



# Agile Leadership

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This lesson will take a deep dive into agile leadership, what it means, how it works, and why it has become an essential part of the modern business world.

Before we get into the detail, let's set out what agile means in a business context.

You've probably worked in traditional organisations with clearly defined hierarchies, projects with delivery deadlines set way into the future and quarterly sit-down reviews with your line manager. Well, agile organisations are a completely different beast.

Writing for legendary management consultancy firm McKinsey, Aaron De Smet , Michael Lurie, and Andrew St. George [1] explain what makes an agile organisation special in the following quote:

*Agile organizations, viewed as living systems, have evolved to thrive in an unpredictable, rapidly changing environment. These organizations are both stable and dynamic. They focus on customers, fluidly adapt to environmental changes, and are open, inclusive, and nonhierarchical; they evolve continually and embrace uncertainty and ambiguity.*

The authors of the McKinsey article also express that they believe agile organizations are far more likely to succeed in the future than traditional ones. So, you can understand why this subject is so important right now in business.

Another way you could look at agile versus traditional is in sports terms. Agile is like always being on your toes and ready to move. In contrast, traditional organisations have their feet firmly planted, meaning they're much slower to react to sudden changes in their situation.

An organization transitioning to being agile will, of course, have a significant impact on everyone who works there—none more so than its leaders.

But what does outstanding leadership *look* like in an agile organisation?

The Agile Business Consortium and the Leadership Working Group list nine principles of Agile Leadership [2] in their white paper on the topic.

They explain that agile leaders lead through their actions, not just through their words. They embody the famous Gandhi quote, "Be the change you want to see."

If you want your employees to act with compassion, you must show compassion to them. That could be as simple as some kind words after a presentation goes badly or letting them know your door is always open if you become aware they are having a difficult time in their personal life.

It's about walking the talk.

Agile leaders must also be masters of their environment. Yes, you must be able to thrive in a rapidly changing world. However, you should also be able to slow everything down and take the required time to think critically about an important decision when necessary.

You understand that high-quality thinking ultimately leads to meaningful action. You are always happy to take on the opinions of those with first-hand experience of the problem you are trying to solve. No agile leader is an island.

A core pillar of any agile organisation is effective, constructive feedback. Agile leaders should always seek to provide their team members with honest, constructive feedback that is delivered respectfully and be open to receiving the same in return—a loop of constant, continuous improvement.

Of course, any leader should be inspiring, and agile leaders understand that people need purpose and meaning to experience a fulfilling work life.

This means giving team members the "why" and the "how" – this is **how** we are going to achieve this goal, this is **why** it fits into our broader vision of continuously improving our service for our customers.

People work best when they genuinely feel they're making a difference. How does your team's work benefit the customers? How will this new change project make the organisation more eco-friendly?

Everyone likes to make a positive difference. Ensure your team members know their impact. Ensure they feel inspired to work every morning. Target their hearts **and** minds.

As an agile leader, you also accept that emotion is necessary rather than something that negatively impacts the workplace. As Susan David and Christina Congleton put it in HBR:

*All healthy human beings have an inner stream of thoughts and feelings that include criticism, doubt, and fear. That's just our minds doing the job they were designed to do: trying to anticipate and solve problems and avoid potential pitfalls.*

Emotion is an essential part of being human, and “when individuals work with their emotions, they achieve more of their potential”.

Agile leaders also believe in the value of having leaders **throughout** the organisation.

You should also always be aiming to unlock the leadership potential in those around you. The more leaders in an organisation, the more chance of success you have, as people take on responsibility and bring others with them on the change journey.

This also means empowering others. If you believe in your people, there's no need to micro-manage them. Set their objectives and then have faith that they will achieve them while always ensuring they know that they can come to you with any issues or when they need support.

Modern employees want autonomy. They don't want to feel like just another cog in a larger machine. As their leader, you must help them unleash their own leadership potential. Let them make mistakes and help them learn from them.

When it comes to your people as an agile leader, it's not just about your relationship with each team member. You need to promote a work environment where all team members are open, honest, and respectful with *each other*.

Without all members of the organization having trust and respect for their colleagues, it can't function at the height of its potential.

This also means developing an acceptance that innovative ideas can come from anywhere. In a sense, an agile organisation has no hierarchy. The voice of the newest team member should be listened to just as closely as any leader or board member.

Status is irrelevant when it comes to great ideas in an agile organisation.

Quite the set of demands, right? The good thing is that agile leadership comes from a very human place – kindness, compassion, and understanding, always desiring the best for everyone around you. Once you get into that agile mindset, the rest will start to follow.

Agile also has some key methodologies - specific ways of working that leaders should leverage, which enable agile mindsets throughout the organisation.

A foundation of any agile organization is leaders building and relying on small, diverse, empowered, and connected teams. These small teams work in rapid cycles, delivering greater value more efficiently and much faster than in a standard structure.

An excellent example of this is Amazon's "two-pizza team." The title refers to the idea they shouldn't consist of more team members than can be fed by two large pizzas.

These small, agile teams can deliver faster, more effective results as they cut out a lot of time wasted in broad catch-up meetings. It's also easy for all team members to view the tasks their colleagues are completing, thus avoiding any duplication of work.

About this way of working, McKinsey says [3],

*[Senior executives] must direct teams to the best opportunities, arm them with the best people, give them the tools they need to move fast, and oversee their work with a light but consistent touch.*

You may have heard of "Scrum teams" or the "Scrum methodology" – this is a way of working that embodies all of this.

Scrum is where a small team—ideally around seven people—is given a very specific goal that will benefit internal or external stakeholders. They engage in 'sprints' – short, rapid bursts of intense productivity – to attempt to achieve that goal.

This is a method favoured by leaders in agile organisations because of its focus and ability to process information learned from previous 'sprints' to keep improving. It's the epitome of fail-fast and pivot.

A vital part of the scrum team's success is called the "daily stand-up."

A daily stand-up is a brief—ideally no longer than 15 minutes—meeting the scrum team has each morning.

These meetings are quick check-ins to ensure the whole team is on the same page and aware of what the other team members are up to. This reduces any duplication of work.

Team members quickly run through what work they completed the previous day and their intentions for the current day. They also highlight any barriers they foresee, which the scrum team can immediately brainstorm solutions to, keeping everything barreling forward.

These meetings may be short and sweet, but they're essential for achieving transparency and accountability – two fundamental principles of an agile organisation.

As an agile leader, to make these forms of agile work methods successful, you have to empower your team members. You must enable them to take ownership of their roles to avoid the lost time of seeking answers from busy superiors.

High-functioning scrum and two-pizza teams are a clear sign of a healthy agile organisation with effective agile leadership.

As you can see, agile leadership requires a large amount of bravery and trust. However, if done successfully, it can revolutionise your organisation and lead to serious advantages within the marketplace.

Do you already exhibit some of the principles of an agile leader? Is your organisation traditional or agile? If you are looking to develop into an agile leader, what changes do you feel you need to make in your leadership style?

These are all critical questions to ask yourself as you plan your next steps in this constantly changing modern business environment.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening.

[1] *Aaron De Smet*, McKinsey & Company (2021)  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/our-people/aaron-de-smet>

[2] *The Nine Principles of Agile Leadership*, Agile Business (2017)  
[https://www.agilebusiness.org/page/Resource\\_paper\\_nineprinciples](https://www.agilebusiness.org/page/Resource_paper_nineprinciples)

[3] *Unleashing the power of small, independent teams*, Oliver Bossert, Alena Kretzberg & Jürgen Laartz (2018)  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/unleashing-the-power-of-small-independent-teams>