

Agile whole leadership How to become an agile leader

In the 1980s through 1990s, market forces such as globalization, information technology, and deregulation all helped create the first calls for leadership agility. Today we're hearing the same call for agility, but with even more urgency. What happened? Why didn't the first effort to create more agile leaders succeed? What's driving the need to revisit the issue again? If organizations are to accomplish this time in sourcing and developing the leadership agility they need to meet critical business requirements, they must first discover the notion of what is behind leadership agility.

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Agile Leadership is not the self-serving, quick-hit leadership for fast results, nor the delegation of change tasks to others. It is the ability to anticipate or adapt to unpredictable circumstances and environments in ways that benefit self and others. This definition is rooted in the belief that agility is ultimately a way of being that is both genetic ("leadership DNA") and capable of development to achieve mastery of even the most demanding business issues and environments.

Research on innovation by Michael Kirton confirms that a certain percentage of individuals do have an orientation to the most forward looking and expansive forms of agility whereas others are more oriented to be "fast followers." This research indicates the importance of both a role and a need for those who are not predisposed to agility but are willing to develop the capability that they have. When focusing on leadership agility there are two important lessons to learn. First, because not everyone is cut out to demonstrate the same degree of leadership agility, expectations should be managed accordingly. Second, leaders who are "being" agile are scarcer but more impactful than leaders who only "do" change. The purpose of this article is to develop a better understanding of the notions behind agile leadership and as a result create more agile leaders.

Trends and research in agile leadership

In Joiner and Josephs' groundbreaking research into leadership agility in 2007, they discovered an essential truth about agility: not everyone is cut out for leadership agility. In 2001 they found the following distribution of agility capabilities in a North America research population: One percent demonstrated a world-class mastery of agility. These leaders demonstrate a steady confidence to handle any

"Agile whole leaders will find a never ending set of dilemmas with which to bring clarity of Head, connectivity of Heart, and commitment from Guts, and the organizations they serve will be stronger for their efforts and capabilities."

condition of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Four percent demonstrated an outstanding mastery of agility. These leaders serve others by developing consensus and action in spite of uncertainty. Five percent demonstrate a superior mastery of agility. These leaders inspire others through their vision and willingness to engage and empower others. Thirty-

five percent demonstrate an average capability for leadership agility. These leaders depend on getting others to align to their strategic orientation. Forty-five percent demonstrate a level of agility that is adequate for achieving incremental change. Ten percent do not see the need for agility.

Joiner and Josephs demonstrated that while it's possible to improve one's capability and to also rise to a higher level of agility mastery, levels of practice cannot be skipped. The temptation is to try to create instant agile leaders, given the pressure to deliver high performance in these turbulent times, so the definition of agility of Oliver Wyman Leadership Development very deliberately includes the phrase "sustainably anticipate or adapt," as an acknowledgement that there needs to be a smarter path to developing agile leaders.

Agile leaders and performance

In 2006 a social systems research conducted by Oliver Wyman Leadership Development (Head, Heart & Guts, 2006) confirmed the value of whole leadership and further articulated the specific whole leadership capabilities that specifically contribute to leadership agility. Within this research three variables were identified that had statistically significant impact on increasing agility capabilities. Mental clarity (Head) is the first factor, and enables individuals to accurately discern when and how environmental conditions are shifting. The second factor is relational connectivity (Heart) which is defined as the ability to seek out connections with others. The third factor is a commitment to action (Guts) in spite of incomplete information.

In 2010 Oliver Wyman Leadership Development studied the impact of agile leadership on financial performance by comparing leadership teams of 20 business units (BU) in a global company with each other. For the fiscal year 2008 to 2009, BUs with leaders demonstrating superior agility in all three dimensions (Head, Heart, and Guts) delivered significantly better financial results as measured by EBITDA, return on invested capital (ROIC), and operating income. Ongoing research is examining the long-term impact of agile leadership on financial performance in these same BUs.

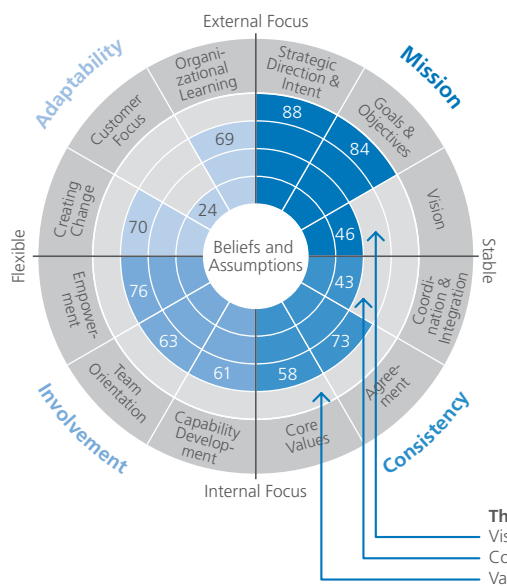
An approach to agile leadership

Agility in leadership can come from either a reactive stance that is typical of a "fast-follower" type leadership, or it can come from a forward-looking "front of the boat" type of agility. Either way it's important to play to an individual's home strength rather than try to become something alien to their natural way of being. This article has argued that it is necessary to recognise that agility is not equally available to all leaders but that it can be developed and enhanced through a variety of means.

The biggest opportunity is to create whole leadership agility that contributes to balancing mission-critical dilemmas for each and every organization.

EBITDA and agile leadership: high / low performers

Decreased EBITDA from 2008 to 2009



Increased EBITDA by 50% from 2008 to 2009

