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Management, Innovation, Transformation

“The more successful organizations I have had the pleasure to work with realize that it takes real Agile leadership – not just Agile development – to achieve the agility that will allow the entire organization to succeed.”

– Don MacIntyre,
Guest Editor

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Cutter Business Technology JOURNAL

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by Don MacIntyre, Guest Editor

Agile in the Workplace

Based on the demand for Agile skills in the workplace, it is quite clear that leaders across the globe are coming to rely more and more on Agile principles and practices to achieve their goals.

What makes some of these leaders successful with their Agile adoptions while other leaders seem to struggle? What is going on in these organizations?

What we see in the field, and what has been called out in leading industry surveys, is that the lack of “Agile leadership” is one of the primary reasons why many Agile projects fail. We can no longer blame failed attempts at Agile solely on the teams. It is crystal clear that leadership bears some responsibility.

Agile Leadership vs. Traditional Leadership

Let’s begin by answering the question, “What is Agile leadership and how does it differ from traditional leadership?”

The traditional leadership model that has been practiced by many generations of managers around the globe was a byproduct of “scientific management,” which was developed by Frederick Taylor (1856-1915). Scientific management was a great success and helped to revolutionize industry over the last hundred years. Scientific management focused on synthesizing the flow of work and maximizing the productivity of labor. The goal was to break down the manufacturing process into small steps that were simple enough to be understood and performed by the unskilled labor force that was migrating from the fields into the factories. Scientific management asserted that these new manufacturing workers needed to be told exactly what to do and when to do it and to be managed very closely. Workers were considered interchangeable resources. If one employee left, another employee could replace them quickly and

easily, allowing production to continue. Management’s job was purely command and control.

Fast-forward a hundred years and, for some companies, not much has changed. However, the rest of the world has changed dramatically. The pace of change today is faster than at any time in history. Technology continues to advance rapidly. What is state of the art today may be outdated technology in a matter of months.

Manufacturing is now often done by robots. The workforce has changed. Unskilled labor no longer accounts for the majority of the workforce in many modern corporations. Knowledge workers, who are paid to think and not just do what they’re told, now make up a significant part of our workforce. Many of these individuals know more about whatever it is they are working on than their managers do. Managing knowledge workers in the same manner we managed unskilled labor a hundred years ago has been problematic for many companies. Today, workers expect to be acknowledged as people and not simply regarded as interchangeable parts.

The people who now make up much of our workforce thrive on autonomy, mastery, and purpose. They want to be empowered. They want to collaborate with their peers. They do not want to be simply told what to do and how long it will take. They want to take ownership of their work — and when we allow them to do so, they deliver.

The Agile Influence

Most technology organizations recognize that Agile principles and practices have worked well within their development organizations. An Internet search for the name of your competitors and “Scrum” will likely demonstrate what I mean. I started using this approach years ago with skeptics who had not been paying attention to what was happening in the industry, and it hasn’t failed me yet.

Indeed, the more successful organizations I have had the pleasure to work with realize that it takes real Agile leadership — not just Agile development — to achieve the agility that will allow the entire organization to succeed.

Beyond IT

It is important to understand that Agile leadership does not pertain to just IT leadership. While “Agile” does have its roots in software development, many companies are finding that these principles and practices apply in most places. What my colleagues and I typically experience is that a well-run Agile transformation creates demand for Agile from all over the company. When people see and hear that a group is having fun and accomplishing great things, they want in. It is not at all unusual for us to be asked to help business units, HR, sales, manufacturing, operations, facilities management — essentially any area of the organization — to work in an Agile way as well.

Leaders Who Cling to Command and Control Are Losing Their Grip

The fact of the matter is that leaders who are attempting to hold on to a traditional command-and-control management style are simply losing their grip — which often translates into losing market share. In contrast, Agile leadership focused on empowering the workforce is leading to increased productivity and innovation — which often leads to increasing market share.



Upcoming Topics

Insurtech: Reinventing the Insurance Industry

Steve Andriole

Big Data Trends: Predictive Analytics, Machine Learning, and the Cloud

Bhuvan Unhelkar

Change Management

Sheila Cox

What Do Agile Leaders Do?

As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.

— Bill Gates

First and foremost, Agile leaders empower their workforce. Agile leaders enable teams to take ownership of their work and trust them to get their job done. What we typically find when teams are empowered to figure out how they will accomplish their goals is that they not only deliver, but they collaborate more and enjoy their work more. As a result, productivity rises. Agile leaders establish the vision, build awesome teams, support them, and get out of the way.

Agile leaders are also responsible for enabling innovation. If your teams are habitually late, unpredictable, and in constant fire-fighting mode, it is doubtful they have much time for innovation. Innovation requires experimentation. Experimentation involves risk. If your culture is completely risk-averse, it is unlikely there is much time for innovation. Innovation drives new product ideas, which create new opportunities that will ultimately drive revenue.

Agile leaders provide a stable environment, helping teams focus on the highest priorities and preventing them from having to multi-task on three different projects at the same time. Agile leaders also encourage their teams to continuously improve. This may take the form of allowing teams time to work on improvements or providing them with the training they need in order to be successful. Getting better takes time, and leaders need to support this objective.

Agile leaders foster a high-trust environment. Trust needs to exist both within the team and across the organization. I often tell leaders that they are responsible for creating the environment that will allow teams to become predictable. Once teams become predictable, trust is usually established across the organization. This requires leadership to remove the systematic impediments that prevent teams from becoming predictable.

Agile leaders need to understand that an Agile transformation is not something just for the developers and testers. To achieve true organizational agility, the entire organization must be in alignment and understand the new approach and how it will affect their role, regardless of whether they are in development, product management, sales, finance, HR, or wherever.

In This Issue

We are pleased to have six authors share their Agile leadership insights in this issue. We begin with an article by Bill Joiner that focuses on “Leadership Agility.” Joiner has done extensive research on leadership and created a leadership development model that works exceptionally well in companies undergoing an Agile transformation. The cognitive and emotional capacities that Joiner helps leaders identify and develop fit perfectly with the principles and values of Agile development. I have used Joiner’s model while helping various companies with their leadership development and have found it a great tool for creating a productive dialogue and building Agile leaders within the leadership team.

Next, Jesse Fewell discusses the debate between proponents of a “culture-first” approach to Agile transformation and those who favor a “structure-first” strategy. Fewell describes the pitfalls of each and makes the case that Agile adoption succeeds best when leaders “encourage a conversation that incorporates both perspectives.” He offers three tips for bridging the divide, then introduces the Agile Leadership Canvas, a tool that leaders can use “to elicit and compare ideas for evolving the organization.”

In our third article, Bob Galen tells of IT leaders who turn to him in frustration as their Agile adoption efforts sputter. Why won’t their teams take the initiative? Why do team members wait to be told what to do? Galen has some uncomfortable news for these clients — it may not be the team but the leader who is at fault. He suggests that the key to creating successful Agile teams is “giving teams enough *space* — space to grow, space to become autonomous, space to become self-directed.” Galen outlines nine “elements of self-directed space” — ranging from metrics and language to team organization and trust building — that will allow teams to “grow in their Agile maturity.”

One of the hallmarks of a mature Agile team is continuous learning. “But,” asks author Jeff Dalton, “do Agile leaders know how and what to teach?” Dalton argues that after decades of “vo-tech” style learning, it’s time for a return to “the collaborative, interpersonal, and analytical skills that ... are so important for successful Agile adoption.” He introduces the Agile Performance Hierarchy, a “basic framework and curriculum for teaching Agile leaders” that consists of six performance circles: leading, providing, crafting, envisioning, affirming, and teaming. Working to master

the performance circles will “help guide aspiring Agile leaders in their transformation from low-trust task managers to high-trust teachers, coaches, and stewards of Agile values.”

In our final article, Jan-Paul Fillié and Hans Boer talk about the “hills” an organization must surmount to implement Agile at scale. Based on their experience with numerous transformations, Fillié and Boer offer helpful advice on resolving such challenges as changing the organizational culture, coping with teams that deliver at different speeds, coordinating dependencies, and distributing Agile practices. For the last of these concerns, they offer two potential remedies: introducing distribution practices into an Agile team or, conversely, introducing Agile practices into a distributed team. Either path “will allow for access to talent and resources wherever they are located, potential cost reduction, and opportunities for improved innovation.”

We hope you find that these articles offer useful guidance for becoming a better Agile leader. After all, to paraphrase one of Joiner’s observations: the agility level of your organization will not exceed the agility of your leadership.

Don MacIntyre is a Senior Consultant with Cutter Consortium’s Agile Product Management & Software Engineering Excellence practice. He focuses on Agile transformations, providing Agile consulting, coaching, and training from the C-level to the team level. Mr. MacIntyre draws upon his many years of experience as a software executive, Agile transformation lead, and software engineering leader to help organizations benefit from Agile principles and practices. Thousands of people worldwide have participated in his team-based Agile workshops.

Mr. MacIntyre has extensive experience in both the commercial and government sectors. As Director of Agile Development at Lockheed Martin, he led the initial large-scale Agile transformation efforts and has provided Agile consulting and training to programs at NASA, DHS, SSA, IRS, DoD, and numerous other agencies. Mr. MacIntyre recently guided an Agile transition for a company at the intersection of mobile, cloud, and the Internet of Things.

Mr. MacIntyre is a Leadership Agility 360 Coach and has worked extensively with executives from the Fortune 100, late-stage startups, and government agencies, preparing them to be truly effective Agile leaders. With his extensive leadership background, leadership coaching experience, and Certified Enterprise Coach (CEC) status, Mr. MacIntyre is one of the few individuals certified by the Scrum Alliance as a Certified Agile Leadership Educator (CALE). Mr. MacIntyre also holds CSC, CSP, CSPO, CSM, and SPC certifications.

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