How Agile Leaders Help Organizations Thrive



They’re best suited to understand the dynamics of surviving and thriving amid organizational headwinds

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“Agile leadership” is a buzzy term in the professional-services industry, urging leaders to navigate pace of change skillfully, with foresight and flexibility. Because the world is ever-changing and consistently serving up challenges that represent volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), leaders across industries must be able to successfully connect the dots between clients, suppliers, marketplace twists, technology, processes, economics and politics. And they have to navigate these myriad concerns amid

the constant evolution taking place within global business ecosystems.

Managers and owners may not have crystal balls, but they can still take steps toward ensuring that the organizations they serve are prepared to weather unavoidable headwinds as strategically as possible. Here's how agile leaders do it:

Creativity and Innovation

We often think of creativity and innovation as interchangeable. They are not. According to Samuel Bacharach, McKelvey Grant Professor of Organizational Behavior at Cornell University, creativity can be described as "non-directed and expressive thinking, where familiar things are imagined in a new light." Innovation, on the other hand, "is deliberate and directed; it creates value and results in new or improved products, services or processes."

Organizations that refuse to think outside the box and bring new ideas to the fore often find themselves outmoded and replaced with more agile alternatives. Consider the case of bankrupt photography giant Eastman Kodak. As it struggled to adapt to the challenges and opportunities of the digital age, it soon became apparent that its cache of 35mm film would go the way of the dinosaurs, much like eight-track tapes. The failure of its leadership to successfully navigate the pace of change in an ever-changing technological environment created a volatile situation where its financial-, brand- and market-losses became all-consuming. Contrast this example with Apple, which consistently found ways to re-imagine its offerings and create added value by providing customers with cutting-edge products overtime. The clear difference is that Apple leadership understood and applied the principles of agility to its advantage.

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Trust, Engagement and Collaboration

The adage “no man is an island” expresses what agile leaders know well: Human beings work better *together.* But in order to optimize interpersonal relationships and participation within the workplace, certain conditions must exist. We’re talking high trust, engagement and collaboration. No matter how smart and able a leader may be, without the full participation of the base, the vision will not move forward.

Trust is the bedrock of this trifecta. It helps people to relax, feel safe and contribute enthusiastically without fear of judgment or reprisal. Leaders inspire trust by being honest, transparent and doing what they say they will do. They create a culture of trust by inviting full participation from the community, being visible, vocal and participatory, as well as providing needed support to the ecosystem. And when trust is high, so is engagement. According to a recent Gallup Poll, employee engagement is on the rise, with approximately 34 percent of all U.S. workers feeling “engaged,” which translates to “better customer engagement, higher productivity, better retention, fewer accidents and 21 percent higher profitability.” Each of these outcomes bodes well for the VUCA environment and the workforce’s ability to help an organization successfully navigate pace of change. What’s more, high engagement also creates greater opportunities for meaningful collaboration. By prioritizing the well-being of the workforce, agile leaders build strength from the inside out and put the organization in the best position to thrive.

Leading at All Levels

Top-heavy leadership structures don’t fly in today’s dynamic business environments. Agile leaders address this challenge by developing more democractic, decentralized forms of governance that position organizations to be more collaborative and

resilient. Such structures build greater capacity, capability and accountability. Holacracy, a decentralized management and organizational governance structure in which authority and decision-making are distributed by self-organizing teams, is one shining example. When diverse actors within an organization are empowered to take responsibility for their role in facilitating outcomes, it fosters greater cooperation, encourages mentorship and strengthens the leadership pipeline. Promoting leading at all levels also keeps top leadership out of "privileged seclusion" (i.e. the Ivory Tower) and more accessible to the organization at-large. When leading is practiced as a group effort, there is greater collaborative skin in the game and an increased commitment to the common good, which is to the benefit of the organization, particularly during turbulent times.

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Lifelong Learning

Continuous learning is critical to a growth mindset. Relying solely on formal degrees and one-time certifications to ascend the corporate ladder won't cut it in today's competitive global business environment. Sustainable success requires the ongoing pursuit of knowledge, skills and competencies to enhance personal and professional development. Besides, without the frequent infusion and application of new knowledge and insights, it would difficult for a leader to truly be agile.

But here's the thing: Agile leaders understand that the push to learn more isn't just about them. They also advocate for lifelong learning as a strategic priority for the the organizations they serve. They escalate this priority by creating relevant, incentivized opportunities for growth, both formally (e.g.workshops) and informally (e.g. professional

development libraries or e-libraries). These opportunities are most often linked to a forward-thinking culture of learning that values feedback and rewards employee efforts via annual reviews, promotions and bonuses. An insightful commentary by McKinsey & Company's Amy Edmondson and Bror Saxberg makes the case for leveraging lifelong learning as a strategic priority by noting, "This may sound like a lot of work, but it's going to become a competitive necessity. The rapid development of information-rich tools, together with the brisk pace of change in every facet of society, mean that the decisions and organizational roles left to people matter more than ever. You must therefore focus more, and spend more of your time, on upgrading your employees's skills and mastering the collaboration, empathy and meaning-making that will help your organization thrive." *Touché.*

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Want to lead more effectively, especially during difficult times? Consider leveraging these strategies as you work to nimbly navigate the unexpected, and sometimes thorny, pace of change.

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