

RESOLUTIONS FOR AGILE LEADERS



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Wherever you are on your Agile journey, shifting your mindset and your organization's culture is essential to achieving business agility. This is the work of an Agile leader and, as W. Edward Deming says, this work cannot be delegated.

In this paper, I'm going to share lessons I learned as a transforming Agile leader in multiple Agile transformations. These lessons are distilled into three Agile leader resolutions: respecting and supporting Agile roles, evolving how you gather information, and modeling Agile behavior. As you start the new year and decade, think about making these three subtle and tactical resolutions. You will be pleasantly surprised at the cultural change these bring about.

Best,
Lorena Conolly
Senior Agile Coach, Agile Velocity



RESOLUTION ONE:

RESPECT AGILE ROLES

As a senior leader in software delivery organizations, I was able to get things done for my organization by understanding my peoples' strengths and how to optimally utilize and mobilize my team. This skill was one of the skills that got me promoted! However, in an Agile environment, I could no longer go directly to my people, as they were now embedded into Agile teams. I now had to work through a Product Owner and Scrum Master. This was hard for me at first!

Damage Done

Even though I understood the Agile principles and why this was necessary, I would fall into this old behavior from time-to-time. Going directly to my people was familiar and it seemed like the shortest route to getting needed work done. However, the longer-term impact of that expediency and comfort was far more detrimental than I could have imagined:

- It appeared to people filling the Product Owner and Scrum Master roles that I did not respect them or their work.
- It put my embedded people in a difficult position with me (how could they say no?) and with their team (their commitment with me prevented them from meeting their team commitments).
- It made people question senior leadership's commitment to the Agile transformation.
- It wasn't a good look for a senior leader to be using her positional authority in such a seemingly thoughtless way.

Just thinking about it makes me facepalm. In my case, when I went directly to the team, I was acting unconsciously and out of old habits. Occasionally, I succumbed to the pressure of an even more senior leader vehemently expressing that "this needs to get done!" Either way, the damage was done.

Repairing the Damage

When I caught myself doing this (or was rightly called out on the behavior by a courageous Product Owner or Scrum Master), I did what an Agile leader should do: accept accountability for my actions, their impact, and sincerely apologize.

Apologizing can undo the damage. In fact, more trust between teams and leadership can be created. Being accountable, acknowledging my mistake, and apologizing modeled the expected behavior of a self-organizing team. However, this works only when there is an occasional misstep. Intentional abuse and disingenuous apologies will inflict further damage and quickly erode trust between teams and leadership.

You can also keep people in Scrum team roles out of harm's way by helping them get stronger. I'm going to guess that in most cases people did not self-assign roles but were put into these positions through careful thought and consideration by leadership. Ensure they have the necessary training, tools, and coaching to be successful.

In this next decade, resolve to be a respectful and supportive leader by respecting Agile team roles. Don't let others or yourself circumvent these roles. If you are an executive, be aware of how you ask to get work done. A small shift in language can remind your leaders to respect the teams. Rather than the go-to "get it done" instruction, try "take this to the team and let me know what they can do."

RESOLUTION TWO: EVOLVE HOW YOU GET INFORMATION

Leaders have a high need for information. When they have to dig for information rather than it being offered freely, or if the information they are getting doesn't add up, they can get very uncomfortable and start to dig deeper and deeper. I know I did when I was in that role.

I used to work in an organization where the need for information was taken to the extreme and created a culture of micromanagement that didn't bode well for the agile transformation. My executive leader at the time had a problem-solving method that was...unique. It involved a phone call at a moment's notice from his executive assistant. She would say, "He wants you to come to the 7th floor," which meant his office.

She wasn't allowed to tell you what it was regarding. You were expected to immediately drop what you were doing and take the dreaded elevator ride to the 7th floor, wracking your brain about all the hot deliverables, whether they were on track, or whatever else might be thrown at you.

Once in his office, the issue was revealed and he peppered you with questions. You were expected to have detailed answers to all of them, ranging from what server the application was running on to an individual project's outstanding defect counts. A response of "I don't know, I will have to get back to you," was unacceptable.

Damage Done

Intended or not, my executive's way of gathering information created an unhealthy environment that did not support an Agile workplace. This drove two types of unproductive behavior:

- 1. People made up answers** – Not only was the information unreliable, it prolonged the discussion as information often conflicted and people had to sort through misunderstandings.
- 2. Senior Leaders were driven way deep into details** - Rather than these highly intelligent and compensated leaders focusing on the big problems of the organization, we were turned into micromanagers with abundant data at the ready for the next 7th floor summoning.

Repairing the Damage

Agile practices provide mechanisms for leaders to get needed information. Most Agile events are open and leaders can **HEAR** first-hand how the team is progressing. Leaders also have the opportunity to **SEE** first-hand how the team is progressing by attending the Sprint Review and observing working software in use as the best measure of progress.

There is no need for status reports or other non-value adding structures to provide information to the leader. If you are in an environment that uses a team-of-teams approach to delivering value, there are typically weekly sync meetings you can attend to learn about the status of work in progress.

Evolve Your Data-Gathering

As a leader you can do a few things in the new decade to change how you get information and to support your Agile transformation.

- 1. Attend the sync meetings and Sprint Reviews** - Your presence will give credence and importance to these meetings and the transformation, and provide opportunities to encourage your people as they demonstrate new agile values and practices through the work they are producing. Attending will also allow you to informally connect with the team, which helps to build trust.
- 2. Ensure that teams do NOT do extra prep work for the Sprint Review**
- Their measure of progress should be working product increments, not unnecessary status reports.
- 3. Scrap your current reporting methods** - The information you need in an Agile environment is much different than the information you may have received in the past. If you do not change the way you get information, especially as an executive leader, you will drive your people back into "old" behaviors in order to produce the current reports.

By resolving to make and continue these subtle, actionable steps toward these three resolutions, you will positively impact your organization's culture and support Agile adoption.

RESOLUTION THREE:

MODEL AGILE BEHAVIOR

If you are in a leadership position, one of the things that you must accept in order to be an effective leader, is that you are always the leader.

Whether you are in the lunchroom, walking down the hall, at a company event, facilitating a team meeting, or in a one-on-one meeting, your people are constantly reading your body language, dissecting your words, tone, and delivery. They are continuously looking for signs of threat or concern to their livelihood, well-being or simply for office gossip.

This can seem daunting and overwhelming. Fear not. Agile leaders are servant leaders, and servant leaders understand that the spotlight creates an opportunity to continuously teach and equip their people. They support their folks by demonstrating how to productively respond to situations, which in turn builds confidence and resilience. As you resolve to support business agility, here are 5 key Agile leadership behaviors to portray on a regular basis.

TRUST

This is foundational to any healthy, safe, and productive work environment.

Damage Done

Without trust, people do not experiment, innovate, or problem solve. Leaders need to look for every opportunity to build trust between the collective leadership and teams.

Repairing the Damage

To earn trust, you need to both trustworthy and trusting. Put team decisions in the hands of the team. Practice transparency and share as much information with the team as possible. If there is information you cannot share, let them know that too. With transparency, people will speculate less. With less speculation comes less gossip. Less gossip creates more safety and productivity.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Without accountability, we get mediocre results, which means leaders are not willing to empower teams, which then fosters less ownership by teams. It's a vicious cycle and nobody wins.

Damage Done

By accountability, I don't mean blame. Blame is an attempt to assign ownership in a disempowering way. Accountability is accepting ownership of the good, the bad, and the ugly in an empowering way, because blame is absent.

Repairing the Damage

We want teams to hold themselves accountable for the commitments they make. This is why we put those decisions in the hands of the team. You can model accountability by owning your individual results and your mistakes.

I once had a new CTO come on board. The first thing he did was pull his new senior team together and in that first conversation he told us, "**From now on, any mistake that gets made, is my mistake. It's on me.**" He demonstrated this in the following days as he took responsibility for any and all mistakes. Every time we had a production issue or delay, he would own it and remind us of what he had said. This gave us an amazing amount of relief, safety, and freedom. He understood that as the executive, he was accountable for our collective results and mistakes. He modeled for each of us senior leaders how to do the same. In turn, we modeled that for our people and so on. Under his tenure, we made more progress and had better results than we had ever before. This was because:

1. We had the space to experiment, learn without blame, and grow.
2. We tried much harder to not make mistakes for his sake.

COLLABORATION

With trust and accountability, true collaboration can begin.

Damage Done

As a leader in a non-Agile or siloed environment, it is likely that there is tension between you and at least one other leader. In the protectionist culture these types

of environments foster, you will have had to push back hard on one or more peers, creating rifts that further reinforce the silos.

Repairing The Damage

To boldly model collaboration for your people, go find that leader. Invite him or her to coffee and work out how you can both tackle a problem or challenge in your Agile transformation. A powerful signal of a new day is seeing old rivals solving a new challenge together. Be seen working together on this, provide updates in all-team meetings, and send joint communications.

R E S P E C T

Is respect a precursor to trust? I think so.

Damage Done

If I don't demonstrate respect for someone, how likely is it that person to trust me or my motives?

Repairing The Damage

I may not yet trust a new person in a new role, but I can assume good intent and respect that they were put there because they have the necessary skills and/or support.

As a leader, I can respect the capabilities and intentions of the teams and trust them with information to make team decisions. I can respect that they understand the priorities I have set, that they have a sense of urgency and desire to do meaningful work. I can trust that they will do anything they can to deliver reasonable and valuable results. I can accept an Agile mindset, respect Agile practices and trust that the teams that apply them will deliver improving results. Demonstrate this respect and you'll earn the teams' respect... and trust.

L E A R N I N G

Continuously learning, adapting, and inspecting is key to improving results.

Damage Done

Learning cannot create damage, but blame can. Teams need to inspect their results without blame hanging over their heads. and learn how they can be improved.

Repairing the Damage

As a leader, you have an immense opportunity to model learning behavior.

- 1. Demonstrate your own passion for learning and improvement** - Share what you are learning even if it's unrelated to work. When I was learning to bake at high-altitude, I brought treats into the office that weren't always awesome. As I got feedback, I would say out loud what I would try. "I think I'll adjust the amount of flour in the mix, or try a double rise before shaping." The next round was inevitably tastier.
- 2. When a mistake, error, omission, or problem arises, how you respond is a critical lesson in learning** - The language you choose to use in these situations is crucial. "Who did this?" "Who's fault is this?" "How did this happen?" These kinds of judgmental questions will not get the information needed to solve the problem. They will discourage transparency and erode trust.

Try this go-to phrase for severe mistakes. Calmly say "Okay. This is not good. What do we do now?" In saying this, you are able to acknowledge the severity of the situation and to draw people into problem-solving and learning. Even though you have your own ideas, it is more important that the people closest to the issue solve and learn from it. When relaying the mistake up the chain, take responsibility for it and credit the team with the corrective action and learning.

By resolving to make and continue these subtle, actionable steps toward these three resolutions, you will positively impact your organization's culture and support Agile adoption. In Agile transformations, we ask much of our leaders. I suggest choosing one of these three resolutions and focus on taking those steps, or your own steps, toward that resolution. Keep at it and in a few months, when it feels more second-nature, observe the changes in your immediate organization. We are here to help if you feel like it's time for a neutral, experienced perspective on how your journey towards business agility is going.

I wish you good luck on your Agile journey and a happy New Year and decade!

ABOUT AGILE VELOCITY

We're a full-service transformation partner offering whole organization coaching, leadership and team coaching, and Agile training. By leveraging our proprietary Path to Agility® transformation approach, we advise clients on the best way to avoid failure and reach desired business outcomes as quickly as possible.

OUR SERVICES

Agile Transformation

Using our Path to Agility® Transformation framework, we help organizations build the capabilities needed to achieve desired business goals with confidence.

Agile Assessment

Identify gaps, establish a baseline for the transformation moving forward, and determine key next steps for achieving your goals.

Agility Tune-up

Target the most pressing challenges that are keeping your team from achieving desired outcomes.

Agile Training

We utilize hands-on training techniques, demonstrations, and simulations to create an engaging, outcome-focused learning experience.

ABOUT LORENA CONNOLLY



With 40 years of leadership experience and 23 of those spent in the software industry, Lorena brings a well-rounded perspective to Agile transformations. With her multi-discipline expertise and acting as change catalyst throughout her career, she has helped several organizations improve delivery, quality, systems, and teamwork. Her focus is on improving business results as well as improving the working lives of the people who deliver those results. She is a coach and mentor that helps teams take a systems view to execute a long-term strategy while responding to short-term needs. Helping people solve big challenges is where Lorena thrives.

Lorena is a Certified Safe 4 Program Consultant (SPC) and CSM. She also holds an ITIL Foundation V3 Certification and ITIL Continual Service Improvement (CSI).



CONTACT US: 512-298-2835 | info@agilevelocity.com