Agile Leadership

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Course Aims. Agile leadership is much more than inspiring people to become fast and flexible. Speed and flexibility matter, but their value gets realized only in a broader organizational context. Agile leadership, for us, is about creating that context. Consider, for instance, the demands facing a top collegiate basketball coach. In addition to helping her players become as quick and nimble as possible, she must enable them to innovate and implement—together, as a team. She must create a context in which they improvise under pressure, while maintaining sure footing on known strengths. And she must achieve this in a competitive arena that's fraught with ambiguity. *Agile leadership is empowering people to innovate and implement—together, fast, and flexibly—in the face of ambiguity*.

Overview. In the first part of our course, we'll consider agility at the organizational level. Before focusing on your own organization, we'll look at two canonical examples of agile leadership: IDEO, as it was led by Dave Kelley, and 3M, under the leadership of William McKnight. Using the ARC (architecture, routines, and culture) framework, we'll distill the distinctive features of IDEO and of 3M, and then use these features as reference points for analyzing and enhancing—"agilizing"—your unit within your organization.

Next, in the middle of the course, we turn to "pull" and "push" factors operating primarily at the network (or team) level: We'll first consider how you might pull disparate kinds of colleagues together—specifically "exploiters" (implementers) and "explorers" (innovators)—into a synergistic, rather than antagonistic, team. We then consider what happens when a boss tries to push his or her team into agility, using the metaphor of "annealing"—the process, familiar to engineers and physicists, by which a metalworker heats and then cools metal in a more desirable shape.

Mixing together colleagues from different functions, whether by recruitment or annealing, raises the risk of internal collisions. Much like conflict among Formula One drivers—who, in an effort to intimidate each other in wheel-to-wheel racing, end up colliding on the track—status contests between "blue" exploiters and "green" explorers can fuel destructive infighting that derails an entire team. We will consider strategies for anticipating and avoiding such conflict when forming agile teams. Our emphasis on status in Formula One will then serve as a bridge to a broader discussion of status, as a factor that, if misunderstood, can restrain your ability to lead with agility. You have status if you're highly regarded by others who are highly regarded, and this can fuel your agility—or hinder your agility, if status is misunderstood, undermined, or lost.

Our penultimate session offers a summary look at status and considers how to engage systematically with ambiguity—so that you can stop ambiguity before it stops you. Our closing session will deal with how to restore an agile culture in an organization that lost its way by stressing technique over substance. Using an array of frameworks, grounded in social-scientific research, you will gain from the course a set of approaches, intuitions, and skills that will enable you to lead with agility.

Learning Outcomes. Our aims in this course are to enable you to:

- Define and discuss agility at individual, relational, and organizational levels.
- Use the ARC (architecture, routines, culture) framework to: (i) evaluate the degree of fit among your organization's core elements, (ii) assess the level of fit between these elements and your organization's strategy, and (iii) sketch next steps for making your organization more agile.
- Understand how agility relates to ambidexterity—the mixture of exploration and exploitation.
- Analyze the advantages and risks—the driving factors and restraining factors—that agile transformations entail.
- Evaluate how your status can enable or inhibit your ability to lead with agility: Identify and preempt status-based barriers to agile leadership—in your own career and in those of valued colleagues.
- Use sensemaking strategies to move systematically from ambiguity to clarity.

Requirements:

- Admission to the class is based in part on writing an essay (of at most 1 page, single-spaced) in response to this prompt: *You realize you need to empower your colleagues (or team) to innovate and implement—together, fast, and flexibly—in the face of ambiguity. What will you say to them in a brief presentation?* (Please note: this is a social-science-based course—in particular, this is **not** a course on agile methods and Scrum and Kanban will *not* be taught—so there's no obligation in your essay to invoke these methods or practices.)
- The course is interactive and group-based. Please apply to the class at this time only if you have several hours each week to participate in group assignments.
- Completing the first, video-based ARC-analysis is **necessary** to continue in the course, as finishing this individual assignment is highly correlated with making strong contributions to group work.