Member's Quarterly

Fall 2019 Edition

Perspective

Managing an Agile Workplace

Time for a mindset shift

Agile organizations are learning to be fast, flexible, adaptable and responsive. This means that managers and supervisors must learn to make decisions quickly and at the right time to achieve the results that they and their organizations desire. How do they do that?

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Qualities of the Agile Organization

To understand the new role, let's review the agile framework. Agile organizations have a number of underlying qualities. They include being faster while not sacrificing quality and usually feature smaller teams that can work in shorter release and decision-making cycles. These decision-making processes are often more bottom-up versus top-down. They foster an open communication style.

Another big difference in agile organizations is that while there are over-arching corporate goals, teams are encouraged to guide the corporate vision with their passion rather than having clearly defined rigid roles. There are also commitments to new ways of working that acknowledge and support individual needs and goals. This includes having metrics like a positive work–life balance and a commitment to innovation and new ways of working that can still achieve corporate success.

Managing in an Agile Organization

There are numerous challenges for managers in an agile organization beyond learning a whole new vocabulary that seems more like a foreign language. They include realigning the existing governance models, organizational structures and processes. That is not simple. Most organizations have built layers of policies, decision-making processes and internal structures that must be unravelled, even as the new agile systems are put into place.

Moving to an agile organization will also change the status and remuneration of some, if not all employees. There may be strong resistance to this change. The main challenge for management will be to keep the baby while throwing out the bath water. They will also have to ensure that the transition to an agile organization does not cost the organization too many growing pains or loss of business or effectiveness. Those organizations that have managed this well are best positioned to continue to thrive and prosper. Here are some tips to help you get there.

Tips for Agile Managers

Jon Younger and Norm Smallwood are co-authors of the book Agile Talent. They offer a number of suggestions to help managers become more agile.

Build a talent network

They suggest hiring the right employees as a good first step. You can train existing employees, but they will need to be led by people with the right technical skills and understanding of this new way of working.

Kickstart the agile working relationships

All new hires will need an onboarding experience that lets the work start fast and strong. They will also need clear goals, well-defined schedules, milestones and an agreement on performance expectations. This early investment in agile working relationships with internal colleagues will always succeed.

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Manage the internal politics

There will be concerns that moving to an agile organization will put some employees' jobs at risk. Even senior management may worry that their role and influence will be diminished. You have to make it clear that agile talent is a supplement, not a replacement for internal staff, and that the benefits of access to new technology, speed, market discipline and flexibility will be worthwhile.

Think of employees as partners

The old employer/employee relationship won't work in an agile organization. Managers need to establish a win/win partnership relationship with their new agile talent, one where both parties feel a stake in one another's success.

Be a talent developer

New employees will need to be mentored and nurtured to success. This should include coaching new employees to work effectively within the organization and to be able to get up to speed quickly.

Ask for feedback

Managers have to be fully engaged with everyone affected by the changes to an agile organization. They have to be attentive and connected to their teams and invest in building individual relationships with every team member.

Nudge the system forward

The authors suggest "nudge" rather than "steer" or "lead" because middle managers don't have the license or authority to drive big system changes. However, they can nudge the system and drive helpful changes that will reduce friction.

The agile workplace is becoming increasingly popular. According to McKinsey & Company, in a survey of more than 2500 people in organizations of all sizes and industries, more than 80 percent of respondents in agile units report that overall performance increased moderately or significantly since their transformations began. It's definitely produced results for many organizations.

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