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Strategies for Agile Leadership in a Challenging Environment

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RESEARCH PAPER · LEADERSHIP

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Purpose	To consider the features of effective leadership in the post-pandemic challenging environment and propose a template strategy for Agile Leadership.
Methodology	Literature review and semi-structured interview with a senior public sector manager responsible for health, education, social services and private sector contracts. Inductive thematic analysis applied.
Findings	A twelve-point template for a strategy for Agile Leadership is proposed, covering: agile practice; networking; empowerment; leadership development; problem-solving; hybrid working; crisis management; recruitment; and time management.
Keywords	Leadership, agile leadership, leadership style, recruitment, staff retention, hybrid working.

INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic environment has provided significant challenges for all organisations, irrespective of sector or nationality. Good leadership is vital in this context. This paper considers the features of effective leadership in a challenging environment and how agility can assist organisations in accommodating environmental demands.

Leadership is defined as 'influencing the direction of the organisation through a focus on change and inspiring the group to improve performance' (Needle, 2015). **Agile** in business terms means being able to deal with new situations or changes quickly and successfully (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

KEY THEMES FROM LITERATURE

Agile Practice

Organisations adopting Agile Project Management principles should focus on delivering value to customers — income generation as a consequence rather than the primary goal (Rigby et al., 2022). Dynamic strategic planning, where plans are continually re-evaluated rather than fixed for three-year periods, is essential in today's volatile environment (Mankins & Gottfredson, 2022). Leaders who communicate time parameters and provide deadline reminders significantly improve project team performance (Siddiquei et al., 2022).

Networks

Strategic networking — developing contacts outside the organisation to assist in positioning and executing key activities — is critical to leadership advancement. Operational networks solve routine problems; strategic networks provide the positioning, resources and perspectives to advance the organisation's environment (Ibarra & Hunter, 2022).

Leadership Techniques

The two 'leadership gears' — authoritarian decision-making vs delegating to the group — should both be applied, depending on circumstances. Best-performing organisations are those where leaders can switch

between these modes: delegate for idea-generation; be directive for final selection (Greer et al., 2023). The ability to 'zoom in' (personal management) and 'zoom out' (strategic view) and switch between them is similarly critical (Kanter, 2023).

Authoritarian leadership demonstrably harms project outcomes by creating 'silence' — workers withholding input and ideas — and restricting upward communication (Zaman et al., 2021). Shared leadership in complex IT projects, by contrast, promotes knowledge sharing, mutual trust, team cohesion and successful delivery (Imam & Zaheer, 2021).

Crisis Management

The 'age of outrage' requires leaders to de-escalate stakeholder confrontations using a range of tactics from cooperation to coercion — with appeals to organisational culture often the most effective (Ramanna, 2023). Social media has dramatically reduced response time in a crisis; leaders must prepare draft statements, response teams and communication mechanisms in advance (Pearson et al., 2023). Politically charged environments require prepared policies and the ability to direct employees with opposing views towards collaborative problem-solving (Kteily & Finkel, 2022).

Recruitment and Retention

Leadership teams must be 'reinvented' to address the anticipated strategic needs of the organisation — not just manage the current situation (Leinwand et al., 2022). Growing leaders internally, combined with realistic succession planning that acknowledges shorter average tenure for talented staff, is the most sustainable approach.

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

Qualifications and values

Leaders need appropriate qualifications and values — a Masters-level qualification combined with ethical values was cited as an indicator of fitness to lead in complex environments.

Empowering, distributed leadership

The trend is towards less hierarchical, empowering, distributed leadership models. 'Flatter' structures where members share equal authority and primary responsibility for their own work are increasingly preferred.

Grow your own leaders

Recruitment and retention are the major challenges. An effective policy on recruitment, retention and succession planning is essential — with realistic acknowledgment that trained leaders may move to more lucrative roles.

Allow individual styles

It is important to allow staff to have their own leadership styles and to provide opportunities for development and progression. Self-expression within the cultural context builds loyalty and broader management capability.

Measure outcomes not hours

Hybrid working requires a shift from recorded hours to outputs — financial and non-financial measures of added value. This focuses work more directly on productivity and results.

Agile means adapt

Being an agile leader means being prepared to adapt to circumstances — global, organisational and local. Leaders must understand the range of options available and gauge the decision-making environment to select the appropriate response.

"You need to be an agile leader, prepared to adapt to circumstances — using tactics based on a contingent perspective to accommodate changing conditions."

TEMPLATE: A STRATEGY FOR AGILE LEADERSHIP

a) Select the best option based on culture and circumstances — agile means flexible. **b)** Promote Agile techniques using prototyping with expert opinion to refine outputs. **c)** Build supportive strategic networks inside and outside the organisation. **d)** Empower staff to allow creativity and ensure commitment in teamworking. **e)** Develop leaders from in-house staff with policies on recruitment, retention and succession. **f)** Ensure leaders excel at problem-solving and hybrid environment management. **g)** Switch between authoritarian decision-making and delegation as appropriate. **h)** Have a crisis detection and response plan, with prepared draft statements and response teams. **i)** Recruit leaders on skills, knowledge and ethical values. **j)** Introduce staff to methods and expectations from recruitment through ongoing development. **k)** Hire temporary staff to ensure delivery of objectives when required. **l)** Ensure all key work has a time plan with proactive leadership backing.

CONCLUSION

This research provides a template to assist organisations in developing a strategy for Agile Leadership. The principal themes — Agile Practice, Crisis Management, Leadership Techniques, Recruitment and Networks — are synthesised into actionable recommendations. Future research should extend to different sectors and access a range of practitioners across global locations.

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