

SIX COMPETENCIES OF AGILE LEADERS

Leading and managing an organization through times of uncertainty and unpredictability requires a variety of leadership competencies and skills. Here are six important ones:

1. Situational Awareness. Situational awareness is understanding how external and internal trends, such as changes in consumer demand, economic shifts, or new government policies, can impact the organization. For example, leaders with strong situational awareness anticipate how a given policy change will impact different areas of the company and identify relevant strategies to improve the company's position.

Related skills:

- Views an emerging issue or challenge from a broad lens, putting it into perspective.
- Shows insight in identifying how trends will impact the organization.
- Understands the position of the organization within a global context.
- Maintains a positive approach in the face of challenges.
- Is visionary in thinking.

2. Self-Awareness. While situational awareness requires leaders to have a good understanding of trends, self-awareness is the ability of leaders to understand their own emotions and motives, keep their own personal biases in check, and make better decisions. For example, a leader whose primary motivation is to win the affection and approval of others will have a difficult time making tough decisions unless he or she recognizes this tendency and keeps it in check.

Related skills:

- Regularly challenges his/her own assumptions.
- Listens to opposing points of view before making decisions.
- Maintains a positive, affirming intention even when experiencing conflict.
- Regularly asks for constructive feedback – and accepts it with grace and humility.

3. Systems Thinking. Complex problems often have multiple causes, and thus have no easy solutions. In large organizations, any action can have multiple outcomes and even unintended consequences. For instance, eliminating employees to reduce costs while maintaining the same level of production may result in more overtime work and outsourcing, which can become expensive enough to negate the intended savings.

Related skills:

- Connects seemingly disparate issues or problems.
- Analyzes issues or problems to get at root causes.
- Identifies systemic changes that will have significant, positive impacts.
- Tests solutions before scaling up.
- Is persuasive in helping others view issues from a systems perspective.

4. Ability to Prioritize. It's equally important in times of uncertainty to identify investments or strategies that will effectively deal with the issue as it is to identify previous priorities that are no longer as important. This is a competency that requires the ability to gather input from diverse

sources, to assemble teams to engage in strategic thinking and planning, and to make decisions that stick. Even the most experienced leaders struggle to get it right at times.

Related skills:

- Has a future orientation – is able to objectively assess a given initiative's value.
- Can accurately distinguish between “sunk costs,” “present value” and “future value.”
- Is willing to say “yes” and “no” to initiatives, based on the current and future needs of the organization.
- Organizes people around both a “to do” list and a “not to do” list.
- Clarifies decision-making responsibilities and takes responsibility for making decisions.

5. Innovation and Creativity: In the face of uncertainty, leaders need to be able to encourage and facilitate new approaches and new ways of doing business. They need to ask: “How can we convert this challenge into an opportunity? What should we do differently? What should we keep doing, what should we stop doing, what should we start doing?” Leaders need to not only cultivate ideas; they also need to be skilled in translating a given idea into a set of actions.

Related skills:

- Is customer focused – has an accurate picture of the different customers that the organization serves, understands their different needs, and focuses on how to meet those needs.
- Appreciates that innovations come in many forms (e.g. products and services, business processes, internal and external partnerships).
- Introduces new ways of looking at problems.
- Envisions how to test an innovative idea and determine whether it is viable.

6. Staff Engagement: As events unfold, leaders need to effectively engage and communicate with staff at all levels of the organization. They need to keep people informed. They need to help people appreciate what's going on. They need to engage people in soliciting ideas and solutions. All of this needs to occur even while events are unfolding at considerable speed.

Related skills:

- Uses a variety of communication modes and techniques to keep people informed.
- Creates forums to bring people together across silos.
- Actively engages people in analyzing problems and devising potential solutions.
- Encourages different viewpoints to be heard.
- Facilitates in such a way that people feel safe in surfacing their concerns and questions.