AGILE
LEADERSHIP
FOR A NEW
GENERATION

The traditional model

When most people think of leaders, their minds go to someone in a position of power: a visionary or executive—a boss. In the business setting, one imagines a corporate vision starting at the top with the CEO and being handed down, each person receiving the vision and passing it to the rank below. However, the traditional model sometimes lacks an ownership of goals and plans as they are cascaded down through the organization. This traditional model of leadership gets diluted to equate to a hierarchical management structure. Nonetheless, leadership and management are not synonymous.

A traditional view of a single leader per organization—whether that organization is corporate, political, or social—is out of date. Too many people equate leadership with a title. At Slalom, we have found that leaders are spread throughout an organization at various levels. And in many cases, these leaders do not have a "leader" title.

The environment changes

As an increasing number of baby boomers retire and the number of Millennials continues to rise in the workforce, companies are seeing a dramatic change in the skill sets and desires of their employees. The new generation is more tech savvy than its predecessors, wants a different type of "meaningful" work, and is more satisfied in a collaborative environment in which to work. Slalom believes that these changes in the

workforce mean that the traditional, top-down model of "leadership" must transform. The new organization must allow room for the changing employee base to be fostered and to grow in a new way. The traditional model impairs individuals (and therefore companies) in several ways:

- **Employee potential often goes unrealized.** When applying the narrow definition of leadership to an organizational structure, formal "managers" (who are seen as the de facto "leaders") may be too concerned with taking credit for an idea crafted alone and executed by their team. This aggregation of credit under one person for work done together impacts collaboration.

- **Morale is lowered.** When employees are kept quiet and made to execute ideas—instead of offering input and taking ownership—morale takes a downturn. Morale is the culture of the team, and when it goes sour it poisons the group and may lead to other issues such as poor performance and increased turnover.

- **Decision making is too narrow.** In a hierarchical model, decision-making power and even idea development are limited to the few at the top rather than incorporating the strength of varied experiences and backgrounds of the rank and file.

A traditional top-down leadership hierarchy, which limits decision making, direction setting, participation, and ownership, is one of the key reasons that Millennials have gained a reputation for disloyalty. They continue to bounce from job to job in search of a place that will offer them what they seek: the chance to build new skillsets, take ownership, and lead, regardless of title or role.

Making the shift

In the late 1990s, the software development industry was experiencing similar challenges: old notions, stagnant processes, and formal control structures that were not producing optimal results. From this situation, the Agile Manifesto was born in Utah during the winter of 2001. The Agile Manifesto[1] was developed to rid the industry of its "arcane policies" and better position it to move aggressively into the faster paced e-business economy. It preached face-to-face communication over written communication, tight self-organizing teams, flexibility in approach, and frequent, iterative builds to deliver faster value to customers. It became the foundation for change in the industry.

Slalom believes that all organizations can borrow from the changes put in place at the turn of the century by the software industry. Similar to software developers' change in perspective, by shifting the focus on leadership and decision making to become more flexible and agile, organizations can dramatically change the way in which they operate. This change will address both the need for more creative output from organizations and the ever-increasing need for better quality. It can also act as the catalyst to engage employees across the organization to take part, lead, and be owners.

Agile delivery stresses multiple principles in its defined manifesto. We've found that several of those values are relevant and transferrable from software development to any type of leadership: collaboration, communication, and team interaction. Combined, these traits are a departure from the hierarchical decision-making process, which is restricted to the executive levels, and filter down through the organization. In collaborative and communicative environments where teams are solicited for opinions on business decisions, employees feel accountable and motivated. They are more likely to want to see their work driven to a successful end because they participate in setting the goals. This adjustment creates a new culture and improves team member satisfaction, which can link to a host of desired individual and corporate benefits, including increased morale, improved overall job satisfaction, higher retention rates, fresher ideas, and faster speed to market.

Based on technology's Agile Manifesto, a spin-off Leadership Manifesto[2] was proposed 10 years later, in 2011, by members in the Scrum Alliance community. The resulting ideas emphasized individual development over the company's momentary necessities, team-building strategy over tracking and monitoring the team's results, and taking action based on root cause over taking action based on an unaccountable "best practice." Slalom has had the opportunity to work with clients that have embraced this new form of Agile Leadership.

Sarah Burnson, a Director in Information Technology at Aon Corporation, was

1 — Beedle, Mike, Arie Van Bennekum, Alistair Cockburn, Ward Cunningham, Martin Fowler, Jim Highsmith, Andrew Hunt, Ron Jeffries, Jon Kern, Brian Marick, Robert Martin, Ken Schwarber, Jeff Sutherland, and Dave Thomas. "Manifesto for Agile Software Development." Manifesto for Agile Software Development. N.p., 2001. Web. 18 Nov. 2013

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2 — Filho, Heitor R. "Achieving Agile Leadership." Scrum Alliance, Inc. N.p., 5 Jan. 2011. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

part of a culture shift in her organization. As Aon moved part of its development organization to the Agile development approach, Ms. Burnson worked within her teams to simultaneously drive an Agile Leadership change. With the restructuring of IT professionals to a flatter, less matrixed organization, there was a desire to empower teams for decision making. Ms. Burnson challenged each person in her organization to become an Agile Leader.

While the Aon restructure primarily focused on teams and team size (the development groups were organized into teams of 7 to 18 people, with only one person per team holding the "manager" distinction), Ms. Burnson worked to engage each of her staff to take ownership of the team's output. This new structure offered many of the more experienced team members the opportunity to teach skills to less experienced team members, and it allowed all team members regardless of role to weigh in on an approach to accomplish sponsor goals and to become leaders within their teams—regardless of title.

This change in approach to ownership, accountability, and leadership has enabled Ms. Burnson's department to realize additional gains in productivity and team morale. Further, it has helped her team meet business sponsors' needs and has resulted in stronger client relationships.

Start small to become an Agile Leader

A shift to Agile Leadership is not immediate. It takes development, care, and nurturing of a team to enable the transformation to take hold. The adjustment should start small and make incremental changes that add value over time. There is no big bang way to move to Agile Leadership.

Organizations are just collections of individuals. Shifting an organization starts with moving the individuals. It is incumbent upon those driving for Agile Leadership to begin with introspection. If each person starts with himself or herself, expands his or her own leadership agility, and then gains an awareness of the value, the larger organization will begin to take notice. Once the value is recognized, ripples will spread across the organization.

Awareness is an effective way to generate the waves of ripples. One method to raise self-awareness is to create a 360-degree feedback loop. An understanding of one's current strengths, weaknesses, tendencies, and biases will help determine the areas to focus on first. A number of credible personality and leadership style assessments are available, including Meyers-Briggs, Strength Finder 2.0, and Tracom Group's Social Styles Model. While the terminology may differ, each tool plots style characteristics along a spectrum. The purpose is not to show what is good versus bad, but to generate self-awareness and assist with developing an inventory of strengths and opportunities. The resulting catalog provides a starting point for understanding where to develop. One may continue to build skills based on natural strengths, develop new techniques to compensate for weaknesses, or even adjust one's own style in order to counterbalance others on the team.

In addition to personality assessments, it can be helpful to observe leadership styles of others who are seen to be successful in their endeavors. Mentoring networks are useful for setting up this type of learning. Conversations with a mentor about leadership style and constructive tactics can help learners develop based on practices that work. Real-time feedback is an important part of driving improvement. Modeling is another easy approach. By studying the approach of public figures—past and present, strong and weak—one can learn and grow.

Coach and lead other Agile Leaders

Since being an Agile Leader is as much about others—the team, the customer, and collaboration—as it is about oneself, the focus on growth goes beyond individual development. Being an Agile Leader is also about creating a culture in which group development and collaboration are encouraged. In order to continue moving away from a top-down style, an Agile Leader will work on building team members into leaders, effectively moving away from the title-equals-leader framework. We have seen several tactics that are effective in mobilizing an agile team.

- **Talk to the team about mission, goals, and direction.** Gain agreement on overall direction, then divide the work into meaningful roles, holding members accountable for delivery and allowing each person to make decisions within his or her role.

- **Set objectives for each role.** Objectives should be set as larger than what any one individual can accomplish alone. This will create an acceleration effect, as the team members must reach out to others to achieve the desired outcome.

- **Be aggressive with establishing timeframes for objectives.** Adding the challenge to deliver within a tight deadline will best highlight the individual's ability to be nimble. This will help individuals stretch beyond past performance and what they have already proven they can deliver.

- **As a leader helping others to become leaders, make yourself available for guidance and questions as needed.** Be available, yet recognize when to walk away and let the team members be responsible for, own, and drive their work. Allowing the team to perform fulfills the larger team's objective to deliver more than you are able to do yourself—without them. Additionally, this grows the talent pool within the organization in addition to achieving the team's delivery objectives.

Aon's Sarah Burnson set up a Community of Practice during their recent change in order to facilitate knowledge sharing. This allowed colleagues in "like roles" to share their experiences, cross-train their peers, and bring up the functional capabilities of the team as a whole. By leveraging this approach, she empowered individuals and gave them the means to reach a level of achievement greater than anyone would have been able to accomplish alone.

Ms. Burnson believes that the leaders on her teams should be working just as hard for their colleagues as they do for her. Her accountability is to remove barriers that are in their way and advocate for leaders to have opportunities to demonstrate their full potential. "There is not one person,

Sarah Burnson continually works to refine her leadership style and that of her team. She works to understand her staff at a deeper level—what drives them personally and professionally, who is looking for more accountability and wants the opportunity to grow?

For herself, she is always trying to "find the balance between caring and requiring." She admits that when modeling behavior, she has also learned about what not to do. Learning comes not just from good leaders but also from the flawed ones. As a result, she is careful to keep her team's morale in mind and ensure that she is customizing her leadership environment in tune with the company. "Fun, safe, approachable," are what she stresses. "I try to learn the culture [of the company] as well as create one of my own [based on the team]."

By building a safe, collaborative environment, Ms. Burnson promotes honest communication with all—colleagues, peers, sponsors, and leaders—to foster growth and opportunity.

including the leader, who has not had to learn something new," Ms. Burnson admits. "Everyone is constantly learning." Replacing the mental equation of "title" with "leader" isn't easy, but there is a lot to be gained from the shift to an agile style of leadership.

- **Employees realize more of their full potential.** The new model suggests a focus on growth through continued education. The cycle allows employees to reach for new roles and continue to drive greater value in the corporation.

- **Raised morale.** The new model lends itself to greater job satisfaction through additive ideation and challenging roles. This allows layers of ideas and experiences to build upon the original. In turn, this builds ownership and drives participation.

- **Decision making benefits from varied perspectives.** A collaborative approach fosters an environment in which ideas gain strength from varied backgrounds and experiences. This in turn creates more thoughtful ideas, strategies, and work products.

Knowing the impact that individuals using Agile Leadership can have at all levels within an organization makes it clear that the traditional model is outdated. Not only is the traditional hierarchy no longer meeting the needs of the changing workforce, it is stifling companies and preventing them from meeting the needs of a fast-changing market. The new method creates a paradigm shift—internally with each employee in the organization driving greater value, and externally as those employees help companies respond to evolving demands of customers.

For the future, our hope is that everyone will see themselves as leaders within their organizations, whatever their formal roles are in the corporate food chain. The challenge is to continually develop your own style to become an example for others in the organization. To share the wisdom of Bill Gates, an admirable leader and fellow technology enthusiast: "As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others."

About Slalom Consulting

Slalom Consulting brings together business and technology expertise to help companies drive enterprise performance, accelerate innovation, enhance the customer experience, and increase employee productivity. The firm delivers award-winning solutions in areas such as information management and analytics, sales and marketing, organizational effectiveness, CFO advisory, mobility, and cloud through a national network of local offices and major alliance partners, including Microsoft, Salesforce.com, and Amazon Web Services.

Founded in 2001 and based in Seattle, WA, Slalom has organically grown to more than 2,200 consultants. The company has been ranked as a Top 10 Best Firms to Work For by *Consulting* magazine four times, and earned recognition from Microsoft as a Partner of the Year five times. For more information, visit slalom.com.

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