

# Being the Agile Boss

Leading through radical uncertainty means helping your team and your network create the future with you.

Linda A. Hill

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[LEADERSHIP]

## Being the Agile Boss

Leading through radical uncertainty means helping your team and your network create the future with you.

BY LINDA A. HILL

Leading in late 2020 means carving a new path through an epic disruption precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has spawned health, economic, and social crises that have rendered the best-laid plans useless. With no road map for the marathon ahead, navigating through these times is a test of agility. Together, you and your organization will have to experiment, execute, and learn from successes and failures to invent your organization's future.

Agile leadership matters now more than ever — it is about leveraging, not reacting to, the turbulence around you. How can you empower your team to solve problems nimbly and resourcefully when circumstances are in flux and reliable data is elusive? How can you create the conditions for your organization to survive? How do you create new ways of engaging with key stakeholders when they are all under pressure and resources are scarce? And how do you cultivate your capacity to cope with the imponderables that lie ahead?

Through three decades of research, consulting, and teaching, I have found that there are three imperatives of great leadership: managing your team — creating a high-performing “we” out of all the “I’s” over whom



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you have formal authority; managing your network — building partnerships with key stakeholders both inside and outside your organization; and managing yourself — using yourself as an instrument to get things done. When your ambition is to prepare your organization for the “next normal,” neglecting even one of these responsibilities jeopardizes the capacity of your organization to act, learn, pivot, and forge ahead.

## Managing Your Team: Focus on Purpose and Learning

Your primary role as an agile leader is to create an environment that empowers everyone to be an innovative problem-solver. Doing so requires that you champion a shared sense of purpose and build a capacity for rapid learning.

Innovation is hard work. It thrives on diversity and conflict. It takes candor to identify and mitigate risk, and it takes courage to accept the inevitable missteps and pivots that occur along the way. To meet those challenges with endurance, your people need to believe that they can make a meaningful contribution to a cause they care about. Aligning people in your organization with a sense of shared purpose requires an answer to two fundamental questions: Why do we exist, and whom do we serve?

Michael Ku, a vice president at Pfizer, knows how hard innovation can be in these complicated times. His organization is responsible for the global supply chain for all of the company’s clinical trials. Well before COVID-19 arrived, Ku established his team’s *raison d’être*: to deliver breakthroughs that change patients’ lives. His team proudly wears “hope pins,” designed by a pediatric patient in one of Pfizer’s drug trials, as a tangible reminder of what drives their work.

Today, with several COVID-19 trials underway, this purpose has special

resonance. Ku said the crisis energized his team members to become innovative problem-solvers. They understand that their work is vital to society. “We have a clearly defined purpose, and that helps guide our ‘what’ and ‘how,’” he said. Imagine the ingenuity, sense of ownership, and coordination required to deliver experimental medicines to clinical sites in 70 countries when business as usual is disrupted by a pandemic.

You must also help your team learn together at speed — which may require you to fight your natural instincts to take charge. Dr. Rakesh Suri, CEO and chief of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at the Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, told me that, as is the case for so many leaders in times

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of crisis, his reflex was to try to steer the ship. “I’m a surgeon,” he said. “When I see blood, I’ve been taught to put my finger in it to stop the bleeding.”

But he realized that rather than setting direction and getting his organization to follow him into the future, he needed to create the conditions for his team to *cocreate* that future with him. “I need to hyper-empower my people to reimagine how we’re going to do things,” he said.

Amid tremendous uncertainty, when facts on the ground are incomplete, imprecise, and constantly changing, you need to put in place a new operating model designed for experimentation. As Dr. Suri explained to his organization, every

assumption must be considered a “working hypothesis”: Collect intelligence, validate data, develop working hypotheses based on that data, act on those hypotheses, and then learn from the results.

Creating the conditions for experimentation to flourish requires that you assess how well your structure, processes, and cadence are organized for rapid decision-making and action. For example, when COVID-19 took hold earlier this year, many leaders realized that they would be overwhelmed during the crisis if they did not distribute leadership responsibilities. They created teams that were empowered to make decisions and execute with speed.

By May, leaders had begun to see that this kind of delegation would be required even post-pandemic, so they formed “next normal” task forces to forge the path ahead. The purpose of these ad hoc teams is to decide on, communicate, and implement the myriad changes organizations must make. These include developing norms and policies for virtual work, re-conceiving workspaces and schedules, and, for sure, determining new metrics to measure progress. Business plans and budgets are rendered irrelevant in times of upheaval. You need metrics that capture your team’s impact — rather than their level of effort — on fulfilling the corporate purpose and serving key stakeholders.

Delegating and clarifying decision-making rights — guided by a sense of purpose — to cross-functional teams or those lower in the organizational hierarchy pay off in several ways. Leaders find that their people are managing conflicts that they used to avoid or escalate to senior management. And when task forces include individuals with diverse expertise and experience, such as junior members who bring curiosity and fresh eyes to the situation, they are not blinded by historical thinking. “[You] want people willing to

tear up — not merely shelve — old business plans,” said one executive I spoke with.

Finally, organizations are discovering the next generation of leaders. One executive told me that her task force helped her “recognize the value of unleashing young talent to shape the future. ... People are stepping up and volunteering as they think about what the company could be doing, not just what it *should* be doing.”

## Managing Your Network: Look Outward, Forge Ties

Never before in modern times have we been more aware of global interdependence and the cost associated with growing inequality both within and across countries. Corporate leaders are being called upon to move beyond a shareholder point of view to consider key stakeholders and do their part to address social ills. Just saying “do no evil” is no longer enough.

Agile leaders recognize that this is no time for arrogance or isolationism. Against the current backdrop of complexity and ambiguity, you need to look out in order to learn — to search for new sources of information to check your assumptions — and you must also cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with those outside your organization on whom your success depends.

That’s why managing your network with agility is the second imperative. Although all leaders recognize that they must figure out how to influence those who report to them, too few think through how to do so with those over whom they have no formal authority but who impact their team’s prospects. If you want your team and organization to be effective, you must map out the web of interdependencies important to your success — partners, suppliers, customers, and community. Then you have to determine how to influence or support those members of your network in order to get the resources you need to respond or

adapt to fast-changing circumstances.

Think about your key internal stakeholders. Ku included partners from other business units at Pfizer on his teams to make sure siloed thinking and actions did not impede agility. Are you aligned around purpose and priorities? Work to form coalitions of network members to support your team’s goals and help others in your network achieve theirs. Seek out colleagues across the organization to help you and your team solve problems and secure the funds and people you need to get your job done.

Next, consider your external stakeholders. What can you do to proactively build out and support your ecosystem? Should you be thinking of ways to coordinate or

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partner with traditional competitors? Focus on creating and sustaining relationships; make a special effort to connect frequently with others and support their needs; and find ways to help people harness their creativity and resourcefulness. Reflect on how you’re serving your community. COVID-19 has brought into sharp relief how dependent business is on government and civil society to create and sustain the local ecosystem. Never in my career have I seen so many trisector engagements to build a resilient public health infrastructure and address racial inequity. Systemic challenges require systemic responses.

Consider the example of Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli, cofounder of Sahel

Consulting Agriculture & Nutrition and AACE Food Processing & Distribution, two companies addressing food security in Africa. When the crisis hit, Nwuneli understood that small farmers would find it nearly impossible to get their goods to market or secure seeds for the upcoming planting season. So she and her colleagues launched a new digital business, NourishingAfrica.com, a web-based platform where agricultural technology entrepreneurs could connect with farmers, potential investors, and other customers. Nwuneli and her companies were able to provide technical assistance and, in a span of weeks, help these small and medium-sized enterprises build out and deploy mobile apps to get essential work done.

Kuseni Dlamini, chairman of the board of South Africa’s Massmart Holdings, which comprises nine wholesale and resale chains across sub-Saharan Africa, is another leader proactively managing his network to support the ecosystem required to save lives and livelihoods. When the virus first emerged in Africa, Dlamini and fellow board members and management engaged with the government to create standardized ways of collecting and sharing key data about the trajectory of the virus and essential supplies. They also reached out to local suppliers and vendors to offer assistance in weathering the financial downturn, such as helping them repurpose operations to keep people employed. “We know that if they don’t survive, we’re not going to have anyone to supply us,” he told me. “We need each other.”

Finally, we all need to rethink how we are reaching out to our customers. As more than one leader has said to me, “Now is not the time to be selling. Now is the time to be serving your customers.” To serve them, you need to listen to them to find out how their needs are evolving and how you can help. Just as building connections with other key stakeholders takes time and



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energy, this isn't done by fielding surveys; it's about having conversations.

## Managing Yourself: Be Prepared to Learn and Adapt

Being an agile leader in times of crisis requires a continued commitment to your own well-being and development. Leadership begins with you: Your values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses drive your decisions and actions and demonstrate your true character. All of these factors affect your capacity to connect with and influence others.

Great leadership is always about an emotional connection. Ask yourself: How are people experiencing you? And how are they experiencing themselves when they're with you? Would they report feelings of mutual trust? If purpose is the glue that holds people together, mutual trust is the grease that allows them to work together. Without trust, people will not express fears and confide weaknesses, and you cannot create the environment of psychological safety required for people to create and learn together.

Transparency is key to building trust. It's a balancing act to project strength and confidence while also revealing your own feelings and vulnerabilities. One CEO I spoke with admitted to his organization, "Yes, I'm scared, *and* I know we have the talent and commitment in the organization that we need to get through this."

In the coming months, you will face hard decisions, pushback from those who disagree with your choices, and dilemmas that test whether you can stay true to the commitments you have made about your organization's shared purpose. You may be criticized as overreacting if you keep inventory levels high to guard against supply chain disruptions caused by future disease outbreaks. Others may call you out as underreacting if your efforts to tackle inequities in the workplace fall short of

expectations. You will have to have moral imagination — the ability to envision a more inclusive path to success — to perhaps even repair relationships with those who have felt marginalized in your organization or community. All of this will take courage and endurance.

Those in positions of authority always run the risk of burnout, and the danger is amplified these days. Taking care of yourself is a leadership responsibility; find ways to refresh and replenish your energy, perhaps by setting aside time to meditate or taking up a new hobby.

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To stay mentally fit, you must also seek support when you need it. As an agile leader, you need a diverse "personal board of directors" — individuals who variously serve as sparring partners or advisers, or offer emotional support and affirmation when your sense of agency is flagging or negativity threatens to overwhelm you.

## Navigating the Next Normal: Leadership Matters Now More Than Ever

To be sure, the challenges of leading through the unknowns of the coronavirus pandemic, economic distress, and social change are going to be with us for some time. We will almost certainly see new waves of infections that we aren't yet prepared to cope with. We all have a lot to learn about how to discuss, let alone advance, racial justice. Many companies are

struggling to survive financially, and a lot of them will not make it.

These crises represent opportunity, too. This is a period in which you will discover how resilient your organization is and whether you have what it takes to rise to the challenge of agile leadership. Are you building the kind of culture and capabilities that spark innovative thinking and unleash nascent leadership within your ranks? Are you looking up and out and nurturing the kinds of relationships that support your organization's purpose? Are you working with leaders across sectors to help your community weather whatever is ahead? Are you developing your own abilities to learn as much as you can as fast as you can? And are you cultivating the mental and emotional toughness that will allow you to go against your instincts and make consequential choices despite knowing that some people will disagree with you?

Even when certain aspects of the global health and economic situation become clearer, many unknowns will remain. As one leader so aptly put it, addressing the new reality is about "being students of the chaos we are going through and the future that we don't know yet."

Cocreating the future with your organization may prove to be the crucible of your leadership journey. It will take imagination, persistence, and moral courage. Use your time wisely. Rethink what's possible.

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