

Eight Characteristics of Agile Leaders



By Emily Livorsi and Kyla Holcombe

The race to cultivate and transition leaders into executive positions is on. Is your company ready for the challenge?

With 10,000 baby boomers retiring every day, the construction industry is in a race to fill vacant leadership seats with candidates who are as competent as they are agile. Defined as the power to move quickly and nimbly while thinking on your feet and acting decisively, agility helps leaders tackle the challenges of today's business environment while also thinking about the bigger picture and planning for the future.

The question that many industry leaders in construction face right now is, how do we take the next generation of leaders and help them quickly and effectively expand their enterprise-thinking skills. And, even more importantly, how can senior leaders help transform millennial employees—who currently comprise 20% of the nation's management roles—into leaders who can make intuitive business decisions?

The latter is becoming a particularly pressing issue as the nation's baby boomers make their way into retirement. In many cases, organizations are taking an age-old approach to the problem by focusing on skills-based training, creating development plans and increasing leaders' business knowledge and skills as quickly as possible. While necessary, these activities are all near term in nature and the question remains: Will the skills we know are important today be enough to help young leaders respond to tomorrow's changes?

In an increasingly complex and volatile industry, tomorrow's leaders will need more than business acumen to lead effectively. Leaders need agility. In this article, we describe how leadership agility is closely aligned with what it takes to be a Peak Leader—a concept FMI has researched for more than a decade in the engineering and construction industry. We also provide recommendations for fostering agility in your people, a task that, if not already on your to-do list, should be marked as an urgent priority starting today.

What Is an Agile Leader?

We're all operating in a VUCA world where volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity reign. Because there are no assurances in this environment, garnering both personal and organizational success requires an agile mindset. At a leadership level, agility is a mindset that facilitates rapid growth and the adoption of key business strategies. Agility helps leaders differentiate themselves on three key levels:

1. Being able and willing to adapt to change
2. Remaining resilient in times of change and uncertainty
3. Learning from their experiences, including failures

Think about your company's leadership ranks. The agile leaders respond quickly to industry changes and lead the charge to seize opportunities. They inspire others to spot and seize future opportunities and drive the team to be operationally nimble. They also create a culture of adaptation where everyone is expected to respond to a changing environment with speed and flexibility.

Now consider the leaders in your firm who might lack agility. They probably become lost and consumed by volatility, uncertainty, complexity or ambiguity. Given their old thinking paradigms, these rigid leaders struggle to cope and are resistant to change, placing their companies at risk of stagnation and extinction.

Agile Leaders=Strong Organizations

In a time when baby boomers are retiring en masse and millennials are, for the most part, unprepared to fill their shoes, FMI has created the Peak Leader Model (Exhibit 1) to help companies develop agile leaders. Based on extensive observation, research and practice around leadership, we've determined that Peak Leaders—those who exemplify what it means to be a leader—exhibit eight key behaviors. You can use this framework to identify, support and develop agility in your own leaders.

EXHIBIT 1 | FMI's Peak Leader Model



Data source: Model is based on in-depth industry research.

- 1. Agile leaders set direction.** Never afraid to stand up and take charge, agile leaders have a clear sense of direction and communicate it with ease. They understand how organizations, teams and other constituents can respond to a changing industry. They see the big-picture vision and the path to getting there. Finally, agile leaders will continuously clarify the direction for others and empower people to achieve the organization's vision.

Suggestion: To hone your own direction-setting skills, you should start by identifying your worldview about leadership and then articulate how this worldview fits with the organization's strategies and priorities. In a tumultuous environment, zoom out and reflect on the big picture; remember to continuously communicate to those around you the big picture behind the change.

- 2. Agile leaders execute and follow through with calculated speed.** When critical business opportunities or project challenges arise, agile leaders know how to balance quick decisions with careful planning and organizing in order to maximize results. They know how to communicate effectively to drive buy-in among key stakeholders as well as push accountability among team members. Because agility requires speed, clear communication is essential for the agile leader. Teams working with agile leaders understand their roles, know what results they are accountable for, and are empowered to get there.

Suggestion: Take a look at your team members. Do they clearly understand their roles? Have you clearly outlined what they are accountable for? Providing your team with clarity will speed up its ability to act nimbly in the face of uncertainty when approached with an opportunity or when it encounters a major obstacle. Remember, agile leaders inspire agility in others to achieve outstanding results.

- 3. They know how to effectively align resources.** Tight budgets and a lack of resources aren't a problem for agile leaders. Rather than complaining or allowing these challenges to stop them, leaders who show agility can leverage those around them to address even the smallest items. They understand how everyone fits into the big picture and how team members will be integrated into an operational change or the adoption of a new game-changing strategy. They are inclusive and understand the power of utilizing resources effectively. They also spot hurdles on the horizon and know how to get those obstacles out of the way so that their people can move swiftly in the right direction.

Suggestion: Identify a person or team with whom you would like more interaction—someone you aren't currently collaborating with. Then, identify at least one opportunity to work with this person/team. Another good strategy is to reflect on a recent project or task, identify what additional resources could have improved outcomes and analyze what resources were non-essential to the success of the project or task (i.e., those resources that could have been utilized elsewhere).

- 4. Agile leaders inspire others to achieve seemingly impossible goals.** The best leaders can effectively infuse their passion into others and help employees achieve their own goals. In some cases, agile leaders can even help others tackle achievements that seemed impossible at the outset. They also motivate others to be early adopters to new strategies or procedures, even when change seems difficult. Agile leaders move others from what they've always done to a new way of being, all while factoring in their team members' individual perspectives.

Suggestion: To help others achieve the impossible, think of someone specific who motivated you through a difficult time at work and then articulate how that person helped you tackle adversity. Important to remember: Everyone has different motivators. You can also ask one of your employees what motivates him or her and then brainstorm two specific ways to alter your leadership style in a way that is personally motivating to this employee.

- 5. They put the spotlight on others.** Agile leaders possess strong emotional intelligence: They know how to focus on the needs and emotions of others and respond appropriately. So while agile leaders embrace change, they don't leave bodies in the wake of that change. Instead, they understand that change can trigger emotions like fear and uncertainty, and they provide their team members with positive energy and a sense of confidence. Agile leaders help others move from feeling fearful to accepting a challenge for change. This is an extremely important quality in today's VUCA world where change is both inevitable and unpredictable.

Suggestion: Put the spotlight on others by simply examining your personal conflict style and then identifying the strengths and weaknesses of this style. Reflect on a recent time when you experienced stress and then identify your immediate reaction (i.e., emotions, thoughts, actions), the impact of that reaction on others, and how the reaction changed over time. What could you do differently to help others in times of chaos?

- 6. Agile leaders know how to think strategically.** In their quest to find answers and underlying truths, agile leaders know how to ask the tough questions, and they don't settle for surface responses. They focus on the horizon with the aim of spotting strategic opportunities that others haven't seen yet. They spot how an operational change might negatively impact another part of the business, for example, and then quickly address the issue. They know when to utilize intuition and gut instinct, but they also know when to dive deeper into the data to make the best possible decisions for their organizations.

Suggestion: When making a future decision (big or small), identify both your gut reaction and your logical reasoning; then determine how your intuition and logic are aligned and misaligned. At the beginning of next week, read something that is relevant to your business and priorities for the coming week. Consider a source that you do not usually use (e.g., newspaper, blog, LinkedIn article, book, podcast).

- 7. They understand the talent development process.** Agile leaders have the humility and foresight to know that they can't tackle the organization's problems alone, so they inspire others to grow along with them. They spot individuals who are excited about learning and then they provide them with the opportunities for development. Agile leaders believe that leaders themselves are responsible for their own development and they should have access to achieve development.

Suggestion: Hone your questioning and listening skills and practice new strategies for connecting with your team and developing its potential. Identify two team members with underutilized potential and then schedule meetings with these team members to discuss how their strengths may be better utilized and stretched.

8. Agile leaders lead from within. Perhaps most importantly, agile leaders aren't afraid of challenges or failure. They view mistakes as learning opportunities. They are kind to themselves and balance a push for self-excellence with an understanding that fumbles are part of leadership development. They understand their own strengths and weaknesses and set clear goals for self-development. The agile leader values all types of learning and can spot applications to their roles, teams and organizations. Lastly, the agile leader is a role model; he or she is an example of adaptability and commitment to self-growth.

Suggestion: To lead from within, identify your personal strengths and growth areas (via self-reflection or by using leadership tools); then develop two specific goals related to your growth areas. Consider how you can use your strengths in untapped ways. Identify a time you recently failed or did not fully meet a goal; then brainstorm three ways you could deal with a similar situation differently in the future.

Fostering Agility In Your People

Some leaders are inherently more agile than others, but our research shows that this trait can be fostered and developed. The pivotal mistake many firms make is assuming that promotions, new assignments and ladder climbing provide their leaders the “experience” to be successful. However, time and technical training do not guarantee that your leaders will develop the skills they need to lead your business. Growth opportunities should be customized to specific leaders and should focus on the eight key traits outlined in this article to develop agility: the characteristic your leaders will need in the absence of time and through uncertainty. By pulling from those traits and FMI's Peak Leader framework, you can effectively nurture and develop agile leaders in any business environment.



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