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Agile Starts At The Top



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Leadership

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Hierarchies - a think of the past? PEXELS ROYALTY FREE

What is an Agile leader?

With more and more surveys showing that most organizations recognize the tremendous value of Agile and DevOps and how they can rapidly change the competitive landscape of any industry, we have good reason to believe a version of this rapidly building, ever-

changing, nimble and innovating mindset will become the pervasive way of work in the very near future.

The question then becomes whether we also need Agile leadership to achieve Agile organizations. Many are adamant that we do and in their absence, no organization is guaranteed a shot of getting good results to any type of transformation they are embarking on. “Don’t even attempt to transform your organization until you can transform yourself” says Jim Bouchard, author of [The Sensei Leader](#).

Some wonderful definitions and traits of what an Agile leader is, can be found [here](#) ranging from being curious and open to adaptive and empowering and then to empathic and emotionally intelligent and, above all, learning how to offer their people the autonomy and safety to be their best. Nonetheless, none of these are groundbreaking in and of themselves, as they are solid tenants of good leadership irrespective of what way of work the organization uses, but therein lies the crux of the issue. Should leaders regard Agile as something that the other layers of the organization does perhaps reduced to project management or software development that can be managed in the same way that they have done their entire professional lives?

How many backlogs on board?

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The success stories we see emerging suggest a resounding "no". To emulate truly successful leaders such as Amazon's Jeff Bezos or General Motors' Mary Barra of GM

who [live and breathe Agile](#) or we need leadership who takes Agile to heart in the most earnest of ways, complete with actually using the methodology and having [innovation epics and management sprints](#) themselves.

It's interesting to observe that for the most part, the companies that are succeeding with Agile are more self-made than they are strategy-house driven and that while all the big names say the right things in terms of what they perceive as best practice to build Agile organizations at leadership level such as these "[5 Trademarks of Agile Organizations](#)" by McKinsey or this encouraging piece on [CIO's role in the organization](#) from Deloitte, most of the examples above have arrived to their Agile post by internal impetus.

Part of the reason for it may lay in the lack of clarity on how Agile is a way of thinking not simply a way of work that exists at all levels of most organizations, and these consultancies are no exception. Another explanation revolves around the fact that changing deeply held beliefs at board level is not an easy task and instead limiting that change to process, be it by sending it an army of Agile coaches, is a much more lucrative path.

As a result, for the time being, even in the companies where there are Agile roll-outs that produce localized magical results, leaders are rarely Agile themselves with maybe the exception of the CIO or CTO but many organizations are starting to understand that their biggest value is their people and that if they want success across the board they need to bridge the mental gap between leadership practices and Agile and embrace it as holistic mindset change.

Agile and Hierarchies

Some voices claim Agile and leadership defined as the model of the structure we have been used to, are ultimately incompatible. That there is no place for hierarchical structures dating back thousands of years in a truly Agile organization as the very nature of the new way of work implies a lack of need for traditional control mechanisms when instead it relies on enough goodwill and personal responsibility. In other words, if an organization is made up of enough Agile teams that have autonomy, a mandate to fail, innovate and create as well as enough self-awareness and emotional investment in the overall vision to succeed then there is no need for the micromanaging, fearful, commanding leader of the past.

Jeff Dalton, author of [Great Big Agile](#) writes about "self-organization" in this [article](#) entitled "Being Agile Required Strong Leadership: Just Not The Kind We're Used To". One model to support the idea, he writes, is the [Agile Performance Hierarchy](#) (APH) from AgileCxO.org which is a leadership model that provides a definition of a self-organizing agile architecture, with objectives, desired outcomes, and set of guidelines for agile leaders and teams trying to achieve large-scale agility by employing self-organizing.

The advice seems to be echoed by some of the best Agile leaders with Sir. Richard Branson of Virgin advising leaders to [take a step back](#) and allow others to shine and [Paul Polman](#) from Unilever fervently advocating a culture rallying around the greater good, not a specific hierarchy.

Chances are, no organization will ever become truly successful if it doesn't have a leadership team that is fully Agile themselves and that, good leaders of the future are of a DevOps mindset and genuinely Agile at heart - people-obsessed, flexible, open, purpose-powered, curious, kind, passionate and compassionate, empowering and immensely emotionally intelligent not closed-off, protective, micromanaging, numbers, politics, sequence and hierarchy driven.

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