

How to transform from a traditional manager into an **Agile leader**?

Customer is king, so is Agile working

More and more businesses are realising that they are no longer the centre of attention. The customers, on the other hand, are more so than ever. They choose and decide as they are constantly considering which company could provide the best service and which responds best to their changing needs. So, the power belongs to them, not to you. A new way of working is therefore needed to anticipate the changing market and new customer requirements more effectively.

Did you know that Agile working can offer the best solution over here? It helps to focus on organic cooperation, autonomous decisions and adjustments. But how do you manage such a change? What are the points of attention in the area of leadership? And how do you eventually transform from traditional leadership to Agile leadership?

What are the differences between traditional management and Agile leadership?

Strictly checking or trusting the team

The traditional manager controls teams that report to the management. Subsequently, the manager will be making decisions based on a report. The information it contains is actually never comprehensive. If a team works a lot from home, as is the case now during these challenging corona times, it is very difficult to control. Unlike the traditional manager, the Agile leader trusts his or her team to make the right choices. In the Agile way of working, a team has much more independence and is given more information.

Orientation of leadership

The traditional form of management is top-down oriented. Goals are set from above and the employees must achieve them no matter what. In short: the team is managed by the manager. In an Agile team, everyone works bottom-up. The employees deliberate with the manager to determine which goals they think they can achieve. Afterwards, the manager helps the team to work together and to perform optimally. This dialogue is especially important when a team and its team leader(s) cannot gather due to corona safety measures. In this way, everyone is on the same page, even virtually.

Using mistakes as starting point to continuously improve

In companies organised in a traditional way, making mistakes is frowned upon and punished. Employees have to do what is asked of them in order not to get into trouble, simple as that. However, making mistakes is human, don't you think? Therefore, getting it wrong is not a bad thing in an Agile working environment. Finding out that something doesn't work is also valuable. Employees will show much more initiative and ultimately productivity will increase if they do not have to be afraid to fail to do something. The fact that this initiative also has to emanate from the team has become evident, especially in times of corona. It is important to try to learn from these mistakes, to remain curious and to constantly strive for improvement.



Handling information

In a traditional organisation, management information is only accessible to the manager as he or she interprets the information and directs the team where necessary. However, in an Agile organisation, this type of information is also communicated to the team. Finally, the team has the expertise on the subject being worked on. This allows each employee to make decisions and adjust when it deems necessary.

Team engagement

Traditional managers are often only interested in statistics that reflect team performance. Moreover, they don't want to be too involved in the ins and outs of the team. The Agile leader cares less. He or she is only concerned with a few specific metrics that really matter. These are targeted at added value for internal and external customers. Furthermore, the Agile leader tries to be involved with the team, so that everyone knows what needs to be done.

In addition, Agile leadership promotes self-organising and autonomous teams, team roles and dynamics. Because of this emphasis, organisations assume that managers are no longer needed. In reality though, Agile leaders can help an Agile team thrive, but "traditional" managers need to be trained, or retrained, to successfully manage people in Agile working environments. This is not a shift we can take for granted.

Why should traditional managers transform into Agile leaders?

The rather “traditional” management style in Agile environments may have constraints on:

- Both the effectiveness of the team and the power of Agile to help people grow and develop their skills;
- The team’s ability to develop self-organisation skills, which are at the heart of the value that Agile brings to an organisation.

Influence is much more important than command and control. Where “traditional” management often relies on command and control, using influence (rather than control) over the Agile team leads to much better results. At first, letting go of control can be frightening for some managers. So can learning to trust, which they often regard as a difficult skill.

Work allocation should be handled by the Agile team. In an Agile way of working, the team decides how work is assigned by individuals committing to the tasks. This does not mean that the manager no longer has any influence on the work division. It rather implies that the manager must advise on these decisions and ensure that the team has access to the necessary knowledge, skills and tools.

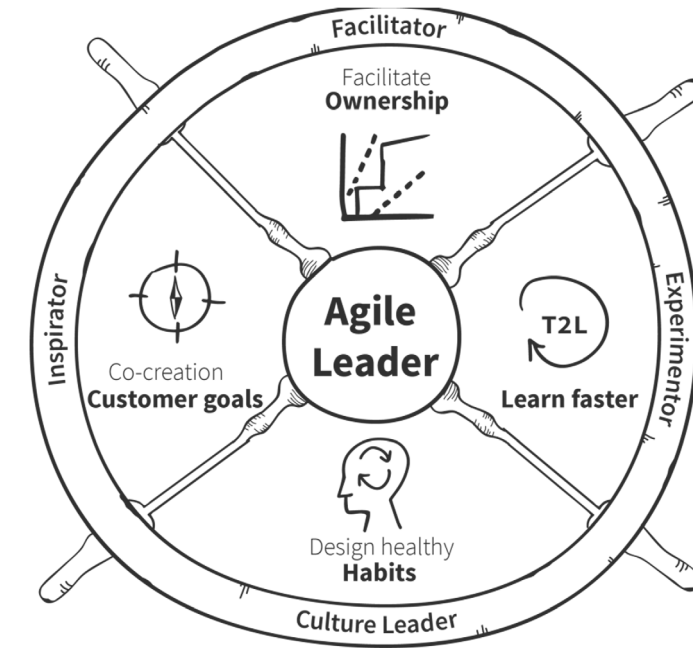
Rigid work regimes are outdated. For employees across all sectors, flexibility is incredibly valuable and helps employers attract and retain top talent. Organisations that offer flexibility to their workforce in the form of telecommuting, flexible schedules and unlimited personal time off, help employees maintain a positive work-life balance.

Evolving to a responsive enterprise thanks to Agile leadership. In Agile organisations, ownership and self-organisation in teams not only increase, teams also take more initiative in the areas of quality, sustainability and effectiveness. This creates more time for continuous improvement.

How should traditional managers evolve into Agile leaders?

Agile Leaders assume a leadership role within an organisation and strive to make their organisation more innovative. In addition, they are aware of the need to change more quickly and continually develop the organisation to deal more effectively with the rapid pace of market change. Above all, Agile Leaders also know that there is no such thing as a <one-size-fits-all> leadership model. Therefore, they continually grow their leadership toolkit and practice applying it in order to demonstrate leadership Agility in different contexts.

One tool to achieve success through Agile leadership is the GRIP (Growing Responsive Impact Patterns) Framework. The GRIP framework provides support to managers and Agile leaders and serves as a toolbox for creating a structure and culture in which teams take ownership of customer impact.



The wheel of the Agile Leader 2.0

Source: The Agile Alliance

This GRIP framework encourages to develop 4 key leadership styles that fit within an Agile context:

1. The Inspirator

As an inspirer, the Agile leader co-creates a shared passion and focus on the customer. This leadership style is about connecting people and teams in a direction that results from the leader’s vision. Although it is also complemented by team co-creation. In the <Customer is King> age, teams must continuously deliver better customer products and services.

2. The Facilitator

As a facilitator of ownership, this leader truly puts himself at the service of the teams in order to create for them the ideal surroundings they may need. The goal is for the teams to take ownership of their work, be proud of what they do, and feel and know that they have maximum influence on their own results. This ownership cannot be imposed or enforced. The leader can only create an environment in which the teams take it voluntarily. After all, mature employees and teams are better able to indicate what they need in the environment than when the leader tries to fill it in for them.

3. The Experimenter

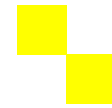
The experimenter is the mentor of the teams involved in conducting experiments. Successful teams learn continuously from their customers. It is up to the leader to create a safe environment in which teams can engage and to provide back-ups in the unlikely event that something goes wrong or stakeholders may complain.

4. The Culture-Driven Leader

As a culture-driven leader, the Agile leader is the visionary and organiser of the specific and desired culture. In creating an environment for self-organising teams, a healthy culture is crucial. Important characteristics of this are collaboration, striving for high-quality craftsmanship, teamwork, customer passion and going for the long haul. Organisations applying this culture attract people with these sorts of qualities. Creating an Agile culture is intensive and complex since there are often short-term interests that undermine it. Successful leaders understand that all parts of culture such as habits, assumptions, norms and values, history, heroes, language and structures influence each other.

Consequently, this described GRIP framework will assist Agile leaders in:

- guiding organisations to respond quickly to market changes;
- co-creating a shared working environment between employees and customers;
- learning to evolve to multi-disciplinary and self-organising teams;
- setting-up a culture in which they can learn, experiment and increase impact quickly;



Agile in a nutshell

Transformations cause stress for many managers, so it is important to give them a grip on Agile working. The Scrum Guide, the SAFE blueprint and the set of Holacracy rules are only a few frameworks that are often used in this context. However, just following these rules will not permeate a company with Agile working. Everyone has to be imbued with the new values and learn to deal with change. This mindset demands a lot from organisations and it is a real challenge to assist traditional managers to evolve into Agile leaders.

So, in addition to the GRIP framework I described above, it is imperative that the following tips are included in your important transformation journey:

- It helps to work in small steps. Small rewards also contribute to encouraging repetition. In this way, you can turn an individual action into a new routine. It provides enough intrinsic motivation for the habit itself to become the reward.
- Self-organisation starts with equality. Scrum teams should no longer report to a manager, but work as equals. In this way, everyone automatically becomes more proactive. Everyone determines their own thoughts and actions.
- However, do not let people go at once. First evaluate the need for autonomy and determine how much freedom a team can handle on that basis.
- As a leader, don't solve the problems you can solve, but solve the problems the team cannot solve. And never blame others, but always blame yourself. The motto of Agile leadership is: you can only change something if you look at yourself.
- Teams learn best from each other. Use the experience of existing team members to build brand-new teams. This way, the collective culture is maintained.
- Make results visible, that is the ultimate way to motivate your team.



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