Leadership Formula

A landscape for an agile leader

Learning your tables is essential for success from primary school on. In an agile context, leaders need to internalize another set of basics for the desired achievements.

by Kurt Mayer

$$AL = PS \times RO$$

Agile Leadership   **Psychological Safety**   **Results Orientation**

Recommended reading

»Change the Culture, Change the Game: The Breakthrough Strategy for Energizing Your Organization and Creating Accountability for Results«
Roger Connors and Tom Smith; Portfolio; 2012

Accountability serves as the core of agile leadership. It helps overcome the victim cycle, mobilize the potential of every single team member and establish an energetic, mindful relationship between the people's behavior and the desired results. To support the emergence of such a culture, agile leaders have to act as enablers. Based on a coaching mindset they are responsible for alignment as well as the level of energy within themselves and their teams. Nevertheless, this is still a rather vague description of how agile leaders actually try to boost performance. During consulting processes and leadership programs, we often observe leaders getting lost in these vague descriptions of agility.

What does it actually mean to be an enabler, supporter and coach? What should I do, if I am a framework setter, aligner and energy manager now? And how is this different from what I have always done? Reflecting on these major concerns, we developed a simple formula with the aim of directing leadership towards agility:

**agile leadership =
psychological safety x results orientation**

One point is really striking: To boost agility and performance, leaders have to focus on psychological safety *and* results orientation at the same time. Focusing only on psychological safety will create a powerless culture of comfort; focusing just on results will shape a powerless culture of anxiety (see illustration). ▶

Landscape for agile leadership
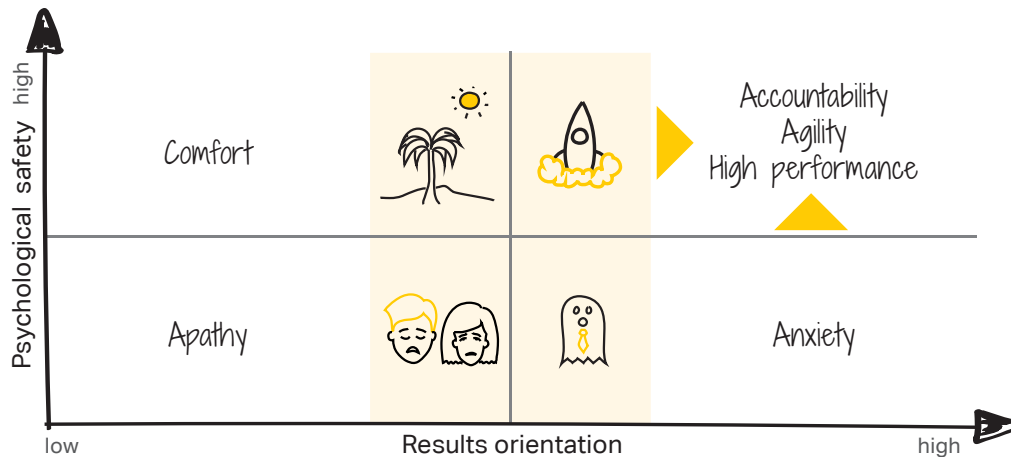
Psychological safety

All members feel confident that no one will embarrass or punish anyone else for to admitting to a mistake, asking a question or contributing a new idea. Teammates feel accepted and respected and safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other. As an external observer, you can recognize a psychologically safe team immediately by two features: You see equality in the distribution of conversational turn-taking and ostentatious listening with full attention and respect. In Project Aristotle, Google tried to find out what makes a team effective. They examined 180 teams (115 project teams in engineering and 65 sales pods) and the results were stunning; who was on the team mattered less than how they worked together. Psychological safety was the most important factor.

Results orientation

In their famous books »Change the Culture – Change the Game« and »Fix it: Getting Accountability Right« Connors and Smith refer to a huge amount of empirical evidence for one simple but crucial factor for an organization's success. The more clearly and unambiguously results are defined, the more likely employees will take responsibility and align their actions towards them. Confusion over results opens the door for maintaining the status quo and keeping an attitude of just fulfilling your own job description. From their own experience, Connors and Smith report that nine out of ten management teams are not able to name the key results their companies need to achieve.

AL = PS x RO

Through our consulting work, we often meet managers who try to overcome the lack of energy and commitment they face by just putting the pressure on to achieve results. Following the undefined premise that »We must become more dynamic and flexible more quickly,« objectives are pushed top-down and cascaded downwards within the established hierarchy. A performance management system is often installed to diligently track the status of goal achievement and tied to the system of remuneration and bonuses. Individuals and teams are held accountable for results they have never even committed to.

Spoiler alert: It is hardly ever successful. The good news is that agility and performance can be acquired if psychological safety is developed together with results orientation. Due to that, future enablers have to ask themselves the right questions at the end of the day. What have I done today to strengthen the psychological safety in my team? And what have I done at the same time to improve the results orientation? And last but not least: What can I do to enable even more success? ●