

The Evolution of Agile Leadership: From Software Development Manifesto to a Mainstream Management Paradigm

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Abstract

Background: The 21st-century business environment, characterized by unprecedented volatility and digital disruption, has rendered traditional, hierarchical leadership models increasingly obsolete. In response, organizations are gravitating towards a new paradigm: Agile Leadership. However, despite its growing popularity, the concept often lacks a clear, unified theoretical foundation. This conceptual paper aims to trace the evolution of agile leadership from its niche origins to its current status as a mainstream management philosophy, moving beyond a simplistic view of agility as mere speed or flexibility.

Methods: This study employs a systematic conceptual review methodology. A comprehensive body of literature was synthesized, including foundational texts from the agile movement (e.g., the Agile Manifesto), peer-reviewed academic articles from management and leadership journals, and influential contemporary works on organizational theory. The analysis progresses through a chronological and thematic synthesis, mapping the intellectual development of the concept and identifying its core, enduring components to build an integrated theoretical framework.

Discussion: The review reveals that Agile Leadership has matured through three distinct evolutionary phases: a **foundational phase** rooted in software development principles, an **adaptive phase** where it migrated into broader business operations, and a current **strategic phase** where it is viewed as a core capability for navigating complexity and leading digital transformation. The central finding of this synthesis is that modern Agile Leadership is best understood not as a singular style, but as a multi-dimensional meta-capability. This framework integrates three core dimensions: **Cognitive Agility** (flexible thinking and reframing), **Emotional Agility** (resilience and psychological safety), and **Relational Agility** (collaboration and empowerment). The interplay of these

dimensions allows leaders to create an environment where innovation and adaptability can flourish.

Conclusion: In conclusion, Agile Leadership has evolved from a set of team-level practices into a comprehensive and strategic leadership paradigm essential for contemporary organizations. The new leadership paradigms that embrace agility recognize that a sound approach to navigating the current landscape is an integrated one—that is, the cultivation of an agile mindset is intentionally aligned with the leader's cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities. This study provides a crucial theoretical bridge, synthesizing the historical development of agile leadership and offering a robust, multi-dimensional framework. This gives academics a clearer foundation for future empirical research and provides managers with a more nuanced roadmap for developing the leadership capabilities required for building resilient and innovative organizations.

Keywords: Agile Leadership, Agile Manifesto, Management Paradigm, Organizational Agility, Servant Leadership, Business Agility.

1. Introduction

The 21st-century organizational landscape is defined by an accelerating pace of change, chronic uncertainty, and profound complexity. In this environment, often described by the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous), traditional models of leadership and management have revealed their limitations (Buhler, 2010). Hierarchical structures and long-term predictive planning are increasingly ill-suited to navigate the fluid dynamics of the digital age (Denning, 2018). In response, a new management paradigm has emerged: Agility.

Originally conceived for software development, agility is now a sought-after capability for entire organizations, defined as the capacity to sense and adapt to environmental changes with speed and effectiveness (Fachrunnisa et al., 2020). However, an organization cannot be agile without agile leaders. This realization has given rise to the concept of Agile Leadership, yet despite its popularity, the concept often remains nebulous. It is frequently conflated with specific agile methodologies (like Scrum) or reduced to a simplistic call for "more flexibility." A discernible gap exists in the literature for a comprehensive conceptual review that traces the intellectual lineage of agile leadership and synthesizes its evolution into a coherent theoretical framework.

This paper aims to fill that gap. Through a systematic review of foundational and contemporary literature, this study will chart the evolution of agile leadership from its

genesis in the 2001 Agile Manifesto to its current form as a sophisticated leadership paradigm. The central argument is that agile leadership has matured beyond project management techniques to become a holistic leadership meta-capability, best understood through an integrated framework encompassing three critical dimensions: Cognitive, Emotional, and Relational Agility. By clarifying its conceptual journey, this paper seeks to provide a more robust foundation for future academic research and leadership development.

2. Methodology

This study employs a **systematic conceptual review** methodology. This approach is suited for synthesizing fragmented literature, clarifying the boundaries and definitions of a concept, and building new theoretical frameworks from existing knowledge (Jaakkola, 2020). The research process involved a multi-stage analysis of a broad range of sources, including: (1) foundational texts and documents from the agile movement, such as the Agile Manifesto; (2) peer-reviewed academic articles from management, leadership, and information systems journals; and (3) influential practitioner-oriented books and contemporary management theory. The synthesis of this literature was conducted through a chronological and thematic approach to map the concept's intellectual development and identify its core, enduring components.

3. The Evolution of Agile Leadership: A Historical Synthesis

The conceptual journey of agile leadership can be understood as progressing through three overlapping but distinct phases, each expanding its scope and sophistication.

3.1. The Foundational Phase (c. 2001-2010): From Manifesto to Mindset

The intellectual roots of agile leadership trace directly to the "Manifesto for Agile Software Development" (Beck et al., 2001). This document laid the philosophical groundwork by valuing "individuals and interactions over processes and tools" and "responding to change over following a plan." While not explicitly naming "agile leadership," it implicitly called for a new kind of leader: one who trusts, empowers, and facilitates collaboration rather than commanding and controlling. During this phase, agility was operationalized through frameworks like Scrum, which introduced roles such as the Scrum Master, a quintessential servant-leader (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2011). The leader in this context was a "gardener," creating the conditions for success to emerge from a self-organizing team (Highsmith, 2009).

3.2. The Adaptive Phase (c. 2010 -2018): Scaling Agility Beyond IT

As agile methods proved successful, organizations began applying these principles beyond IT, giving rise to the concept of "Business Agility" (Denning, 2018). The focus shifted from team-level practices to organizational-level capabilities. The literature from this period connected agility with established concepts like **strategic flexibility** (Sanchez, 1995) and **dynamic capabilities** (Teece, Peteraf, & Leih, 2016). Consequently, the role of the agile leader evolved from a team facilitator to a systemic **change agent** and **organizational architect**. Their primary task became the removal of bureaucratic impediments to foster a culture of transparency and trust (Theobald et al., 2020). This phase recognized that agile transformation is fundamentally a cultural transformation, requiring leaders to model the desired behaviors of humility and continuous learning, a role closely aligned with transformational leadership theories (AlNuaimi et al., 2022).

3.3. The Strategic Phase (c. 2018-Present): The Emergence of the Integrated Leader

The current phase is characterized by the integration of agile leadership with the overarching challenge of digital transformation (Warner & Wäger, 2019). Leading this profound level of change requires a leadership paradigm that is inherently adaptive and collaborative (Delioğlu & Uysal, 2022). In this strategic phase, agile leadership is understood not as a fixed style, but as a multi-dimensional **meta-capability**—the ability to cultivate agility within oneself, one's teams, and the broader organization.

4. An Integrated Framework for Agile Leadership: Deconstructing the Core Dimensions

The strategic evolution of agile leadership, spurred by the relentless demands of digital transformation and complex operating environments, reveals that agility is not a monolithic trait or a singular leadership style. Rather, it is a multi-faceted and integrated **meta-capability**. The truly agile leader does not merely apply a set of tools or ceremonies; they embody a deeply ingrained mindset and a sophisticated repertoire of behaviors that enable them to navigate chaos and ambiguity effectively. Based on a comprehensive synthesis of foundational and contemporary academic literature, this meta-capability can be deconstructed into three core, interdependent dimensions: **Cognitive Agility**, **Emotional Agility**, and **Relational Agility**. Together, these three dimensions form an integrated framework for understanding, assessing, and developing the leaders required to guide 21st-century organizations. This section will delve deeply into each dimension, exploring its theoretical underpinnings, key components, and practical manifestations in an organizational context.

4.1. Cognitive Agility: The Engine of Strategic and Adaptive Thinking

Cognitive Agility is arguably the intellectual engine of agile leadership. It is defined as the mental flexibility to adapt one's thinking in the face of new, ambiguous, or contradictory information and rapidly changing circumstances. It represents the capacity to break free from the

cognitive prisons of rigid thought patterns, confirmation biases, and pre-existing mental models that, while perhaps successful in the past, have become obsolete in a new context (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). A leader with high cognitive agility is not just comfortable with ambiguity and complexity; they are energized by it. They possess the mental bandwidth to hold multiple, even conflicting, perspectives simultaneously, to consistently challenge their own and their organization's most deeply held assumptions, and to skillfully reframe problems to uncover innovative solutions.

In a world of constant disruption, this ability to "think about how you think," or what psychologists term **metacognition**, is a vital leadership skill (Flavell, 1979). It allows leaders to move beyond established cognitive maps and perceive the faint signals and emergent patterns that others miss, making it a critical driver of strategic foresight and entrepreneurial action. Cognitive agility is what allows a leader to pivot a strategy not as a sign of failure, but as an intelligent response to a changing landscape. This dimension can be further deconstructed into several core, interconnected capabilities:

First, Perspective-Taking: This is the foundational skill of cognitive agility, representing the ability to deliberately step outside one's own ingrained viewpoint and analyze a situation from multiple angles. Traditional, hierarchical leaders often view problems through a single, narrow lens, typically defined by their functional expertise or their position in the organization. In stark contrast, a cognitively agile leader actively seeks out and synthesizes diverse perspectives. They endeavor to understand a strategic challenge from the viewpoint of the customer, the frontline employee, the competitor, the supply chain partner, and even the regulator. This capacity to mentally shift frames is not merely an exercise in empathy; it is a strategic tool. It enables leaders to make more holistic and balanced decisions, anticipate unintended consequences, and design solutions that create value for a broader set of stakeholders, a central tenet of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984). This practice fundamentally moves the leader from a position of "knowing the answer" to one of "facilitating the discovery of the best possible answer" by integrating the collective intelligence of a network.

Second, Contextual Intelligence: This capability is the sophisticated recognition that effective strategies and solutions are not universal. What succeeds in one context—a specific market, culture, or technological phase—may fail catastrophically in another. Cognitively agile leaders possess a high sensitivity to context, adapting their strategies and approaches based on the unique circumstances of each situation (Gavetti & Rivkin, 2007). They avoid the dangerous trap of over-relying on generalized "best practices" or transplanting solutions from one domain to another without critical evaluation. Instead, they focus on finding "best fit" solutions that align with the specific reality they are facing. This requires a deep diagnostic ability: a leader must understand the organization's unique history, its cultural norms, its hidden power structures, and its specific capabilities before prescribing a course of action. This is the antidote to the "hammer looking for a nail" syndrome that plagues many less agile leaders.

Third, Reframing and Creative Problem-Solving: This is a hallmark of the cognitively agile leader's toolkit. They do not accept problems at face value; they interrogate, deconstruct, and reformulate them. Instead of immediately asking, "How can we solve this problem?", their inquiry often begins with more profound questions: "Is this the right problem to be solving in the

first place?", "What are the unstated assumptions and biases that frame our understanding of this problem?", or "What would have to be true for this problem to become an opportunity?". This ability to reframe is a foundational skill in innovation processes, as it breaks the cognitive chains that lock organizations into incremental thinking and opens up new avenues for breakthrough solutions (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2017). Cognitively agile leaders employ techniques like lateral thinking and systems thinking to deconstruct complex, wicked problems into their constituent parts, generating a wide array of potential solutions before converging on the most promising path (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Fourth, Sensemaking in Ambiguity: In turbulent and uncertain environments, information is rarely clear. Data is often ambiguous, incomplete, contradictory, or overwhelming. Cognitively agile leaders excel at the critical process of "sensemaking." Sensemaking is an ongoing, iterative process of interpreting these ambiguous cues from the environment, creating plausible narratives or "maps" of the situation, and acting upon them to shape what is happening (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). It is a profoundly creative act that goes beyond mere data analysis. It is about constructing a coherent story that gives meaning to events and allows the organization to move forward with a degree of clarity and purpose, even when the future is unknowable. The agile leader, in this sense, acts as the organization's "chief sense-maker," helping teams interpret weak signals, understand complex interdependencies, and build a shared understanding of their reality, which is essential for coordinated, adaptive action in the face of the unknown.

4.2. Emotional Agility: The Foundation of Resilience, Trust, and Psychological Safety

While cognitive agility represents the intellectual dimension of agile leadership, emotional agility relates to the leader's internal state—their ability to manage their own thoughts and emotions in a productive, mindful, and value-driven way. Coined and popularized by psychologist Susan David (2016), emotional agility is a critical counterpoint to the outdated ideal of the stoic, emotionless leader. It is not about suppressing or ignoring difficult emotions like stress, fear, or disappointment, but about acknowledging and accepting them without being controlled or "hooked" by them. It involves a sophisticated process of recognizing one's emotional and thought patterns, accepting them without judgment, aligning one's actions with core values, and only then moving forward with intention.

An emotionally agile leader is highly resilient, remains calm and centered under pressure, and is able to maintain a positive, forward-looking perspective even amidst significant setbacks. This internal stability is not merely a personal virtue; it is a critical leadership function. A leader's emotional state is highly contagious within an organization. A leader who reacts defensively to bad news, punishes failure, or is emotionally volatile will quickly create a climate of fear, stifling any nascent agility and innovation in their organization. Emotional agility is, therefore, the bedrock of trust, resilience, and psychological safety. Its key components include:

First, Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation: This is the foundational skill of both emotional intelligence and emotional agility. It is the leader's ability to recognize and understand their own moods, emotions, and psychological drives, as well as their effect on others (Goleman, 1995). An emotionally agile leader is highly attuned to their internal triggers. They know what

situations or behaviors cause them stress, anger, or frustration. More importantly, they have developed a repertoire of strategies to manage these reactions constructively rather than letting them dictate their behavior. This self-awareness allows them to act with intention and purpose, rather than from knee-jerk impulse—a critical distinction in high-pressure, high-stakes decision-making environments.

Second, Resilience and Composure Under Pressure: Agile environments are inherently stressful, characterized by tight deadlines, shifting requirements, frequent failures of experiments, and constant uncertainty. The leader's ability to absorb this pressure and maintain composure is vital. A leader who panics, becomes overwhelmed, or visibly projects anxiety will transmit that stress directly to their team, leading to narrowed thinking, poor decision-making, and a breakdown in collaboration. In contrast, an emotionally agile leader demonstrates a steady hand in turbulent times. This resilience is not about being emotionless or detached; it is about processing stress effectively, modeling a constructive and optimistic response to adversity, and in doing so, building the resilience of the entire team (Luthans, 2002). They frame challenges as opportunities for growth and setbacks as valuable learning experiences.

Third, Cultivating Psychological Safety: This is perhaps the most critical external manifestation of a leader's internal emotional agility. Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). In a psychologically safe environment, team members feel comfortable speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. They can challenge the status quo—and even the leader's own ideas—without fear of humiliation, retribution, or damage to their career. An emotionally agile leader is the primary creator of this safety. Because they are secure in themselves, they do not react defensively to criticism or bad news. When a project fails, their first question is "What can we learn from this?" not "Whose fault is this?". This non-defensive, learning-oriented response is only possible for a leader who is secure and agile in their own emotional landscape, and it is the single most important factor in unlocking the collective intelligence and innovative potential of a team.

Fourth, Authenticity and Vulnerability: Modern leadership theory has increasingly recognized that the old model of the stoic, infallible, "hero" leader is no longer effective or credible. An emotionally agile leader embraces authenticity; they are willing to be vulnerable, to admit when they do not have the answer, to acknowledge their own mistakes, and to show their humanity (Brown, 2012). This vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but of profound strength and self-confidence. It builds deep, authentic trust with their teams, as it signals that it is acceptable to be human and imperfect. This authenticity demystifies leadership and makes it more accessible, encouraging others at all levels to step up and take ownership—a core tenet of agile principles that relies on distributed, rather than centralized, leadership.

4.3. Relational Agility: The Mechanism for Collaboration, Co-Creation, and Influence

If cognitive agility is the "what" and emotional agility is the "how" of the leader's internal world, relational agility is the external-facing dimension that translates these internal capabilities into collective action and influence. It concerns the leader's ability to build, maintain, and leverage

collaborative, trust-based relationships with a diverse and often competing set of stakeholders. A relationally agile leader is a masterful communicator, an empathetic listener, and a skilled facilitator of collaboration (Steinhart, 2025). They understand that in a complex, networked world, sustainable value is created through partnerships and co-creation, not through unilateral command and control (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). They are adept at navigating organizational politics, aligning diverse interests, and empowering cross-functional teams. Relational agility is the mechanism through which an individual leader's vision is translated into shared commitment and organizational capability. Its core components include:

First, Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Creation: Agile leadership extends the Manifesto's concept of "customer collaboration" to a broader and more profound principle of stakeholder engagement. Relationally agile leaders view stakeholders—including employees, customers, partners, suppliers, and even regulators—not as entities to be managed or influenced, but as genuine partners in the value creation process. They actively seek out diverse perspectives, facilitate constructive and continuous dialogue, and design processes that allow for the co-creation of solutions that address a wide range of interests (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). This represents a fundamental departure from a purely transactional view of relationships, moving towards a more collaborative and ecosystem-centric approach where the leader acts as a hub and a connector within a complex network.

Second, Empowerment and Servant Leadership: A central practice of relational agility is the deliberate and consistent empowerment of others. This is closely aligned with the principles of Servant Leadership, which posits that the primary role of a leader is to serve the needs of their team by removing obstacles, providing resources, and fostering their growth and autonomy (Greenleaf, 1977). A relationally agile leader is constantly working to push authority and decision-making down to the lowest appropriate level, closer to the information and the customer. They trust their teams and provide them with the autonomy to self-organize and manage their own work. This act of empowerment is not an abdication of responsibility; it is a deliberate strategy to increase the speed, creativity, and ownership of the team, thereby enhancing the agility of the entire organization (Parker et al., 2015).

Third, Masterful Communication and Facilitation: Agile leaders are exceptional communicators and facilitators. They are skilled at articulating a clear and compelling vision that provides direction and purpose (the "why"), while simultaneously creating channels for open, transparent, and multi-directional communication. They are masters of the "powerful question," using inquiry to stimulate thinking, challenge assumptions, and foster dialogue rather than providing ready-made answers. They are also skilled at facilitating difficult conversations, managing conflict constructively, and helping diverse groups with competing interests find common ground (Schwarz, 2016). This facilitation skill is critical for harnessing the collective intelligence of cross-functional teams and for navigating the inevitable tensions and disagreements that arise in innovative and creative work.

Fourth, Navigating Organizational Politics and Building Coalitions: The principles of agility often challenge the established power structures, processes, and silos within a traditional organization. Therefore, a degree of political savvy is an essential component of relational agility. A relationally agile leader understands the informal networks of influence, the hidden agendas,

and the cultural undercurrents within their organization. They are skilled at building broad coalitions of support for change, managing resistance from entrenched interests, and securing the resources and top-level sponsorship necessary for their teams to succeed (Pfeffer, 2010). They are not "political" in a manipulative or self-serving sense, but rather "organizationally intelligent," understanding how to navigate the system to enable positive change and to protect their teams from the bureaucratic antibodies that often attack innovative efforts.

In conclusion, this three-dimensional framework—Cognitive, Emotional, and Relational Agility—suggests that becoming an agile leader is a profound and ongoing developmental journey. It requires the deliberate cultivation of capabilities on an internal (emotional), intellectual (cognitive), and interpersonal (relational) level. It is this integrated, holistic view that defines the strategic phase of agile leadership's evolution and provides a comprehensive model for understanding and developing the leaders needed to navigate the complexities of our time.

5. Conclusion

This conceptual review has charted the evolution of agile leadership from its origins in software development to its current state as a comprehensive management paradigm. The journey has been one of expansion and maturation, culminating in a holistic understanding of the agile leader as a meta-capability integrating cognitive, emotional, and relational agility.

This evolutionary perspective has important implications. For scholars, the proposed three-dimensional framework offers a more robust and testable model for future empirical research. For practitioners, this review serves as a caution against the superficial adoption of agile "theater." It highlights that true agility is not a process to be installed, but a culture to be cultivated, and that this cultivation begins with the deep, multi-faceted development of agile leaders. As organizations continue to grapple with a turbulent world, the principles and practices of agile leadership have become essential for survival, innovation, and sustained success.

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