

Strategic Agility – Leadership and Accountability

In agile organisations Leadership and Accountability is not restricted to Senior Management. To be successful in the external environment there needs to be a high standard of leadership throughout the Organisation. Each team within the business needs to be led by a well-rounded business leader who is capable of making sound business judgments and has an aspiration to succeed and grow the business. Where an employee has come up with an innovative idea it is not unusual, in agile organisations, for that person to take the lead in a project. That employee still needs to show the same high standard of leadership and so may need mentoring in order to gain the trust of others. The quality of succession planning is paramount to ensuring the quality of the leadership (see my previous article on this subject). However, if teams are to be made accountable for business success, they need to be resourced correctly and given the autonomy required to be able to make judgments based on their evaluation of changes occurring in the internal and external environments.

All those in a leadership role need to be constantly vigilant in order to ensure that objectives and key results are being achieved. As highlighted in previous articles, inter-departmental collaboration and communication are key to ensuring that learning objectives are met. Both success and failure need to be recorded and communicated so that lessons can be learned by other teams and so that Business Partners can re-align the support, being provided to productive platforms or service providers, to take account of any changes that might need to be made. Furthermore, where there is an ongoing shortage of talent, teams may need to collaborate in a different way. In order to take the lead in the marketplace, talented people in agile organisations will often be moved around to take account of upcoming deadlines, thereby ensuring that the right skills are being utilised in the right place, at the right time, so that projects are completed in a timely manner. They also need to be aware of changes in the external environment. These changes may have been brought about due to the behaviour of competitors or through changes in the expectations of the customer.

Leaders need to anticipate (or even create) the unserved needs of the customer and to encourage innovation and creativity if the Organisation is to take the lead in the marketplace. This will require a high degree of trust and mutual commitment within the teams if tension is to be avoided and conflict is to be seen as an aid to enabling change. However, if business teams are to operate with agility and entrepreneurial drive, there must also be an alignment of accountability, authority and incentives (the latter based on achievement in meeting team goals). When leaders encourage conformance, there is a reduction in productivity, flexibility and engagement. Actively involving employees in defining expectations enhances their commitment. The more ownership they feel, the more innovative and productive they will be. Furthermore, committed employees will more readily adapt to change. However, I have seen some major errors when it comes to assessing accountability.

Everyone in the Organisation has a responsibility, and should be accountable, for the success of the Business to some extent. Whilst there is a need to work to peoples' strengths, leaders also need to ensure that they provide the mentoring required to strengthen an individual's weaknesses; thereby providing an aid to creating a collaborative

environment. However, the way in which we apportion work and assess a person's contribution can sometimes leave a lot to be desired.

Although I am not a great lover of psychometric testing, as I am aware that people can act differently when under 'stress' and so such testing can, in some situations, provide a misleading outcome, I acknowledge the fact that it does prove that people can be better suited to tasks that fully utilise their strengths. If team leaders gain an understanding of the people that they manage, they should be in a position to apportion goals to individual employees that make the best use of their strengths; thereby gaining the best possible results for the team as a whole. But then we need to look at the way in which we assess these individual contributions.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual to find that employees are being 'ranked' against people who do not share the same strengths and weaknesses as themselves. This tends to lead to subjective assessments that do not reflect the true contribution of the individual. If you set specific tasks for an employee, then the assessment of their contribution should be made solely against their individual performance and the achievement of those goals. Feedback should be given to employees on a regular basis. This provides the individual with confirmation of successful achievements and an indication of where improvements might need to be made; this is particularly relevant if teams are to meet specific timescales for the completion of projects.

How would you rate your organisation when it comes to leadership and accountability?