conversations, Experts either strongly assert their own opinions or withhold their views in an attempt to avoid conflict. They may also swing back and forth between these two stances. Regardless of their style, they are inclined to believe that difficult conversations will not go well. Partly for this reason, they're less likely than Achievers or Catalysts to give or request feedback.

Achievers usually develop an interpersonal style that is primarily assertive or accommodative. However, assertive Achievers usually work some accommodative elements into their style, and vice versa. Whatever their style, Achievers will often accept or even initiate feedback, as long as they feel it will be helpful in achieving valued outcomes.

Catalysts can be assertive or accommodative, as the situation requires, though they most prefer a balanced style where they assert their own views, then immediately inquire about others' views. Because of their genuine interest in learning from diverse viewpoints, they are proactive in seeking and utilizing feedback.

Thus, as team leaders become more agile, their capacity for collaboration increases, and they develop a genuine and increasingly proactive interest in feedback of all kinds, setting a tone within the team that supports and encourages agile practices.

Assessing Your Leadership Agility
Accelerating change and increasing interdependence mean that higher levels of agility are essential regardless of your organizational position. If you want to increase your own leadership agility, you can use the chart presented earlier to assess your current level of agility. To supplement your self-assessment, ask a few trusted colleagues to tell you where they think you function most of the time.[3]

Developing Leadership Agility
In our experience, the best support for increasing your agility is a workshop, coaching relationship, or action learning program that focuses specifically on leadership agility. Ultimately, however, the primary "engine" for developing leadership ability is self-leadership: Start by assessing your current agility level. Then ask yourself whether and you want to develop further within your current level or to the next level. Set specific leadership development goals (new behaviors) that match this aspiration.

Once you've set your leadership development goals, the key to increasing your agility is to use your everyday initiatives to experiment with more agile behaviors. Self-leadership is an ongoing, cyclical process of setting objectives, clarifying a plan for achieving these objectives, taking action, then reflecting on and learning from your experience.

Repeatedly engaging in self-leadership allows you to use the challenges you face everyday to increase your agility. The more you nurture a resilient, self-empowering attitude toward these challenges, the more your own commitment to self-leadership and leadership agility will grow. With this practice as your ally, you'll be able to meet the changes and complications that come your way with curiosity and optimism - and you'll be able to help others to do the same.

Informal Assessment Chart: Five Levels of Leadership Agility

Each level of agility *includes and goes beyond* the skills and capacities developed at previous levels.

Level of Agility	View of Leadership	Pivotal Conversations	Leading Teams	Leading Organizational Change
Expert	***Tactical, problem-solving orientation.*** Believes that leaders are respected and followed by others because of their authority and expertise.	Style is either to strongly assert opinions or hold back to accommodate others. May swing from one style to the other, particularly for different relation-ships. Tends to avoid giving or requesting feedback.	More of a supervisor than a manager. Creates a group of individuals rather than a team. Work with direct reports is primarily one-on-one. Too caught up in the details of own work to lead in a strategic manner.	Organizational initiatives focus primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with little attention to stakeholders.
Achiever	***Strategic, outcome orientation.*** Believes that leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives.	Primarily assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Will accept or even initiate feedback, if helpful in achieving desired outcomes.	Operates like a full-fledged manager. Meetings to discuss important strategic or organizational issues are often orchestrated to gain buy-in to own views.	Organizational initiatives include analysis of external environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to soliciting input.
Catalyst	***Visionary, facilitative orientation.*** Believes that leaders articulate an innovative, inspiring vision and bring together the right people to transform the vision into reality. Leaders empower others and actively facilitate their development.	Adept at balancing assertive and accommodative styles as needed in particular situations. Likely to articulate and question underlying assumptions. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactive in seeking and utilizing feedback.	Intent upon creating a highly participative team. Acts as a team leader and facilitator. Models and seeks open exchange of views on difficult issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development.	Organizational initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that input increases the quality of decisions, not just buy-in.
Co-Creator	***Oriented toward shared purpose and collaboration.*** Believes leadership is ultimately a service to others. Leaders collaborate with other leaders to develop a shared vision that each experiences as deeply purposeful.	Integrates his/her assertive and accommodative sides in pivotal conversations and is agile in using both styles. Able to process and seriously consider negative feedback even when highly charged emotionally.	Develops a collaborative leadership team, where members feel full responsibility not only for their own areas but also for the unit/organization they collectively manage. Practical preference for consensus decision-making but doesn't hesitate to use authority as needed.	Develops key stakeholder relationships characterized by deep levels of mutual influence and genuine dedication to the common good. May create companies or organizational units where corporate responsibility and deep collaboration are integral practices.
Synergist	***Holistic orientation.*** Experiences leadership as participation in a palpable life purpose that benefits others while serving as a vehicle for personal transformation.	Centered within his/her assertive and accommodative energies, expressed appropriately to the situation. Cultivates a present-centered awareness that augments external feedback and supports a strong, subtle connection with others, even during challenging conversations.	Capable of moving fluidly between various team leadership styles uniquely suited to the situation at hand. Can shape or amplify the energy dynamics at work in a particular situation to bring about mutually beneficial results.	Develops and maintains a deep, empathetic awareness of conflicting stakeholder interests, including his/her own. Able to access "synergistic intuitions" that transform seemingly intractable conflicts into solutions beneficial for all parties involved.