How to Build an Agile Leader

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Companies adept at navigating the accelerating change and mounting complexity found in today's business environment are aptly called "agile" organizations. Organizational agility is essential for business success, and, in fact, agile organizations outperform their less agile counterparts ("Organizational agility," Haneberg, 2011). However, most executives acknowledge that their organizations are not as agile as they need to be ("Organizational agility: The new normal," Implement Consulting Group, 2010).

A 2010 survey conducted by ChangeWise and the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that the central factor for increasing an organization's agility is the "level of agility" exhibited by a company's leaders and leadership culture. The implication is that CLOs and other leadership development professionals have a crucial role to play in developing increased organizational agility.

Levels of Leadership Agility

To help leaders develop the capabilities needed to create agile organizations, CLOs first need to understand what leadership agility is and how managers develop this capacity. These questions were at the heart of a five-year research project conducted by consulting and training firm, ChangeWise, resulting in the publication of *Leadership Agility.* We used quantitative studies, on-site observations, documented business conversations, in-depth interviews, and manager journals to examine the thought patterns,

behavior and organizational outcomes of over 600 managers across a range of industries, functions, and organizational levels.

We found that leadership agility – the ability to lead effectively in complex, rapidly changing environments – goes considerably beyond learning agility, a more familiar term that refers to how well a leader adapts to new assignments. The ChangeWise study found that leadership agility includes how effectively leaders frame their initiatives, how well they work with stakeholders; how creative they are in solving complex problems, and how proactively they seek and learn from feedback on their own effectiveness.

To examine how leaders develop higher levels of agility, this study took an approach advocated in Nick Petrie's 2011 white paper, "Future trends in leadership development." As the business environment becomes more challenging, he points to the need to supplement competency-based models with more dynamic models that emphasize "vertical" adult development. Vertical development refers to a robust body of research that reveals how the "meaning making" capacity of adults broadens and deepens through distinct developmental stages. (See *Ego Development* by Jane Loevinger and *The Evolving Self* by Robert Kegan).

The ChangeWise research on leadership agility asked: How do leaders at the most relevant adult stages act when leading change, leading teams, and in pivotal conversations? The researchers not only identified qualitatively different leadership behaviors that correlate with each stage, they also clarified the mental and emotional capacities that enable these behaviors. Together, the constellation of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills rooted in each developmental stage is called a "level of leadership agility." A condensed summary of behaviors found at three key leadership agility levels is provided on the following page:

Level of Agility	Assumptions about Leadership	Pivotal Conversations	Leading Teams	Leading Organizational Change
Expert	*Tactical, problem-solving orientation.* Assumes leaders are respected and followed because of their expertise and authority.	*Either* strongly assertive *or* very accommodative in dealing with differences. May flip from one mode to the other. Tendency to avoid giving or requesting feedback.	More a supervisor than a manager. Creates more of a group of individuals than a team. Works primarily one-on-one with direct reports. Too caught up in details to lead strategically.	Organizational change initiatives are focused primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with relatively little attention to stakeholders.
Achiever	*Strategic, outcome orientation.* Believes leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives.	Primarily assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Will accept or even request feedback, if seen as helpful in achieving desired outcomes.	Team meetings often include group discussion of important strategic or organizational issues, largely motivated by an attempt to gain greater buy-in.	Organizational initiatives include analysis of external environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to solicitation of input.
Catalyst	*Visionary, facilitative orientation.* Articulates an innovative, inspiring vision and bringing the right people together to trans-form vision into reality. Feels that leadership is about empowering others and actively facilitating their development.	Balances assertive and accommodative styles as needed in specific situations. Questions underlying assumptions, including their own. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactively seeks and utilizes feedback.	Creates a highly participative team. Acts as team leader and facilitator. Fosters an open exchange of viewpoints on challenging issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development.	Aims to develop a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engage-ment with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that this input will increase the quality of decisions, not just buy-in.

Adapted from *Leadership Agility*

These leadership agility levels are not based on personality types, like those assessed by the MBTI or the DISC. They are sequential stages in a leader's development. Importantly, leaders retain the skill-sets developed at previous agility levels. About 10% of managers are at the pre-Expert stage, 45% at Expert, and 35% at Achiever. Currently, only about 10% have developed the mental and emotional capacities needed to lead at the Catalyst level. This is significant, because the research shows that managers who can lead at the Catalyst level are much more effective in today's business environment than Experts and Achievers. (For further information, including real-life stories that illustrate the differences between Expert, Achiever, and Catalyst, see *Leadership Agility*).

CLOs who help the leaders in their organizations to develop into their next level of agility can assist their companies in greatly increasing their organizational agility. Once CLOs have gained a clear understanding of leadership agility levels, what steps can they take to increase the agility of their leaders?

Assessing agility levels

A good place to start is to examine the assessment instruments used in the organization's current leadership development programs. Competency-based instruments tailored to a company's unique requirements may still be essential. However, most of these assessments focus primarily on Achiever-level competencies. Leadership development professionals who understand the difference between Achiever and Catalyst leadership are beginning to use the Leadership Agility 360 to supplement these assessments by providing feedback that pinpoints a leader's level of agility in three distinct action arenas: leading change, leading teams, and pivotal conversations.

This new form of assessment is being used in leadership development programs, with senior teams, and in organization development interventions. A key advantage of this type of assessment is that executives and high potentials who "max out" on traditional (implicitly Achiever-focused) 360s discover a whole new (Catalyst) zone of development into which they can grow.

Developing Leadership Agility

The other important step is to examine the organization's current leadership development programming. As with assessment processes, leadership development programs can be designed so they increase agility levels while also focusing on company-specific competencies. For this purpose, the most effective approach is to use well-planned action learning programs that combine multiple learning modalities: workshops where participants apply new perspectives and skills to their real work, coaching based on 360-degree feedback, learning circles, and individual or group projects.

However, action learning alone is not sufficient for raising agility levels. Most LD programs focus implicitly on the Achiever level, sometimes with a "sprinkling" of Catalyst. Programs for executives and high potentials, in particular, need to actively assist participants in growing into Catalyst mind-sets and skill-sets, then guide them in applying them to challenging conversations, team leadership, and organizational change projects. In addition, the coaches chosen to support these multi-modal action learning programs should have solid training and experience in facilitating a leader's development from one agility level to another.

Examples of Applications

When Balfour Beatty agreed to acquire RT Dooley, a smaller construction company based in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bill Blank, the southeast division president of Balfour Beatty wanted to develop a real partnership in the region that would result in one company with two distinct brands.   To accomplish this, he used a facilitated process that included shared visioning, coordinated change management work, and an LD effort that would increase the agility of senior leaders in both companies. Eighteen senior leaders received 360-feedback on their agility levels. The collective results were discussed at a "leadership summit" where the Leadership Agility framework became the common language for building a shared leadership culture. The result, a highly successful integration that was more like a merger than a traditional acquisition, was attributed in part to the increased agility of the senior leaders, an enhanced ability to navigate change and to manage the interdependencies needed for business success ("The

joining of Balfour Beatty Construction and RT Dooley: Making acquisitions and mergers work, even in tough times," Joan Wright, 2010).

The sidebar by Carter and Woods provides another example. In this case, the ChangeWise Leadership Agility framework and the Leadership Agility 360 were used in a corporate LD program at Monsanto to increase the agility of high potential managers. For further information about ways to increase the agility of a company's leadership culture, see "Creating a culture of agile leaders" (*People + Strategy*, vol. 32, issue 4, 2009).

Author Bio

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