Beyond the Buzzwords of Leadership

Successful businesses are able to adapt quickly and satisfy the changing needs of their customers. Community Members tell **Emma Carroll** how they are leading in a way that enables this agility

The most effective leaders are the ones that build teams around them that are both adaptable and comfortable with making decisions at pace. Creating this isn't easy, which is why 87 percent of attendees at Criticaleye's recent Asia Leadership Forum acknowledged that their top teams need to be more agile.

Clearly organisations must have structure, oversight and governance in place, especially when operating in highly regulated sectors or where there is a focus on health and safety. However, it's also true that a lot of companies are under pressure to move faster to meet the needs of their customers, and a failure to do so can have existential consequences.

Here, we get the thoughts of business leaders from our Virtual Asia Leadership Forum about what agility means to them.

This is what they said:

Carmen Wee

Carmen Wee, Board Member of HTX (Singapore's Home Team Science and Technology Agency), states that leaders need to adopt an agile mindset if they are to unleash the power of their workforce.

Many companies are fairly static when it comes to their culture. They use the organisational structure and business model they had in the past and replicate it or use it as a frame of reference to design for the future. Today, organisations need to move from being reactive to being more creative.

> **"** *Having an innovative culture means moving from a state of 'knowing it all' to discovering things together* **"**

Having an innovative culture means moving from a state of 'knowing it all' to discovering things together. Senior leaders must adopt a stance where they discover new insights through a process that includes diversity, openness and transparency.

It is about moving from authority and towards partnership. A lot of Asian companies have a different kind of culture, where everybody looks to the leader for the answers. To adapt quickly in a fast-changing environment, we must recognise that the leader does not know everything – and that creates a shift in the balance of power.

That's difficult for some companies, but to create a really agile organisation you need to be willing to share some of that soft power.

To do this, you must train your top team and your middle management to have a coaching culture rather than a telling culture. A coaching conversation is about asking the right questions, so you unleash the potential of the workforce and empower them to take risks and to experiment.

Rahul Malhotra

Rahul Malhotra, Head of Brand Strategy and Stewardship at Royal Dutch Shell, says adopting an agile culture is about positioning yourself along a continuum.

You can say you want a culture that is agile or one which is customer-centric, but those can just be buzzwords. There are choices that a leader must make about the kind of culture they would like to have, and it is a continuum.

So, at one end, you can have a lot of thoroughness and governance, which is needed around some things like safety and financial compliance. At the opposite end, you could have complete agility, for example around customer recruitment.

That continuum is finely tuned, and it's like adjusting bass and treble volume controls. You must think about how much agility you need, in which parts of the organisation, and then move the dials accordingly.

Agile leadership teams understand why things must change, what controls must be put in place, what will be done differently and how to get there. **>**

Matthew Blagg

Matthew Blagg, CEO of Criticaleye, comments that the challenge for leadership teams when operating at pace is to stay strategically aligned.

We are in an incredibly contradictory environment at the moment. In some ways, leaders can act with more agility as you can execute plans faster in a virtual world. However, it is much more difficult to debate and develop your strategy remotely.

Under these conditions, it can be a challenge to get alignment at the top and this permeates down throughout the business, making it harder than ever for leaders to engage their people and bring them along on the journey.

Fractures appear when you can't come together. The further you are away from the centre, the wider those cracks can grow. In many global organisations, the views of regional leaders and those of Group are diverging, and until people can travel and get back together, this misalignment is likely to increase.

In this environment, indicators are fluctuating around which makes operating in an agile way particularly difficult. You must be ready to benchmark ideas, adapt fast and course correct if need be.

Till Vestring

Till Vestring, Independent NED at Keppel Corporation and a Board Mentor at Criticaleye, says leaders must break problems down into chunks that agile teams can tackle.

> **❝** *Get out of your office, meet customers, interact with your teams and lead from the front* **❞**

Becoming more agile is a personal journey for leaders. It is about empowering a team to break larger, complex problems into smaller ones that can be solved in iterative and adaptive ways.

It's not about something like coming up with a strategy – I don't think you could ask an agile team to come up with a strategy in a week's time. However, you can break a problem down into manageable pieces – say introducing a new product – and ask a team to figure out in a week whether it makes sense to do that or not.

Companies that are doing agile at scale may have up to 100 different teams running at any time and so, as a leader, you have to be the architect of the process. That means dividing problems into smaller pieces that can be distributed and then brought back together.

It is also important not to forget the customer perspective. During big management reforms, such as a move to agile, we can get totally obsessed by our own organisations and forget the external world, including our customers and competitors.

It's important to get out of your office, meet customers, interact with your teams and lead from the front. You need to think of yourself as an architect, coach, facilitator and motivator, rather than as a manager in the traditional sense. ∎

Click here for more information on Criticaleye's Asia Leadership Forum, taking place on Thursday 25th November.

This event will discuss:

- Reimagining the Customer Experience
- Navigating Complexity as a Leadership Team
- A New Landscape for Talent and Leadership.

Featuring Commentary From:

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