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Agile Leadership Competencies

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"Leading self-managing teams"

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Agile software development has been around for more than 20 years, and several companies (despite their profession) have adopted agile methods, we even see agile transformations into agile organizations (Sommer 2019). This calls for a change in management style from command and control to a style of leadership. Agile methods advocate self-managing teams; however, even self-managing teams use and need leadership (Strode et al. 2022). Unfortunately, agile methods do not prescribe how to manage agile self-managing teams, and the research on agile leadership is still in its infancy, only a little attention has been paid to the formal leadership in agile organizations (Gren and Ralph 2022). Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate what constitutes agile leadership and what competencies agile leaders need. A case study was conducted in the IT department of a large Danish retail company, going from a classic, plan-driven organization, towards an agile setup working in self-organizing teams. Approximately one year into its agile transformation we investigated how leaders use agile leadership. The data consists of a focus group and a total of 11 interviews with leaders and team members. The preliminary findings show how agile leaders bring five core leadership competencies into play: 1) coach, 2) motivate, 3) empower, 4) enable, and 5) collaborate. *Coaching* is about enhancing the team by asking questions and listening to the team members while pushing them to improve and embrace learning. *Motivating* the team is a key competence, to motivate the team, the leader must have a great understanding of the team and a trusting bond with the members. Self-managing teams must have *empowerment* to make decisions; an agile leader must push decisions downward; through empowerment, problems are solved faster. By sensing what the team needs and bringing it; an agile leader can *enable* the team. *Collaboration* is important when working agile, thus an agile leader must focus on supporting collaboration both within the team and across teams and roles. The findings also indicate that leaders in different roles need different competencies and show how shared leadership is one of the key elements in agile organizations that sets agile leadership aside from traditional leadership. However, it is difficult and takes time to find the right distribution of responsibilities among the leaders. This study calls for discussion and future research on what kind of leadership agility entails and if or how it differs from the management/leadership of traditional teams.

References

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