



Leading Agility

Agility is top of mind for many leaders across public and private organisations in the current context as they react to changing circumstances that, for many, can amount to a 'crisis' both personal and organisational.

Agility is a metaphor - a frame of thinking - that acts as a stimulus to think afresh about how to respond in this environment.

Our colleagues at Public Leadership Inquiry (PLi) have been researching agility and this article summarises some key themes and offers a model and a simple action frame for leaders seeking to strengthen their own, their team's and their organisation's agility. If you would like to find out more go to www.publicleadershipinquiry.co.uk

Research headlines

PLi's public service research underlines how vital agility is to the future success of public service organisations – both in responding to the budget cuts and well beyond this. And this runs in parallel with IBM's latest annual survey of 1500 CEOs worldwide which shows 'creativity' to be the number one concern.

Defintions

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'Agile' as "1. Quick in movement, nimble. 2. Mentally quick and acute." Samuel Johnson, the forerunner of dictionary definitions, described it as "Having the quality of being speedily put in motion. However, agility is not just about joints and limbs, but also mental quickness and acuteness." Watching agile athletes in action words that come to mind include 'speed', 'courage', 'calculated risk', 'flexibility', 'practice', 'creativity', 'nimbleness', 'integration', 'imagination', 'readiness', 'energy', 'timing', 'explosiveness', and 'impact'.

Product innovation

A look at radical product innovation in the private sector shows the potential of 'less is the new more', focusing on massive cost reduction in the assembly of products such as computers and medical instruments to fuel radical innovation. Companies are driving for a huge price reduction and then challenging traditional assumptions about customer needs and rallying all parts of the organisation to the cause of developing a new product within the target price range.

Public service response to crisis

It is striking how the public service around the world has used the experience of crises to shape their aspirations for being more agile. For instance, the Australian public service's desire to develop an agile culture with the characteristics of 'can do', 'goodwill and generosity', 'collaboration' and 'outcomes over rules' was strongly influenced by the way

public services and other agencies responded to the terrible bush fires in Victoria a few years ago.

Agility focus in IT

The IT and software development industry has paid a huge amount of attention to agility in the last ten years or so. Examination of the plethora of 'agile manifestos' and 'charters' that exist in this world highlight the attributes of 'fast delivery and results', 'iteration', 'customer feedback loops', 'very close relationship with the customer', and 'self-organised teams taking full responsibility for work scheduling and planning'.

Academic perspectives

The science of complex systems makes a number of contributions to thinking on agility, including notions of:

- Complex systems making change a routine so as to avoid the trauma of not being able to respond to new challenges
- Order and chaos, and how minimal but careful interventions can hold the system on the (good) edge of chaos – shared purpose and vision, appropriate reward systems and shared operating platforms.

And finally, scrutiny of the academic literature on 'agile leadership' shows that agile leaders do not lead with structural change - but use structure to reinforce an increasingly agile culture. Their focus is on a stretching and engaging sense of purpose; bringing people together across functional boundaries; encouraging strong relationships; driving for demanding goals; intervening to minimise conflict; appreciating talent; encouraging learning.

PLi Model of Agility

Drawing on this research and shaping it in discussion with senior leaders, PLi have developed the following model under a number of headings:

Develop a new psychological contract

- Treat staff as 'associates' or even 'volunteers'
- Reframe the relationship with people – engaging in common endeavour and empowering
- Design roles to be fluid
- Develop 'serial incompetence' - urge yourself and your people to move into an area, learn as much as possible about it, but quickly move onto another area with the next steep learning curve.

Move to the edge

- Hold the tension between order and chaos
- Inspire and coalesce people towards Big Hairy Audacious Goals ('BHAGs')

- Recognise the dynamics of an organisation, not rushing to structural solutions
- Be ready to break existing business models and processes.

Apply 80/20 beta methodology

- Think beta versions and prototypes
- Accept that 80% is good enough
- Then test, refine and improve
- And move quickly.

Use the leadership tools and mindset of crisis management

- Free up good will and generosity
- Release energy and commitment, a sense of 'can do'
- Thrive on flux. Allocate roles based on talent and knowledge
- Rally all functions to the cause.

Foster organic interaction

- Frame the organisation as an organism rather than a machine
- Encourage quality conversations – strategic, creative, curious, experimental
- Embrace the spirit of the start-up
- Maximise intellectual capital and learning.

Suggested action frame

Spend some time with your team, reflecting on the model above and shaping an action plan in service of your agility ambition (in an agile way of course!). Here is an example of some actions agreed recently by a leadership team that you might find helpful:

- Hold a different conversation with people about the need to be more agile and what is in it for them
- Stretch people to solve tough performance questions, treating them as volunteers in this enterprise
- Invest in boosting people's intellectual agility – wider experiences, wider responsibilities, wider horizons
- Only recruit people capable of performing a wide variety of roles, with a real hunger to learn
- Set the Big Hairy Audacious Goals with a call to arms, AND the reachable near term objectives to build the momentum

- Make bigger requests of people, trusting them to achieve more. Raise the heat across the organisation, moving everyone out of their comfort zone (but not into their panic zone!)
- Provide more proactive strategic leadership that supports fast course adjustments in response to ever changing priorities
- Break some of the love of perfectionism – deliver rough and ready more often
- Make a habit of the communication practices of crisis management, such as regular five minute stand up meetings for the whole team
- Bring people together across functional boundaries more often – socially, for learning, for collaborative projects – to encourage more sparky, cross-boundary, creative conversations that stimulate breakthrough work
- Sharpen up the structures and platforms that support agile working; flexible working arrangements, performance management/reward processes, and approaches to capability development.

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