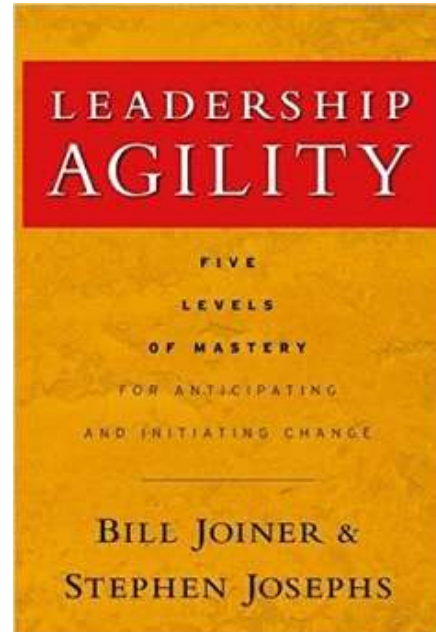


ACTION LEARNING AGILITY

In today's world of rapid change, leaders and organizations must evolve faster than the white water rapids we are cascading through. Organizations that simply try to improve on the current benchmark will not survive, they must invent the products and methods that will define the new standard. To do this, they must shift to being a learning organization that is open to change. The flexibility and robustness of action learning leads to agile leaders, agile teams, and ultimately agile learning organizations.

These changes must come from the top. Until recently, little was known about what the agile leadership required for this shift looked like in action, not to mention the underlying mental and emotional capacities it requires. The concept of agility means the ability to "anticipate and respond to rapidly changing conditions and to lead complex, interdependent relationships effectively." All organizations and teams must develop higher levels to adapt to the relentless change of today's business environment.

"Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change" (Jossey Bass, 2007) reveals that leaders develop agility by moving through five hierarchical stages: Expert, Achiever, Catalyst, Co-creator, and Synergist.



The Five Levels of Leadership Agility

In "Power Up," David Bradford, refers to leaders at the Expert and Achievers level as heroic leaders. These leaders focus more on the management of their employees – setting goals, coordinating activities, and grading their performance. The rapidly changing environment of business requires more and more leaders to be at the post-heroic levels. Post-heroic leaders retain these managerial responsibilities, but create highly functioning teams that share a commitment to the success of the organization.

The following examines each of these levels and how Action Learning develops the skills necessary to progress.

Expert Leaders are tactical in nature and rely on their expertise and positional authority for their power. They focus on incremental improvements to help the organization. They supervise, rather than truly lead. They tend to attack or avoid when it comes to difficult conversations.

Achiever Leaders are more strategic in their thinking, shifting efforts more toward the



outcomes than tactics. Their power includes being able to motivate others and their goals for the organization focus on the bigger picture of the entire industry. They solicit input from stakeholders rather than going it alone. They meet with team members to insure buy-in of the direction the team is heading. When faced with difficult conversations, they hold them openly.



Catalyst Leaders, the first of the post-heroic levels, are visionary in nature, believing if they clearly articulate the vision, the team will translate it to reality. They view organizational change as creating an empowered workforce that will take the organization to the next level, continually involving diverse stakeholders to improve the quality of decisions. Their teams

are encouraged to participate, as catalysts have an eye on creating future leaders. They are adept at difficult conversations, which includes openly seeking feedback.

Co-creator Leaders believe their mission is to create a shared purpose and orientation. They build relationships with key stakeholders to achieve a common good. Their teams comprise collaborative leaders who recognize their responsibilities to succeed go beyond their individual goals, working toward the good of the organization as a whole. Also, co-creators adept at difficult conversations, and openly shift tendencies, when feedback suggest a better way of being.

Synergist Leaders believe leadership is a life purpose, allowing for personal transformation. They maintain a deep, empathetic awareness of the needs of conflicting stakeholders and transform seemingly unsurmountable conflicts into solutions that benefit all. Their team's energy is amplified to bring about mutually beneficial results. Difficult conversations do not appear difficult as their present-centered awareness creates a strong connection with others.



Leadership Agility, Team Agility, and Organizational Agility

Leadership, team and organizational agility is the ability to take effective action in complex, rapidly changing conditions. Joiner and Josephs tell us agility requires flexibility in four competencies: context-setting (selecting and framing issues), stakeholder (understanding and aligning key ones), creative (solving complex problems), and learning (from experience). These get applied at three levels: individual, team and organization.

Highly agile leaders recognize we are constantly in the white water rapids of change – global, complex, uncertain and competitive. Continual adaptation is the only means to survival. They set new benchmarks by questioning old assumptions and actively

encouraging others to do the same.



Agile leaders use diverse perspectives to see the situation from many angles, then synthesize the information to achieve innovative breakthrough solutions. For these leaders, teams' and organizations' failures as well as successes are seen as learning opportunities. From this continual learning emerges a learning organization. Research done by Joiner and Josephs indicate that less than 10% of today's leaders have achieved Catalyst or beyond. It's no longer

adequate to know the answers, leaders must be able to identify the problems.

Action Learning Agility

Within Action Learning, teams see the agile behavior described evolve naturally. Action Learning teams are made up of four to eight people with diverse perspectives examining deep organizational challenges to identify breakthrough solutions while they are developing and learning as leaders.

The two rules of Action Learning encourage the use of questions and reflective learning, both of which are paramount to being an agile leader. The first rule is that statements can only be made in response to questions. The use of truly curious questions are stimulated because it is the questions we don't know the answers to that will let us determine the underlying problem. The second rule is that the learning coach can intervene whenever there is the opportunity for learning which encourages the deep reflection.

Each participant of an Action Learning team identifies a leadership skill they want to develop during the session. In this way, they have selected a skill that is important to him or herself, making it something he or she has a vested interest in practicing. At the end of the session the coach circles back to each participant to assess how they did with their skill. Thus encouraging learning on an individual level.



The coach raises questions as to how the team is progressing, this encourages the team to reflect on how they are working together, allowing the team to continually adapt their behavior to achieve the highest levels of processing. Ultimately, this questioning ability infiltrates the culture of the organization. The culture becomes one where it is safe to question everything. These teams look for ways of developing new benchmarks to keep the organization ahead of the change curve.

Action Learners see opportunity in every situation. Experimenting and failing is no longer feared but embraced and seen as an opportunity to excel. Action Learners easily live in the Co-creator level of agile leadership.



Action Learners live in shared leadership. They strive to find a common understanding of the problem that ultimately gives them a shared purpose and orientation. They look for solutions that truly address the challenge without regard for the politically right answer. Their teams include collaborative leaders who recognize that their responsibilities to succeed extend toward the organization as a whole.

Action Learning coaches tend to be synergistic leaders, seeing Action Learning as a life purpose that transcends the needs of the individual and guides to team to learn and transform at all three levels (self, team and organization). Coaches guide their teams to be aware of conflicting needs. By raising everything to awareness and allowing the team to determine the path forward, seemingly unsurmountable mountains become molehills, ultimately focusing the team's energy towards breakthrough solutions.

Dr. Bea Carson, MALC
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