



accenture

5 learning journeys of the agile leader

Whitepaper

Executives in companies undergoing transformations usually want to help. They often try to make the changes needed to become a more agile leader. They remember from their past training that they need to empower teams while striving to be less directive themselves. They know what a user story is, they have even authorized re-naming all of their project managers to scrum masters—what more is there to it?

And yet transformations still fail. So, there must be more to it. How can leaders improve the success of the transformation of their organizations—and themselves?

In this white paper, we offer five learning journeys that every agile leader must be familiar with and some of which they will have to undertake themselves in order to effectively lead an agile organization “from the front.”

5 Learning Journeys

01

How to be Agile

02

How to Manage in Agile Environments

03

How to Lead in an Agile Organization

04

How to Lead Change and Transformation

05

How to Develop a Coaching Capability



Go forth and transform

One of the authors gave a workshop at a global gathering of the agile Center of Excellence (COE) leaders for a client, a large conglomerate, and the topic we were exploring was obstacles to enterprise business agility transformations. One of the leaders shared an anecdote that struck a chord with me. It's a story that many have heard several times, but this time it was stated in a way that beautifully identified a gap and that gave rise to this article.

At the client at the center of the story, the executives were very supportive, would provide the transformation leaders whatever they needed, including generous funding and plenty of room to make decisions and drive the "IT transformation."

The leader of the agile change initiative, Lee (all names have been changed) would meet with his executive sponsor Chris monthly to provide "status reports" on the transformation. Every month Chris would review the report and ask a few good questions and if there was anything he can do to help. Then he would close the meeting with "Keep up the good work!" and "Go forth and transform!" Lee left every meeting thinking, "He has no idea what it will actually take to transform. What can I do to further this transformation without having to first make executives like Chris understand the broader implications?"

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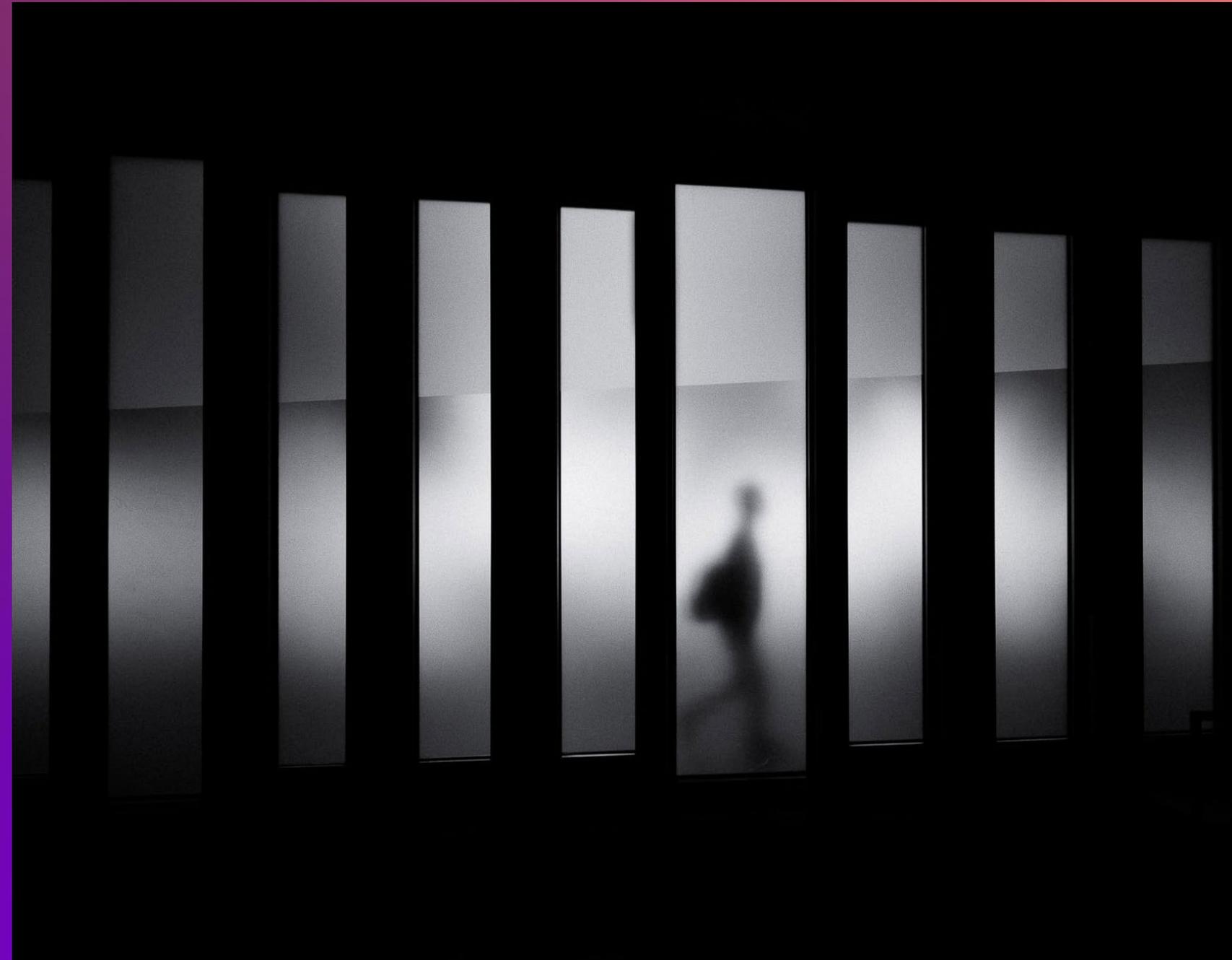
Lee knew the executive sponsor was too busy to make the time to lead the transformation “from the front”; that’s why Lee was hired on in the first place. All of the IT executives had attended the “Agile Overview” training when their organization started its journey three years previous, so Lee didn’t think more training was the answer. When Lee talked to his peer in the Finance group about changing how initiatives were funded to allow the teams to adapt more quickly, they agreed that neither of their bosses would understand the need to change the very high-level process that they didn’t have visibility into. These were governance processes overseen by the Board! It was just too big of a problem and

none of them really knew what the solution would be. Furthermore, they felt they should be taking solutions to their bosses, not problems. The teams were already empowered, weren’t they? The IT org “went agile” a few years ago, after all.

As the other agile COE leaders listened in to this story, they all nodded in agreement. They all felt stuck. Each of them felt like they had gone as far as they could and that they now needed their executives to understand a lot more about what makes agile effective and what an enterprise transformation really means. And they didn’t know how to even begin that conversation with them.

What can we do to help our leaders understand?

In our experience, there are five learning journeys that leaders should consider for themselves and others in the organization to improve the chance of transformation success. Which journey for the leader to take or for them to invite others to is based on that person's role in the company, their role in the transformation, and their personal development goals.



Learning journey 01

How to be agile

The prevailing wisdom among leaders in an organization still early in its transformation journey is that “agile is for developers” or “agile is for IT.” Neither is strictly incorrect, but agile is also very much for leaders, managers, the business in general and everyone in any organization that seeks to thrive in constant change.

Leaders of all levels should have a working understanding of what agile is, what business agility is, and why transformation is the means to get the business outcomes that they define. This includes learning and being familiar with:



The Agile Manifesto and the principles behind it



The core agile principles, values, and approaches



Any new language and terms



Changes to processes and governance



New behaviors to expect from teams and managers.

The aim is for leaders of all levels to become basically “conversant,” aware of the new ways, and informed of the changes that will take place—all in the service of achieving business-identified outcomes.

Learning journey 02

How to manage in agile environments

In complex, uncertain times, how to manage effectively is different than in simpler times. It stands to reason that, if individuals are changing their relationship to work, then the managers of those individuals must have an understanding of how the work environment—physical, virtual and psychological—will change as a result.

Managing in agile environments is significantly different from more traditional approaches to management, which seemed more about optimizing utilization and machinery. Agile helps individuals, teams, and organizations to collaborate more effectively, to focus on outcomes (happy customers) not outputs (more features), to continuously improve, and more. Agility enables businesses to thrive in complexity and volatile markets.

When seen through this lens, just about every management practice and every business function looks very different. Managers of all levels should embark upon a continuous journey to learn:



New skills and approaches to managing processes and empowering teams



How to introduce agility and lean thinking to other aspects of their company's operations—such as HR, marketing, finance, and more.



How to evolve their own roles



How to model desired behaviors

Without significant change, the traditional manager can be left behind the agile wave—uncertain of their roles and responsibilities as their teams become more self-sufficient.

Learning journey 03

How to lead in an agile organization

Business agility yields organizational benefits to the whole business when everyone does their part. Beyond just the practices of management, leaders need to:



Adopt new values, mindsets, and perspectives in order to lead their teams and organizations to succeed in this rapidly changing world.



Continuously develop their personal leadership (including their beliefs, values, mindsets), their relationships (in how they behave and the leadership stances they assume with others), and their organizational leadership (how they recognize and influence systems).



Co-create and clarify a shared vision with people in the organization and design environments in which it can be achieved

In a way, this path isn't accessible to most leaders today because most organizations, lacking fluency in agile and business agility, require a holistic transformation to become an agile organization.

We do see agile leaders in small- and mid-sized companies, however, because these were either founded on agile values or were able to transform relatively quickly in the decade or so since agile transformation has become mainstream. Further, these companies may already have a high degree of business agility—where all aspects of the business use agile mindsets, practices and processes to deliver rapid value; to innovate and disrupt markets; to adapt their organizations in accordance with market pressures; and to lead through complex times. A leader in a fully agile organization is in a position to steer and motivate.

Unfortunately, most leaders will need to understand the fourth learning journey—how to lead change and transformation—before they lead in an agile organization. Leading an already agile organization is fundamentally different from leading a traditional organization through agile transformation.

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Learning journey 04

How to lead change and transformation

We often engage with organizations who understand the need to transform—and who wish to do this themselves. They, understandably, want to develop a capacity to maintain whatever momentum they create in early years and protract that momentum onward into the future, without depending on an external consultancy. We recognize the desire to be self-sufficient and support it—with some reservations.

Agile is such a drastic paradigm shift from traditional thinking that no amount of book-reading or class-taking can prepare you for the rippling changes caused by putting the business agility lens on.

Leading a change that you don't understand, while admirable, is like a child—having seen their parents making dinner, driving the car, and spending money—deciding to raise itself. No one would mistake parenthood for the activities parents perform, and yet leaders who do not understand agile and attempt to lead their own agile transformations invariably confuse agile practices and activities (e.g., standups, Scrum teams, SAFe) for agility itself. These things help—no self-respecting parent would fail to feed his or her children—but they are not synonymous.

Instead, many business leaders are caretakers for a system that worked for a long time and now cannot work because the environment requires new thinking. That new thinking is not housed in the organization—or if it is housed there, there hasn't been enough critical mass for this new thinking to have affected the overall system. An organization's "immune system"—its culture, its history, its sales and incentive infrastructure, its monetization practices—actively prevents transformative change.

That is why leading successful change requires particular skills and approaches that traditional leaders and even agile leaders do not generally have. These are skills like:



Clarifying future states



Determining strategies to achieve it and experiments to move towards it



Co-creating change through effective stakeholder management



Continuous learning and planning



Double-loop learning

Organizations seeking to gain this capability need leaders that develop and improve themselves in order to effectively lead change.

While there are a decent number of agile leaders today, the number of agile change leaders is much smaller. Leading change, let alone leading transformative change, is a new skill different than leading an agile organization. Agile today, requiring change at many levels, benefits from the effort of change leaders, be they actual company leaders and executives, employees at any level of the organization, or external consultants.

How to develop a coaching capability

Deming said that “[significant] change must come from outside the system, and [be] invited” and a number of management and business thought leaders agree on this point. A pervasive example today is coaching. Some companies may benefit from developing internal coaches who are able to enable new teams to adopt new mindsets and practices to a basic level, so that consultant coaches can focus on more advanced capabilities that require many years and intense effort to develop.

Coaching is a particular form of leadership and requires a set of skills that can be developed over time. Fortunately, coaching has a long history of helping change stick, with thought leadership by leaders in the agile space like Lyssa Adkins, Michael Hamman, and Michael Spayd of the Agile Coaching Institute (ACI), as well individuals like Diana Larsen, Esther Derby.

What is less settled is what coaching looks like in a leadership context. This includes both how to lead coaches and how to coach leaders. The same

problem here as elsewhere applies: coaching is often viewed by leadership as for “others” who are “actually the problem” and “if we could just optimize their performance, then we can continue to do what we’ve always done, because that is what works.”

In our experience, coaching is essential for anyone who is testing out new muscles and new nerve endings that have gotten little use over the years. Developers will need to understand technical skills like test-driven development—but so too will the CHRO and the CFO need to understand new skills applicable to the VUCA world we live in. Indeed, even your board could stand to be coached, because sooner or later the traditional expectations of ROI will come up against new-generation thinking around employee engagement, customer delight, and continuous learning.

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Putting it all together

We have described five different and interlocking learning journeys that every leader must be informed of. They must partake in some of the journeys, understanding that individuals across the organization will need the different skills, mindsets, and perspectives that each journey offers. Not every leader needs to undergo every learning journey, but your leadership team must have strengths in all of these areas:

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The era of improvement being imposed only on others is long behind us. Many leaders, managers, and executives are on board with the new program where everyone leads from their place in the holistic system. In other words, leaders are not those people who bark orders from the top; we are all of us leaders, or we have the potential to be.

After all, a leader is “someone who leads” and anyone can lead. These five learning journeys provide a way for traditional leaders to lead “from the front” again, steering the transformation effort and modeling the behavior they expect in others.

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