



Leadership for the Agile Organization



There are two kinds of leadership; one depends on orders and supervision; the other depends on training and trust. One kind of leadership values control and the other kind values responsiveness. If you are trying to create an agile organization which kind of leadership would you use?

The first kind of leadership is what we are most familiar with. It is where the person in charge tells people what to do and watches to make sure they do as they are told. It is leadership characterized by high visibility, issuing orders, and getting personally involved in lots of details. This style of leadership is needed when people aren't sure what to do. This is **explicit leadership** because it is exact and unequivocal; people are expected to listen carefully and then do as they are told.

The other kind of leadership is **implicit leadership**. This style is characterized by leaders who adopt a low profile, who seek consensus, and who delegate details to others. Leaders who use this style are clear about what they want but they do not say how they want it done. They provide their people with lots of training and let them decide how to do what has been asked of them. People are trusted to figure things out for themselves.

The agile organization is an organization that can handle high change situations; that can assess new situations quickly and then act fast to achieve its goals. So you would think explicit leadership is what you need to create agility. Yet, actually, implicit leadership is what you need. This seems counter intuitive at first but think about it.

In my experience explicit leadership works for only a short time (usually not more than 12 months) before people start to turn off; "leader fatigue" sets in. Explicit leaders work harder and harder for less and less response. People become numb; they don't think for themselves; they do nothing at all unless told to. This is not agile behavior. Explicit leadership becomes like welfare; over time it robs people of their drive and self-initiative.

Explicit leadership has its place but it is only effective for short periods. So the question becomes how to use implicit leadership most of the time; even though we live in a fast-paced world where situations are always changing. Don't confuse implicit leadership with slow, bureaucratic managerial practices or with leadership by committee. There is actually a very active side to implicit leadership but it is more in the nature of teaching and encouraging people to think and act for themselves instead of telling them what to do. Give a person a fish and they will eat tonight; but teach them to fish and they will eat for life.

Agility is a way of working, not just a passing fad. And implicit leadership is the best style of leadership for organizations over the long haul. Implicit leadership starts by setting meaningful goals that are clear and stable. Meaningful goals are statements of intent; they are descriptions of what an organization strives to accomplish. They do not change even though the situations an organization encounters change all the time. When goals and the performance objectives needed to achieve those goals are clear then people understand what is expected of them and they become skilled at figuring out how to achieve those goals. When people learn to think and act for themselves without waiting to be told what to do then they can be agile. Although it may seem slow at first, implicit leadership is what fosters agility.