



ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY - QUICK TIPS

Modern universities are complex organizations characterized by multiple layers of approval, authority and an abundance of rules designed to ensure compliance with laws, policies promulgated by governing boards, and internal practices and procedures. Yet, effective leadership demands that strong, timely decisions are made and implemented effectively. This creates a tension, which is amplified by the ever-increasing pace of events and communication. Organizational agility is a term often used to describe the ability to navigate this environment effectively and constructively, achieving goals, advancing mission, and preserving career options and reputation.

Impediments to Agility

Change is often incremental; sometimes revolutionary. Agile leaders anticipate change and find opportunities for problem solving. As a leader, there can be many obstacles to overcome:

- Policies and procedures that require many steps or approvals for even straightforward matters; these may be cumbersome, outdated, or opaque; change frequently; cause frustration; and sap energy and time
- Conflicting messages and demands from rules, constituencies, and reward structures
- Personalities, biases, egos, and motivations that shape senior leaders' perception of subordinates
- Social systems, opinions and emotions that are fluid, consuming cognitive and emotional energy to manage
- Cultures that create "unofficial" rules that obscure authority and complicate decisions, requiring political skill to navigate
- Resistance to change, even when that change may be essential to the health or survival of the unit

"When people are determined they can overcome anything." - Nelson Mandela

Thinking Patterns That Can Hinder Agility

There are common thinking patterns that can impede agility and harm unit health. As a leader, watch for these and target their extinction to hone your unit's ability to respond effectively to a variety of situations.

Rigor / close minded thinking

"We always do it this way."

Us / them divisions / thinking

"They don't get what it is like here."

Group think and narcissism

"We are always right here."

Lack of social skill and emotional intelligence

"You're stupid."

Categorizing and group labeling

"Only a woman would say that."

Lack of proactive behaviors

"We can wait you out."

Miscalibration with larger unit effort

"The campus plan isn't useful."

Misuse of power

"Who does he think he is?"

Lack of / bad communication

"I heard a rumor..."

"It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive, but those who can best manage change." - Charles Darwin





Tools of Agile Leadership

- **Develop communication skills:** Communication enables agile navigation of the complex academic social structure. (See “Clarity of Intent” Quick Tip)
- **Network effectively:** Networking is the art of building trusted relationships through personal interactions. Know who influences decision makers and accord them as much respect as those they serve. Understand who in each unit (do not overlook those within your own unit) performs important tasks, especially gate-keeping staff who are essential and all-too-often taken for granted or overlooked.
- **Understand the Organization:** Assess who the real decision-makers are and how they approach issues. Often, a person in charge looks to others for advice on certain situations. Knowing which person has influence on the official decision maker for the issue or item on which you are concerned, and providing sufficient and full information to that person or those persons themselves can be essential in agile leadership.
- **Manage up effectively.** Working with more senior leaders in ways that advance their goals earns several agile benefits. (See “Managing Up” Quick Tip). If you are managing up effectively, you
 - feel comfortable, without tension or nervousness
 - understand how senior managers think and act
 - get things done by talking their language and responding to their needsand your recommendations are acted upon.
- **Practice authentic communication.** Say what needs to be said, both positive and negative, at the right time, to the right person, in the right manner; speak up, taking the heat as necessary. In agile leadership, you are capable of
 - providing current, direct, complete and actionable feedback
 - letting people know where they stand
 - facing up to problems and difficult people
 - not being afraid to take negative action when necessaryand you build moral authority as a result.
- **Develop political skill.** Accept the messy reality of hierarchies: egos, constituencies, issues, rivalries, history, long memories... and deal with it to get things done for maximum benefit. Deal with it...politics by whatever name is always involved. Political skill is essential for agile leadership. Agile leaders
 - maneuver smoothly and quietly through political waters
 - are sensitive to how people and organizations function
 - anticipate land mines and plans for them
 - accept organizational politics as a necessary fact of life
 - enable management of difficult people
- **Cultivate empathy.** Empathy - the ability to understand the feelings and needs of another is one of the greatest unrecognized political skills. The ability to accurately “sense” the another’s reaction to what is being said enables one to focus comments on questions and areas of interest that the other person may have, creating more productive communication and building bridges of common ground.





- **Learn some negotiation theory and apply it regularly.** We all negotiate constantly with each other and sometimes ourselves. Develop the ability to assess situations through the eyes of others, and learn what motivates them. Consider ways to find “wins” for others, and to save face and dignity in losses. (See “Negotiation” Quick Tip.) Agile leaders ask themselves:
 - What does he or she need to become successful after leaving the meeting? (What are his or her interests?)
 - What can I afford to give up to make him or her successful? (Make an integrative deal?)
- **Make the case clearly.** Agile leaders combine the skills outlined above to define goals and objectives and navigate surrounding environments to achieve unit goals. This can encompass
 - focusing on the conversation and big picture, not yourself
 - standing tall, making eye contact where socially needed
 - speaking confidently, naturally and clearly
 - not speaking rapidly or saying too much.
 - speaking succinctly and to the point (not dominating airtime and conversations)
 - answering questions crisply and directly, especially when the answer is negative for your position and not hiding or disguising negative information
- **Be persistent.** The bureaucratic structure of academia requires persistence to successful navigation.

*“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence.
Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful
men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost
a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated
derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are
omnipotent.”*

- Calvin Coolidge

