



ChangeWise

Pioneer in Leadership Agility

# Leadership Agility: From Expert to Catalyst

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As a manager, no one needs to remind you that we live in a global economy that constantly bombards us with change and complexity. Every year, new technologies, markets, and competitors emerge at an ever-increasing pace. As change accelerates, so do novelty and uncertainty. Future threats and opportunities become harder to predict. We also live in an increasingly complex, interconnected world, where quality attention to internal and external customers, strategic allies, and other stakeholders is essential for business success.

## The need for agility

While specific future developments are increasingly difficult to predict, there are two deep trends we can predict with great certainty: The pace of change will continue to increase, and the level of complexity and interdependence will continue to grow. In this new era, companies need to be “agile” — able to anticipate and respond rapidly to changing conditions by leveraging highly productive internal and external relationships.

To enjoy sustained success, companies need to develop a level of agility that matches the accelerating pace of change and expanding complexity in their business environment. Yet, for the vast majority of companies, full-fledged strategic and operational agility is still more an aspiration than a reality.<sup>1</sup>

One of the major reasons for this continuing “agility gap” is the need to develop more agile leaders. To have teams and organizations that have the agility demanded by today’s turbulent environment, companies need leaders who embody a corresponding level of agility.

It’s no wonder, then, that senior executives have ranked agility among the most critical leadership capabilities needed today.<sup>2</sup> What is leadership agility? In essence, it’s the ability to lead effectively under conditions of rapid change and mounting complexity. Because these powerful trends affect all managerial levels, this is a capability that’s increasingly needed not just in the executive suite but throughout the organization.





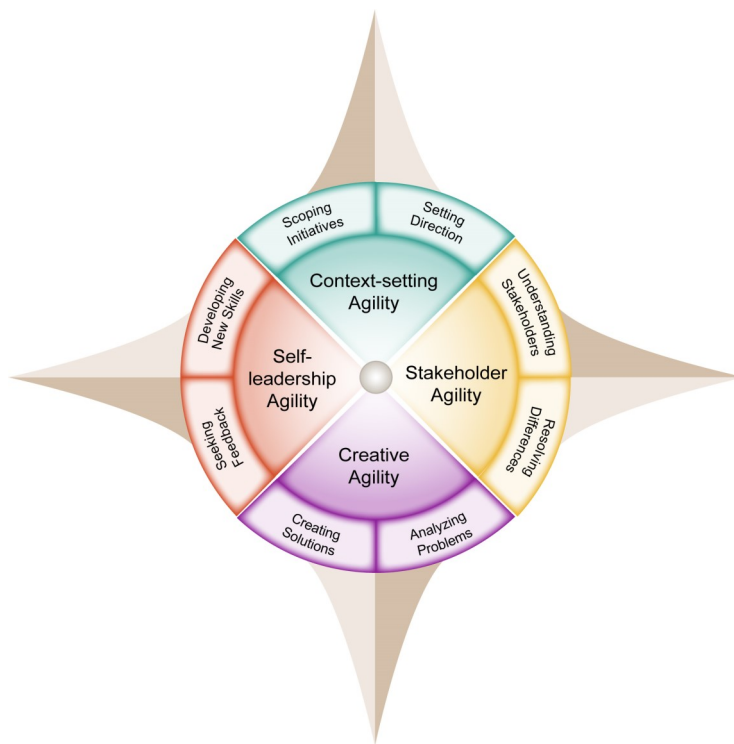
Our extensively researched book, *Leadership Agility*, shows that managers grow through multiple stages in developing their agility. The chart below presents abbreviated profiles of how managers at three levels of agility conduct themselves in pivotal conversations, when leading teams, and when leading organizational change. The *Expert* level is best suited for relatively stable environments with low complexity. The *Achiever* level works well in environments with moderate complexity and episodic change. The *Catalyst* level is the most effective for today’s rapidly changing, highly complex environment .

Level of Agility <sup>3</sup>	Assumptions about Leadership	Pivotal Conversations	Leading Teams	Leading Organizational Change
Pre-Expert (~10%)				
Expert (~45%)	<i>Tactical, problem-solving orientation</i>  Leaders are respected and followed by others because of their authority and expertise	Style is either to strongly assert opinions or hold back to accommodate others. May swing from one style to the other, particularly for different relationships. Tends to avoid giving or requesting feedback	More of a supervisor than a manager. Creates a group of individuals rather than a team. Work with direct reports is primarily one-on-one. Too caught up in the details of own work to lead in a strategic manner	Organizational initiatives focus primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with little attention to stakeholders
Achiever (~35%)	<i>Strategic, outcome orientation</i>  Leaders motivate others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to larger objectives	Primarily assertive or accommodative with some ability to compensate with the less preferred style. Will accept or even initiate feedback, if helpful in achieving desired outcomes	Operates like a full-fledged manager. Meetings to discuss important strategic or organizational issues are often orchestrated to gain buy-in	Organizational initiatives include analysis of external environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to soliciting input
Catalyst (~10%)	<i>Visionary, facilitative orientation.</i>  Leaders articulate an inspiring vision and bring together the right people to bring it into reality. Leaders empower people and actively facilitate their development	Adept at balancing assertive and accommodative styles as needed in particular situations. Likely to reflect on one’s own underlying assumptions. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactive in seeking and utilizing feedback	Intent upon creating a highly participative team. Acts as a team leader and facilitator. Models and seeks open exchange of views on difficult issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development	Organizational initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Pro-active engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that input increases the quality of decisions, not just buy-in

Each level of *agility* includes and goes beyond the capacities and skills developed at previous levels.

## Four Types of Leadership Agility

To better understand leadership agility and the best ways to develop it, we conducted a multi-year research project that used questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and client case studies and journals to examine the thought-processes and behaviors of hundreds of managers. We found that those leaders who are most successful in turbulent environments are skilled in exercising four mutually reinforcing types of leadership agility, represented below in the “Leadership Agility Compass:”



### Context-Setting Agility

Leaders use context-setting agility to scan their environment and decide what initiatives to take. This type of agility also includes determining the optimal scope of an initiative and the outcomes it needs to achieve. When leaders grow into the Catalyst level, they expand their thinking to include relevant longer-term trends that extend beyond usual strategic boundaries. When the timing is right, they undertake visionary initiatives that are personally meaningful and beneficial for their organization and its key stakeholders.

### Stakeholder Agility

Leaders use stakeholder agility to identify an initiative’s key stakeholders, understand what they have at stake, and assess the current degree of alignment. This type of agility also includes engaging with stakeholders to develop more optimal alignment. Catalyst leaders can enter deeply into frames of reference that differ from their own, while still honoring their own perspective. They seek input from key stakeholders not simply to gain buy-in, but because they feel genuine dialogue will improve the quality and effectiveness of their initiatives.



### **Creative Agility**

Leaders use creative agility to transform complex, novel issues into desired results. Catalyst leaders begin their initiatives with a keen appreciation of the novelty inherent in the situation they're addressing, even if it seems quite familiar. Having a deep understanding of the limitations of any single perspective, they encourage the expression of multiple views and question underlying assumptions.

### **Self-Leadership Agility**

This type of agility involves determining the kind of leader you want to be, using your everyday leadership activities to experiment toward this aspiration, and reflecting on these experiences. Catalyst leaders understand that their self-awareness is more partial than they assumed it to be at previous levels. Consequently, they develop a strong interest in becoming aware of behaviors, feelings, and assumptions that would normally escape their awareness. They are motivated both to increase their self-awareness and to more fully align their behavior with their values and aspirations. As their self-awareness deepens and becomes more complete, they increasingly find that personal growth is an integral part of their professional development.

### **Putting It all together**

Highly effective leaders use all four types of leadership agility together. While it's best to begin an initiative by explicitly setting the context, highly effective leaders engage with stakeholders while they set the context for their initiatives. They also begin to think about how to use the initiative as an opportunity to grow further as a leader.



### **Putting It all together (con't)**

Creative agility is especially useful when working on the specific problems and opportunities encountered in the process of planning and implementing an initiative. To maximize your effectiveness, you need to engage key stakeholders in creative problem solving, and you need to be pro-active in learning from your experience as you go along. In addition, new developments in the larger context might require you to use context-setting agility to reconsider your initiative's scope and objectives.

### **Developing leadership agility**

Developing increased agility will make you more effective in carrying out your everyday leadership initiatives, and it will aid you in helping others become more effective leaders.

The best support for increasing your agility is a workshop, leadership program, or coaching relationship that focuses specifically on leadership agility.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, the primary “engine” for developing greater agility is self-leadership: Start by assessing your current agility level and your strengths and limitations in the four types of leadership agility . Then set your leadership development goals.

Do you want to move to a new level of agility? Even if you don't want to move to another level, what types of leadership agility do you want to develop further within your current level? Once you've set your leadership development goals, the key to increasing your agility is to use your everyday initiatives to experiment with more agile behaviors.

At the heart of self-leadership and the other three types of agility is a practice we call “reflective action.” This is an ongoing, cyclical process of setting objectives, clarifying a strategy or plan for achieving these objectives, taking action, then reflecting on your experience. Reflective action can be very rapid and intuitive, as in the midst of a conversation, or it can be more sustained and systematic, as in developing a new business strategy.

## References

- 1 Economist Intelligence Unit (2009). "Organisational agility: How companies can survive and thrive in turbulent times."
- 2 Survey of 130 senior executives and human resource professionals in Fortune 500 companies, conducted by a global career-management services firm.
- 3 *Leadership Agility*, Joiner and Josephs (2007).
- 4 *Power Up: Transforming organizations through shared leadership* (1998), Bradford and Cohen
- 5 *Mastering Self-Leadership* (2012), Manz and Neck

## The Author



**Bill Joiner** is lead author of the award-winning book, *Leadership Agility*. Sought internationally as a speaker on this topic, he is recognized as one of the world's foremost authorities on agile leadership. Bill consults on and facilitates organizational change and senior team development. He also coaches senior executives and provides leadership workshops and action learning programs that accelerate leadership development. He has 30 years of experience helping companies based in the US, Canada, and Europe achieve outstanding results.

Bill has an MBA, and he earned his Doctorate in Organization Development from Harvard University. He served for nine years as an adjunct faculty member in Leadership for Change, an innovative leadership development program at Boston College. Five of his many published articles are: "Leadership for Organizational Learning" (in *Transforming Leadership*), "Creating a Culture of Agile Leaders" (in *People + Strategy Journal*), "How to Build an Agile Leader" (in *CLO magazine*), "Leadership Agility: A global imperative" (in *Dialog Journal*), and "Bringing Leadership Agility to Agile" (*Cutter Business & Technology Journal*).

Bill is CEO of ChangeWise, a leadership and organization development consulting firm with a strong network of strategic alliances throughout the US, Canada, and Europe. Some of the better-known organizations ChangeWise has served include: Adobe, Aetna, Amgen, Bell Canada, Brookings, Chubb, Corning, Digitas, Deutsche Telekom, EMC, Fidelity Investments, General Dynamics, Goodwill International, Harvard Business School, Healthways, IBM, Intel, Macy's, MIT, McKinsey, New England Journal of Medicine, Novartis, Partners Healthcare, PepsiCo, Pfizer, Polaroid, Progress Software, Royal Canadian Mint, Siemens, State Street, Sun Microsystems, Ste Michelle Wine Estates, Sunoco, T. Rowe Price, Travelers, United Way, and various federal agencies.