

Leadership Agility - C.Landry

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FILE	13441_CAROLYN_LANDRY_LEADERSHIP_AGILITY_-_C.LANDRY_1650698_646827264.DOCX (31.2K)		
TIME SUBMITTED	17-NOV-2019 06:11PM (UTC-0500)	WORD COUNT	1716
SUBMISSION ID	1215637683	CHARACTER COUNT	9800

Running Head: AGILE LEADERSHIP: A NEW MODEL FOR TODAY'S BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Agile Leadership: A New Model for Today's Business Environment

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Agile Leadership – Towards and Evolved Leadership Model

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Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to Tonya Dow and Mary Catherine Rawls, whose kindness inspired me to learn what it means to be a leader. Special thanks to my parents Brenda and Jim Jordan my aunt Lois Kerr and the rest of my family who have supported me on this journey, been exceptional professional and academic role models and most importantly, tolerated my absence from a lot of family time over the past two years.

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Abstract

As the business world evolves, it is natural for new leadership models to arise as well. Agile Leadership is a business model that has grown in use over the past twenty years. Industries from technology to hospitality have embraced Agile Leadership and have been transformed for the positive. In reviewing the business and academic literature that has explored Agile Leadership to date, it can be reasoned that Agile Leadership is seen as a valuable leadership model, worthy of application across industries, organizations and teams. However, before applying Agile Leadership, organizations, teams and leaders should seek to understand what Agile Leadership really is in order to ensure that they are maximally effective in its application. Explored herein is the current thinking on Agile Leadership, including the psychologies, mindsets and practices of Agile Leadership with examples of successful application interspersed utilizing the Agile Leadership concept of “Leadership Storytelling.”

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Introduction

As with any emerging concept, it is important for leaders to truly understand what they are trying to implement so as to both ensure maximal effectiveness and benefit as well as to mitigate undesired outcomes. Are businesses today ready to embrace Agile Leadership as a primary leadership and management mindset? They might just be. But first, they need to understand what Agile Leadership really is.

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Literature Review

For generations, businesses have relied on traditional hierarchical, command-and-control leadership models. While these leadership models worked for the industries doing business in the past, the evolving business world has prompted a need for new leadership models. Denning (2018) One such leadership model is Agile Leadership. The Agile Leadership model has, at its heart, the value of innovation, the imperative to work collaboratively, the goal to deliver increased value and to “delight the customer”. Denning (2017) In today’s business world, where innovation is happening constantly, where workers are more empowered and where customers have more options for where and how they do business, Agile Leadership provides a way for organizations in all industries to compete in the increasingly complex world of business. Joiner (2007).

The concept of “agile” was conceived of in the early 2000’s through the work of a group of software engineers who were looking for ways to improve their work processes. Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi (2016) Over the past twenty years, the conversation about “agile” has evolved from being a concept used in software engineering, to being a management and leadership mindset. Publications to date have focused on defining “agile”, identifying Agile Leadership and Agile Management practices, discussing barriers and considering the application of the mindset in different industries and disciplines.

Bill Joiner and Stephen Denning are the primary thought leaders on the topic of Agile Leadership and Agile Management as well as its applications in the business world. Both have authored landmark books on the topic. Joiner’s 2007 book, Leadership Agility, started the conversation from the perspective of change initiation. It interweaves real-life stories with the core competencies of leadership agility. In his 2018 book, The Age of Agile, Stephen Denning

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added depth to the definition of agile by identifying three laws that comprise the agile mindset:

1) The Law of the Small Team, 2) The Law of the Customer and 3) The Law of the Network.

According to Denning, organizations that use small teams, are better able to adapt to changing priorities and execute quickly on complex issues. The focus on delighting the customer and surpassing the customer's expectations every time is another core characteristic of agile.

Denning's definition of agile is rounded out by stating that the way teams use their resources, including the skills of others in their networks, not only allows teams to be nimble, but to focus on what they are good at more of the time, and bring in experts where needed rather than trying to learn anew themselves. Denning illustrates these laws using the metaphor of a large lumbering warship versus a flotilla of small speedboats and provides a nice way of thinking of the difference between traditional management and organizational styles and that of agile. Denning states, "When the whole organization truly embraces Agile, the organization is less like a giant warship and more like a flotilla of tiny speedboats." Denning (2019) Denning's illustration, however, does not negate the importance of hierarchy in a team or organizational structure. Denning clarifies the role of hierarchy by identifying agile as a "mindset" rather than an organizational structure. That said, agile teams leverage hierarchy in different ways and for different purposes.

Denning also provides perspective on the barriers to "agile". He identifies two reasons why business leaders fail when it comes to applying "agile": 1) leaders and managers too often seek partial fixes rather than long term solutions; and 2) there exists a bias of senior leaders against agile practices. Denning (2017).

Together, the works of Joiner and Denning offer definition of agile leadership and provide context and illustration to understand its application and barriers. Additional books and

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articles published over the last ten years characterize agile leadership in much the same way that Joiner and Denning did. In a 2016 article entitled “Embracing Agile: How to Master the Process that is Transforming Management”, authors Rigby, Sutherland and Takeuchi add additional perspective by digging into the reasons agile works and providing more depth about the ways it can fail. According to Rigby, Sutherland and Takeuchi, the problem with business leaders’ mastery of agile is that many business leaders don’t really understand it. Rigby et al. (2016) In addition, business leaders’ typical management and leadership behaviors and practices are actually counter-intuitive to Agile. Rigby et al. (2016)

The concept of leadership agility is part of an ongoing learning process for organizations today. The business and academic literature to date has done a nice job of defining, contextualizing and debating the topic as well as providing examples of organizations in many different industries which have done well in applying leadership agility to their organizational practice. Much of the literature published in since 2010 focuses on the application of agile to unique business needs, whether that is a specific industry, discipline or team setting. Additionally, the academic and business literature to date offers insight and advice on how leaders can embrace agile. The literature identifies the mindsets, psychology and thought processes which make agile successful.

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Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Agile leadership is revolutionizing the way business is done; and businesses and organizations are definitely ready. As we move towards the year 2020, agile leadership has gained a foothold and shown measurable value to businesses and leaders across many industries.

The current literature on the topic of “agile”, Agile Management and Agile Leadership explores the concept of agile as a management and leadership practice as a mindset. Most of the literature offers insight and advice for how to leverage and apply the agile mindset to ones’ management or leadership practice.

“Agile”, as it is collectively known, holds a lot of promise for business as well as for the discipline of leadership. From employee engagement, to increased value for customers, “agile” is a new way of thinking about how work gets done. The concept of agile as a leadership model is still quite new and warrants more study by the academic and business worlds.

To date, there has not been any literature published exploring agile management and leadership from the standpoint of the team or of the individual staff member whose leaders operate within the agile mindset. In addition, there has not been anything published discussing agile leadership practices in healthcare or other highly regulated industries.

Next steps in the academic study and business application of “agile” should delve into the following topics:

- Leading and Managing the Millennial and I-Generations
- Healthcare quality and safety: using agile to improve patient outcomes
- Stories of failure: when Agile goes awry

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