

The Weakest Link: On the Run Towards Making an Organization More Agile

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Abstract: This paper is about and for those evolving leaders who may have experienced leadership at non agile workplaces and/or those who are trying understand the new leadership ground better in agile environments? This paper is making us aware of new ways of working and new areas to focus as for leading an organisation to be agile. This research can be put into application by agile team members and leadership roles alike as understanding these findings can only enable a leader-leader equation in organisations and in life in general where people are working in groups and trying to lead towards a collective goal. This paper is about letting people be aware of the highly valuable goals over less valuable goals. And encourage people to put their strength to the play, outplaying what becomes a weakest link by setting up goals that do not yield the leader-leader environment needed for an agile workplace that makes teams and stakeholders equally happy.

For: evolving leaders! People responsible for being agile and leading an agile way of working to create value and happier teams.

Design/methodology/approach: This is Theoretical research and a logical exploration of a system of beliefs and assumptions. This research includes theorizing or defining how a system and its environment behave and then exploring valued behaviors to enable a people led transformation. This research is very valuable in understanding better goals a leader can have on an agile journey. Also, the reading can help understand characteristics of the system that cultivates a change for creating high value and highly happy teams.

Practical implications: Often organisations get started with agile transformation and tend to withdraw or loosen their interest on the way. In the absence of the right goals to move in a direction where there could be more autonomy, happiness and stream of business relevant outcomes, we need to have better goals. This can enable an organisation led by all people regardless of their role or any existing hierarchy to stick to the ground, see challenges with new eyes, and have priorities that enable over creating more challenges.

Originality/value: This paper proposes 5 areas with a researched description upon it. Focusing on them can enable people to identify more such areas with improved clarity of priorities that enable oneself and teams for high agility, more value and happier teams.

Keywords: *Internal team environment, Shared leadership, Motivation, Creativity, Self-Management, Done, Trust, Autonomy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Managing the work with traditional leadership and practices was needed in the age of mass productions. Its essence was in building processes, managing work and also - providing intelligence for work to be done.

In the digital or software age, those needs have evolved. The necessity has become to create teams that are empowered to respond to their environment.

The era, where management was the king and workers were resources; looked in a very same way as other resources as tools and finances to get work done, has passed.

Agility or need of new agile leadership is about up-ending the traditional hierarchies. Putting teams first. Creating autonomy. Making transparency a habit. Creating healthy boundaries. Understand the maturity of a group and respond as if they were at the next level of maturity by taking a leap of faith with people. What organizations really wish and shall seek is to see groups evolving to a new stage where they are more agile. [16]

There is a new meaning to high performing teams now which does not revolve around more output but creating done increments matching needs of the users/customers and also supporting stakeholders to know them in a much better way by failing fast and absorbing feedback from users/customers. [8]

Autonomy could be completely misleading. It might appear as if anyone can do anything and understanding this better enables us to know what are healthy boundaries in a team environment and what are new focus areas for an agile leader over a traditional one.

Single most important sign of being an agile team is having multiple small wins on the way. A group reluctant of this fact and not taking moments and ways to join the celebration of it, is either not being agile or not sensing their agility to go to the next level. [A]

We have identified and researched 5 better goals, 5 themes for evolving leaders.

II. UNLEASHING VOICES

The organisational hierarchy has changed. Rather upended. The teams are meant to be facing the customers directly. Meant to be empowered to understand feedback frequently and respond to that. [7]

A leader in the traditional old environment where a leader's own ability to think and execute upon directions would have paid off greatly as they would have been the people mostly working with customers very closely. In the new equation, it is very important that the creativity in the team is empowered. Their voices are unleashed.

Storytelling is an art. Evolving leaders keep getting better at it. At times, surfacing the pain being experienced currently or idea of potential benefit can be compelling to create a hook. At the same time, starting a conversation with a very fixed idea of exact actions that should take place is a trap. It goes a long way to put people forward, to put their ideas forward. To let people, have a fingerprint on the action plan over things by structuring a discussion where teams present divergent ideas and then converge on some by their own. This creates more ownership

as people know they have found and decided to give it a try themselves. This helps teams unleash. Unleash their voices. Customers, in the long run, find more support from a bunch of folks showing courage to think creatively, diverge on options and converge collaboratively. In the long run such an unleashed team can understand the needs of the customer solidly over a team that takes and executes mere directions/orders sometimes stories as is, without probing the why parts.

Teams created with intentions to be creative themselves,

- to respond to situations in a creative way,
- Experiment faster.
- Learn faster.
- Use timeboxes wisely.

Make most of a time box as a safe place to experiment. [17]
[18] Team's creativity to improve their way of working pays off greatly.

It is key managers, internally start processing their roles and duties without even organisation formally naming the role as a - coach. In the agile way of working, in order to create teams that are able to respond to situations, it's a key that managers start becoming coaches to the teams and empower creatively in them. Unleash the best in them. Create an environment where teams do not seek permissions but show courage to solve tough problems by self-managing around it.

As we brush up our memories, we can find moments when we p with a leader who worked as not the smartest person in the room and that made the team feel more ready to be open and show courage to work on tough problems. [10]

This leads us to the theme Facilitation over Direction.

II. HIGH PERFORMANCE

Often high-performance and speed are associated with the word agile. Our systems have a background. Where manufacturing and producing were goals in many industries. In the new era where customer experience and value delivery have become paramount, the definition of performance should simply change and adjust to it. Though it does not look to be taking place that easily. Many managers set forward the wrong goal and wrong question to solve for.

It gets tougher because traditionally we seek answers from the team about what we are doing. There is a lot of focus internally within the members and managers about making sure the team is disciplined enough and people are engaged at work through most of the working hours. That does not solve the real goal, that cannot guarantee customer happiness unless we start asking what is getting done, what will the criteria meet when this is done, is it valuable enough.

Typically, a software engineer in their beginning faces an issue to find a logical end to a work item, it will usually be the situation that one is almost done but not complete. Similarly, a leader evolving in their role as Agile leader should try to avert from looking at performance of the team as a list of things finished by a day but to create a structure where team duly participate and probe the work for its size and impact together. Team spends time to slice, order and club the tasks or stories or work items in order to create a meaning. The goal should become what is getting done when we finish rather than what we are doing day after day. [12]

Agile leaders shall rewire their meaning making around high-performance. In the new context it's about,

- a high-quality product,
- a highly satisfied customer,
- a highly useful review,
- a highly usable feature,
- a higher rate of learning,
- a higher rate of delivery,
- a highly effective product
- even if the team is not highly efficient. [13]

The new goals can empower the leaders to focus on the right interventions.

The beauty of focusing on what is done as an increment, over what we are doing day after day, is that slowly teams start self-managing around the better goals and they become efficient at them.

A team finishing all stories in every sprint versus a team finishing only some of it but ending with a useful increment is far more high performing in the new context. It's a job of the whole group, whole team to showcase what leadership, how leadership and why leadership. [4]

Getting better at the right goals and becoming efficient at them is the goal.

There comes a point in the evolution of the agile leader where they have coached and created enough experiments with the team that they efficiently can deliver effectively done increments, and still be vulnerable to be not fully efficient every spirit as long as the value created was effective. [14]

A traditional leader would enjoy the self-glory of how they have created a high performing team, The agile leader would take pride in how their team self-managed around the effectiveness of the goal every iteration.

This leads us to the theme as Done over Doing.

II. PROBLEMS, TRANSPARENCY & PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

One strong anti-pattern in the new way of leadership, from traces of earlier command and control leadership era, is trying to fix the problems within the team. They might come from an interpersonal background or products/requirement understanding background or more. In the true sense, walking towards building a team which can work, learn and improve as a group, it becomes more important to surface the issue, making problem areas transparent. Effective use of retrospective to invoke a conversation on the burning need of improvement within the team is a key. [5]

The leaders can look at retrospectives for primarily two purposes. Improvement and celebration.

In a true sense, taking a walk towards a team that builds incremental value, it is given that there will be a lot of small wins on the way. Taking time to let the team course correct and celebrate any small win has a power.

It is also important to understand that people approach from different ego states when working and collaborating.

People do not come from but they operate at different ego states. This is important to understand. Perceiving that people come from different ego states is totally different than people operating at different ego states.

Being aware of it can help leaders have the right dialogue to create and influence the teams to have a more complementary conversation. [2]

This leads us to the theme as Making problems (surface/bring up) transparent over fixing them.

IV. DEPENDENCIES AND CREATING FOCUS

Suiting the earlier world, it was cherished, how a leader comes and influences to resolve a big dependency. And at times such scenarios were unknowingly sought by teams and organizations as it gave a glorious win to a few.

In the new world, where creating value is utmost important along with teams of motivated individuals, it makes more sense to focus on creating teams that can create an end-to-end value. It makes sense to create value streams & look to reduce & ideally eliminate dependencies. [9]

Building an environment for teams where they can focus has two key shifts leaders have to make and enable. First shift is about how we look at dependencies.

Second shift is about focus. In an empirical environment, it's very important to follow the principle of YAGNI. It tells us that – You are not going to need it now. In the traditional environment typically, teams are chasing a very big goal without having it sliced for small experimental iterative review and feedback. It is very important that teams are built and supported where they can refine and slice work to fit a small duration. Forget worrying too much about what happens after this and strive for a slice of product/ slice of value which can be reviewed in order to match the needs and wishes of customers and stakeholders. [8]

Leaders need to create an environment and also boundaries where teams are good to focus on now, work a unit which can deliver experience in an end-to-end way. Leaders should see great benefits of creating teams capable of end-to-end value delivery. This can greatly take care of showstoppers or plans created with assumed commitment and timelines of other teams which can variably change depending on the primary goal of other teams. In order to create focus on now within the team its important teams are mostly self-sufficient to create value.

The product goals can guide greatly on a broader path. It's important to make use of specific goals for small periods/iterations. It gives great focus on now, and better chances that the team would utilize their potential on a focused goal in the moment.

This leads us to the theme as Now over Then.

V. LEAP OF FAITH

Every team will have a collective level of maturity. Every leader will have its own maturity level. It becomes a play between the maturity levels when we try to zoom in at the agile practices.

The facilitation, for example, could be very specific to the team. It can vary based on the team's maturity. If a team is new, they will only understand the rules and try to follow it. Similarly, building a change, also needs to adopt a style that suits the current maturity of the team.

To understand and identify the maturity a leader can look at these indicators. A team waiting on a permission before acting. A team's ability to execute orders over building decisions or consensus with others. A team's ability to be able to self-manage around things when direction or goal is shared.

This maturity can very well be observed through executions of daily meetings and collaborations. the way people participate and add voice at the meetings.

The leader on the other side will also have their own maturity, leaders may find themselves to be on a journey to better understand the purpose of practices or better ways of Facilitation. Or better ways of establishing trust within the team. Or better ways of leading through a conflict. Or better ways of helping the organization, in its agile journey.

What is important is that, the goal of the level of delegation a leader chooses, should be not to match the current maturity level of the team. But, to really go one step ahead and show further trust, inspire them and create an environment where the team can start operating at the next level. There comes a better goal, to elevate than to delegate.

These elevations prove to be the core experience the team gets and remembers. A human being doing a particular thing in a way they have been doing is one thing and they doing the thing in an improved way, taking risk of failing, learning fast and sensing a shift within is the experience they seize, they cherish.

Elevating over delegating, involves possible failures. It involves taking a leap of faith with the team members. A leader has to practice trust and inspiration and having the back of the team. This is a way by which the relationships between the team members and leaders get a lot of opportunities to get built. To come together, do uncomfortable things, fail fast, learn faster and enjoy a shift. [3]

Agile workplaces seek to build improvements and next level of maturity. A leader having 'elevate over delegate' as a goal is conditioned for that kind of outcome to come through.

This very well applies to the leader himself as well. Leaders have their own evolutionary journey, the mindset of taking a leap of faith, trying to go to the next level of maturity is a way to ease through the challenges of doing the same thing in the same way and feel pressure of increasing duties through the work at the same level of maturity or paradigm.

A leader set on a path to find ways to take a leap of faith with themselves as well as with the team, creates a true environment where improvements are happening and where maturity is not only addressed but it is growing.

This leads us to the theme as Elevate over delegate.

VI. AUTONOMY AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Taking a leap of faith with self and with the team members, by not only doing a delegation matching current maturity levels requires a leader not only to delegate but to elevate. Simon Sinek writes in one of his quotes that a true value of a leader is not measured by the work they do. To measure the leader's true value, is by the work they inspire others to do. To practice this, it becomes very important to understand the true understanding of creating autonomy via healthy boundaries within which self-managing teams can thrive and be inspired to show courage to take on challenging work. [15]

One common misconception with Autonomy is it is perceived as anyone can do anything. During the research it was found that the movement towards autonomy was started after the movement to flexibility for employees/associates. In the VUCA world, more than flexibility, autonomy works out to prepare teams to respond to the situations. Some of the key factors to enable autonomy are as these.

A person feeling free to act, with all their capability, participating in deciding and planning together within the boundaries is autonomy.

For a leader, creating autonomy can simply mean creating a team that can own the outcome. Putting trust on the team, this can be possible by some of these findings:

- Help teams know their stakeholders.
- Coach teams to create partnerships within.
- Encourage teams to adopt ways to share all things transparently at shortest possible intervals.
- Coach teams to be ahead on sharing risk and dependencies that have a chance to emerge.
- Get a team making good use of frequent feedback from internal and external stakeholders.
- Create an atmosphere where people can respectfully and safely participate in conversation to challenge ideas and offer new ways to look at things, without fear of retaliation.
- Making joy a priority at work. [1]

This holds importance as one of the key findings suggests that the problem exists within people mostly and largely because they do not know each other well. Creating an environment where people play with each other very often to discover more facets of each other goes a long way.

A team, ready with these structures, can more directly own the outcomes and a leader can elevate than delegate in everyday situations.

In the agile leadership in practice, there is no alternative to trust than trust. Building this trusting relationship with self and with others, needs re-thinking of goals. Pursuing better goals enables us to keep elevating while the team grows stronger together.

This leads us to the theme as Trust over Trust by making valuable interventions to create trusting relationships.

CONCLUSION

- Taking a leap of faith with self and with others is the need at making an organisation agile via leading self-managing, autonomous, psychologically safe teams. Not taking this leap of faith is a weak link that does not let the transformation happen and be sensed by people.
- New age leadership or facilitative leadership or agile leadership is ALL about taking a leap of faith with yourself as well as with your peers. Putting Trust over Trust. No other alternatives in the VUCA world. How do we take a few steps that the last step of taking a leap of faith and trust is possible through all things we do. They are presented in this paper through better goals in A over B form.
- Having poor goals as a leader on the walk towards becoming agile as a group is a weakest link.
- Not able to take a leap of faith with self and with others is a weakest link.

This paper summarises the finding to get away from the weakest link in the true people led, people benefitable transformation form as these.

- Facilitation over Direction
- Done over Doing
- Making Problems Transparent over Fixing Problem

- Now Over Then
- Elevate over Delegate
- Trust over Trust

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