



# Leading in the age of agility

# Leaders have always been thought of as a kind of superhero, ready to leap into action and save the day whenever danger strikes. They're strong, bold, confident, fearless, and they have all the answers to all the tough questions.

These types of leaders served us well in the past when change and disruption weren't so fast-moving and when uncertainty wasn't wreaking havoc on the world of work. So how can our leaders guide us through complex and challenging times?

## From industrial era to agile era

Two hundred years ago, the first industrial revolution saw machines mass producing products that previously had to be made by hand. Then, about one hundred years later, the second industrial revolution kicked off, powered by electricity and combustion engines, and accelerating mass production even further. This was when the assembly line was born, along with most of our theories about management and how to lead people. The focus of leadership at the time was on creating mechanistic and repeatable processes that would boost efficiency. The work was highly-structured, markets were very stable and predictable, and leaders often achieved their positions through long tenure, not necessarily because of their leadership capabilities.

Now that we're in the digital and the information age, and right on the cusp of the fourth industrial revolution, the leadership skills that served us in the past are just not going to cut it anymore. Most of these repeatable processes will become automated or roboticised. And as we see even more of these digital technologies embedded into our everyday lives, the nature of work itself is going to change.

Because these exponentially advancing technologies create conditions where new threats and innovation opportunities are emerging all the time, most businesses are thinking about the best ways to adapt quickly. Enter, agile. Most organisations

today are embracing some form of agile working practice or are at least trying to. The agile way of working puts a strong emphasis on empowering and engaging teams so that they can deliver better quality products to customers much faster. It's about trusting that because they are the ones doing the work you hired them to do, that they know how to do it best.

Gone are the days of playing follow the leader, where managers had all the answers about what to do and how to do it. To work well in complex and ever-changing markets, leaders need to be able to inspire others and create an environment where everybody in the organisation feels safe to bring their best selves to work. This is what's called psychological safety, and it's the secret to creating high-performing teams.

**Behind every great team is an environment created so that members feel safe to make mistakes, take risks, share new ideas and voice concerns without fear of punishment or blame.**

These teams are highly motivated, and they can depend on their teammates to get work done; they find their work meaningful and have the structure and clarity needed to be successful.





## Leadership in the age of agility

Being a great leader in the age of agile isn't about gaining a title, managing people or delegating tasks; it's about providing direction and supporting teams through coaching and mentorship. Coaching means connecting with people and helping them to grow by challenging thinking, asking questions and drawing out innovative ideas for solving complex challenges. The role of a leader, coach and mentor is to convey why people are showing up to work every day, the common goals that everyone is working towards and then making sure that everyone has the resources and the skills they need to be effective in their job. It's about removing limits rather than creating them.

## Driving organisational agility

All of this sounds easy in theory, but it's a lot harder in practice. Giving up that power and control and trusting teams to do their work can be uncomfortable, especially when leaders feel like they'll be to blame when things go wrong. Also, for someone that has gained their authority by being the smartest and most experienced person in the room, it can be hard to put pride aside and acknowledge what we don't know. But, in an uncertain world that is always changing,

**a leader's greatest superpowers are their humility, vulnerability, courage, empathy, curiosity and eagerness to learn.**

And a big part of continuously learning and growing is unlearning.

The old mindset says that leaders are the most important people at the top, holding all of the knowledge, power and influence over the people below. But new ways of working require leaders to give all that up, recognise their own biases, question their assumptions and reimagine what it means to lead.

So, command and control management is on the way out, and empathetic leaders who make an effort to connect are in. In the disruptive digital age, we need daring leaders that are ready to face complex challenges and navigate through change and crises by supporting and mobilising teams to solve problems. Today's leaders need to lay their armour down, put ego aside and give everyone the chance to step up and lead.

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