AGILE LEADERSHIP for a changing workplace

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The business environment is changing. While
globalisation has been talked about for some
years now, its full impact is only now starting to
fundamentally impact the way organisations function.

Rapid advances in technology and the broad
dissemination of information have created new
resources, competitors and possibilities. Global
businesses are finding that they need to amalgamate
different business units and even industries to address
this new complexity.

Business models designed to take advantage of
repeatable, predictable cycles are now too rigid to
deal with diverse, rapidly changing and nuanced
customer requirements. Altering business models
means significantly changing how we work.

Stable, permanent jobs that fit together in a neat
hierarchy, which were once the norm, are being
replaced with more flexible work arrangements to
address the uncertainty inherent in a more complex
marketplace.

Workers’ expectations are changing, too. Well-
educated and connected individuals are not satisfied
with being a cog in the machine; they expect to
have their views heard and make a difference.
As organisations transfer some of the risk and
uncertainty of doing business to employees, these
same individuals reasonably expect to share in the
decision-making process and rewards.

The speed of change is significant. Rather than
incorporating one change and then restabilising
systems and processes, changes are coming in rapid
succession from multiple directions. There are no
longer ‘times of change’ and ‘periods of stability’, only
constant shifts and the need for swift adaptation.

Resilience and flexibility, which were previously
considered ‘nice to haves’, are now the minimum
requirements for most workplaces. And geographic
location, different time zones and physical constraints
no longer pose barriers to the production of value.

Long-held notions related to knowledge, power,
ownership and relationships are being called into
question as the parameters keep changing. Cherished
values are being redefined to meet conflicting
stakeholder demands.

A different approach to leadership is needed to
address these shifts in beliefs, values and physicality.
Old ‘carrot and stick’ approaches to performance
management, traditional change management
concepts, one-size-fits-all thinking strategies and
hierarchal relationship structures are no longer
effective.

In short, effective leadership in an agile environment
is less dependent upon seniority or privilege but more
reliant on developing the skills to facilitate adaptation,
attract and leverage diversity, foster collaboration and
inspire outstanding performance.

Recent findings in neuroscience provide some new
strategies that will help leaders overcome many
common roadblocks to adaptation, facilitate stronger
business performance and create higher employee
wellbeing.

These include techniques for labelling and accepting
emotions to build resilience and create a sense of
control, new ways to ‘think together’ to facilitate more
effective decision-making, utilising the social brain to
connect quickly with people, and creating the right
environments to support different types of work:
collaboration, creativity, efficiency or analysis.

Seven key concepts are pivotal to successfully
transitioning to agile ways of working.
1. Higher order thinking – not knowledge per se – is power

The wide accessibility of the internet enables virtually anyone to tap into a vast reservoir of information previously held by only a privileged few. This democratisation of information has contributed to a shift in power. Ignorance is no longer a tool that can be used to keep people in check. Knowledge and instruction are only a few clicks away.

The easy dissemination of information also heralds the need for more transparency. In a matter of minutes, social media allows information that previously would have taken weeks, months or even years to surface to be digested by millions.

Effective leadership no longer means having the most knowledge but requires a keen understanding of how to quickly and creatively leverage this information to create value.

Adaptation requires the ability to shift thinking styles flexibly in order to address challenges that require different mindsets, such as the need for innovation versus efficiency.

Leaders who understand that what we typically call multi-tasking involves shifts in attention, with attendant reductions in efficiency, may well choose to reduce distractions for team members by working differently with messaging and email programs.

New ways of working may also require people to use different thinking skills to deliver the desired outcomes.

There are many models for effective thinking including Learning Quest’s PATE® process. These techniques for complex problem solving, which were once the reserve of special leadership team off-sites to address unusual needs, now have a part to play in the day-to-day running of an organisation.

2. Knowing your stakeholders is key

The demarcation between what the company owns and what an employee or customer owns has blurred. Data is collected, repurposed and repackaged on a scale no one could have imagined even a decade ago, calling into question assumptions about ownership and privacy.

While governments race to keep pace, businesses and individuals are testing the limits. Works of art, scientific discoveries and business processes are subjected to ‘mashups’ in unprecedented ways, resulting in both the creation and destruction of value.

The uncertainties related to ownership of data also impact privacy and potentially shape our thoughts, motivations and behaviour. For example, the harvesting of browsing history and click-throughs enables us to be presented with an opportunity to buy exactly what we want before we even know we want it.

Sensitivity to the diverse needs and expectations of various stakeholders is essential for today’s leaders.
3. New paradigms for collaboration and innovation

Business relationships have changed in unparalleled ways. Former competitors are now partners; employees may also be stockholders. Industries thought to be separate are combining to create entirely new ways of providing value.

Even the separation between commercial and charity has become blended with social enterprises, charities with self-funding commercial arms and corporate organisations boasting their own foundations.

New ways of working require collaboration with diverse people across multiple regions and time zones. Permanency in organisational relationships has become a thing of the past as groups and teams form to take advantage of specific skills and experiences and then dissolve and reform as the needs change.

Leading within this complex social environment necessitates a higher level of interpersonal sensitivity, nuance and ability to collaborate than was necessary when relationships were more fixed. Leaders must be able to connect quickly themselves and be equipped to facilitate collaboration between others.

Diversity of thought – rather than conformity to the status quo or the powers that be – is becoming a key lever of organisational effectiveness. Leaders have to rethink concepts such as accountability by establishing mutually meaningful outcomes and metrics that facilitate motivation and high performance rather than punitive measures designed to promote compliance.
4. Organisations with resilient employees prosper

Leaders need to have the capacity to assist people to build resilience and adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

At the individual level, leaders need to promote self-awareness including an understanding of how our brains naturally react to change and stress. Leaders also need tools to assist people to practically mitigate the negative impact of change and to coach employees to cope and flexibly adapt in order to thrive in an uncertain environment.

People who are knowledgeable about how their own brains work are in a better position to work with its natural functioning rather than fight against nature. For example, recognising that there is a region of the brain especially designed to sense change – and that this part of the brain plays a key role in personal protection – helps people realise that typical responses to change such as resistance, avoidance and negativity are not only normal but expected.

Like a strong undercurrent in the sea, fighting this natural tendency head-on will only result in exhaustion and decreased performance.

Leaders that understand and coach their teams to recognise common reactions to change, adopt brain-based techniques for mitigating chronic work related stress and learn methods for emotional regulation are equipping employees to more quickly thrive in work environments that are constantly changing with ever increasing demands for output.

Rather than trying to shut down strong emotional reactions, assisting people to label their emotion, acknowledge/address individual losses and engage in collaborative decision-making helps people to adapt more quickly.

Shifting requirements and expectations naturally trigger concerns about adequacy to perform and ability to contribute. Empowering people with knowledge and responding supportively to legitimate worries gives people a sense of control, self-esteem and confidence.

Ultimately, employees who feel in control are better able to regulate their own behaviour in order to attain long-term goals that are aligned with the organisation’s requirements. Leaders need the capability to facilitate self-awareness and self-control for their teams.
Case study: Call centre restructure for telco

Learning Quest recently worked with a technology company that was merging several call centres, offshoring part of the capability and moving premises – a significant amount of change. Here are the steps we took to facilitate a smooth transition:

1. Provided people leaders with science-based information related to how people react to change – so they knew what to expect

Learning that a range of emotions – as well as temporary reductions in attention, concentration and even memory – were common for people experiencing significant change allowed the people leaders to interpret employee behaviour in the context of coping with change rather than necessarily inferring unhelpful behaviour as resistance, poor motivation and bad attitudes.

Rather than trying to suppress employee emotional expression, leaders encouraged their team members to label their emotions. This enabled them to work constructively to integrate thinking with emotion to better understand and adapt to required changes.

Having the confidence and competence to anticipate and manage losses, rather than feeling helpless or frustrated, enabled the leaders to better support their team members and help them remain productive while adapting to their changing circumstances.

The natural inclination to either blame or avoid people who struggle ‘out loud’ was countered with regular one-on-one manager/employee meetings designed specifically to uncover individual concerns and work together to address these issues.

Moreover, people leaders were equipped and encouraged to engage their teams in collaborative discussions to help anticipate difficulties and address common challenges together, thus facilitating a sense of control and employee connectedness.

2. Organised group-based ‘self-leadership’ courses for employees – to learn how to label their emotions, think things through and move forward

Group courses enabled employees to gain insight and learn techniques to more effectively manage their own reactions. Recognition that many of their concerns were related to a very normal need to be competent and effective at work, enabled employees and their managers to use their anxieties as a catalyst to explore new ways of working that were consistent with the changing circumstances.

Employees also developed strengths-based personalised techniques to cope with rapid and successive changes at work or home.

Group-based sessions normalised reactions and contributed to a work culture that made the healthy expression of emotion, exploration of diverse options, feedback and learning part of the new way of working. These cultural changes contributed to more authentic working relationships, higher levels of peer support and ultimately increased productivity and higher wellbeing.
5. Creating the right environment to support different types of work

Leaders should never underestimate the role the physical environment has to play in supporting the type of work their employees need to accomplish. Whether the objective is to facilitate analysis, creativity or efficiency, leaders need to create the conditions that support the thinking style needed to achieve the task at hand.

Knowing more about how the environment can impact their thinking enables people to make informed choices that support the type of work they need to accomplish. For example, analytical reasoning tasks require a narrow focus, attention to detail and keen error detection, while innovation tasks benefit from a broader focus, delayed judgement and random associations.

Historically, organisations have promoted quieter environments with limited movement to different workstations throughout the day. Recent trends have focused on frequent movement even to the extent of ‘policing the environment’ to make sure people change workstations throughout the day!

Binary leadership approaches, such as these, are unhelpful.

Effective leaders assist people to think about and then find the physical and social environment that will support their work. For example, guaranteeing that people can secure a quiet, secluded space free of distractions where they can focus deeply without interruption on higher quality analysis enables the team member to perform the task with less frustration.

Selecting this type of environment might require ‘bucking the system’ in an organisational culture that promotes high collaboration and the belief that frequently ‘bumping into others’ is needed for all employees all of the time.

Alternatively, allocating the time, place and headspace needed for innovation is equally as important and, at times, challenging. Many organisations call for more creative thinking while, at the same time, allocating few if any resources to promoting a culture that encourages these types of thought processes.
Case study: New way of working for a professional services company

Learning Quest recently worked with the CEO of a professional services company to implement new ways of working to help steer the company through an expected 18-month rough patch in an economically tight business climate when many long-term contracts were ending. Here are the actions he took:

1. **Challenged the leadership team to delegate their ‘business as usual’ tasks to their teams to clear their slates.**

   While seemingly straightforward, this is never an easy task at any level of management. Leaders, like all people, become ‘attached’ to the work they do well.

   They come to see themselves as the only one who can make certain decisions, or work effectively with certain stakeholders. Moreover, there are frequently underlying and often unarticulated concerns that if they ‘give away’ what they are good at they may not be as good at a very different challenge.

2. **Changed the leadership mindset from expedient decision-making based on past experience to more creative, innovative approaches to problem-solving**

   The executive team embarked on a journey to learn to more broadly ‘think together’. Learning to recognise common mental biases and thinking errors enabled the team to combat their ‘natural’ tendencies to:
   - view different perspectives as ‘competing’
   - dismiss disconfirming data and thus avoid risk taking (especially personal/reputational risk)
   - avoid emotional information at all costs.

   They also came to understand that the human brain naturally takes short cuts in thinking and prefers efficiency to innovation.

   While it is incredibly difficult to recognise thinking errors and shortcut thinking in ourselves, we are better at seeing it in others. When teams learn to ‘think together’, they tend to be much more effective than most individuals working in isolation.

   Seeking diverse and previously excluded views, exploring contrary ideas, framing and reframing challenges and opportunities within different potential contexts takes time and effort. So initially, the team’s thinking seemed to ‘slow down’, which was frustrating for executives who prided themselves on being fast and decisive.

   While the team initially resisted the technique of making use of emotion and social data, the CEO calmly and firmly persevered. Continued efforts to remain ‘curious and open’, to ‘audition’ and blend ideas rather than compete and persuade, paid off and the quality of their ‘thinking together’ began to improve.

   Even after a couple of working sessions it became obvious to the team members that not only were they seeing their challenges and opportunities differently but they were actually beginning to bounce ideas between themselves in a way that amalgamated and created new concepts from sometimes very different perspectives.

   Once the ‘natural instinct’ to ‘use what you know’ and move quickly was inhibited, they began to make time and create the conditions to foster a creative mindset.
6. Never underestimate the ‘social brain’ side of leadership

The interpersonal/social environment that characterises today’s working environment is often complex. Attracting diverse teams to jointly tackle a project is no longer a one-off activity. Leaders need to constantly redesign teams of people to accomplish specific pieces of work.

These teams may include employees, contractors, consultants, suppliers and various others. Moreover, these teams will likely need to interact with various other teams both within and outside of the organisation.

To lead in this environment, it is not enough to be smart or have experience; leaders need a highly developed social brain. The emotional sensitivity to decipher the needs and wants of diverse stakeholders, interpret the dynamics of the group and facilitate effective working relationships between dissimilar individuals takes effort to develop.

Whereas historically the effort and time needed to build these capabilities has not been worth it, today it is a prerequisite for effective leadership.

Core skills, such as being able to quickly grasp the perspective and values of others, provide a strong foundation for cultivating trust and confidence with people working across physical and psychological boundaries.

Likewise, the ability to predict potential conflicts, as well as potential synergies, enables leaders to proactively facilitate better teamwork rather than always reacting to ‘people issues’.

Building on understanding individual motivations, effective leaders appreciate how groups function. They are able to integrate this knowledge with the requirements for the job and design the most effective team to get the job done.

For example, understanding the social complexities of a problem or strategic initiative enables leaders to think through what type of relationships are needed to accomplish the given piece of work, thereby avoiding wasting time building high levels of collaboration when only cooperation is needed.

Conversely, failing to allocate the time/resources for projects that require high levels of collaboration will likely result in poor team performance as well as lower morale.
Case study: Engineering firm’s move to activity-based working

Learning Quest recently worked with the People & Culture team of an engineering consulting and project management business to help prepare them to move from a traditional office space to activity based working. Here are the steps the senior manager leading the project team took that enabled the group to create synergies and quickly deliver what the organisation needed:

1. **Assembled people with the right skill sets to facilitate all aspects of the move**

   The project lead started the ball rolling by creating a diverse team of people from inside and outside the organisation to work together to design and implement a process to transition the organisation to a different way of working.

   The group included facilities, technology and human resources professionals working together and alongside external experts in interior design, furniture and fit-outs, specialised technology, leadership development and cultural change.

2. **Facilitated regular interactions between different groups/individuals to proactively identify potential points of conflict and convergence opportunities**

   In addition to ensuring that all team members had a strong grasp of the purpose and value of the changes, the project lead facilitated opportunities for different groups to gain a thorough understanding of each other’s needs/requirements and methods of working.

   The result was a highly cohesive team that came together quickly, accomplished the work needed and later dispersed having grown as professionals and made strong connections with a diverse group of people.
7. Giving people the tools and resources to manage themselves

The ultimate aim of any leader is to inspire high performance that generates results. Assumptions such as throwing enough money at someone will produce results have no place in new ways of working. Of course, people expect to share fairly in the results of their efforts, but this is not enough to gain the commitment and self-discipline that is needed to exert the mental effort typically needed to deal with the complexity inherent in today’s marketplace.

In an agile environment, it is not enough for people to just do what they agreed to do. Businesses also need people to apply their judgement in order to know when ‘what was agreed’ is not the right thing to do and to respond appropriately.

Uncertainty and rapid changes require even front line employees to think and make judgements. Effective leaders know that this takes more mental effort and personal courage than just following the rules. They recognise that people will only be able and willing to persevere in this situation if they feel they are partners in accomplishing the desired outcomes.

Shared commitment requires a blending of the business needs and those of the individual. Systems and processes, as well as individual leader practices that incorporate this principle, contribute to building strong partnerships and high levels of commitment.

Effective leaders recognise that this is neither a one-off conversation nor a one-size-fits-all approach. They continuously work to ensure that there is high alignment between the organisation and all stakeholders.

Even when commitment is high for everyone, it is important for leaders to keep in mind that different personal skills are needed for working effectively in a more flexible environment. Leaders have to ensure that people have the tools and resources they need to manage themselves well.

For example, people who understand the relationship between health and performance – and who have the tools to regulate their own emotion – are much better placed to perform effectively.

Access to relevant information and appropriate guidance in how to apply these concepts will bolster competence, confidence and resilience in people. Proactively equipping people in this way will pay off in terms of better efficiency and overall effectiveness for the business and higher wellbeing for the individuals.

Lastly, experimenting with new ways of leading is essential. Leaders who are at the coalface are well placed to learn both from trial and error as well as from each other.
Dr Connie Henson is the author of BrainWise Leadership: Practical neuroscience to survive and thrive at work. A lively presenter, Connie’s passion for the science of ‘how people work’ enables her to apply the most current research and techniques in a way that is both practical and entertaining. Her talks encourage high interaction and quickly get people thinking and working differently.

Connie also designs and implements change leadership programs that are informed by the latest neuroscience research through her company Learning Quest, a Sydney-based applied psychology and leadership development consultancy.

Connie has been running Learning Quest since 2001. Her focus and expertise lies in helping people, organisations and communities to realise their strengths and abilities. She has extensive experience delivering highly effective leadership programs for organisations in a range of industries, including finance, health, media, professional services and government.

Connie’s Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology is from the University of North Texas. She also has a Master of International Public Health from the University of Sydney, a Master of Science in Rehabilitation Counselling, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and is a graduate member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Connie’s objective is to make science practical. Her work is underpinned by a strong belief in human rights and a keen desire to contribute to increased wellbeing for clients and colleagues. A popular speaker, Connie runs development programs for both corporate clients and not-for-profits across Australia and internationally. She works effectively with diverse groups of people, from CEOs and their leadership teams through to employees and with marginalised groups and refugees.

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