Tool Box - Attributes for Agile Leadership

Leadership styles are the patterns of behaviours you use as perceived by others. We should understand that no one single type of behaviour can be appropriate for a leader to use exclusively. We need to be able to call upon different styles of leadership.

One misconception is the belief that a good leader can pick the style to suit the situation; be it directive, coaching, supporting, delegating or empowering. The reality though is that an agile leader will continually flex their leadership throughout tasks, gauging as they go that the desired effect is being achieved.

It is therefore true that agile leaders need to be adaptable. So let's look at some of the attributes needed and how to develop them to improve agile leadership.

Visionary

A visionary is quick to spot key elements to future success of the organisation. Leaders know what their long term vision is, using interpersonal skills to ensure their teams are motivated to make it happen. They speak with passion and belief in the goal. They also have the ability to break down the long term strategy into manageable sized steps or targets that others will want to achieve.

To develop in this area:

- Ensure you fully understand your organisation's vision and what is expected of you and break this down into steps that you and your team can take as interim goals.
- Seek opportunities to talk to your team about the impact of their work.
- Ask others to commit to work with you to achieve the goals you have set. Surround yourself with others who share your passion.

Values Champion

Once an organisation has set a vision, leaders should identify the core values that need to be in place to achieve it. Leaders are clear and open about their core values - be it at work or in life - and can communicate, justify and demonstrate these as role models. Agile leaders will often use core values to assist in decision making; especially when all the facts are not clearly available. They will also be quick to intervene when values are infringed.

To develop in this area:

- Ensure you can share your core values and why they are important to others for work and life guidance.
- When core values are infringed, have the strength to challenge someone on a matter of principle. Base your decisions around these core values.
- Agile leaders must really be seen to be living the core values. As a role model this is the only way to spread good behaviours.

Social adaptability

Leaders need to be able to communicate and relate to people from a variety of backgrounds and a range of skills. Being able to build rapport is pivotal for agile leaders to listen, read and respond to differences between individuals, and will become more approachable and more trusted by the teams.

To develop in this area:

- Schedule time to talk to your team, get to know them personally and find what motivates them. Don't be afraid to ask for their ideas.
- Actively listen to build rapport. Hear the words, see the body language and understand the meaning behind what others are saying to you
- You can build up your skills by taking time to listen to people inside and outside of your organisation.

Proactive

Being proactive is tasking yourself to see what has happened, what is happening and what is likely to happen so you can identify and initiate the appropriate action. Others may see this attribute as quick-thinking or effective decision making however the agile leader must continually be 'on the pulse' and have the courage to make the changes that keep the team on the right route.

To develop in this area:

- Know yourself, know what your strengths are. Be ready to call upon these when you have an issues or obstacle to overcome.
- Help others to think laterally about problems and seek opportunities to provide creative solutions to move things forward.
- Action will typically beat inaction, so even if you can only identify the next step or two, push on and then you are still moving forwards

Reflection

Agile leaders make time to review how things are and how they should be. We need to sometimes take the time to move up and above the clutter of running a team and take a 'helicopter view' to see the big picture and what is actually happening. Then they can use this to enlighten others, so that they too can make sense of what is happening and can see their role in the bigger picture.

To develop in this area:

- Create time to think. You have to schedule this time in your diary and treat it like any other task by ensuring it happens. You will be in a reactive state if you fail to do this.
- Use a structured approach in your thinking to ensure it is constructive. A good model for continuous improvement is: 'PLAN – DO – REVIEW – IMPROVE'.
- Share some of your thoughts with others, their feedback and opinions may give you extra context, more options or validate and support your plans.

Resilience

There will be twists and turns on a long road, so resilience is about the energy and determination to focus on the mission and to stay on course. There will be times when a distraction or a crisis will take people away from their primary task however an agile leader recognises this and will keep bringing others back to their purpose. The leader is never seen to waiver from or give up the task.

To develop in this area:

- Starting with the company vision, list the strategies that are key to the organisation's future and map them into targets and performance expectations for each member of the team.
- Clearly identify the priorities for everyone who works with you to show what to do and what not to do. Also inform them to notify you if they themselves feel they are being led off track.
- Like any journey you cannot keep travelling without a break. Ensure you plan down-time to rest, relax and gain more energy for the journey.

You may feel that some of the above points are more about personal attributes rather than qualities of a leader. There will also inevitably be more attributes you will think of to develop agile leadership, however using the above points as a starting point will be a good base to build upon for further improvement.