The Agile Practitioner: Agile Leadership

WARNING: I'm going to be talking about some tough topics. Mature audience advised.

I've been reading Brene' Brown's [Dare to Lead](#) recently. It's not a book about agile leadership, but it might as well be. The principles that Dr. Brown calls out speak to the trust that is so essential for good agile leadership. Let's break it down.

What Starts Where?

Let's start with a basic premise about how agility works best. If we think of the functioning of an organization as answering a series of questions, leaders are responsible for WHY. The mission and vision of an organization answer the question of why they choose to be what they are and why they choose to do the things they do. The rest of the organization looks to leadership to provide this information.

WHAT is a transitional question. Because of this, it is the easiest one to mess up. Think of WHAT as a hierarchy of definitions. In physics, we start with astrophysics, which is at a very large scale, and we go all the way down to quantum mechanics at the tiniest. Leadership is responsible for answering the astrophysical WHAT, but they should absolutely stay away from quantum mechanics. Somewhere in between, there is a grey area that is a matter of finesse. Simply being aware of this can be enough for good leaders to make sound choices about which decisions to make and which to leave to operational teams.

HOW questions are almost always the property of operational teams. The most common antipattern associated with a lack of agility is leaders being involved in HOW. Granted, nothing is absolute and judgment is paramount. However, generally speaking, when leaders answer "how" questions, they sap teams of trust, creativity, and motivation. This is not a good recipe for superior outcomes.

Since we're talking about questions, I should probably not leave out WHERE and WHEN. These two are most often dictated by the marketplace. At ITHAKA, we rely heavily on evidence to determine these things. In fact, "evidence" is one of our core values. We believe that our decisions should always be guided by data and other observations that can, at the very least, be qualified if not quantified. Good agile leaders know which level of the organization is best suited to gather said evidence and leave the decisions around it to the folks doing and analyzing the discovery.

No Room For Inflated Egos

Anyone who has been a manager knows that sometimes it can be hard to evaluate your value. Whereas operational folks are doing work to deliver products and/or services, unless you are a working manager, you technically deliver nothing directly to the organization's customers. That uneasy feeling can have different effects based on one's personality.

It has occurred to me that people work hardest at getting what they value most. There is a certain portion of the population that, for whatever childhood trauma, seeks power in order to attempt to control their world. Sadly, their ego demons make them the least qualified to become good agile leaders. Nonetheless, they are working harder than anyone else around them to get the positions that give them what they seek -- the comfort that comes with control over their environment.

People with inflamed (I use this term to properly acknowledge that this is a treatable pathology) egos will almost always be disruptive to the proper flow of decisions in a well-functioning agile organization. This happens because "decisions" are the currency of power and these folks are not good at sharing power. Like cancer, the only two good options are to treat it or cut it out. This may seem harsh, but transforming from a command-and-control culture to an agile one will be neither simple nor easy.

Back to Dr. Brown

In her books, Dr. Brown speaks of vulnerability and shame. As a student of agility, I could not help notice the many parallels with the agile concept of servant leadership. I have read books about servant leadership and I think Dr. Brown would approve. While they don't all use her language, they speak to the importance of trust-building and empowerment.

While I don't want to turn this into a book review, there are a few key points that are worth noting:

1. **Making mistakes comes with being a human.** If you are listening carefully, you will get the feedback from your environment when you make one of these. Owning it doesn't mean blaming yourself, but rather connecting with those impacted by it to share that you want to do better and listening to their guidance. Whether you're the person listening to someone else who has made one or you are the listener getting feedback about your own mistake, "listening" is the most important thing.

2. **Empathy is an essential skill for leaders and you can learn it if you don't already know it.** If you are like me, you grew up thinking that some people have empathy and some don't. This turns out to be just plain wrong. Anyone can learn it if they really want to. What you can't do is fake it. Fake empathy is as easy to spot as a guinea pig in a cage full of hamsters. Like any other skill, you learn what to do and then you practice it. Dr. Brown can help you with this.

3. **Trust is the only foundation on which good leadership is built.** Most of the organizations to which I have been affiliated have leaders who fail to build trusting relationships with subordinates and other staff further down the hierarchy. The opposite of trust is distrust. How can you expect someone to believe that you have their best interests in mind if they already distrust you? Answer: you can't. That's just toxic.

4. **All of these things take courage to implement.** Dealing with mistakes, showing empathy, building trust; Dr. Brown will tell you that you must be prepared to be vulnerable to do these things. Being vulnerable is scary and meeting fear head on takes courage.

I could go on, but when it comes to practicing agile leadership, these strike me as the highlights. Agile leaders understand that their purpose is to synthesize the organization's capabilities and the market's needs/desires into a clearly communicated mission and vision; and then to empower the organization to execute on that vision. Empowering at the leadership level means removing obstacles and always challenging others to grow and improve.

I leave you with two scenarios that epitomize great agile leadership:

1. A leader stands before hundreds of employees and says "I was wrong about that and here's what I learned…"

2. A leader is asked to make a decision and she says "what do you think?" Or, "I'm not the right person to make that decision. You should talk with…"

These actions engender courage. They do this by demonstrating that it's okay to be vulnerable and that everyone is valuable and trusted to make decisions appropriate to their role. Every chance a leader can find to dispel fear and encourage shared ownership, is an opportunity to grow agile leadership.

So...

Organizations that rely on the chain of command and the control provided by a fear-based management system will fail spectacularly at agility. These practices literally paralyze operational employees, which is the exact opposite of what is needed for agility.

By utilizing these practices (and they are really hard to get to if you're coming from the other end of the spectrum), you embolden people to take the risks necessary for exploiting every creative opportunity that comes with rapid iteration. This is the cornerstone of agility and the reason agile leadership is necessary.

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