

Leadership Agility

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Extract from Leadership Agility White Paper

As a manager, no one needs to remind you that we live in a global economy that constantly bombards us with change and complexity. Every year, new technologies, markets, and competitors emerge at an ever-increasing pace. As change accelerates, so do novelty and uncertainty. Future threats and opportunities become harder to predict. We also live in an increasingly complex, interconnected world, where quality attention to internal and external customers, strategic allies, and other stakeholders is essential for business success.

The Need for Agility

While specific future developments are increasingly difficult to predict, there are two deep trends we can predict with great certainty: The pace of change will continue to increase, and the level of complexity and interdependence will continue to grow. For over a decade, organizational change experts, acutely aware of these powerful trends, have been talking about the need to develop “agile” companies — organizations that anticipate and respond rapidly to changing conditions by leveraging highly productive internal and external relationships.

To enjoy sustained success, companies need to develop a level of organizational agility that matches the increasing level of change and complexity in their business environment. Yet, for the vast majority of companies, full-fledged strategic and operational agility is still more an aspiration than a reality. One of the major reasons for this continuing “agility gap” is the need to develop more agile leaders. To develop teams and organizations with the level of agility demanded by today’s turbulent business environment, companies need leaders who embody a corresponding level of agility.

It’s no wonder, then, that senior executives have ranked agility among the most critical leadership competencies needed in their companies today. But what is leadership agility? In essence, it’s the ability to lead effectively under conditions of rapid change and mounting complexity. Because these trends affect all managerial levels, this is a competency that’s increasingly needed not just in the executive suite but throughout the organization.

Research reported in our book, *Leadership Agility* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), shows that there are three distinct levels in the mastery of this vital competency. Each new level of agility represents an ability to respond effectively to an increased level of change and complexity. Strikingly, this research indicates that only about 10% of managers have mastered the level of agility needed for consistently effective leadership in today’s turbulent world economy.

In the summary descriptions below, you will find profiles that show how managers at the three levels of agility conduct themselves while carrying out initiatives in three, key “action arenas”: (1) engaging in pivotal conversations (2) improving team performance, and (3) leading organizational change.

Based on data collected from over 700 managers, we estimate that about 90% of managers operate at the pre-Expert, Expert, or Achiever levels of agility. The **Expert** level, with its tactical, problem-solving orientation, is best suited for relatively stable environments where complexity is fairly low. The **Achiever** level, with its strategic, outcome-orientation, is effective in moderately complex environments where the pace of change is moderate and episodic.

The predominant combination of Expert and Achiever leadership worked relatively well for most companies until the waning decades of the 20th century, when the globalization of the economy ushered in an era of continuous change and growing interdependence.

Generally speaking, consistently effective leadership in this uncertain environment requires mastery of the visionary, facilitative orientation found at the **Catalyst** level of agility.

Quick Reference Guide to Three Levels of Leadership Agility

Each level of agility includes and goes beyond the skills and capacities developed at previous levels. Percentages refer to research-based estimates of the managers currently capable of operating at each agility level.

Expert Level (~45%)

View of Leadership

Tactical, problem solving orientation. Believes that leaders are respected and followed by others because of their authority and expertise.

Engaging in Pivotal Conversations

Style is either to strongly assert opinions or hold back to accommodate others. May swing from one style to the other, particularly for different relationships. Tends to avoid giving or requesting feedback.

Improving Team Performance

More of a supervisor than a manager. Creates a group of individuals rather than a team. Work with direct reports is primarily one-on-one. Too caught up in the details of own work to lead in a strategic manner.

Leading Organizational Change

Organizational initiatives focus primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with little attention to stakeholders.

Achiever Level (~35%)

View of Leadership

Strategic, outcome orientation. Believes that leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives.

Engaging in Pivotal Conversations

Primarily assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Will accept or even initiate feedback, if helpful in achieving desired outcomes.

Improving Team Performance

Operates like a fully-fledged manager. Meetings to discuss important strategic or organizational issues are often orchestrated to gain buy-in to own views.

Leading Organizational Change

Organizational initiatives include analysis of external environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to soliciting input.

Catalyst Level (~10%)

View of Leadership

Visionary, facilitative orientation. Believes that leaders articulate an innovative, inspiring vision and bring together the right people to transform the vision into reality. Leaders empower others and actively facilitate their development.

Engaging in Pivotal Conversations

Adept at balancing assertive and accommodative styles as needed in particular situations. Likely to articulate and question underlying assumptions. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactive in seeking and utilizing feedback.

Improving Team Performance

Intent upon creating a highly participative team. Acts as a team leader and facilitator. Models and seeks open exchange of views on difficult issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development.

Leading Organizational Change

Organizational initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that input increases the quality of decisions, not just buy-in.

Post-heroic Leadership

Managers who operate at the Catalyst level of agility have a different mindset about what it means to be a leader. In their book, *Power Up: Transforming organizations through shared leadership*, David Bradford and Allan Cohen distinguish between “heroic” and “post-heroic” leadership. We found that managers at the Expert and Achiever levels of agility operate from an heroic leadership mindset. That is, they assume sole responsibility for setting their organization’s objectives, coordinating the activities of their direct reports, and managing their performance.

Heroic leaders can be highly effective in certain situations. However, in complex, rapidly changing organizational environments, heroic leadership over-controls and under-utilizes subordinates. It discourages people from feeling responsible for anything beyond their assigned area, inhibits optimal teamwork, and implicitly encourages subordinates to use the heroic approach with their own units.

Leaders who operate at the Catalyst level practice what Bradford and Cohen call post-heroic leadership. These leaders retain the ultimate accountability and authority that comes with their role, yet they create work environments characterized by high involvement and shared responsibility.

Assessing Leadership Agility

As we noted earlier, the development of higher levels of leadership agility is essential not only for top managers but for people at all organizational levels. If you want to increase your own leadership agility and help those who report to you do the same, you can start by doing two informal assessments:

First, use the definitions above to assess your own level of agility. To supplement your self-assessment, ask a few trusted colleagues to tell you where they think you are most of the time. Then ask yourself whether you want to develop to the next level. Developing increased agility will make you more effective in carrying out your everyday leadership initiatives, and it will aid you in helping others become more effective leaders. Second, use the same chart to assess your managers’ agility levels. Compare their current levels with where you think they need to be.

Developing Leadership Agility

Ultimately, the primary “engine” for developing leadership agility is self-leadership: Start by assessing your current agility level and your strengths and limitations. Then set your leadership development goals. Do you want to move to a new level of agility? Even if you don’t want to move to another level, what leadership agility competencies do you want to develop further within your current level?

Once you’ve set your leadership development goals, the key to increasing your agility is to use your everyday initiatives to experiment with more agile behaviours. At the heart of self-leadership is a practice we call “reflective action.” This is an ongoing, cyclical process of setting objectives, clarifying a strategy or plan for achieving these objectives, taking action, then reflecting on your experience. Reflective action can be very rapid and intuitive, as in the midst of a conversation, or it can be more sustained and systematic, as in developing a new business strategy.

Whatever form it takes in a particular situation, repeatedly engaging in this practice allows you to use your everyday leadership initiatives to develop your leadership agility competencies. This is because this practice involves stepping back from your current focus in a way that generates new insights and helps you make wiser decisions, then re-engaging in what needs to be done next:

The more you nurture a resilient, self-empowering attitude toward the challenges you face, the more your own commitment to reflective action will grow. With this practice as your ally, you'll be able to meet the changes and complications that come your way with curiosity and optimism — and you'll be able to help others to do the same.

Extract from Leadership Agility Whitepaper (Joiner). Reference below.