

# The Agile Leader: Applying Agile Principles to any Organization

Whether they realize it or not, many organizations embraced “Agile” mindsets and methodologies at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The innovations needed to respond quickly to the sudden changes brought on by an economic shutdown were not part of any executive’s strategic plan. Teams formed to tackle urgent needs and pivot quickly. Managers and frontline workers had to be empowered to make decisions fast and with less supervision in order to adapt to remote workplaces, institute new safety measures, and develop solutions to new customer needs.

Meanwhile, the shift to a remote connection made meetings shorter, although sometimes more frequent. Many leaders have been pleasantly surprised at the outcomes of this new, more agile mindset and are ready to embrace agile principles for the long-term. Disruption is nothing new, whether it is a pandemic, a natural disaster, a customer’s changing needs, or a rival company introducing a more popular product. An agile approach to leadership can help organizations survive in turbulent times.

## What is Agile?

Agile methods were first developed in the tech industry to increase success rates in software development and move new products to market quickly and efficiently. As the tech industry experienced rapid growth and shifts, companies discovered they needed better systems to react quickly to the ever-evolving market. In 2001, a group of 17 software developers came together to create the “Agile Manifesto” to address two key opportunities:



1. How to shorten the delay of benefits to users to resolve the product-market fit and development graveyard issues
2. Getting feedback from users quickly and frequently to confirm the usefulness of new products and continue to improve on them

While Agile methodologies have continued to evolve, the authors of this first “manifesto” expressed the following 4 Core Values:

*Through this work, we have come to value:*

- **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools
- **Working product** over comprehensive documentation
- **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation
- **Responding to change** over following a plan

This group of developers chose to name this concept "Agile" because that word represented the ability to adapt and respond to change quickly and easily. Ultimately, Agile is a mindset rooted in the values and principles laid out by this group of developers. Once they identified the core values, they embraced 12 principles as the foundation for this mindset (summarized below):

The highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of a valuable product.	Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.
Deliver working products frequently, with a preference for shorter timescales.	Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the tools and support they need, and trust them to get it done.	The most effective and efficient communication within a development team is face-to-face conversation.
A working product is the primary measure of progress.	Agile processes promote sustainable development. Teams and users should be able to maintain a consistent pace indefinitely.
Continuous attention to excellence and good design enhances agility.	Simplicity is essential.
The best requirements and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.	Teams must reflect on how to become more effective at regular intervals and adjust behavior accordingly.

These basic tenets created a framework from which many agile methodologies have developed. Agile has evolved over the years and spread from the IT industry to all kinds of organizations, from NPR using Agile methods to create new programming to John Deere utilizing an Agile approach to develop new machines.

## Agile Methodologies

Agile teams can turn sporadic innovation into systemic innovation and find better ways to take care of both stakeholders and shareholders. There are different tools used to implement Agile concepts. Two common ways to approach Agile are known as Scrum and Kanban. Both have become buzzwords that are sometimes used interchangeably with Agile. However, they are more accurately considered unique systems for applying Agile principles.

### Scrum

Scrum is a framework for project management that prioritizes accountability, teamwork, and iterative progress to achieve a specific goal. It is known to increase productivity and speed, as well as enable teams to adjust to changing requirements smoothly. Scrum principles are most easily applied to complex product development, and it benefits organizations through greater control over projects and schedules, substantial increases in the quality of deliverables, and predicting and handling changes more effectively.

The term Scrum comes from the sport of Rugby, referring to a team formation where the ball is passed within the team as it is moved up the field. Similarly, in an Agile approach, each member of a Scrum team has a specific role in advancing a project to completion. These roles

include the Scrum Master, the Product Owner, and the Development Team.

The Scrum Master is a servant-leader for the Scrum Team. Scrum Masters are responsible for making sure their teams are using the best tools and Agile practices, and for coaching and coordinating the team to ensure the project is making progress. The Product Owner is responsible for the planning and prioritization of work for the Scrum team. Product Owners are also a liaison between the internal and external stakeholders. They ensure that expectations for the final deliverable have been communicated clearly and agreed upon along the way. Lastly, the Development Team is a group that works together to create and test the final product's incremental releases.

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In Scrum, there is an emphasis on accountability that requires a well-defined objective or outcome. The Product Owner collaborates closely with the Development Team to establish a product backlog or list of tasks that must be accomplished to deliver the final product. Once priorities are set, the cross-functional teams estimate timelines for incremental milestones referred to as "sprints." A sprint is generally a timeline of 2-4 weeks. Once the team has committed to the tasks and timeline needed to complete that sprint, only the members of the development team can add tasks to that particular sprint. Once the specific sprint is completed, the product backlog is re-evaluated, and priorities are re-adjusted as needed. At that time, tasks may be added to the next sprint if necessary. There is often a shared visual work board to track the workflow from the beginning of a project to the team's ultimate definition of completion.



## Kanban

Another popular Agile tool is Kanban, which uses a shared visual work board to break down complex projects into manageable chunks and track progress. However, rather than limiting the amount of time in terms of "sprints" as Scrum methods do, it limits the number of works in progress (WIPs) allowed in any one condition or category. Kanban reduces waste and increases productivity by visualizing wait times and identifying problems in the workflow.

Kanban focuses on visualizing a team's capacity by dividing tasks into categories like project backlog, priority tasks, planning, tasks in progress, tasks completed, etc. There is a pre-determined limit to the number of WIPs allowed in each category. As one item moves to the next phase or column on the Kanban board, bandwidth opens in the previous category, and a new task from the backlog can move in. This tool helps teams to analyze how long it takes to complete a project and

where challenges or obstacles occur frequently. The shared visualization of tasks and timelines also allows for reflection on how to improve processes and better predict how changes to one process might impact other timelines downstream.

Unlike Scrum, there are no definitive roles like Scrum Master or Product Owner in Kanban. However, there are often people assigned to manage service delivery and service requests, especially when teams are new to Kanban. One team member would take on the responsibility of managing the flow of work and ensuring that work-in-progress limits are adhered to while identifying challenges and facilitating change and improvement in the system. Another team member would take on the role of understanding client needs and expectations to assist in prioritizing the backlog, ensuring consistency of process.



## Agile Beyond Scrum and Kanban

While Scrum and Kanban are both popular tools to help organizations become more agile, it is important to remember that they are not the only way to build an Agile team. In fact, rigid adherence to either system can result in a fragile system that lacks flexibility. Remember, one of the core principles of

Agile is prioritizing people and interactions over processes and tools. It is important to consider how these tools are best used in an organization. While helpful in project management and product development scenarios, they are not always suited to day to day operational functions or easily applied to customer service teams. So while every team can become more agile, it is not always necessary (or helpful) to implement Scrum or Kanban to do so.

## How Can Leaders Embrace Agile?

At the heart of an agile organization is leadership that removes barriers to success and increases employee independence, trust, and personal accountability. Agile is best understood when viewed as an overarching cultural practice rather than a prescriptive process. To become more agile, leaders must find the obstacles to performance and remove them, facilitate connection among employees, and create psychological safety and room for failure.

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## Create Stability to Encourage Agility

Recent research shows that that agility is a blend of both proactive and reactive elements, and companies that scored high in agility and resilience had a 150% return on investment on those efforts. They also found some common characteristics of agile and resilient businesses. Surprisingly, the most important factor is stability, followed by right-sized teamwork and relentless course-correction. A foundation of organizational stability provides teams with a sense of



rapid changes. Providing a sense of security allows employees to stay focused on the task at hand, act rationally, and adapt quickly.

Leaders must exhibit discipline in setting priorities and communicate them clearly and frequently. When employees feel like they can trust leadership and are well-informed about organizational goals, they share ideas more freely and collaborate more effectively. Agile managers stay tuned in to team members, watching for any obstacles such as failing technology or miscommunications that stall projects. Whenever necessary, they should deploy workarounds and solutions as quickly as possible to avoid further disruption.

### Focus on Clear Communication

Agile leaders prioritize effective and frequent communication, which is increasingly important now that more teams are working remotely. The key to successful remote team management is ensuring that everyone understands the overall vision of a project, as well as each

team member's role in the strategies being employed to progress towards that goal.

Agile principles recommend that frequent face-to-face communication is best, and that still holds true even if it must be done over video conferencing. Agile leaders must create regular opportunities for teams to meet for updates and feedback. To facilitate that connection, leaders can focus on shorter, more frequent meetings that feel more like collaborative work sessions than traditional management meetings. Keep agendas short and focused on identifying and resolving challenges.

For example, if an organization has ten small teams working on aspects of a larger project, each group could meet daily for 15 minutes at 9:00 am. Then at 9:15 am, the ten leaders of those teams could meet for an additional 15 minutes to discuss and solve any problems that escalated from the smaller team meeting. If needed, there could be an additional 15-minute meeting with the C-suite at 9:30 am to address any issues that the team leaders could not solve. Using this Agile approach to meetings allows for decisions to be made in a matter of hours as opposed to waiting for weekly hour-long department-wide sessions that identify issues to be discussed in a future lengthy monthly leadership meeting.

### Make Conflict More Constructive

In an Agile environment, conflict should not be feared or avoided. Team members need to feel free to have honest and respectful discussions about different approaches. These discussions should focus on reaching a consensus about how to produce the best possible product or outcome. It takes practice and leadership skills to facilitate productive conversations in moments of conflict, and employees must feel safe sharing differences of opinion. However, when confidence and optimism throughout challenging times and

approached effectively, learning to discuss different views and approaches as a team will ultimately lead to better outcomes.

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People who work on agile teams will feel comfortable disagreeing with their leaders. For example, if the CEO suggests a course of action that had previously been considered, it would not be uncommon for someone to speak up even if they are not a manager. They might say, "you know, we discussed that option in an earlier session, and here are some reasons we did not move forward with that as a solution." Likewise, an agile CEO is humble enough to trust the expertise of team members on the front line and move forward with other ideas.

### Learn from Failure

Agile leaders create an environment that optimizes failures. As teams innovate and pivot to face new challenges and take on new projects, there will inevitably be bumps in the road. Agile leaders avoid assigning blame. Instead, they embrace using failure as an opportunity for reflection and learning. Remember, a core value of Agile is choosing to respond to change rather than follow the original plan. Creating a safe space for team members to try new ways of achieving goals without fear of failure will lead to increased creativity and innovation.

One common slogan in Agile organizations is to "fail fast and fail often." This counterintuitive slogan is intended to encourage experimentation and creative thought. Because

Agile values working in short sprints and receiving frequent feedback, experimentation is encouraged. When one course of action does not prove effective, Agile teams re-evaluate and pivot to a new solution. An Agile leader's role is to give their people the tools and support needed to get the job done, so when confronting failure, it is best to be honest, reflect on learnings and call attention to opportunities that will empower the team to move forward.

### Allocate Resources Effectively

Agile leaders must focus on allocating resources strategically and inclusively to their teams, emphasizing how each team member will be integrated into any operational changes and how they can most effectively utilize resources. One precious resource that Agile leaders consider carefully is how time is spent.



Agile leaders consider whether management teams are spending too much time meeting about day to day operations and not enough on strategic planning. They empower their teams to be more autonomous and handle more decisions. Top executives protect their valuable time by delegating time-consuming activities to subordinates when possible, allowing them to focus on things that only the C-suite can do.

One great example is the Mission Bell Winery's use of Agile to improve operations. After a coaching session on Agile and Scrum, the leadership team invited employees to share ideas about making the winery a happier and more productive workplace. Once they had a collection of these suggestions, they established small pilot teams in different departments. The distribution team shared that they needed time to complete special products, but daily work and frequent interruptions impeded their progress. They began testing processes to improve the speed of daily tasks and find more time to work on special products. They also allocated 10% of their time in anticipation of interruptions and devised effective methods to deal with them more efficiently.



The new process empowered the team to resolve most issues without waiting for approval. Problems that could not be solved by the team were escalated to a resolution team. This process increased the distribution team's efficiency more than tenfold, and the annual finished goods inventory process increased by 90%.

### Embrace Life-Long Learning

Agile leaders are adept at navigating uncertain circumstances. They embrace a growth mindset, which includes believing that there are always ways to improve products, services, and, most importantly, yourself. Agile principles require that teams reflect on how to improve their performance and adjust behaviors accordingly.

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One way to accomplish this goal is for leaders to prioritize professional learning and development for themselves and their teams. Competitive organizations realize that their workforce must always be upgrading their skills and knowledge. Continuous professional development empowers managers to become true leaders, able to think critically, adapt quickly, and consistently improve outcomes, which is consistent with Agile principles.

### Agile is About People

Essentially, the key to increasing an organization's agility comes down to people. Any leader can implement the core values of Agile to improve their team's performance. Before Agile was a buzzword and Scrum Masters came on the

scene, the essentials of an agile leader were clear. Effective leaders value their people and interactions more than any tool or process. Building relationships and creating trust will always improve innovation and increase productivity. Agile leaders value great outcomes more than piles of documentation. Reducing bureaucracy and paperwork saves time and energy that can be better spent on improving processes and finding creative solutions to problems. Effective leaders know successful outcomes come from collaborating effectively with customers, not from negotiating contracts. And, in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing business environment, Agile leaders know that responding to change by evolving in the face of new circumstances is a more effective strategy than rigidly staying the course. These core values of Agile can be applied to any team to create a more resilient and nimble organization that will thrive even in uncertain times.



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