

Agile Leadership

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Abstract

Agile leadership is a contemporary leadership approach that stands out in today's business world of uncertainty, rapid change, and complexity. Developed as an alternative to traditional hierarchical and rigid management models, this approach focuses on flexibility, adaptability, participatory decision-making, and innovation. Instead of focusing only on task and process management, agile leaders tend to unlock the potential of team members, strengthen the culture of collaboration, and support the learning organization approach. In this context, empathy, open communication, creating an environment of trust, and developing employees' competencies are among the basic principles of the agile leadership approach. In addition, agile leadership considers change not as a threat but as an opportunity for organizational development and competitive advantage. Accordingly, agile leaders do not ignore long-term sustainability while adopting short-term adaptation strategies. As a result, agile leadership is a leadership model that contributes to a more resilient and innovative structure in the face of change, with its structure that can react quickly to dynamic environmental conditions, making learning continuous, and encouraging employee participation. Agile leadership focuses on responding quickly to change regardless of the sector, supporting a culture of learning and creating collaborative organizations. It is a critical 21st-century leadership model for sustainable success in dynamic and uncertain environments.

Agile Leadership Concept and Definition

Agility is defined as the ability of businesses to adapt to changes in market conditions by monitoring new opportunities emerging in their environment and to develop accurate, timely, and effective responses to these changes (Swafford, Ghosh & Murthy, 2006). In other words, agility is the capacity of an organization to perceive the developments (e.g., opportunities or

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threats) in its social and economic environment, to produce rapid solutions for consumers and other stakeholders, and to reshape its processes, resources, and strategic methods in this direction (Ganguly, Nilchiani & Farr, 2009). Equipping businesses with dynamic capabilities enables them to create and sustain value in innovation processes and strengthen their competitive advantage over time (Fabrizio, Kaczam & de Moura, 2022). In addition, agility offers advantages to businesses in various aspects, such as openness to change and innovation, providing safe working conditions, gaining technological knowledge and skills, strengthening teamwork, increasing the emotional flexibility of employees, and acting by anticipating future risks. In creating such an agile work environment, the behaviors exhibited by leaders play a critical role (Özdemir & Çetin, 2019).

Today, the continuous development of technology, the emergence of new markets, and the proliferation of competitors intensify competition among businesses. As environmental change accelerates, both the need for innovation and the level of uncertainty increase, making it difficult for managers to predict future opportunities and threats. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainable success, it becomes imperative for businesses to develop an organizational agility that will adapt to the increasing level of change and complexity in the business environment. In other words, for long-term success, firms need to have an agility capacity compatible with change and complexity. However, there is a strategic and operational agility gap in many organizations. This gap stems from a lack of ability to recognize new opportunities in a timely manner and to quickly gather the necessary information and relationships to transform them into a competitive advantage. The main reason for this agility gap is that businesses need more agile leadership (Özdemir & Çetin, 2019).

Agile leaders stand out with their ability to provide strategic direction, open communication, monitor performance, and motivate their teams in fast-changing business environments. This leadership style plays a critical role in increasing the agility and competitive advantage of organizations (McPherson, 2016). A leader's ability to demonstrate agility depends on his/her ability to closely monitor technological and environmental developments and to produce new strategies in line with these changes. In this process, the leader needs to constantly think innovatively, organize, and manage processes. In addition, in order to be successful, he/she must have the capacity to provide fast, practical, and personalized solutions on a large scale. An agile leader acts like a living organism that can seize new opportunities, bring additional value to customers, continuously develop and transform, grow, and adapt to change easily.

In general, the ability of businesses to achieve their long-term goals and objectives depends on their emphasis on short-term goals, teamwork, and adaptation to environmental changes. This approach, which forms the basis of agility, plays a critical role in achieving the goals set by leaders. In other words, factors such as constantly changing environmental conditions, crises that last longer than expected, or political transformations in the country force businesses to a continuous process of adaptation and change. Being able to adapt to these factors necessitates agility in order for businesses to maintain their continuity, sustainability, and gain a competitive advantage. The people who can realize this agility capacity of businesses are agile leaders. Therefore, managers' adoption of the agile leadership approach is of great importance for businesses (Akkaya et al., 2020).

Historical Development of Agile Leadership

Fabricated production, which replaced manual production after the Industrial Revolution, has led to the emergence of different production styles over time, and this process has dragged businesses into an intense competitive environment. In order to gain an advantage in competition, enterprises have developed new production models in different periods. In this direction, the mass production model came to the fore until the 1990s, the lean production model in the 1990s, and the agile production model in the 2000s. Today, organizational agility models that advocate the adoption of agility in all units of enterprises have started to be developed (Akkaya et al., 2020).

Today, the pace of change is faster than at any other time in history. Technology is advancing at a dizzying pace, and what is considered the newest technology can become obsolete within a few months (MacIntyre, 2017). This rapid change increases complexity and interdependencies. Organizational change experts have long been aware of these powerful trends and have emphasized the need to develop “agile businesses” that can manage technical and stakeholder complexity, anticipate changing conditions, and adapt quickly (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). In addition, the concept of VUCA was introduced to explain the need for the agility of businesses. VUCA, which stands for “Volatility”, “Uncertainty”, “Complexity” and “Ambiguity”, is used to describe the uncertain and turbulent nature of today’s business world. Experts and leaders argue that we now live in a “VUCA world”. While this poses many risks for leaders, optimists argue that if the challenges can be overcome, businesses can reap significant benefits. In addition, the VUCA environment poses a significant risk for many organizations, and

organizations need to develop more agile and innovative strategies to manage these uncertainties (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Given the changing market conditions and rising performance demands, agility is recognized as one of the most important challenges facing firms in the global business environment (Teece, 2007). According to Rodriguez and Rodriguez (2015), the current leadership structure (millennials, baby boomers, and Generation X), combined with the VUCA era, requires a new understanding, wisdom, and a different leadership approach, especially for top management. The VUCA environment, therefore, clearly demonstrates the need for a specialized leadership model in the style of agile leadership. This approach increases intergenerational collaboration and contributes to eliminating biases in communication. This more participative and collaborative leadership approach strengthens the agility, innovation, and flexibility of organizations, enabling them to make the right decisions in a world full of uncertainty (Setiawati, 2021).

The Importance of Agile Leadership for Businesses

The prominence of agility in management enables quick decisions to be made and business processes to be concluded more effectively and efficiently. The fact that businesses in Turkey have turned towards the agile approach in recent years can be considered as an indicator that this understanding will develop further in the future. However, in order for agility to settle in the management culture, first of all, a comprehensive change process is needed in enterprises that do not show flexibility. Because agility can only be realized with leaders and team members who adopt this understanding. The way to be strong and effective in global markets is to be able to adapt to rapid changes, which is only possible with agile managers and employees (Şanal, 2018).

The difference between the operating environment of companies and the level of agility needed reveals the extent of the agility deficiency. Therefore, businesses need to develop agility at a level that will overcome existing deficiencies. At this point, it is critical for companies to increase their agility capacity above their current levels. However, if agility cannot be increased within the framework of existing resources, companies should first identify their weaknesses (Durmuşoğlu & Ersoy, 2016).

Although it is becoming more difficult to predict future developments with certainty, the pace of change is increasing, and complexity and interdependence are deepening. Change experts have long been aware of these strong trends and emphasize the need to create agile organizations that

anticipate and respond quickly to change. In order to achieve sustainable success, it is inevitable for businesses to improve their level of organizational agility. However, for many companies today, strategic and operational agility is more of a desired goal than a tangible reality. Therefore, it is important for senior executives to be aware that agility is one of the most critical issues. The leadership capacity needed in today's conditions is the ability to lead effectively in rapidly changing environments (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).

Characteristics of Agile Leaders

The responsibilities of agile managers are analyzed under certain categories:

- Style of Interaction,
- Innovation/Exploration Tendency,
- Change Approach,
- Information Acquisition Mode and
- Visionary Talent is classified as a dimension (Bonner, 2010).

Style of Interaction: It addresses the way an individual relates to others and is critical for agile management. This dimension covers a large part of coaching and leadership behaviors. For example, while individuals with a controlling interaction style may tend to direct rather than develop common solutions, the prominent interaction style of agile leaders is to trust employees and believe that they can do good work (Vandenbosch, Fay & Saatçioğlu, 2001; Bonner, 2010). Agile leaders are those who motivate employees to go beyond the norms and develop creative methods, provide continuous guidance, strengthen the bonds between teams, inspire, and ensure the progress of work without resorting to an authoritarian control mechanism. However, they do not hesitate to intervene when necessary (Highsmith, 2004).

Innovation/Exploration Tendency: Agile leaders are open to going beyond traditional leadership norms and adopting different perspectives and solution strategies. This involves the manager “looking outside the box” and embracing innovative ideas. Encouraging employees to change and innovate is also an important part of this trend. Agile leaders exhibit a high motivation for exploration while providing environments where innovation can flourish (Highsmith, 2004).

Change Approach: This dimension refers to how the leader approaches and manages change. Agile managers embrace change rather than

maintaining the status quo and initiate change when necessary. They see change as a gateway to innovation and an opportunity to find quick solutions to problems. In addition, ensuring that team members accept change and transforming their perspectives are among the responsibilities of the agile leader (Vandenbosch, Fay & Saatçioğlu, 2001; Highsmith, 2004).

Information Acquisition Mode: This dimension encompasses the leader's information-gathering methods and includes the capacity to obtain data from different sources. While some leaders use information only to support their point of view, agile leaders use it as an opportunity for conflict resolution and strategic decision-making. Agile managers have an outward-looking perspective and constantly monitor and interact with environmental conditions. They are also leaders who are continuous learners, able to analyze customer needs, manage conflicts within the team, master new technologies, and use agile methods based on current knowledge (Bonner, 2010; Krievsky, 2002).

Visionary Talent: Visionary ability refers to the extent to which a leader is able to look far into the future and design desired future conditions. Leaders with this capability can envision possible scenarios based on past experiences, set goals, and share their vision with their teams. Agile managers guide projects, make changes when necessary, and ensure project sustainability. They also set goals and constraints and share this vision with team members, creating a favorable environment in which goals can be achieved (Highsmith, 2004).

Sub Dimensions of Agile Leadership Concept

The concept of agile leadership is analyzed through six basic dimensions: result orientation, team orientation, competence, flexibility, speed, and change orientation. Results orientation, one of the main dimensions of agile leadership, prioritizes developing a strategic vision and planning short-term goals that will enable businesses to achieve their goals and objectives. In this dimension, the leader acts as a role model to his/her employees, provides appropriate work environments where they can develop their talents and skills, and directs people to the right tasks at the right time. In addition, they increase performance and motivation by rewarding innovative ideas and suggestions from employees (premiums, bonuses, promotions, etc.) (Akkaya et al., 2020).

Result Orientation: The result-oriented leader clearly defines the duties and responsibilities of employees within the organization and guides them to achieve the targeted goals. By establishing strong communication with

employees and giving them importance and trust, he/she supports high performance (Kalsoom, Khan & Zubair, 2018). At the same time, the leader supports and trains employees, leads with innovative and productive behaviors, and provides encouraging actions and directions to achieve the set goals.

In general, in the results orientation dimension, the leader allocates tasks according to the skills and abilities of employees, explains performance expectations, plans short-term goals, and manages and coordinates the whole team to achieve these goals. They also organize the necessary tasks to make the work effective (Yukl, 2008). Leaders provide direction and order in the organization and clearly communicate tasks, goals, and expectations to employees; this facilitates the achievement of organizational goals (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005).

Team Orientation: The team-oriented approach prioritizes group and team work rather than individual work. Within this framework, the leader increases employee motivation by rewarding the success and performance of the team. It also strengthens cooperation with different units within the organization and provides employees with advantages such as favorable working conditions, social opportunities, and job security. It allows employees to develop and demonstrate their talents and encourages their active participation in the pre-production, production, and post-production stages of the processes (Salas, Sims & Burke, 2005).

Team-oriented leadership plays a critical role in improving production quality, ensuring customer satisfaction, expanding the business vision, and supporting the continuous development of employees. In this context, leaders should effectively manage team conflicts, deal with obstacles, guide the team's goal and objective setting processes, distribute tasks and responsibilities fairly, and increase motivation by rewarding achievements (Aaberg et al., 2025). Team-oriented leaders maintain intra-team communication by clearly defining tasks and roles, providing appropriate support for members' strengths and weaknesses, eliminating external obstacles, and promoting goal achievement through continuous interaction (Friedrich, Peterson & Van Doorn, 2024).

Competence: Competence is defined as a set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that support organizations to achieve their strategic goals and contribute to the increase in productivity, efficiency, and performance (Wijayanti & Sari, 2023). Competence, which has an important place among the dimensions of agile leadership, refers to the applicability of the concepts of responsiveness, flexibility, and speed. The leader's ability to create

collaborative environments suitable for internal or external changes plays a critical role in the realization of long-term goals. In addition, the effective use of technological resources and optimization of internal structures are of great importance for the business to meet customer needs (Özeroğlu, 2019).

The competence dimension enables the agile leader to gain potential access to different markets and also contributes to the perceived consumer value of the end product or service. This dimension includes core competencies that are difficult to imitate by competitors (Mills, Platts & Bourne, 2013). Therefore, the agile leader should be customer-oriented and success-oriented, be able to influence and develop those around him/her, communicate correctly with employees, act responsively, make the right decisions, and have the ability to analyze.

Flexibility: Flexibility is defined as the capacity to provide predetermined responses to changes within or outside the organization (Oosterhout, Waarts & Axelsson, 2006). In other words, flexibility refers to the ability of businesses to respond quickly and effectively to environmental changes and the diversifying demands of customers, and plays a critical role in ensuring the continuity of businesses (Özeroğlu, 2019).

Service-oriented businesses face frequent demand fluctuations due to product diversity and differences in customer demands. To adapt to these fluctuations and maintain a competitive advantage, businesses need to have a certain level of flexibility (Kamble, Gunasekaran & Sharma, 2020). The capacity of businesses to respond quickly to changing demands and the ability to create resources for new or existing business models are among the key elements that shape flexibility. In addition, flexibility is also considered the capacity of an organization to perform different tasks and achieve various goals. This dimension includes elements such as production volume flexibility, organizational flexibility, product design and configuration flexibility, and human resource flexibility (Husain, 2024). In general, the flexibility dimension can be defined as the capacity of the business to develop dynamic capabilities against environmental factors and to respond to the changing demands and needs of consumers at the right time and in the right way by using internal resources such as employees, machinery, equipment, and other assets effectively. The process of adapting to these changes and ensuring the sustainability of business dynamism is made possible by developing the dynamic capabilities of all employees, especially leaders. In other words, the leader should have the ability to respond quickly to the demands of consumers, adapt to changing environmental conditions, and manage interactions that require business dynamism (Akkaya & Tabak, 2018).

Speed: The speed dimension of agile leadership is defined as the ability to complete tasks and responsibilities effectively and quickly. This dimension includes elements such as shortening the time to market of new products, timely delivery of products and services, and rapid execution of operational processes (Soto-Acosta, Popa & Palacios-Marqués, 2022). In other words, speed refers to the capacity to meet all agile requirements as soon as possible. In addition, the ability to learn quickly, implement tasks and procedures in a timely manner, and quickly implement necessary changes is also an important part of this dimension (Sherehiy, Karwowski & Layer, 2007). Therefore, speed stands out as a critical agile leadership dimension that increases the leader's capacity to innovate in response to changes within the organization.

The speed dimension refers to the fact that the response times of businesses to consumer demands and the speed of preparation of products and services are shorter compared to their competitors in constantly changing and developing competitive conditions; this provides a competitive advantage to businesses (Özeroğlu, 2019). The ability of businesses to respond quickly to changes depends on the strategic decisions taken by the leader. In general, the speed dimension in agile leadership refers to the capacity of managers to quickly adapt to environmental and technological changes and to meet customer demands in a timely and effective manner (Chowdhury, Paul, & Choudhury, 2023).

Change orientation: The last dimension of agile leadership, change orientation, involves following environmental and technological changes and responding quickly to the opportunities and threats created by these changes. In this dimension, the leader has the knowledge, experience, and skills to adapt constantly developing technological products and services to the organization. They also have the capacity to respond to the changing expectations and needs of consumers in a short time (Akkaya et al., 2020).

A change-oriented leader can make the organization open to innovation and change, anticipate possible changes in advance, and adapt employees to these changes. At the same time, he/she can make the employees adopt the benefits that the changes will provide to the organization and involve them in the process (Özdemir & Çetin, 2020). Agile leadership enables managers to meet customer demands in a timely and effective manner by rapidly adapting to environmental and technological changes; in this process, it allows employees to develop their knowledge, skills, and competencies (Brown & Hennny, 2025).

Since the concept of change involves uncertainty and takes people out of their usual situations, it may create difficulties for employees to adapt to this

process. For this reason, it is of great importance that changes in organizations are carried out within the framework of a specific plan and process. On the contrary, unplanned changes may increase employees' intention to quit their jobs. In this context, the leader should implement the changes in the business in line with a systematic plan and program (Demirağ & Çelik, 2019). In general, leaders must quickly adapt to environmental changes in order to achieve high performance and continuous improvement. Therefore, leaders should monitor changes, support innovative thinking, inspire employees, and increase their trust and commitment to the organization (Chowdhury, Paul, & Choudhury, 2023).

Agile Leadership Application Areas

Agile leadership is not limited to the private sector; it is a leadership approach that can be effective in all areas that require change, uncertainty, and rapid decision-making. In this context, agile leadership offers a framework that can be applied in a wide range of fields, from business to public administration, from educational institutions to the health sector. Each field implements the principles of agile leadership in different ways in line with its own dynamics.

Agile Leadership in Business: Agile leadership approach has become a strategic necessity, especially in the private sector, where competition is intense and change is constant. Today's businesses adopt agile leadership principles in order to quickly adapt to uncertainties in market conditions. Instead of limiting their employees to fixed procedures, agile leaders encourage innovative thinking and experimental learning. This facilitates organizations to become learning organizations (Denning, 2018). In addition, agile leaders encourage a team-based culture of collaboration by minimizing hierarchical constraints in decision-making processes. In this way, both organizational performance and employee engagement increase (Joiner & Josephs, 2007).

Agile Leadership in the Public Sector: Public administration has traditionally been seen as a field resistant to change due to its bureaucratic structure. However, digitalization, increased citizen expectations, and crisis management requirements have led public administrators to adopt a more flexible and innovative leadership approach. Agile leadership accelerates decision-making processes in public organizations, improves service quality, and strengthens stakeholder participation (Rigby, Sutherland & Takeuchi, 2016). Especially within the scope of local governments and e-government

practices, agile leadership principles offer a ground compatible with citizen-oriented service design and participatory governance models.

Agile Leadership in Educational Institutions: Educational institutions also need an agile leadership approach in an environment of increasing change pressure and uncertainty in recent years. With the pandemic process, digital transformation, distance education, and blended learning models have made it mandatory for school administrators to have agile leadership skills (Horney, Pasmore & O'Shea, 2010). Agile school leaders facilitate teachers' and students' adaptation to change, support innovative practices in learning processes, and dynamically shape the vision of the school. Moreover, agile leadership in educational institutions fosters a culture of collaboration and encourages teamwork among teachers.

Agile Leadership in Healthcare: Healthcare is a field that requires high levels of uncertainty and crisis management. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again demonstrated the importance of agile leadership in healthcare organizations. Healthcare leaders need to be able to react quickly to sudden changes, show flexibility in decision processes, and coordinate teams from different disciplines (Denning, 2018). The agile leadership approach supports healthcare organizations to adapt to changing patient needs, accelerate process improvements, and increase patient safety.

Agile Leadership in Technology and R&D: Technology and R&D based sectors are among the areas where the concept of agility was adopted the earliest. Agile methods used especially in software development processes have also transformed the understanding of leadership. In these sectors, agile leaders adopt a leadership style that encourages innovation, prioritizes learning agility, and provides opportunities for employees to learn through trial and error. In addition, agile leaders have the capacity to continuously update their strategic vision by rapidly adapting to technological developments (Rigby et al., 2016).

In conclusion, agile leadership is a leadership model that can be flexibly applied according to the specific conditions of different sectors. The common denominator is rapid response to change, supporting a learning culture and creating a collaborative organizational structure. In this respect, agile leadership offers a critical leadership approach for sustainable success in all sectors in the dynamic and uncertain working environments of the 21st century.

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