



AGILE CHANGE
management limited

Leadership behaviours for an Agile Change culture

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Introduction

We know that agility is not a methodology or set of processes or techniques. Agility is the behaviours and attitudes that enable the ability of individuals and organisations to move quickly and easily. At an individual level, this ability leads to innovation, creativity, rapid adoption of new ways of working. At an organisational level, this behaviour is demonstrated by continuous improvements, the quest for new learning, the willingness to adopt new approaches and ultimately, faster to market and frequent creation of new products and services to customers.

Agile behaviours are supported by new ways of planning and prioritising work, but they need an environment that encourages and rewards their use. Leaders are principal players in creating this environment. Leaders are not restricted to those with hierarchical power within their organisations. A leader is someone who others willingly follow.

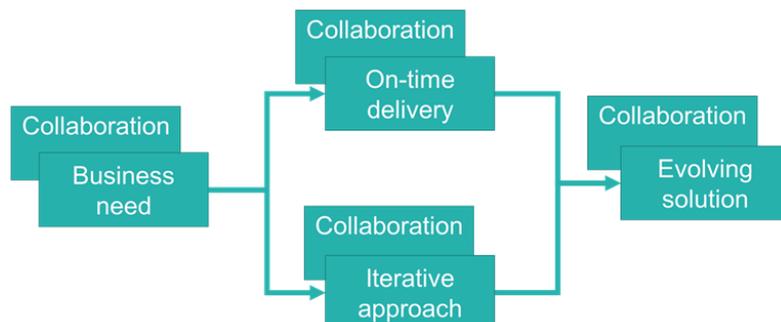
I work with lots of organisations in various states of agility, and I have observed a core group of behaviours, working together, that enable agile processes and techniques to flourish:

1. Imagining the future state
2. Flexing your vision
3. Identifying small steps
4. Living with uncertainty
5. Decision making
6. Seeking the input of others
7. Relinquishing control

If you are in any form of leadership position, this paper will give you the chance to benchmark your own behaviour against agile excellence and to identify areas for improvement. If you are a project/programme manager, PMO or Product Owner, this will give you lots of ideas for what to discuss with your Sponsor.

Mapping leadership to an agile approach

To make sense of these Agile behaviours (and the environment that supports them) we need to define our understanding of agility. Underpinning Agile Change is a set of concepts, drawn from combining principles, values and philosophies from the many agile approaches that exist today.



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Business need – this is the purpose of the change. It explains why the change is necessary and is a mixture of the expected improvements (benefits), the level of quality that the change must meet (acceptance criteria) and the features and functions that the change is expected to have (requirements). This purpose drives what is ultimately created (the solution) and the order in which components of this end goal are delivered (iterative approach).

Evolving solution - new ways of working are adopted piece by piece, building new achievements as each new capability becomes the norm. It enables us to benefit early from good ideas and helps us test if they are as good as we think they are. If we are right, our early experiences of the benefits motivate us to keep going. If we are wrong, we have avoided the waste of a fully developed idea that just doesn't work. The evolving solution starts with an end goal, which is what the organization will be capable of when all aspects of the change have been adopted, recognising that this end goal will evolve as each iteration is delivered, and we update our assumptions with feedback and live experience of the impact of our changes to date.

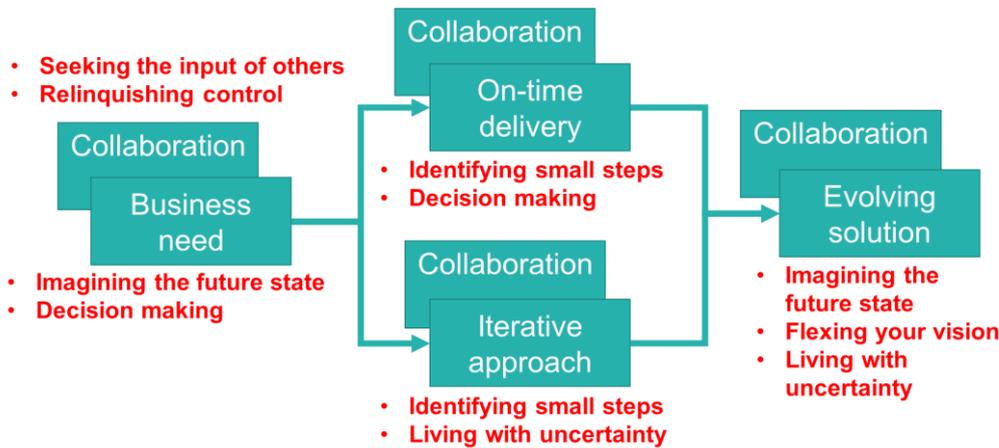
Iterative approach – iterative is another word for repeatable. We develop one aspect of the change, apply it to real business conditions, then learn from this experience to improve the next iteration where another aspect of the change will be developed and implemented. Only the immediate future is planned in detail; the rest of the change is defined using the feedback from the early implementations. This creates the flexibility to respond to new developments.

On-time delivery – this leads to early and frequent return on investment, as the accurate use of time creates dates at which the realization of the expected financial benefits can be measured and set against the costs of implementing the change. A trusted schedule, where dates are honoured and not moved at the last minute creates trust in the process and enables people to plan for these "certain" deliverables, increasing their level of involvement and support.

Collaboration - this creates shared understanding of what is needed between those creating the tangible changes, those involved in designing the new ways of working, and all those who will need to work in new ways. It involves joint participation in the creation and implementation of new ways of working.

An understanding of these concepts helps us to identify the leadership behaviours needed to successfully apply an Agile Change approach. Clearly there is overlap, as the behaviours support more than one of the concepts, but I thought a visual representation would help us see how application of the concepts relies on a willingness by leaders to think and act in an agile way, themselves, and encouraging the same behaviour in others.



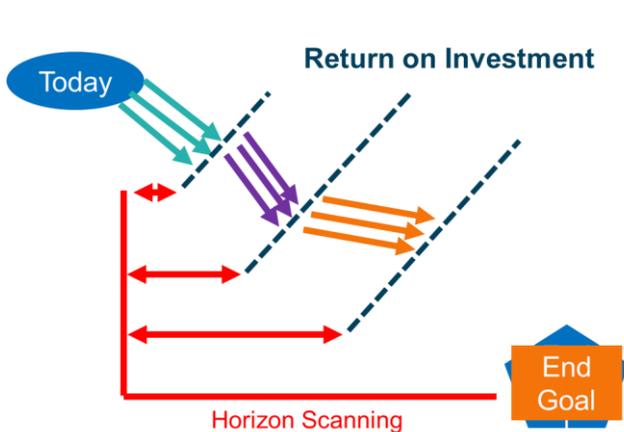


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Imagining the future state

Imagining the future state is at the heart of achieving agile change, because it sets the ultimate destination for what we are trying to achieve. Leaders need to step into the future, and imagine what capabilities now exist that didn't exist before. This is all about starting with the end in mind, not building up bottom up from individual requirements, features and specific functionality but looking at their potential results and describing this exciting, compelling future state.

A successful future state describes what the organisation can do, who it does it for, how this fits into the competitive landscape and wider business environment without descending into a shopping list of all the elements that enable the organisation to behave in this way.



The end goal can be one or a combination of these answers:

- **What** we do – products/services
- **How** we do it – manual/automation; known/innovative
- **Who** we do it with – external suppliers/internal resources
- **Where** we do it – onshore/off-shore; continents/countries; urban/rural
- **When** do we do it – time of day/week/month; frequency; regularity

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A description of the future state is more stable than a description of all the elements, system, apps, techniques etc needed to create it, with the added advantage that without describing in detail how the future state works, the leader remains open to change, which is important when so many elements are subject to rapid innovation cycles, forcing changes and updates.

Flexing your vision

To apply Agile Change, leaders need to recognise that their vision is always going to be just over the horizon, because in an environment of continuous change, any achievement is temporary, because there is always more to add, more to change to better reflect the latest circumstances.

Effective leadership involves changing course in response to new information, taking account of ever-changing end goals. For example, if an organisation has the end goal of “digital first” what is required will evolve over time as the understanding of digital becomes clearer.

This requires courage, because embracing additions and changes to your vision can feel as if you are admitting you were wrong in describing your initial vision. “Sticking to your story”, being consistent in what you say have always been prized leadership qualities. Now, in this time of Agile Change, we are demanding the opposite from leaders. We need those who are open to new sources of information, constantly challenging their original view, benchmarking it against what else is happening in the market and openly announcing how their ideas are evolving.

In my experience, leaders are more willing to adopt this flexibility if I can point out that it is a recognised school of thought. In my own consultancy work, I often use the work of Heifetz and Laurie on Adaptive Leadership to give credibility to this “agile approach”:

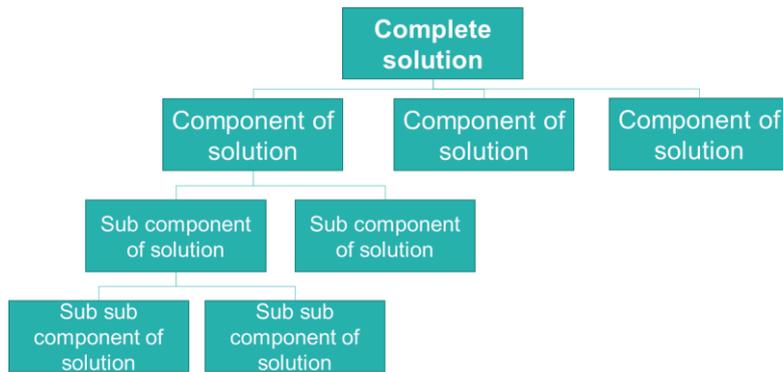
“Leadership is about more than identifying a vision and aligning the workforce with that vision. Leaders should get away from the habit of providing solutions and devolve this responsibility to the ‘collective intelligence’ of all employees. The role of the leader in facing adaptive challenges is to protect employees from outside threats while allowing the pressures of reality to be felt without too much distress – challenging values, beliefs and norms in the process.”

Heifetz and Laurie, 2002

Identifying small steps

We need leaders to be able to decompose their vision into smaller, specific achievements to support an iterative approach and on-time delivery. There is real skill involved in breaking a big achievement into stand-alone pieces of work that are smaller in scope, duration and resources required. In my Agile Change work, this is often the activity that causes the most difficulty. Looking at a piece of work and identifying all the inter-dependent strands that taken together will achieve it requires a structured approach to investigating what is required and who might be impacted.





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Apply this series of questions to find the smallest element of work that can be delivered without waiting for the completion of something else:

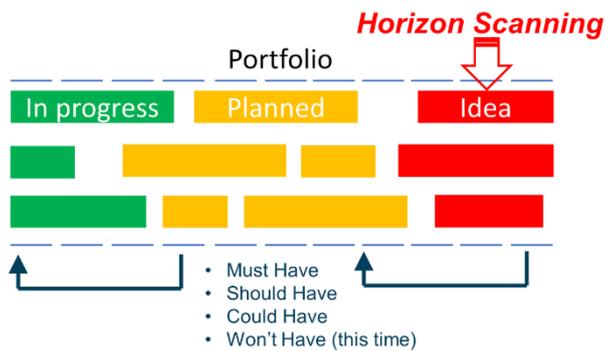
- Can this be used without other components?
- Does this component solve a problem?
- Does this component offer new features or functionality?
- Does this component enable the creation of another component?

Living with uncertainty

In continuing uncertainty, where we operate in a VUCA world - volatility; uncertainty; complexity; ambiguity, it is essential that leaders are open to new information. The need to continually challenge their assumptions and their expectations. Remaining curious and avoiding complacency are essential leadership traits, which involve greeting new information with the view that this could be interesting rather than threatening is the key here.

It isn't possible to accurately scan for all possible changes that will affect our organisations, but creating a regular, robust structure for debating potential changes encourages everyone to look out for them and to share their views on what they think is coming next. It is not a guarantee, but an established horizon scanning approach reduces the chances that changes originating elsewhere will be a complete surprise.

Ideally, this horizon scanning approach, which can trigger changes to existing initiatives but also trigger the need for more initiatives is partnered with a portfolio management approach. This enables leaders to see the context in which new information needs to be viewed.



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More opportunities mean that there are more decisions to be made, and these decisions need to be made rapidly and consistently. Leaders need a set of criteria to assess the business value of each option. If there are more opportunities for change, and therefore more changes, it stands to reason that each change is likely to have a shorter lifespan. This means:

- Deliver faster – don't miss the opportunity
- Don't "gold plate" – will soon be obsolete

In response to less stability:

- Keep describing the end goal as your constant – frequently share an easy to understand description of the idea future state
- Explain changes to this future state by referring back to the most recent version, with an explanation of what has been added, amended or subtracted in response to changing circumstances
- Appreciate the emotional impact of frequent, continuous change and provide reassurance by acknowledging how unsettling it can feel, and that it is OK to feel uncertain about what is going to happen next

Decision making

In Agile Change, there are a continuous stream of decisions to be taken. Leaders must decide if they are going to flex their vision and if so in what way; they have to decide what outcomes will create the greatest business value and prioritise this work; leaders have to assess their environment to decide who best to collaborate with. A willingness to take decisions frequently and without delay so that there is a flow of activity, providing continuous delivery of new capabilities, bringing together tangible and behavioural change.

Leaders need to apply their understanding of the benefits and capabilities to be achieved by their vision, to know the difference between opportunity and distraction, which ties deeply to an understanding of how your organisation will work in the future, who it will service and what products and services it will provide.



Prioritisation is important because it addresses to common areas of failure:

- Danger of too much change – effort spread too thin
- Losing your way – too many different initiatives working at tangents to each other



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Increasingly, prioritisation also contributes to less stress and mental health benefits. We are in an epidemic of too much to do, and too little time to do it. Being clear about what work is the most valuable and beneficial now and what can wait until later creates reduces this pressure.

Seeking the input of others

This requires relationship building skills and an ability to facilitate the sharing of different views with the willingness to listen to others. Often it is the willingness to listen and then apply what has been heard that causes the most difficulties because it means accepting the value of someone else's view over your own. Our brains naturally fight against this because our brains act as our own personal cheerleaders. When we have a thought, our brain immediately gets behind the concept and encourages us to act on it. When we hear the views of others, we are more sceptical and more cautious.

The easy way to overcome this is to form bonds with others, areas of common interests and perspectives. There is research to show that when we view someone as "like us" then we give their ideas the same encouragement and support that we give to our own ideas.

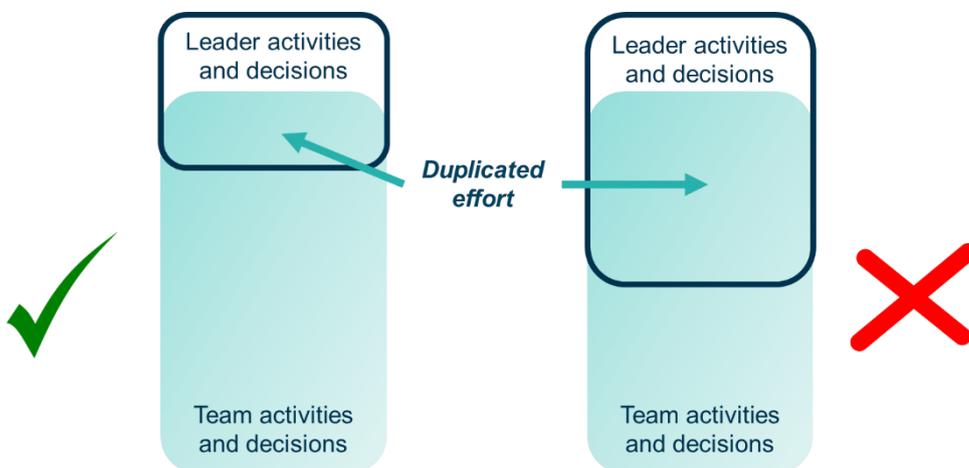
Another way to engage with others is to build trust. Trust means that people believe you. In a business environment this means they are willing to follow your lead. If you are a trusted resource, you become a magnetic force, where people are drawn towards you. When I wrote Agile Change Management – A Practical Handbook, I interviewed several hundred leaders who were identified as having high levels of trust. I asked all of them why they thought they were trusted by others, because I was interested in how to create trust. The top 5 factors that appeared across all these interviews were:

- Be reliable – do what you said you were going to do, when you said you would do it
- Be predictable – be clear about your values and your positions on different issues so that others can understand your reactions to events

- Be congruent – make sure there is consistency between how you ask others to behave and how you behave yourself
- Be open – give honest feedback, do not avoid difficult conversations and welcome honest feedback in return
- Be loyal – give credit to others for their work and provide your support when it is needed

Relinquishing control

The pace of change is so high, leaders cannot supervise everything, and cannot keep up to speed with every decision that is being taken. This means that empowering teams is not just good practice for the team, increasing their motivation and use of their specialist expertise, it is a survival mechanism for leaders. Leaders who successfully create an agile positive environment are ones with an appropriate span of control:



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Just like “seeking the input of others”, this leadership behaviour takes self-confidence. Empowering a team means that they find their own answers, they do not escalate everything to the leader for approval, so it is easy to feel out of control. Clearly there is a need for balance. Leaders held accountable for the impact of certain decisions cannot be removed from the decision-making process. However, these are often far fewer than the leader allows for.

The way to achieve this balance is to establish clear criteria for when decisions should involve the leader and when work can be self-directed by teams and individuals. This must be accompanied by frequent discussions about the future state, and how this is being interpreted by everyone. If there is common agreement on the destination to be achieved then leaders can have greater confidence in the devolved power of their staff, because everyone is aiming to achieve the same things. Leaders can then be surgical in their assessment of the work that needs senior level engagement, and work that is better devolved to specialists and experts who can bring their extensive experience to fully assess every aspect of the decision.



I spend a lot of time telling my team what their boundaries of authority are, and within that they have complete freedom. They don't need to invite me into meetings, they don't need to double check something with me. If they do, I am interrupted, I cannot engage with the strategic decisions and relationship building that is critical to my role. This creates two types of delay:

- I delay the team by waiting on me for my input
- I am delayed because I cannot get on with my work because I am taking decisions for the team

It is inefficient to try to maintain control over everything as it means we are duplicating our efforts.

Conclusion

Agile Change is not just a process, it is a way of working, thinking, and acting. Leadership behaviours, whatever their formal role in Agile Change is key to making this work. Leaders are agents of change, and being deliberate in how they think, act and behave enables them to role model the change in approach that needs to be adopted universally if agile is to become the new way of working.

I hope this paper has given you some ideas, and if you want more content like this, please sign up for my newsletter where I regularly share new thoughts and ideas

<https://agilechangemanagement.co.uk/newsletter/>

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I am the founder of the Continuous Change Community and the Chief Examiner of the Agile Change Agent qualification. I am a respected author of books and articles on change, project and programme management.

