



Nurturing agile leadership mindsets

What future-focused
organisations are doing today,
in order to thrive tomorrow.

The rise of agile - and what it means for leadership

TOMORROW HAS NEVER BEEN MORE EXCITING - OR UNCERTAIN

When you think about what the future holds for your organisation, and indeed your industry, how clear is the picture?

Technological advances, globalisation and climate change are just some of the forces that present both threats and opportunities, ultimately making the future incredibly hard to predict.

For example, while globalisation allows us to do business almost anywhere in the world, it also means we're increasingly susceptible to competition from overseas. Likewise, while many employers now give their teams the technology to work remotely, those same devices - and our reluctance to switch them off - can be the cause of overwhelm.

The impact of COVID-19 is being felt by businesses globally, and we are about to enter a time of unprecedented disruption with likely reshaping of social, political and economic systems. Factors like these mean that, even with a clear vision and strategy, most sectors are facing historic levels of ambiguity, complexity and change.

While many organisations are focussing on short-term survival and business continuity, navigating these uncharted waters requires a different way of working - and with it, an agile leadership approach.

SURVIVAL OF THE AGILE

To survive (let alone thrive!), organisations must now be more flexible, adaptable and able to work effectively despite ambiguity.



Leadership is critical in moving to an agile approach.

In response to this need, many are moving to an 'agile' approach, which favours a more organic and responsive way of working. Typically, agile organisations are characterised by:

- A clear purpose that is owned at every level
- A flat management structure
- Flexible work practices
- Encouragement of continuous learning
- Embracing technology and innovation
- Constant experimenting and iterating

While the agile approach is not yet established as 'status quo', many businesses are reporting significant benefits. McKinsey's 2017 report 'How to create an agile organisation' notes several examples, including:

- A global electronics enterprise that delivered a 20% share price increase over three years after adopting an agile operating model with its education-to-employment teams
- A multinational bank that reduced its costs by 30% while significantly improving employee engagement, customer satisfaction and time to market.



Tomorrow's leaders need to challenge today's definition of what leadership looks like.

WHY LEADERSHIP IS THE KEY INGREDIENT

So, how does the agile model impact an organisation's leadership approach?

While an agile approach is becoming more and more necessary in order to remain competitive, for many organisations its characteristics are a significant departure from traditional ways of working.

That means, in order to migrate an existing organisation to an agile approach, major change is needed – and the only way to implement it successfully is to start with those who are tasked with leading.

The trouble is, in most organisations, the methods being used to develop leaders have changed very little in the last 25 years.

Traditionally leaders learn through on-the-job training, supplemented by competency-based training focused on management skills and techniques. While these are important, leaders are no longer developing fast enough or in the right ways to match today's changing environment.

To create future-fit leaders that can thrive in complexity and change, we need to support individuals in developing their thinking. We also need to challenge their preconceptions of what leadership needs to be – this process often

involves personal implications for them in how they learn, grow, collaborate, innovate and take on change.

HORIZONTAL VS VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT

"Some people want to put Christ back into Christmas; I want to put development back into leadership development." Robert Kegan - Professor of Adult Learning and Professional Development, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The conventional approach to development of new skills, abilities and behaviours is technical learning or 'horizontal development'. Horizontal development is most useful when a problem is clearly defined and there are known techniques for solving it.

Vertical development on the other hand is developing a different mindset or ways of seeing and interpreting the world. When leaders develop their mindsets, they are able to think in more complex ways and have a greater sense of what is changing in their environment and how to respond. They are also more reflective and orientated towards personal growth and learning.

Agile leadership – key principles

IS IT TIME TO SPARK CHANGE?

If you're in a senior role within your organisation, or one that includes a focus on people development, it's likely that you will have heard or read about 'agile leadership'.

While the terminology is common, for many organisations there is ambiguity around whether a drive towards agile leadership is really needed.

Make no mistake, for any organisation to remain competitive and effective, an agile business model is a key ingredient – and that makes an agile leadership approach critical.

While future-planning is the ideal driver of a move toward agile leadership principles, the most common catalysts are often a 'here and now' need for change.

Common signs your organisations needs to embrace an agile leadership approach:

- Business is busy, but performance is flat
- Increased uncertainty within your organisation or sector
- People are feeling overwhelmed
- Company culture is holding you back
- Engagement is slipping

- Teams are siloed and struggling to communicate
- Change is slow to occur
- You have low confidence in your leaders' ability to deliver on medium-term goals and long-term strategy

Even one of these signs can be the basis of a business case for shifting your operating model – and your leadership approach along with it.

WHAT DOES AGILE LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

"I believe the future of companies is going to be about ideas coming from the bottom up. We do not need bosses. We need servant leaders. We need people to serve their teams and let their teams come up with the best ideas." Vasant Narasimhan CEO of Novartis (NVS)

There are many definitions of agile leadership out there. What's common to them all is the desire to drive an entire organisation towards an agile approach – to do this successfully, key leaders must first be on board.

Equally, agile leadership traits vary in definition, depending on who you consult. The Resilience Institute Europe has identified a comprehensive list of 13 key characteristics that are needed in agile leaders:

1. **Purposeful: Focused and well organised** – Able to see the "wood from the trees". They keep a firm eye on current goals, while constantly seeking new ways to achieve them
2. **Self-aware** – Accepting of self, with a clear understanding of how to leverage their strengths and transform beliefs and behaviours that are getting in the way



3. **Constantly learning** – Self-directed learners, curious and proactive in seeking feedback and information from multiple relevant sources
4. **Comfortable with uncertainty** – Confident in the face of social, political, climate and technological disruption. Able to work confidently and effectively during times of increased ambiguity
5. **Champion of the organisation's 'Why'** – Not letting 'how we've always done things' overtake an organisation's greater goals
6. **Creates a safe environment for calculated risks** – By creating collaborative, psychologically-safe environments that nurture engagement and new thinking
7. **Collaborative community builders** – Creators of high-trust, respectful communities of colleagues who have meaningful relationships
8. **People-focused** – Fully present in every interaction, happy to listen and take advice, and genuine in caring. Seeks ways to help colleagues feel more invested, connected and satisfied at work
9. **Continuously edits the rule book** – Happy to change process if a better way is found
10. **Prepared to drive change** – Unafraid to pivot and change course when new threats or opportunities arise
11. **Scans the horizon** – Takes a holistic view, scans the horizon and is constantly updating and aware of industry and business changes. Makes connections between ideas and identifies opportunities

ARE YOUR LEADERS READY TO EMBRACE AN AGILE APPROACH?

If the leaders within your organisation aren't consistently exhibiting these characteristics, then it's time to drive change – starting with the foundations for creating a leadership mindset within your key people.



Agile leaders are people-focussed and driven by their organisation's 'Why?'

Moving to an agile leadership approach

HOW DO WE GET STARTED?

Mantle has partnered with dozens of significant organisations within the private and public sector to develop their leaders. Over the course of these engagements, we have observed three common areas of focus in moving to an agile leadership approach:

1. Creating alignment around purpose

We know that having a sense of connection to something that is bigger than ourselves is often a strong motivator – and it seems to be increasingly important to millennials.

Data published in the Harvard Business Review shows that 58% of companies with a clearly articulated sense of purpose experienced growth of at least 10% over three years, compared to 42% of companies that did not prioritise purpose.*

While a stated company ‘vision’ may be restrictive, a clear sense of ‘why’ the organisation exists, which resonates with your people, will encourage individuals to approach their roles more creatively and flexibly by flipping their focus from the ‘things I need to get done today’ to ‘what are we ultimately trying to achieve’.

Useful resources:

If you’re interested in creating alignment around purpose within your organisation, the following links provide a great starting point:

- Creating a Purpose-Drive Organisation (Robert E Quinn and Anjan V Thakor) – Harvard Business Review
- Start with Why (Simon Sinek) – TED Talk

*Keller, V. (2015). *The Business Case for Purpose*. Harvard Business Review. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Publishing.



Creating a psychologically-safe environment is key to encouraging agile thinking.

2. Evolving the way leaders (including senior executives) and teams work with one another

In 2015, Google began a two-year long study into which factors have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of its teams. The number one characteristic of high performing teams? Psychological safety.

Organisations that foster a culture where individuals believe they can take considered risks, speak their mind and offer novel solutions find it much easier to move to an agile approach.

This is a stark contrast to traditional leadership models, which see small numbers of people controlling most decisions within an organisation. Tomorrow’s workplace requires the empowerment of leaders at all levels within the business.

Useful resources:

Want to learn more about creating a psychologically safe workplace? The following resources give an insight into the key principles involved:

- The five keys to a successful Google team (Julia Rozovsky) – Google



Mindset is the key factor in developing agile leaders.

Useful resources: (continued)

- High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create It (Laura Delizonna) – Harvard Business Review

3. Developing new mindsets

In transitioning your key people to an agile leadership approach, there is one key consideration that trumps all others – mindset.

Agile leaders don't just behave and interact differently, they think differently too. By going through a process of self-discovery, agile leaders have a greater insight into their own internal beliefs, personality traits, strengths and weaknesses.

This level of insight gives them the self-awareness to become more present, authentic and effective in their interactions, and the confidence to nurture innovation within their teams.

Useful resources:

To start conversations that encourage introspection and thought about the way people

work and what they value in your organisation, try the fantastic Emotional Culture Deck – available online at <https://theemotionalculturedeck.com/>

THE ONLY WAY FORWARD IS AGILE

Ultimately, if your organisation is to remain relevant in years to come, shifting to agile operating and leadership principles is not a matter of 'if' – it's a matter of 'when'.

While gaining buy-in to the process of transitioning can seem daunting, there are many organisations, both globally and locally, who have already made the switch and achieved significant results. In many instances, moving to an agile approach ahead of competitors or impending sector change has created a clear competitive edge.

This resource is intended to get you thinking about how agile leadership principles could benefit your team. For a more in-depth conversation about the opportunities for your organisation, and to hear about the experiences of our clients, please contact us.



About Mantle

Mantle is at the forefront of contemporary leadership development practice in Australasia.

Based on proven neuroscience principles and underpinned by an emphasis on practical learning, and a clever use of technology, our blended learning programmes create 'Future-Fit Leaders' with agile mindsets that empower them to lead confidently and effectively in any situation.

The option of virtual or mixed virtual and face-to-face delivery provides a tried and tested, scalable and flexible leadership developmental approach. Our focus on effective measurement and constant improvement supports our long-term partnerships with our clients. It is also why so many leading private and public sector organisations choose to work with us.

The first step in any engagement is developing an understanding of what you need, and what success looks like for your organisation. For an initial, no obligation consultation, contact us – info@mantle.co.nz

Learn more about us at www.mantle.co.nz

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