# AGILE LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT

## LEARNING TO THRIVE WITH SELF-MANAGING TEAMS

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solutions and find opportunities. This is crucial because in complex environments, solutions can only be found by exploring and experimenting, learning from failures, and continuously growing as a team. Ownership gives them momentum to overcome unexpected challenges and obstacles.

As a leader, it's wonderful to see teams take ownership. Not only is this often the only way to be successful, but it also gives a deep sense of satisfaction to leaders. It's the agile leader's job to create an environment in which people and teams grow, work together, laugh, build trust, and do beyond-exceptional things for the customers. Micromanaging—telling people which tasks they have to do and making all kinds of small decisions—is not only too slow in this rapid world, but it also doesn't bring out the best in people. It often kills their brainpower, their creativity, and the synergy within the teams. Again: agile leaders create a working environment in which employees thrive and let them be proud on their work.

> *It's the agile leader's job to create an environment in which people and teams grow, work together, laugh, build trust, and feel proud on the things they do for their customers.*

## How Do Teams Deal with Ownership?

How can an agile leader get his teams to take ownership of their work? They can't be forced into it; they must voluntarily take it on. The agile leader can only create an inspiring environment and encourage ownership, giving teams exactly enough freedom to suit their own maturity—no more, no less.

To give teams the right degree of freedom, the agile leader must know when to intervene and when not to. If he acts too quickly, he gives his team too little freedom, causing them to feel frustrated or thwarted. Teams in these circumstances will not take ownership. If the leader doesn't intervene or if he intervenes too late, his team gets too much freedom, resulting in the team feeling lost and confused; they also will not take on ownership.

How does a leader recognize situations in which he has to let go and other situations in which he should intervene and take action? Agile leaders struggle

with this because every team is different, and teams are also constantly changing and growing. Striking the right balance means answering the following five questions:

1. When is intervening the best strategy, and when is letting go better?
2. How mature is my team?
3. How do typical teams grow?
4. How can the borders be aligned with the maturity?
5. When does the ownership model work and when does it not?

To help answer these questions, the third and fourth tools from the agile leadership toolkit are useful: the Ownership Model, which visualizes what teams need to take genuine ownership, and the Freedom Matrix, which makes concrete what specific freedom a team has, and when. More about these shortly. First, I'll explain the role of the agile leader as facilitator.

## The Agile Leader as a Facilitator

The role of the agile leader in this second part of is that of a facilitator. A facilitator is someone who actively supports a group or team in achieving a result. A facilitator helps in getting to understand the common goal and also in planning to reach the desired goal. Again, ownership can't be forced on the team. Ownership can't be created by telling (or yelling at) the team that they have to take ownership. Successful agile leaders ask their teams what they need in order to take ownership voluntarily. Vulnerable and passionate, they share their motivation regarding why they want their teams to take ownership—not for the ego or the power but because they know how crucial ownership is in this complex world.

It's crucial that the tools explained in this part are used from a facilitator mindset. By improving the environment in which the teams operate, the leader can actively improve the ownership and thereby the success of the teams. But to know what to change in the environment, he has to ask for candor in what the teams need. What needs to be changed, added, or removed? Do, for example, they need more or less decision power on certain topics? Do they

need to hire a certain expertise? Do they need training or mentoring on a certain topic? Does another team have to be told they deliver a product that is too low quality?

When, on the other hand, the leader assumes what the teams need, he has a small chance of being right. Also, copying what worked for another team is not the way to engage ownership.

By asking openly what the teams need to grow ownership—and by doing so, facilitating ownership—the agile leader can actually create an environment with awesome teams that operate on high levels of proactiveness, pride, creativity, and results that are beyond expectations.

Skills the leader can develop to improve the craft of facilitating are as follows:

- **Powerful questions.** Powerful questions increase creativity, promote honesty and transparency, stimulate out-of-the-box thinking, and focus on the outcome. By asking powerful questions, the teams are invited to take action, discover solutions, and make things clear and explicit. Nonpowerful questions are often aggressive, blaming, or directing to a fixed solution. These nonpowerful questions stimulate a can't-do mindset, making of excuses, resistance to change, or unfairness. The difference between powerful questions and offering help is often that the helper (the person asking the questions) is doing most of the problem solving and the actual work to fix it. Conversely, good powerful questions give the teams the feeling they can also solve the challenges at hand. Examples of powerful questions are
  - What are the possibilities?
  - What seems to confuse you?
  - What are other angles you can think of?
  - If you could do it over again, what would you do differently?
- **Self-reflection.** The behavior of the teams is a mirror of the environment agile leaders create. Nobody comes to his work thinking, "Today I want to be demotivated, criticize others, and distrust my boss." When people don't

have that spark in their eye called ownership, it's not because they want it to be that way. It's because we agile leaders haven't yet improved the environment enough. Improving the environment starts with a moment of self-reflection as an agile leader. In other words, being a better facilitator of ownership goes hand in hand with being better at reflecting on one's own behavior. What did I do wrong? What can I do different? What do I need to do less (or more) so my teams pick up ownership? Do I have the courage to be vulnerable and candid enough to tell the teams that I need their feedback on how I lead?

- **Team process.** Good teams reflect, modify, and amplify each other's ideas into even better ideas, seeking synergies to produce a better result. Together they are smarter than the team members are individually. Building these awesome teams is a difficult skill to master. The model I often use is the model of the five dysfunctions of a team by Patrick Lencioni.[1] It explains perfectly what teams need in order to grow from individuals to a high-performing team. The second level, "fear of conflict," is particularly interesting—inspiring, but also hard.
- **Growth of craftsmanship among team members.** People in successful agile teams are multiskilled, which means they master different areas of expertise. They need an environment that not only promotes knowledge transfer and skill development but also inspires them to become true craftsmen at several areas of expertise. Agile teams that develop software need craftsmen in their teams on expertises such as continuous deployment, performance test automation, or cybersecurity. Teams in marketing need craftsmen on social media, SEO, lead generation automation, or emotion marketing. As an agile leader, it's impossible to be the expert on all the areas of expertise a team will need. Therefore, successful agile leaders ask what teams need to grow their skills, and they use this information to improve the environment of the teams. So, teams work in an environment where they can become masters in their area of expertise and start becoming experts in new areas as needed.

1. https://www.tablegroup.com/books/dysfunctions

## 2.2 WHEN IS INTERVENING THE BEST STRATEGY, AND WHEN IS LETTING GO BETTER?

*To let go or not to let go,*
*that is the question.*