Agile leadership

By Eleanor Hudgell, Learning Design Lead

Introduction

No doubt you will have heard the term 'agile' many times and in many different contexts. The concept of agile started life in 2001 as a manifesto to speed up software development – it subsequently evolved into project management methodology and was adopted as a process guide by banking and technology firms. As a result, many different interpretations of what it means to be agile have evolved. Leadership practices based on the overall concept of agile are now widely recognised as an aspirational approach – not only leadership at an individual level, but for the transformation of the organisation in its entirety.

Many organisations have rapidly adopted agile practices and principles in response to the coronavirus crisis, whether deliberately or by necessity. Flexibility, adaptability, innovation and empowerment have become essential for survival, reflecting one of the four critical values of Agile software development at its inception – "Responding to change over following a plan".

Responding to change, uncertainty and unexpected events has become 'business as usual' for all of us, so at Hemsley Fraser, we believe that agile is here to stay, as a guiding principle for organisations and a primary style for leaders.

> **So, do agile leaders make for more agile organisations,
> or is it the other way around?**
>
> **Does the shift to a more agile way of working start with changing leadership mindsets, or with transforming organisational systems?**
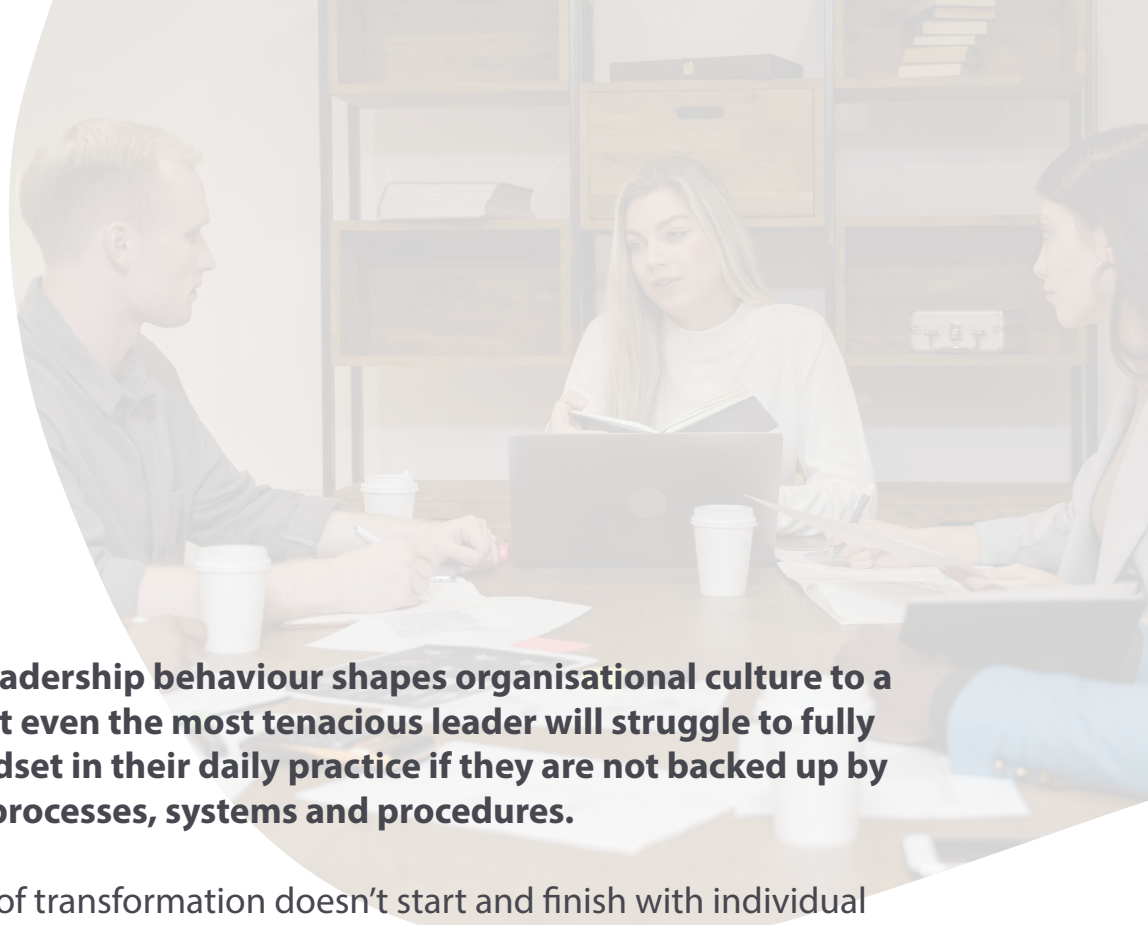
We know that leadership behaviour shapes organisational culture to a great extent, but even the most tenacious leader will struggle to fully embed this mindset in their daily practice if they are not backed up by corresponding processes, systems and procedures.

Clearly, any kind of transformation doesn't start and finish with individual leaders, but at the same time, any intent to change has to start with oneself. If the enterprise redesigns itself before its leaders are ready to redesign their approach, the initiative will almost certainly fail.

If leaders are still clinging to command-and-control methodology and don't grasp how to apply an agile approach to how they manage their teams, then those teams will end up bewildered and frustrated.

So, is becoming an agile leader a mindset, a skillset or a toolset?

Certainly, there are essential skills that any leader aspiring to become more agile will need to develop, and a broad range of tools that can be applied to support those skills; but without a doubt, mindset is the key ingredient required to make the transformation. Agile leaders think about and talk about innovation and change in a new way - being agile as opposed to doing agile.

Five steps to an agile leadership mindset

1. Anchor yourself

Anchor your approach to a clear vision, purpose and direction. Why are you here? What do you hope to be? What drives the success of you and your team? Make sure that the team actively embraces this vision and follows it with genuine conviction – that people not only believe in it but recognise the role they play in fulfilling it so that they keep it in their thoughts as they choose what to do and how to act on a daily basis.

2. Let go of control

Define the outcomes that are required, and let people work out the inputs required to achieve them. Forget hierarchies, processes, excessive documentation and overengineering – an agile leader lets people take risks and accepts failures as part of the process.

This means taking a coaching approach to leadership, empowering people to create and experiment with their own solutions, rather than providing them with a detailed roadmap that's based solely on your personal experiences and perspective. Realise that you may be holding onto obsolete beliefs about what has worked in the past, be prepared to confront reality and challenge and change the assumptions you have formed over time. As long as the vision and the outcomes are clear, people are committed to achieving them and have the skills and resources they need, there's no need to direct or dictate what people do.

This 'letting go' can be a struggle for many leaders, as it means putting ego aside and abandoning the pursuit of perfection. Agile leaders are comfortable with being uncomfortable and use that state of discomfort to learn, grow and thrive.

3. Live in the present

Be aware of the issues you are facing, and handle them with a current mindset, rather than instinctively returning time and again to tried and trusted solutions. Watch and listen to what is happening around you right now, and be prepared to be creative, take risks, and act quickly – after all, the present doesn't stay the present for very long. Your experience is still valuable, but only if you use it as a tool, and a foundation from which to keep learning and evolving.

Don't rely on experience to solve every problem as each of them has a unique set of circumstances and conditions.

Live in the present, but keep looking to the future – remember your anchor and the vision you are trying to accomplish.

4. Be inclusive

Collaborate freely, and not with the same people and teams every time. Reach out and make use of as many different minds as you have access to. This means involving cross-functional groups and diverse stakeholders in decision making, as well as your immediate colleagues. Work to build a sense of community that is based on trust and psychological safety, give people unrestrained permission to disagree with each other (and with you), and suggest fresh approaches.

Be open to disruptive ideas and innovations, and be curious about other peoples' views and perspectives - particularly those that are the most divergent from your own.

Being agile also means demonstrating agility with individual employees – each one has a different set of values, skills, and perspectives, so each one requires a different communication style and leadership approach. As a leader, you need to recognise and understand these diverse needs and align your approach to what people need from you in the moment.

5. Learn faster

Cultivate learning agility in yourself and others. Learning agility is a set of skills that allows us to learn something in one situation and apply it in a completely different situation. It's about knowing what to do when you don't know what to do.

People who are learning in an agile way actively seek new experiences and challenges, because they have an avid interest in making sense of them and learning from them. Subsequently, they have more tools and more solutions to draw on each time a new challenge arises.

To cultivate learning agility in your teams, aim to embed learning in the flow of everyday work and encourage continuous learning through personal reflection and social dimensions. Move to a 'just in time approach' to learning – what do we need to solve this problem right now? Agile teams learn from their failures as much as their successes, constantly on the lookout for ways to do better and be better.

As an agile leader, rather than being firm, consistent and resolute, you need to listen, learn, and adapt your position as circumstances demand. This shift in mindset requires a high degree of self-confidence, with both the confidence to humbly admit that you don't have all the answers and to relinquish control of the process.

But is it possible to be too agile? From the very start, the founding fathers of agile recognised the need to find a balance – prioritising collaboration and simplicity without completely rejecting planning, process and methodology. Agile leaders must also find the optimal balance for each area of operation: innovation balanced with standardisation; autonomy balanced with bureaucracy; and flexibility balanced with rigour.

Being agile doesn't mean being unfocused, inconsistent, ambiguous or disjointed; it means being adaptable, dynamic, and fully present.

CONTACT US

hemsleyfraser.com

UK
+44 345 071 2801
enquiries@hemsleyfraser.co.uk

US
+1 888-559-0074
inquiries@hemsleyfraser.com

GERMANY
+49 69 9203 75680
info@hemsleyfraser.de

CANADA
+1 250 999 2656
inquiries@hemsleyfraser.ca