Agile and Adaptive Leadership in the Public Sector

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IBM Center for
The Business
of Government

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Agile leadership moves away from position and status, and toward community and organizational qualities to provide cover for agile teams working toward a solution.

Foreword

Daniel J. Chenok

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On behalf of the IBM Center for The Business of Government, we are pleased to present *Agile and Adaptive Leadership in the Public Sector*, by Dr. Ines Mergel, Professor of Public Administration at the University of Konstanz, Germany.

Few questions in public management have grown more consequential in recent years than this: how can leaders take positive actions when conditions keep changing? As Professor Mergel's report highlights, the environment facing government leaders today has been captured in frameworks like VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) and, more recently, BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible).

These are not academic labels. They reflect the daily reality of managing agencies through demands that emerged from the pandemic era, digital transformation, and geopolitical disruption. Traditional command-and-control hierarchies were built for a different world. This report addresses leadership in the world today.

Professor Mergel brings scholarly depth and practical orientation to the topic. Drawing on extensive research in public administration and organizational behavior, she reframes agile as much more than a project management methodology borrowed from software development—rather, the agile paradigm represents a fundamentally different way of thinking about leadership. Many government efforts to adopt agile have focused on the mechanics of scrums and sprints while leaving untouched the deeper implications for leadership, which the report focuses on.

The report opens with an examination of why agile approaches have become so urgent for public sector organizations, and what this change demands of the government workforce. From there, the author explores agile leadership across several interconnected dimensions: the mindset required to lead in an adaptive fashion, the specific work practices that make agile teams function effectively, and the organizational conditions that either support or undermine those teams.

The report describes several key issues. First, Professor Mergel treats agile leadership as emanating from self-leadership, contending that leaders cannot create conditions for adaptive teams if they remain wedded to fixed thinking. Her discussion of growth versus fixed mindsets, and of promotion-focused versus prevention-focused orientations, gives leaders a framework for candid self-assessment rather than another checklist to complete.

Second, the report's attention to the need for flexibility deserves notice. Iterative learning, adjustments based on empirical data, and the willingness to surface failure and make changes early all require an environment that supports speaking up about problems to correct. These elements provide a structural precondition for agile work to function.

Third, the report points to specific leadership assignment worksheets, available via a separate link for download. These practical guides translate the report's concepts into structured exercises that leaders and their teams can work through directly, connecting the analytical content to driving change inside government organizations.

This report represents the latest contribution to a sustained body of work on agile government that the IBM Center has developed, including several reports done in partnership with the National Academy of Public Administration's Agile Government Center. Earlier reports in this series, *Leadership Framework for an Agile Government*, *Human Centricity in Digital Delivery: Enhancing Agile Governance*, *The Future of Agile Government*, and *Learning: the Role of Public Affairs Education*, include examinations of the application of agile principles to policy development and program implementation, government, digital modernization, and adaptive governance under conditions of disruption. Professor Mergel's report complements and deepens this series by addressing the leadership dimensions that determine whether agile methods take root.

We hope this report will offer value to a broad audience, including senior executives working through the realities of organizational transformation, mid-level managers building cross-functional teams under resource constraints, and those responsible for developing the next generation of public sector leaders. Professor Mergel has brought rigor and clarity to a topic that can help improve government service delivery and mission impact in a complex age.

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Executive Summary

Leadership in public sector organizations faces many unique challenges relative to other sectors. There are limited financial and personal rewards to increase public service motivation or incentivize civil servants. Organizing usually occurs along line-based command-and-control functions, with relatively little freedom to experiment with new work practices—unless officially sanctioned by agency leadership.

At the same time, the current multi-crisis context in which many public agencies operate demands new ways of working. Multi-faceted societal problems cannot simply be solved by leveraging a single expertise. Instead, they require the involvement of diverse competencies that typically span across multiple agencies. They require teams with cross-functional competencies that can work together in projects, some of which will dissolve after solving the problem. Examples of these cross-domain problems include climate resiliency approaches, mobility issues, digital transformation of complex processes, enterprise data management tasks, and many more.

To address this increasing complexity, governments have started to develop flexible project-based strategies and processes that allow for time-bound cross-functional collaboration outside the existing hierarchical structures. For many public servants, this parallel project-based approach challenges leadership and organizational norms, rewarding time and effort for regular work as well as the extraordinary work done in the parallel projects.

To address this imperative, agile work practices enable new ways of working. Agile work practices were first introduced in vanguard parts of the organizations (i.e., through innovation labs or digital services teams), in which their members experiment with approaches that emerged in the private sector and developed in the automotive or software industries to control for versions and quality. Agile practices focus on cross-functional work, iterative approaches to learning about the problem space, and experimenting or modeling to understand what might work and what could fail when implemented. Agile work allows agency teams to operate more efficiently, in ways that have proven to increase the quality of the outcomes as well as job satisfaction. Much research has demonstrated the value of this trend, including studies from the IBM Center for The Business of Government directly and in collaboration with the Agile Government Center of the National Academy of Public Administration.

Leading agile teams in the digital age has become a central skill for public managers, who need to understand their teams' capabilities and how best to provide support and guidance to them. The report informs government leaders of different dimensions of successful agile leadership, as well as ways to apply these dimensions directly in their daily work.

AGILE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In recent years, the speed of change and the increase in ever more complex problems that must be solved by public bureaucracies have dramatically increased. These problems include evolving geopolitical conditions, the vast number of complex decisions during the COVID pandemic years, and changes such as the digital transformation of government processes.

As a result of these developments, the U.S. Army War College coined the term **VUCA** as an acronym to highlight the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of our time.[1] Their significant report recommended that businesses and governments adapt to a constantly changing environment and context. Many studies have derived from these statements the need for transformative leadership.[2]

A few years later, VUCA was replaced in an essay by Jamais Cascio titled "Facing the age of chaos."[3] Cascio claimed that the public also lives in a world no longer reliant on existing structures, values, or political preferences, but instead one in which societal problems are characterized by high levels of instability. He coined the term **BANI**, which stands for brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible. Cascio described BANI as a framework to articulate the increasingly commonplace situations in which simple volatility or complexity are insufficient lenses through which to understand what's taking place.

Public bureaucracies have to become more adaptable or agile, which is defined by the *Business Agility Report* as "a set of organizational capabilities, behaviors, and ways of working that afford your business the freedom, flexibility, and resilience to achieve its purpose."[4] Similarly, Linda Holbeche defined agile organizations as organizations that "can intelligently and proactively seize opportunities and react to threats and make timely, effective, sustainable changes that generate competitive advantage and give them leverage in the marketplace or in their ecosystem."[5]

Agile organizations can focus on four different domains of agility based on a recent survey of the Business Agility Institute:[6]

- **Agile transformation,** where selected services or technology teams work with greater autonomy to improve product delivery.
- **Agile @ scale,** where teams use agile work practices and techniques to deliver all components of a service.

1. Johansen, B., and J. Euchner, (2013). "Navigating the VUCA world." *Research-Technology Management*, 56(1), 10-15.
2. Horney et al, 2010
3. Cascio, J. (2020, October 13, 2024). "Facing the Age of Chaos." *Jamais Cascio*. https://medium.com/@cascio/facing-the-age-of-chaos-b00687b1f51d.
4. Business Agility Institute. (2023). *2023 Business Agility Report*. https://api.businessagility.institute/storage/files/download-library/2023-11%20BAI-Business-Agility-Report-2023.pdf.
5. Holbeche, Linda (2019). "Designing sustainably agile and resilient organizations." *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 36(5), 668–677.
6. Business Agility Institute. (2023). 2023 *Business Agility Report*. https://api.businessagility.institute/storage/files/download-library/2023-11%20BAI-Business-Agility-Report-2023.pdf.

- **Agile outside IT**, which focuses on services, processes, and products outside the IT department to increase productivity among project management teams.
- **Business agility**, which includes products, services, and operations that are redesigned so that the whole organization can quickly adapt strategy and business models to market needs.

At its core, agile is a dynamic capability that describes the ability of the organization to reprioritize resources and adapt capabilities in learning, sensing, and seizing opportunities through innovation and the adoption of new systems for value creation and protection in response to the changing environment.[7] Often, dynamic capabilities require organizational characteristics seen as foreign to administrative bureaucracies, including flexibility to change within the preestablished parameters, speed to change and carry out tasks in the shortest possible time, and technology infrastructure, innovation, and proactiveness.

In the circumstances described above, the traditional line-based hierarchical type of leadership reaches its limits, and a new set of leadership practices can enable adaptation to the specific context or problem. In the public sector, agile has been adopted by governments that place a priority on agile software development or to address shortcomings of line-based work in command-and-control structures in disaster management, especially during significant disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.[8] The practices are based on the values and principles articulated in the Agile Manifesto and advanced for government by a variety of efforts, including research for the IBM Center for The Business of Government and the Agile Government Center of the National Academy of Public Administration[9].

7. Teece, D., M. Peteraf, and S. Leih, (2016). "Dynamic capabilities and organizational agility: Risk, uncertainty, and strategy in the innovation economy." *California Management Review*, 58(4), 13-35.
8. U.S. GAO. (2020). Agile Assessment Guide: Best Practices for Agile Adoption and Implementation. U.S. Government Accountability Office. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-590g.pdf. Baham, C., et al. (2017). "An Agile Methodology for the Disaster Recovery of Information Systems Under Catastrophic Scenarios." *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 34(3), 633-663. https://doi.org/10.1080/07421222.2017.1372996.
9. See https://napawash.org/agile-government-center.

The Agile Manifesto's values and principles

The Agile Manifesto provides an overview of the values and principles that are the foundation for any agile practice. According to its signatories, the Manifesto was developed because of the frustrations of demands that took technology development teams away from their core task. They had to invest too much time in documenting every decision instead of using the time to develop a working product. Customers or clients were not involved in the development process, and too many surprises or needs for change after the product was developed and ready to ship led to wasted time, ultimately cost overruns, and problems managing the allotted time.

When the signatories came together in 2001, some of these issues were quickly written down because they all shared the same frustrations, and some were more carefully negotiated. In the end, they agreed on the following values and principles as guidelines for working with agile work practices. In the following table, they are summarized.

Table 1: Agile values and principles[10]

Agile Values	Individuals and interactions over processes and tools	Working software over comprehensive documentation	Customer collaboration over contract negotiation	Responding to change over following a plan
Agile Principles	**1.** Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.	**2.** Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.	**3.** Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.	**4.** Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
	5. Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.	**6.** The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.	**7.** Working software is the primary measure of progress.	**8.** Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.
	9. Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.	**10.** Simplicity—the art of maximizing the amount of work not done—is essential.	**11.** The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.	**12.** At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

A 2021 Public Administration Review article drew on research from the IBM Center and other sources to adapt the principles and values of the Agile Manifesto to the field of public administration, and highlight what the adaptation to the changing environment of command-and-control bureaucracies might need:[11]

10. Beck, K., et al. (2001). The Agile Manifesto. Agile Alliance. https://agilemanifesto.org/ and http://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html.
11. Mergel, I., et al. (2021). "Agile: A new way of governing." *Public Administration Review*, 81(1), 161-165.

- Agile assumes situations are fluid and change over time.
- Agile favors adaptive structure over hierarchies and silos.
- Agile emphasizes responsible individual discretion over bureaucratic procedures.
- Agile emphasizes continuous self-reflective learning processes.
- Agile increases knowledge about processes, procedures, and requirements for new processes and services.

To lead these changes toward an agile and adaptive government, the authors highlighted that agile is often antithetical to many typical bureaucratic line organizations. Line-based organizations working in agile cross-functional teams challenge middle managers in taking responsibility for the outcomes of cross-functional teams. They also highlight that Agile requires new forms of leadership to provide the space and safety in which consensual decision-making and trial-and-error approaches are applied by decentralized teams, instead of top-down decision-makers.

National Academy for Public Administration Agile Government Center and Resources

The Academy's Agile Government Center serves as the hub of a network that brings together governments, nonprofits, foundations, academic institutions, and private sector partners to assist in developing and disseminating agile government principles and case studies of agile policies and programs. This Center, for which the IBM Center for The Business of Government serves as a founding partner, provides a source of assistance to those who want to adopt and implement agile to provide public goods and services that fully meet customer needs and build public trust. As part of the Agile Government Center, the Academy's Agile Learning Program is a virtual, six-week program designed to equip leaders at all levels of government with agile management principles. The Academy training, led by Academy Fellows and partners, prepares leaders to govern through the pillars of the end-user, the network, and the team.

Resources:

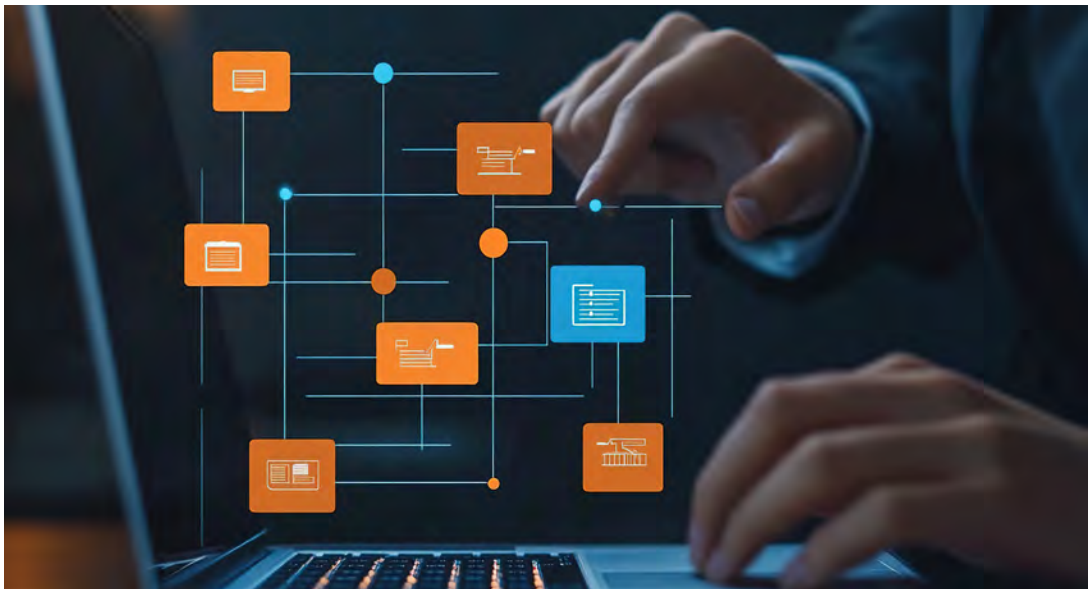
From the Agile Government Center:

Agile Learning Program - National Academy of Public Administration
Leading Agile Transformation Overview
The Agile Pathway for Policymaking - National Academy of Public Administration
Agile Regulation Gateway to the Future
Building an Agile Federal Government - National Academy of Public Administration
The Road to Agile Government (with the IBM Center)
The Future of Agile Government (with the IBM Center)

From the IBM Center for The Business of Government

Digital Modernization in Government: An Implementation Framework
A Guide to Adaptive Government: Preparing for Disruption
Leadership Framework for an Agile Government
Agile Government: The Role of Public Affairs Education
Adopting Agile in State and Local Governments
Human Centricity in Digital Delivery: Enhancing Agile Governance

** Additional agile publications can be found on the website of the Agile Government Center*



From waterfall to agile project management

Waterfall project management approaches follow an upfront, defined sequence of tasks within each project phase. A phase needs to be finished and receive final approval from top management or the client; otherwise, the project team cannot proceed to the next phase. Change in plans or reopening a previous project phase can be very difficult and costly. The project usually advances without revising a previous project management phase, and mistakes or errors are often only detected at the end of the project period. Aligning available resources also presents a challenge, given that payments often flow based on project periods to a contractor rather than work achieved.

Traditional waterfall project management approaches have many strengths. Strategic planning aligns well with linear policy processes and budgeting guidelines, when it is clear upfront what resources the project team might need to support their progress. Waterfall has a strong hierarchical orientation, where important decisions are made in advance by strong leaders who can trust the upfront laid-out process. And the linear path dependency allows for efficient resource distribution.

However, as Kappelman et al. point out, the lack of management support often leads, especially for large-scale projects, to failure and a lack of effectiveness in delivering the planned outcomes (cost and time overruns).[12] These types of failures occur in IT projects, as seen during the HealthCare.gov launch, but also in transport infrastructure projects.[13] Many of these failures are attributed to waterfall project management approaches and the lack of management and leadership competencies and communication abilities, when costs are underestimated due to overly optimistic planning errors in public works projects—or due to a bias for unique approaches that leads planners and managers to erroneous decisions in forecasting costs, time, and performance of their projects.[14]

12. Kappelman, L. A., et al. (2006). Early warning signs of IT project failure: The dominant dozen. *Information Systems Management*, 23(4).
13. Flyvbjerg, B., et al. (2004). What causes cost overrun in transport infrastructure projects? *Transport Reviews*, 24(1), 3-18. Anthopoulos, L., et al. (2016). "Why e-government projects fail? An analysis of the Healthcare. gov website." *Government Information Quarterly*, 33(1), 161-173.
14. Flyvbjerg, B., et al. (2002). "Underestimating costs in public works projects: Error or lie?" *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 68(3), 279-295. Flyvbjerg, B., et al. (2004). "What causes cost overrun in transport infrastructure projects?" Transport Reviews, 24(1), 3-18.

Waterfall project management does not consider the high degree of uncertainty of changing expectations of the users. The conditions and contexts might be changing, which then leads to unexpected delays. In summary, waterfall planning might work well for those occasions where the project management team has a clear understanding and plan of what the output can look like, and there is no alternative to these outputs. In addition, waterfall might be useful with no need to change the scope of the project once it has started, and where the concept and definition are the keys to success. Waterfall project management approaches work best when there are no ambiguous requirements.

Agile project management is useful in situations where the concrete output cannot be defined upfront, and additional empirical evidence is necessary that needs to be collected along the way. Agile problems can, for example, include those of a strategic nature for the whole organization, where there is no previous experience inside the organization or ready-made solutions that can be bought off the shelves from vendors. They are usually time-bound, and need cross-functional expertise from across the organization rather than from one expert group.

A recent IBM Center report[15] discussed how best to apply agile and waterfall approaches in government modernization, and has additional discussion of how the technical teams can operationalize the two techniques.

15. https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/digital-modernization-government-implementation-framework.

DEFINING AGILE LEADERSHIP

Agile leadership means leading with the principles, values, and tools derived from the Agile Manifesto, so that the organization will become more effective and the quality of its services and processes can increase. Public sector bureaucracies use agile work practices, such as agile project management methods, to solve complex administrative problems.[16] They often identify the current waterfall-like and step-wise project management approaches as barriers to the identification of new solutions to problems, which cannot be solved by exploiting the existing standard operating procedures or agreed-upon best practices.[17]

Agile as a leadership form is closely related to the concept of "servant leadership," where the leader assumes a serving approach and concentrates on enabling success of team members. Agile includes aspects such as leading with empathy ("what does my team need from me, instead of what do I need my team to do"). The leader's role is not necessarily tied to professional competence; instead, many team members might have more expertise in their area of specialization than the leader. In the context of a government organization, the leadership role moves to a coaching approach and aims to empower and enable teams to experiment with agile tools and artifacts to solve complex problems for which there are no routines, best practices, or blueprints available.

In Robert Greenleaf's original idea of a servant leader, leadership was not bestowed upon a certain person by rank or order; instead, it resulted from a servant nature first, and not assumed. A servant leader addressed the problems of the day and supported the team by pointing out better ways of working and remaining otherwise in the background, moving away from the "great man" theory of leadership:

> The idea of The Servant as Leader came out of reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. In this story, we see a band of men on a mythical journey, probably also Hesse's journey. The central figure of the story is Leo who accompanies the party as the servant who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They cannot make it without the servant Leo. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.
>
> —Greenleaf 1970[18]

16. Baxter, D., et al. (2023). "Institutional challenges in agile adoption: Evidence from a public sector IT project." *Government Information Quarterly*, 40(4), 101858. Greve, C., et al. (2020). "Unpacking Nordic administrative reforms: Agile and adaptive governments." *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(8), 697-710.
17. Denning, S. (2017). The age of Agile. *Strategy & Leadership*, 45(1), 3-10. Lappi, T., & Aaltonen, K. (2017). Project governance in public sector agile software projects. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 10(2), 263-294.
18. Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). What is servant leadership. *New York, NY and Mahwah*.

Figure 1: Key characteristics of servant leadership

- A "servant" leadership approach that focuses on others
  - Leading with empathy
    - Focusing on the interests and needs of employees
      - Recognizing that managers do not inherently have more knowledge/expertise than employees
      - Empowering teams to experiment with digital media
      - Moving away from maintaining one's own status towards community and organizational quality
    - Combining technical and digital skills
  - Giving teams political support at the top

As Greenleaf points out: "If one is servant, either leader or follower, one is always searching, listening, expecting that a better wheel for these times is in the making."[19] He continues to highlight how servant leaders use their power by showing that their followers "will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants."

19. Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). What is servant leadership. *New York, NY and Mahwah*.

Such descriptions also apply to agile leadership. The following contrasts how classic understanding of leadership may clash with an agile understanding of leadership:

Table 2: The difference between classic and agile leadership

Classic understanding of leadership	Agile understanding of leadership
• **Supervisor provides functional and personal orientation**	• Employees with expert knowledge have the highest level of compe-tence
• **Supervisor makes decisions**	• Employees make decisions together
• **Supervisor determines the strategy**	• Strategy, goals and procedures are discussed together in the team
• **Supervisor provides detailed imple-mentation specifications**	• Managers define rough guidelines within which employees make their own decisions
• **Important discussions are conducted by the responsible supervisor**	• Employees are present at im-portant meetings
• **Supervisor controls implementation and desired behaviors**	• Supervisor trusts the team and regu-larly reviews progress and adjust-ments
• **Deviations are viewed critically as errors**	• Iterative approaches, only plan the next steps together, feedback (re-views, dailies), course changes pos-sible at any time
• **Supervisor defines goal, develops plan, monitors execution of steps**	• Joint development of the "Definition of Done"
• **100% quality of work**	• Iteration by learning from mistakes

Agile leadership moves away from position and status, and toward community and organizational qualities to provide cover for the agile teams working toward a solution. This type of leadership has been proven to increase team collaboration, efficiency, and organizational citizenship behavior. The mindset of the team in an agile leadership framework increases satisfaction and engagement, but also commitment to the task and the organization. They often experience more work-life balance and well-being, while employee absence and fluctuation decrease.

Overall, employees working with a leader with "servant leadership" or an agile leadership approach have shown higher degrees of performance and innovativeness.[20]

Expert interviews with agile leaders conducted for this report included an exchange with traditionally appointed leader who had the difficult task of consolidating dispersed functions across many federal departments in the U.S., and had little formal power over each of the department heads the leader collaborated with.

20. Liden, R. C., et al. (2008). Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(2), 161-177. Sendjaya, S., and J.C. Sarros (2002). Servant leadership: Its origin, development, and application in organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 57-64.

Instead of introducing a vision as a fixed plan, this leader took impressive measures that included meeting with as many of the departmental heads and their teams as possible and asked them, "What do you need (from me) in this process?" Based on the insights gathered, the leader derived hypotheses on how to involve everyone's needs and moved forward to successfully implement a difficult policy.

Another perspective on agile leadership can be found in a recent IBM Center report, Leadership Framework For Agile Government.[21]

Agile leadership is first and foremost self-leadership

At its core, agile leadership is predominantly a form of **self-leadership,** which means that an agile approach focuses first on self-influence—and not on the leadership of other people. Leaders who want to understand how their team needs to be led need to first influence themselves and be able to lead themselves effectively.[22]

Agile leaders decide that they will take responsibility for their actions—a form of leadership that Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House call **co-active leadership**. The authors define the following leadership practices:[23]

- They take responsibility for specific problems and tackle a problem with all its aspects.
- They decide to take responsibility and won't let themselves become a victim of the circumstances—they act not because they are forced to but because they want to.
- They consciously define the boundaries of their world and accept emerging problems as part of their world. They explore options and act out of a sense of responsibility.

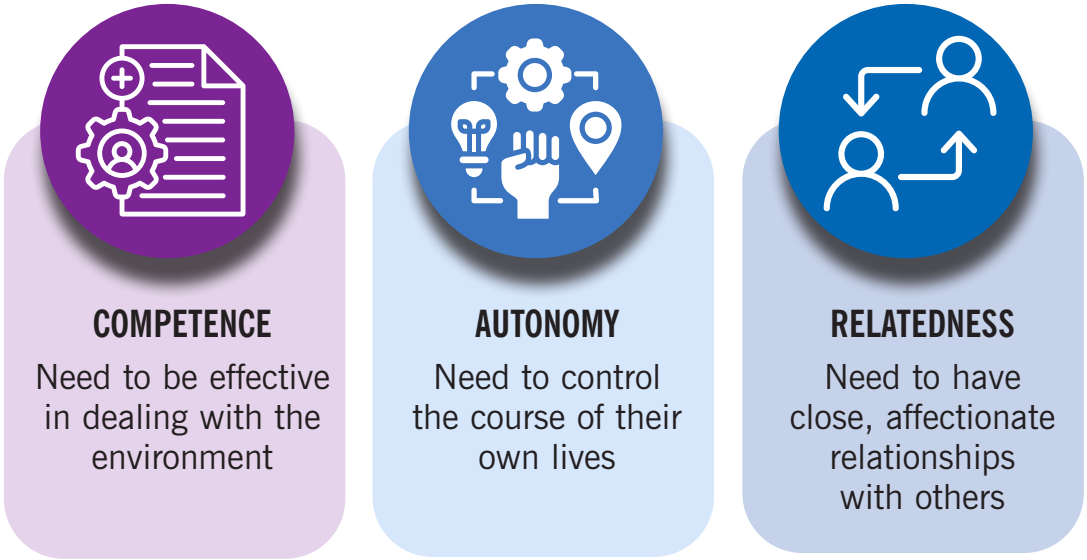
Self-leadership calls for an understanding of the values, incentives, and rewards that are driving or motivating oneself. Ryan & Deci's[24] theory on self-determination shows that people succeed in work environments when they:

- experience autonomy to decide which steps they tackle to solve a problem,
- feel that they are competent in applying their skills to solve a task, and
- experience relatedness to their colleagues.

Deci and Ryan assume that intrinsic motivation is stimulated by the natural needs for competence and self-determination. Accordingly, agile leaders can show intrinsically motivated behavior when allowed to satisfy their needs for self-determination and the experience of competence. According to self-determination theory, perceived autonomy and self-determination do not align with extrinsic rewards (e.g., compensation). Agile leaders understand the following three dimensions to successfully lead agile teams: they need to empower the teams to feel competent, work autonomously, and feel that they have close and affectionate relationships with others.

21. https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/leadership-framework-agile-government.
22. Stewart, G. L., et al. (2011). Self-leadership: A multilevel review. *Journal of Management*, 37(1), 185-222.
23. Kimsey-House, K., and H. Kimsey-House (2021). *Co-active leadership: five ways to lead*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
24. Ryan, R. M., and E. L. Deci (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.

Figure 2: Elements of self-determination



The ability for self-reflection can then lead to continuous improvement and leadership by modelling the values and actions an agile leader might also expect from their team members.

An agile leader makes sure that teams can experience accomplishments through how they apply competencies effectively to solve tasks. Agile teams can then be self-organizing and autonomous, to decide together how to choose the best course for the steps that they take and what kind of approaches they choose. Agile leaders make sure that they are available regularly and support the agile team in maneuvering through challenges and around obstacles.

Strengths-based leadership

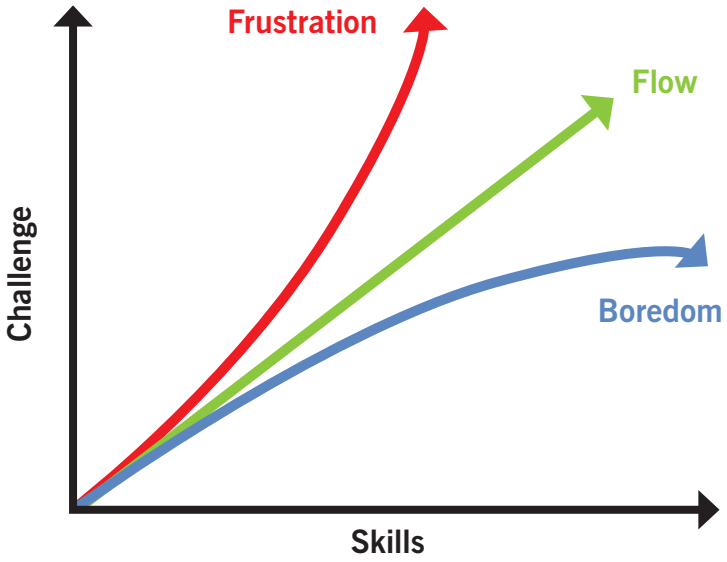
Like an agile leader's motivation, it is important to understand and utilize their own and the employees' strengths. People can give their best when a) self-determination dimensions are clear and b) when they are neither overextended nor under-extended. They experience a **flow feeling**, similar to what athletes report when they simply enjoy the work that they put in and do not feel overburdened, tired, or overwhelmed.[25]

In a situation where the challenges and the competencies are in alignment, they can come into a flow state. In situations where people must overextend themselves, they might feel too challenged and stressed and not contribute their best. In situations where they are underextended, they may become bored and a flight risk, looking for other types of more fulfilling jobs.

25. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention. Harper Perennial, New York, 39, 1-16.

The following graphic shows the different states:

Figure 3: The flow model based on Csikszentmihalyi (1997)



To more closely understand how to enable the flow zone, agile leaders can leverage their own strengths, and help their agile teams to identify what team member strengths are and how to best employ them within their team. The VIA Character Strengths Institute suggests taking their free test to understand how applying the strengths can increase confidence, happiness, and positive relationships, as well as reduce stress and anxiety.

As an example, Ryan Niemiec suggests that leaders and team members need to find the golden mean between overuse and underuse of their strengths to avoid stress and boredom. He suggests several ways a person's strengths might lead to overuse or underuse:[26]

Table 3: Examples of overuse and underuse of character strengths

Example of character strengths	Overuse	Underuse
Leadership	Follower; compliant; mousy; passive	Bossy; controlling; authoritative
Teamwork	Self-serving; individualistic; going it alone	Dependent; lost in group think; blind obedience; loss of individuality
Judgement; Critical thinking	Illogical; naïve; unreflective; closed-minded	Narrow-minded; cynical; rigid; indecisive; lost in one's head

Source: Adapted from Niemiec (2023)

26. Niemiec, R. M. (2023). Finding the golden mean: the overuse, underuse, and optimal use of character strengths. In A second-wave positive psychology in counselling psychology (pp. 183-201). Routledge.

AGILE MINDSET

An important prerequisite exists for the implementation of agile work practices: having an **agile mindset**. But what does that mean in practice, and how can agile leaders identify such a mindset in their perceptions and those of their agile team members?

An agile mindset can be defined as a post-bureaucratic mindset necessary to develop quick and leading-edge solutions by empowered and enabled team(s). In practice, this means that agile leaders need to adjust their leadership style and cheer on their team from the sidelines, share knowledge, help to explain the progress to the top management, celebrate the team's successes—observing and supporting the team. Two types of mindsets foster or prevent the adoption of agile work practices.

Growth vs. fixed mindset

Agile work practices require that public leaders engage in new ways of working that are often alien to line-based command-and-control bureaucracy. This requires the courage to adopt agile self-management practices, as well as the will to experiment by testing one's hypothesis before launching a new service or project.

These self-management practices focus on the expansion of the current repertoire of approaches that might not have been tested and tried in one's department or agency. With few blueprints to go by other than those often found in digital services teams, adopting such new work practices is a challenge.

Bureaucratic stereotypes often include resistance to change, or even willful ignorance of advances in technology or modern management methods. Research on positive psychology has found that people who tend to have a **growth mindset** are more likely to overcome these bureaucratic traditions and routines[27]—they can test and experiment to learn about innovations. Instead of stating, "We are not allowed to do this here," they are more likely to state that they might ***not yet*** know how to apply agile, but will learn over time. This dynamic mindset will allow agile leaders to engage in learning on their own and encourage others to learn agile approaches.[28]

27. Yeager, D. S., et al. (2019). A national experiment reveals where a growth mindset improves achievement. *Nature*, 573(7774), 364-369.
28. Dweck, C. (2016). "What having a "growth mindset" actually means." *Harvard Business Review*, 13(2), 2-5.

In contrast, public servants with a **fixed mindset** are generally characterized by a rather static perspective. They are less likely to explore new work practices without being told to do so. They probably see the application of agile work practices as too difficult and believe that they cannot do so on their own, and as a result may not learn something new. People working in companies with a fixed-mindset culture report more cheating and deception among employees to gain an advantage in the talent race.

Each type of mindset will have consequences on how agile leaders deal with risks, project budgets, manage projects, and address increased complexity. Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a fixed mindset, and their employees report feeling far more empowered and committed. They also receive greater organizational support for collaboration and innovation.

Figure 4: Growth vs. fixed mindset

Promotion vs. prevention-focused mindset

Similarly, employees who aim to be innovative differ from those who prefer to prevent any changes and want their work environment to stay consistent over time.[29] These two types of mindsets are defined by the motivation with which people approach a task.

Leaders and employees with a **promotion focus** strive to achieve the maximum, focus on realizing their wishes and hopes, and aim to focus on personal accomplishments and advancement. They support a learning culture to advance their own competencies and learn as an organization.

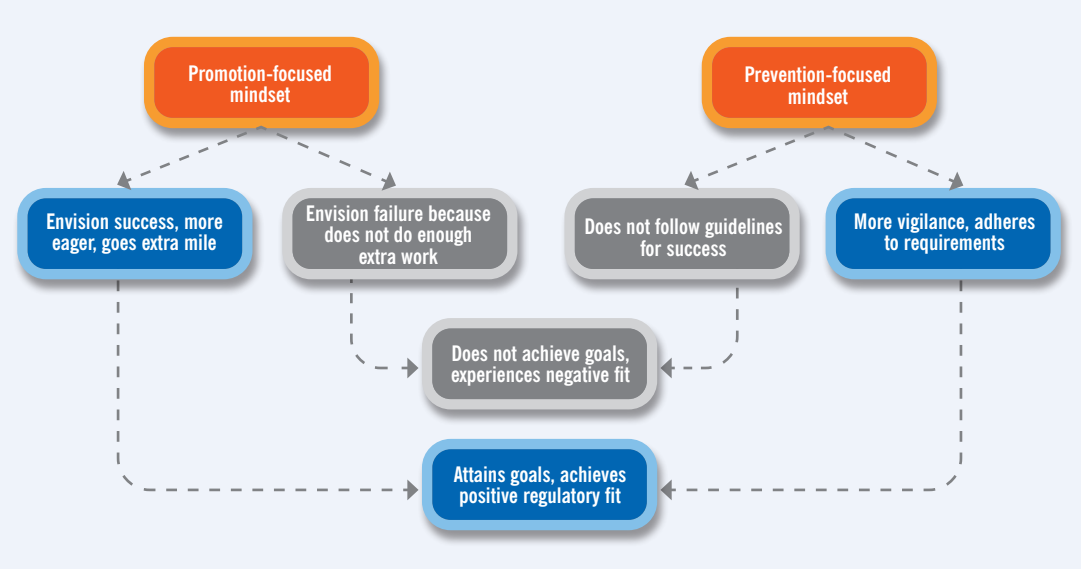
29. Higgins, E. (2012). Regulatory Focus Theory. London: Sage.

Employees and leaders with a **prevention focus** strive not to make mistakes, focus on fulfilling duties and responsibilities, emphasize security and safety by following the guidelines and rules, and avoid loss and preserve what has been achieved.

Leaders and their team members will experience **regulatory fit** when the manner of their engagement in an activity sustains (rather than disrupts) their current motivational orientation or interest (either promotional or prevention).

The following figure shows how the different types of mindsets drive leaders' and employees' behavior in decision situations and their gravitational foci:

Figure 5: Gravitational focus when faced with a decision[30]



30. Larsen, R. J., et al. (2005). Personality psychology: Domains of knowledge about human nature.

INCREASING AGILE LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

At the core of agile work practices is the need to increase the efficiency and quality of government services and processes. However, the principles that guide traditional administrative effectiveness differ from agile effectiveness. The two types are contrasted in the following table:

Table 4: Efficient administrations vs. agile effectiveness

Principles Of Efficient Administration	Principles Of Agile Effectiveness
• Specialization to increase administrative routines, which are usually specified by experts	• Ad hoc specialization by calling in specialists as required during the process
• Unified mandate: division of members into a specific hierarchy of authority along areas of specialization	• Shared leadership and joint decision making by cross-functional teams
• Manager makes decisions and ensures top-down coordination to avoid confusion	• The team makes evidence-based decisions based on professional judgment
• Span of control: limiting the number of subordinates who report directly to only one manager	• Equal plausibility that management effectiveness is increased when only the agile team prepares and makes decisions
• Organization by purpose, procedure, clientele, and location "to provide a specific service"	• Organization around the problem to be solved (or the purpose, even if it is ad hoc)

APPLYING AGILE TO PUBLIC MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Many current administrative routines include standard operating procedures that are highly patterned, quasi-repetitive, and based on tacit knowledge. Repetitions usually lead to cost savings. They are uniform and expected, and therefore support the notion of administrative stability and reliability. Decision-making follows a path dependency often described with terms such as inertia or rigidity. Strict compliance is seen as an end in itself, making it very difficult to adapt administrative work practices to complex new problems.

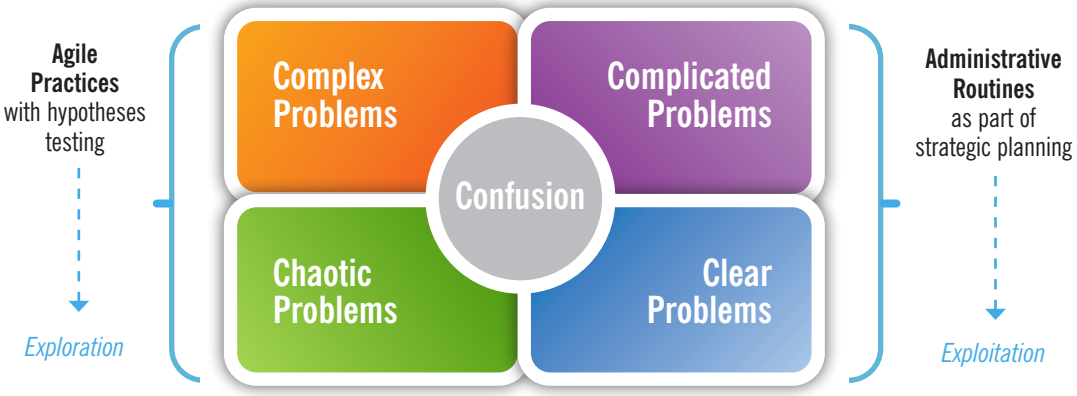
However, many societal challenges call for more dynamic, incremental, and continuous change that does not necessarily follow a blueprint of administrative best practices and routines—but encourages learning and new knowledge creation without losing the bureaucratic control mechanisms.

One leadership tool to assess what types of problems an agile leader faces is the Cynefin framework by Snowden and Boone,[31] which classifies four different types of problems:

- **Simple problems** are clear, and the organization already has experience in solving comparable problems. There is usually an administrative routine that helps to solve them. They are called the "known knowns."
- **Complicated problems** can also be solved with the existing administrative routines but are called the "known unknowns." They need additional analysis to understand which potential solution might help to solve them.
- **Complex problems** include many issues around a difficult problem that public administrations are facing at the moment (wicked problems), which could include problems around digital transformation, the implementation of lockdown mandates during the pandemic, decisions about vaccine distribution, and geopolitical situations. For these types of tasks, public leaders need trial and error to develop adaptive or novel practices because good or best practices do not apply to the types of problems.
- **Chaotic problems** include organizational situations in which cause-and-effect relationships are unknown, and they need to be explored and analyzed to understand what might cause them, and potential solutions might affect all dimensions of the problem. They can be solved with agile project management approaches.
- **Confusion** is a situation that lacks any kind of clarity about the type of problem, and it is difficult to assess it with the existing criteria. Many different perspectives might be necessary to get closer to an understanding.

The following figure shows the Snowden & Boone's Cynefin framework:

Figure 6: Agile problem-solving framework based on Snowden & Boone's Cynefin framework[32]



31. Snowden, D. J., and M. E. Boone (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68.
32. Snowden, D. J., and M. E. Boone (2007). A leader's framework for decision-making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68.

AGILE LEARNING

Agile learning generally comes through iterative approaches: by testing a hypothesis of a stepwise solution, collecting insights from participants in the organization who will need to use final project outcomes as empirical evidence, and then reusing that data to improve the project in future steps. This stands in stark contrast to formal learning, where little transfer occurs from those who made experiences to adjusting formal administrative practices, making insights difficult to diffuse throughout the organization.

As a result, agile learning needs to be individualized, demand-oriented, practical, and applicable; agile learners need time and space to self-organize their learning experiences, and in a collaborative and cooperative way learn through co-creation. In essence, agile learning involves experimentation in practice, and then transferring learnings into administrative routines applicable to the rest of the organization.

Agile leaders, therefore, must understand how learning works. Similar to the fixed mindset discussed previously, some learners take on a protective, immediate response given the unexpected or new, and will protect themselves by formulating anti-learning responses—often in the form of **"Yes, but . . ."—"Yes, but** we have always done things before we knew what we were doing." Or "**Yes, but** we are not allowed to do this here."

An agile leader who recognizes this conundrum can find support for their work by changing the wording to a **"Yes, and"** rhetoric, often used in improv theater. Coparticipants affirm each other and creatively build on what any and all bring to the conversation and activity at hand. They can enhance excellence by cultivating confidence, creativity, and collaboration. This brings the whole group into an upward spiral of positive aspirations about their collaboration and the innovation potential.

In addition, Dweck connects to the growth mindset with an additional rhetorical "trick", in which she encourages participants that instead of saying they cannot do a certain change or innovation, and asks her study participants to reformulate it to "We don't know how to do it YET." Imagine an agile leader talking to their team, who wants to help them understand the value of an agile work practice: one person starts, and they take turns with the "Yes, and . . ." approach.

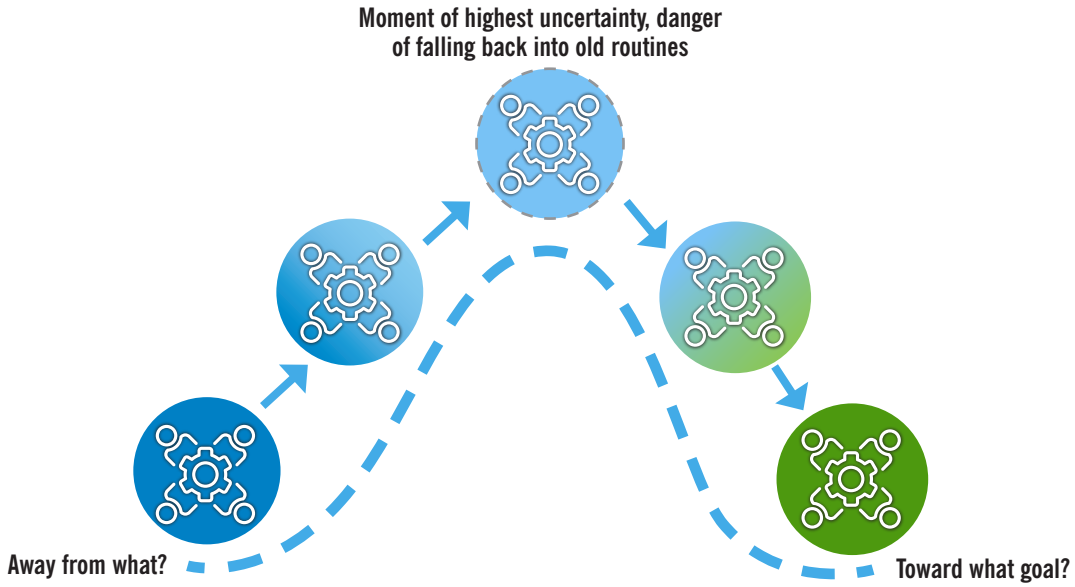
According to Hebb's learning theory, this type of social learning or peer-to-peer learning nudges the team out of the "We are not allowed to do this here" mindset, and to a shared understanding of how they can innovate together. As Hebb states: "Neurons wire together if they fire together," or applied to agile learning: "What fires together, wires together."[33]

33. Hebb, D. O. (1949). *The Organization of Behavior: A Neuropsychological Theory*. Wiley.

Similarly, Lindblom very early—even in the pre-agile era—stated that public administrators should muddle through by testing and iterating to find the best way to move forward.[34] He wrote that he "abandoned faith . . . as a disposition to believe in anything without some empirical tests, and, in addition, faith considered as a virtue. I opted for skepticism and inquiry." And he continued: "Policy is not made once and for all; it is made and remade endlessly." He added: "Policy making is at best a rough process." He introduced the successive limited comparison method, in which public managers should evolve from the current situation step-by-step and by small degrees of successive approximation to a desired objective. By proceeding through a succession of changes, agile leaders can avoid serious and lasting mistakes.

The following graph shows how agile teams can move away from old administrative routines to new ones:

Figure 7: Transitioning from administrative routines to agile ways of working



In practice, public bureaucracies have several opportunities to apply these principles:

- Lunchtime hands-on workshops/brownbag meetings
- Cross-functional teams
- Bar camps
- Lean coffee
- Peer case consultations
- Fish bowl

34. Lindblom, C. E. (1959). "The Science of "Muddling Through." *Public Administration Review*, 19(2), 79–88

Opportunities for agile learning in the public sector

Agile leaders operate in a human-centric way. That also means that they assume that their team members and any stakeholders did their best in the situation, following Kerth's prime directive:[35]

> **Prime directive:**
>
> *Regardless of what we discover, we must understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.*

Many Digital Service teams around the world came in with slogans from the software development world that did not sit right with public leaders. They promoted slogans like "*Fail often to succeed sooner*" or "*Fail forward*"—when failure is one of the most scrutinized events in the public sector. Failing publicly usually leads to negative press, a spiral of blame, and loss of positions or even funding. Many public managers aim to avoid mentioning failures publicly, which usually also means no internal review to process what type of failure was made and how to learn from it for the future.

Agile work practices are, however, all about experimenting and testing one's hypotheses to understand blind spots early in the process. As Edmondson states, not all failures are the same, as she shows in her spectrum of reasons for failure.[36] They range from avoidable "blameworthy" failures that are based on deviance, inattention, lack of ability, and competency or process inadequacy—all issues that a capable leader and their managers should be able to assess upfront. These are generally preventable failures when they occur in predictable operations.

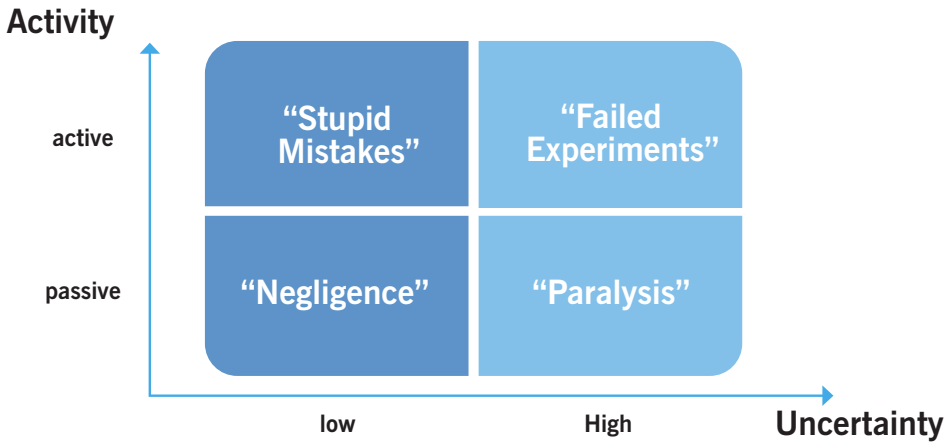
However, other "praiseworthy" failures, according to Edmondson, are unavoidable in complex systems with challenging, chaotic, or overly complex problems. They occur by design when experimentation is necessary in uncertain environments that require testing an initial hypothesis or exploring potential pathways to a solution.

Figure 8: Spectrum of failures[37]

35. Kerth, N. L. (2013). *Project retrospectives: a handbook for team reviews*. Addison-Wesley.
36. Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(4), 48-55.
37. Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(4), 48-55.

Agile leaders should avoid shortchanging their failure analysis and promote experimentation in their agile teams. Agile work practices include a mindful approach to failure, especially when the process and context are so complex and uncertain that existing administrative routines will not allow for an adequate problem-solving approach. These are what Edmondson calls "intelligent failures," as shown at the upper right frontier of Figure 9.

Figure 9: Agile learning and failure (based on Edmondson 2011)



For additional perspectives on agile learning, see NAPA's Agile Learning Program.

Providing psychological safety to agile teams

Psychological safety involves the ability to show and apply oneself without having to fear negative consequences for one's self-image, status, or career.[38] This reflects the shared belief that the agile team has a safe environment in which to take interpersonal risks. In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected.

The following team questions for psychological safety might be useful for agile leaders to conduct:

1. On this team, I understand what is expected of me.
2. I feel my ideas are valued, and I feel safe in suggesting them.
3. If I make a mistake on this team, it is never held against me.
4. When something goes wrong, we work together to find the systemic causes.
5. I feel able to bring up problems and concerns.
6. Members of this team never reject others for being different, and nobody is left out.
7. It is safe for me to take an intelligent risk on this team.
8. It is easy for me to ask other members of this team for help.
9. Nobody on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
10. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Source: https://www.psychsafety.co.uk/measure-psychological-safety/.

38. Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724.

Empiricism, Iteration, and Muddling Through

Agile is described as a "lightweight process underpinned by short iterative cycles."[39] Agile leaders should, therefore, encourage their teams to create successful failures. These include pilot projects that aim to produce intelligent failures and generate valuable insights of what might go wrong—before a project is released to the public. Some useful questions to ask as an agile leader include:

- Is the pilot being tested under typical circumstances (rather than optimal conditions)?
- Do the employees, customers, and resources represent the firm's real operating environment?
- Is the goal of the pilot to learn as much as possible (rather than to demonstrate the value of the proposed offering)?
- Is the goal of learning well understood by all employees and managers?
- Is it clear that compensation and performance reviews are not based on a successful outcome for the pilot?
- Were explicit changes made as a result of the pilot test?

This empirical process through iteration helps agile teams to understand which conditions might lead to errors early during the planning phase. The data gained during these steps can then be used to correct and iterate in the next step (see also the PDCA cycle described next).

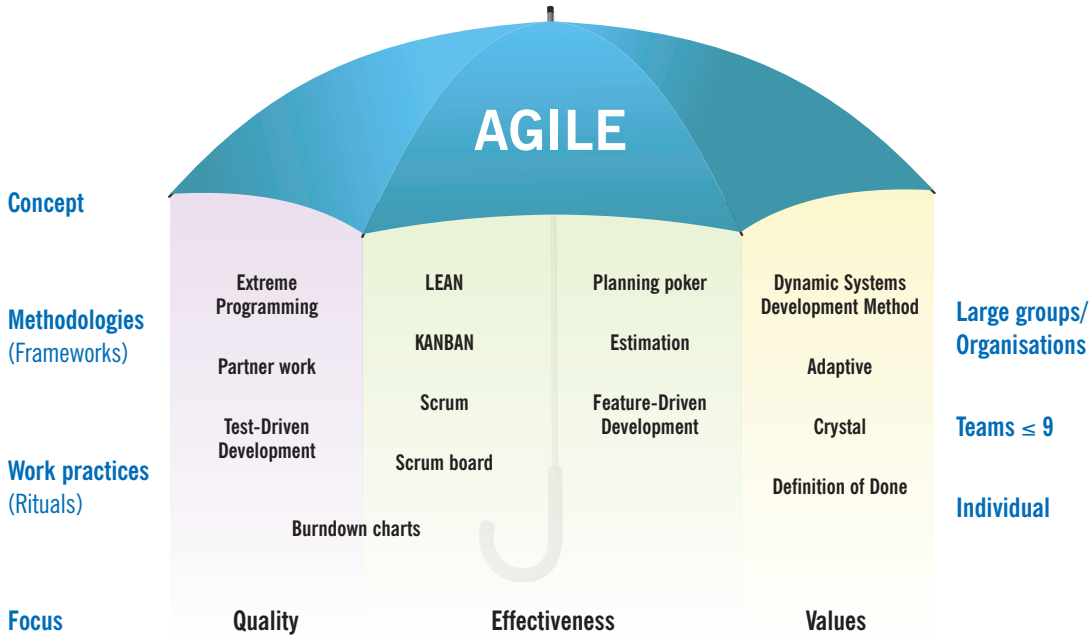
39. Patanakul, P., and R. Rufo-McCarron (2018). "Transitioning to agile software development: Lessons learned from a government-contracted program." *The Journal of High Technology Management Research*, 29(2), 181-192.

AGILE LEADERSHIP WORK PRACTICES

Agile work practices are defined as a "(w)ork management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by reviewing one's own hypotheses, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning."[40] They originate from lean product development practices in the automotive industry, are used in software development to deliver digital products in iterative ways, and in recent years also extend beyond these domains to solve other organizational problems[41]—as done for government by the National Academy of Public Administration's Agile Government Center.

Agile teams collect early feedback on their progress from potential users and integrate this feedback as data into the next iteration. They focus on the improvement of project quality, effectiveness in delivery, and core values that include user centricity, collaboration with customers, delivery of working products, and continuous adaptation to user needs.

Figure 10: Agile work practices



40. Mergel, I. (2023). Social affordances of agile governance. *Public Administration Review*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13787.
41. Dingsøyr, T., et al. (2012). A decade of agile methodologies: Towards explaining agile software development. In (Vol. 85, pp. 1213-1221): Elsevier. Dong, H., et al. (2024). "What is Agile Project Management? Developing a new definition following a systematic literature review." *Project Management Journal*, 87569728241254095.Takeuchi, H., and I. Nonaka (1986). The new product development game. *Harvard Business Review*, 64(1), 137-146.

Agile work practices are often foreign to line-based hierarchical bureaucracies, and need to be introduced to public servants through training or immersive practices.[42] To accomplish this and expose the workforce to agile work practices, government agencies have used external consultants to guide public servants through the application and adoption of agile. Alternatively, they have set up temporary fellowship programs to bring in external agile experts who work alongside public servants on time-bound projects—with the explicit goal of applying agile practices so that they experience agile in the context of a relevant problem, so that this immersive experience leads them to the acceptance of agile work practices.[43]

Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (PDCA)

The plan-do-check-act cycle was created by physicist Walter Shewhart at Bell Telephone Laboratories. Edward Deming modified it in the 1940s, and later, it was applied to quality management practices in Japan. Today, it is known as the Deming cycle or the PDCA cycle.[44] It is used for continuous quality improvement:

1. **Plan**: During the first planning step, the objectives are established, and required processes are defined to deliver the desired results.
2. **Do**: In the next step, the team carries out the objectives from the previous step.
3. **Check**: During the check phase, the data and results gathered from the do phase are evaluated and compared to the expected outcomes to identify any similarities and differences.
4. **Act**: In the last step, the team acts on the lessons learned during the previous check phase and improves its process.

Figure 11: PDCA—plan do check act/deming cycle

42. Dingsøyr et al., 2012; Mergel et al., 2021
43. Muratovski, G. (2017). "Tour of duty: A conversation with Mitchell Sipus—Presidential Innovation Fellow at the White House." *Journal of Design, Business & Society*, 3(1), 7-20.
44. Moen, R., and C. Norman (2006, May). *Evolution of the PDCA cycle*.

Scrum and working in iterations

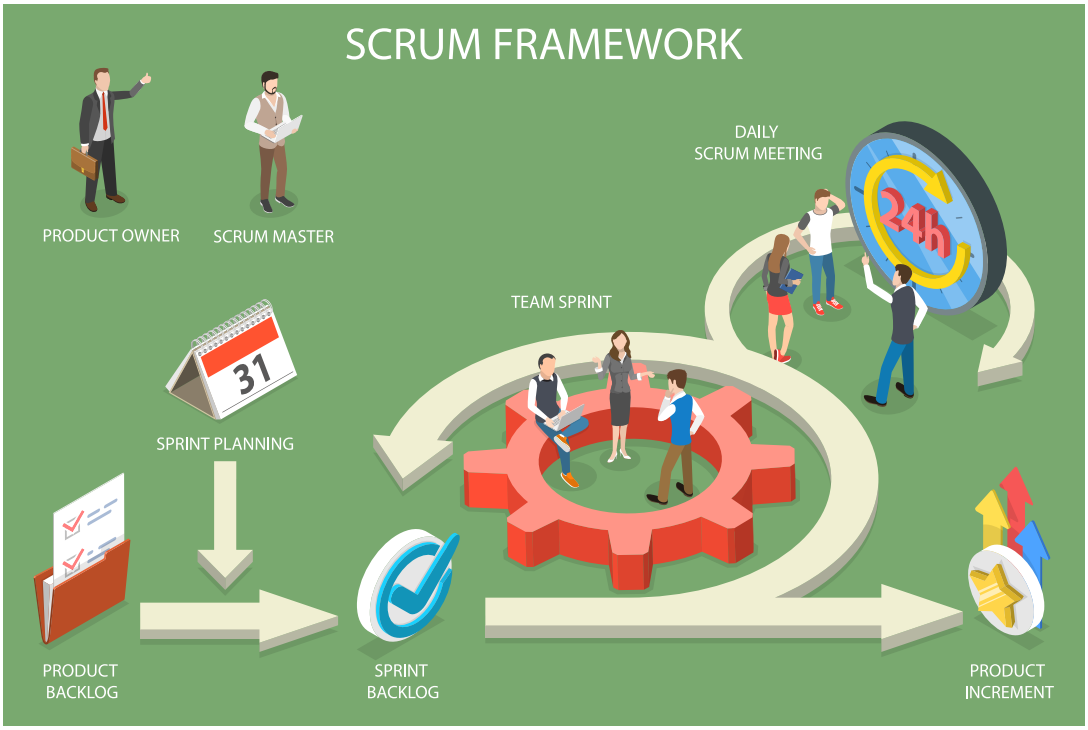
Scrum is defined as an iterative process through which teams work through a task that they develop upfront. Scrum techniques involve a collaboration framework commonly used in the software development industry, and have been successfully employed as an iterative problem-solving approach in the public sector.[45]

A Scrum team breaks down tasks to complete for a 3–4-week project phase into short, time-boxed iterations (**sprints**). The team meets daily for about 15 minutes to check in on their progress or any issues that prevent them from moving forward (**daily scrums/standup meetings**). They pick their tasks from a Kanban board that transparently shows what tasks are still on the backlog and what is being worked on.

After a sprint, the team reviews its progress and plans for the next sprint. They continuously check in with the **product owner**, who is either a real-life stakeholder of the project they are working on or a dedicated project team member.

This iterative and incremental process can improve results relative to waterfall approaches. Errors in the assumptions and hypothesis of what the product owner needs are resolved in the process instead of after the project—and often the budget availability—ends. A scrum process concludes with a retrospective in which the team reviews what went well in their collaboration, and what they want to continue, end, or start for the next phase.

Figure 12: Schematic scrum process



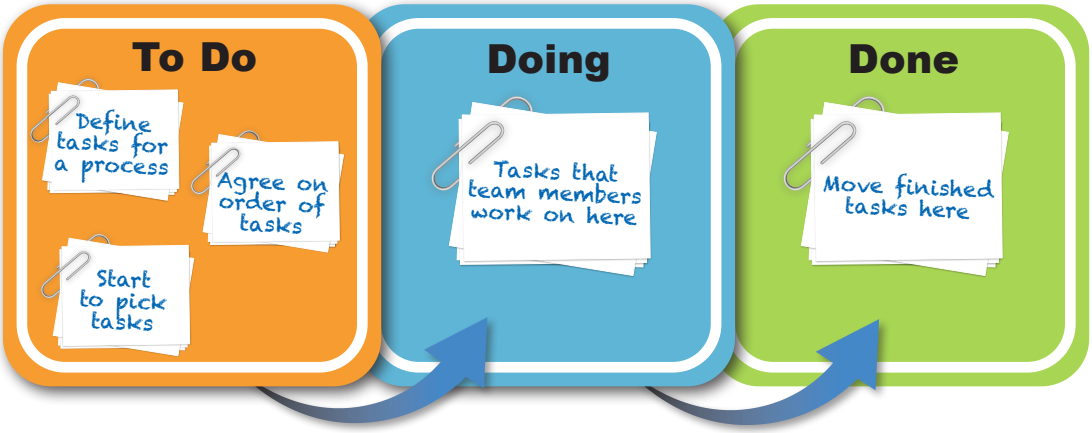
45. Schwaber, K., and J. Sutherland (2011). The scrum guide. *Scrum Alliance*, 21(1), 1-38.

Transparency and visual management with Kanban

An agile leader can use a Kanban board during a Scrum process to create transparency and visually manage their agile teams. These boards are known as a just-in-time method to oversee the progress of the tasks an agile team works on. They were developed in the Japanese automotive industry to structure tasks and processes. This visual management approach helps agile leaders to identify each day where there might be delays, and identify whether the team is still working towards the right goals and whether these goals are achievable.

The following figure shows a representation of a simple Kanban board:

Figure 13: Kanban board to increase transparency



Reviews

After each iteration, or sprint, an agile leader should work through a short review with the team. In near-real time, scrum reviews are useful to understand timing, what goes well, what the team might need to change immediately, and what they want to continue. Helpful review questions include:

- What to start-stop-continue?
- What works well, needs to change, opens questions/new ideas?
- I wish, I like, what if?

User journey maps

A user or customer journey map helps agile teams to understand what actual problems they should work on, and shows pain points that a user of their product or process is currently experiencing and what is a desired state that they would expect.

There are three different types of user journey maps:

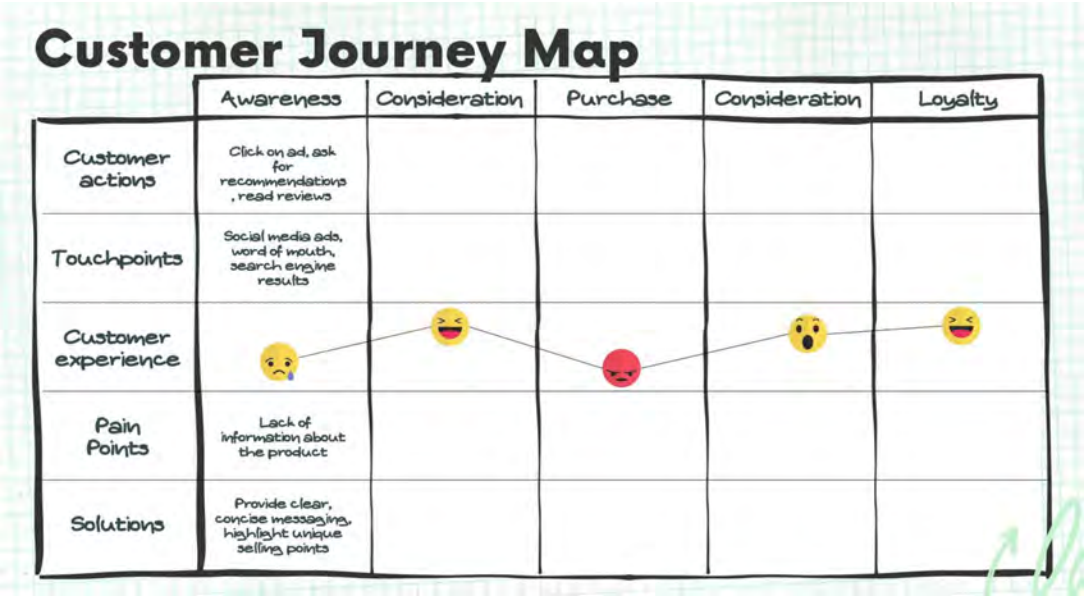
1. **Hypothetical 'as-is journeys' that sketch out how a service may work now (what is supposed to happen)**
   - These can help pull out assumptions from internal stakeholders about how things work (that can later be challenged through research).

2. **Research-based journey map (what happens)**
   - Give a starting point from which to begin design work
   - Help capture and synthesize the current experience of real users (this might mean changing the structure from an existing hypothesis)
   - Show how things work (or don't) and what the interdependencies are
   - Highlight pain points and where things are broken
   - Uncover the most significant opportunities for change

3. **To-be journeys that show how things could be**
   - Build and develop without losing the thread or forgetting the user's point of view
   - Build a consensus about what goals
   - Flag up who to talk with about changing other aspects of the service
   - Show how things should work and be connected
   - Convince people about things that need to be done
   - Build a roadmap for delivery

The following figure shows a model of a customer or user journey map:

Figure 14: Customer journey map



Source: Canva

Daily scrum meeting

Daily or standup meetings are short meetings that agile teams use to understand on a continuous basis what they are currently working on, and where team or individual team members might experience challenges—where they are making progress, and where they need support from other team members or the agile leader. The agile team usually stands up in front of the Kanban board to review and demonstrate the progress of tasks for no more than 15 minutes per day—a time that helps them readjust and understand whether there might be any obstacles that might slow down their overall progression:

Figure 15: Daily standup meeting

Typical questions to answer during a daily meeting include:

- What was done yesterday?
- What will be done today?
- Are there any blockers or impediments preventing work from being done?

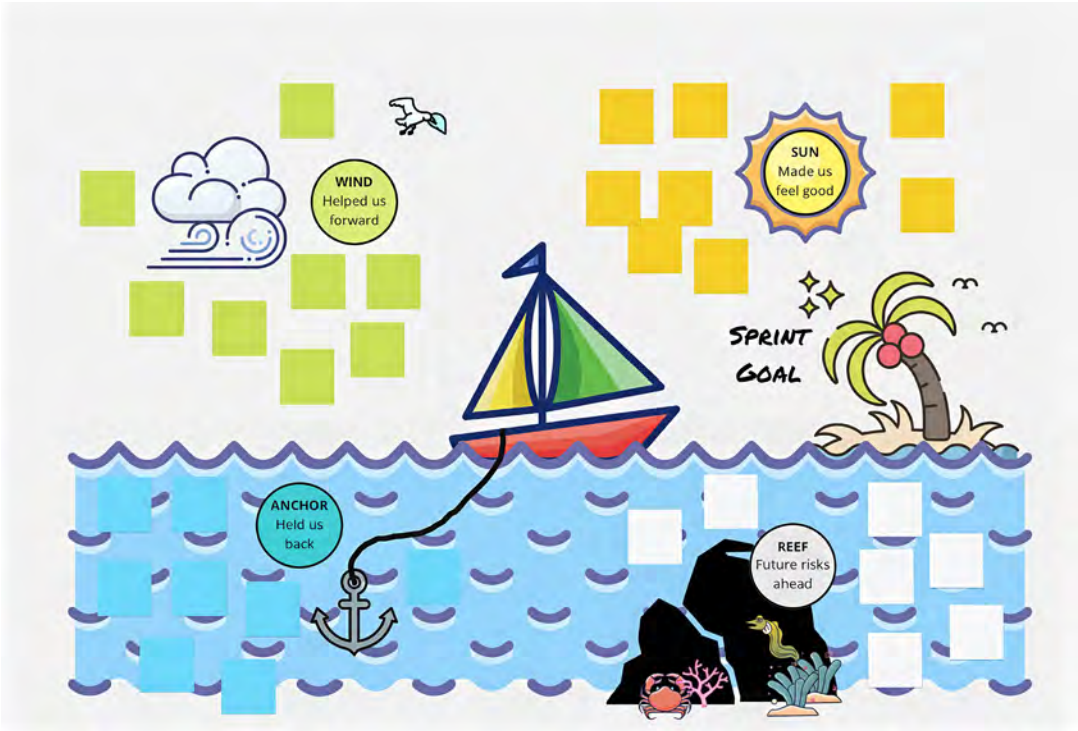
Retrospectives

A retrospective is another agile work practice that helps agile teams and their leaders to understand whether the team itself has successfully collaborated during the previous Scrum cycle—or iteration of their project work. The following figure shows a template of a retrospective in which the agile team works through questions like:

- What helped the team move forward?
- What made people feel good as a team?
- What held the team back?
- What future risks might the team face?

These questions help the team to understand what they might continue to do or change in their processes. The answers provide an agile leader with important information about the needs of their team.

Figure 16: Sailboat retrospective



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AGILE LEADERS

Recommendation 1: Aim to apply agile work practices as a leader first and foremost through a self-management tool, and when the leader feels confident in their use, apply them to agile teams. They will appreciate that the leader understands their needs and can support them in their progress using the tools they know.

Recommendation 2: Apply visual management practices so that the team always sees their progress, and they are aware that their agile leader knows what everyone works on. This serves as a talking point in daily or standup routines, and helps to move the check-ins to those aspects of progress where the team might expect obstacles or delays. Kanban boards are a useful instrument for the display of a project team's progress.

Recommendation 3: Pick and choose the types of management problems best solved by an agile team. These include strategic tasks that need to be fulfilled in addition to existing routine tasks, are important to the whole agency and not just a single entity, and can only be solved by a cross-functional team recruited from within the agency. The project should be time-bound with a clear goal and the mandate to apply agile work practices.

Recommendation 4: Understand that agile and iteration do not mean that the agile teams "make up" their work or the goals of the project daily. Instead, agile is a highly structured approach that aims to deliver on the sub-goals of the overall project iteratively. This does not mean abandoning administrative processes and routines established for routine tasks.

Recommendation 5: Apply a strengths-based approach to your leadership activities. First, agile leaders should know their own strengths, and can use the VIA strengths survey cited in this report as an indicator. Second, agile leaders should know the strengths of team members, and support them in choosing tasks that align well with their strengths. This will allow agile leaders to align the needs of these largely self-governed teams, enabling them to flourish in their collaboration.

Recommendation 6: Use agile work practices consistently so that agile teams can rely on their routines, and have the freedom to choose the work practices that most align with the project tasks and the overall goal to work in an agile and iterative way. Moving back into administrative routines will likely reduce motivation, progress, and might even lead to "faux agile" approaches that have proven detrimental to the success of agile teams.

Recommendation 7: Review how to assess the success of the agile team as a whole and the contributions of each team member. Leaders should make sure that existing evaluation criteria can be applied to line-based routine tasks in the same way as to project-based tasks, and this might need work in-house and conversations with the HR department.

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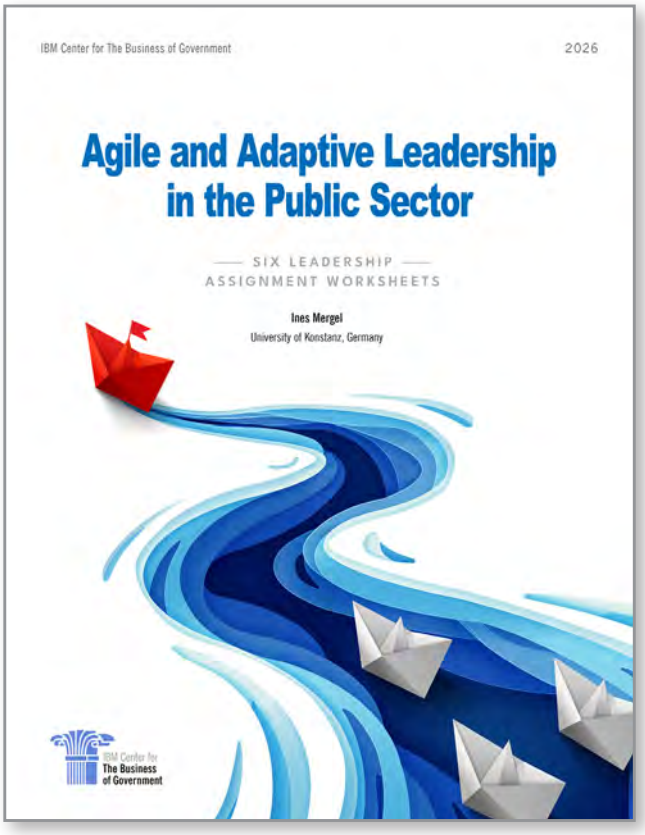
Six Leadership Assignment Worksheets

This worksheet is designed to support the accompanying report by guiding leaders through a series of practical agile leadership exercises focused on team strengths, problem-solving, psychological safety, and continuous learning. The activities encourage reflection and application of agile leadership principles to help leaders build adaptive, collaborative, and high-performing teams within their organizations.



https://businessofgovernment.org/report/agile-adaptive.

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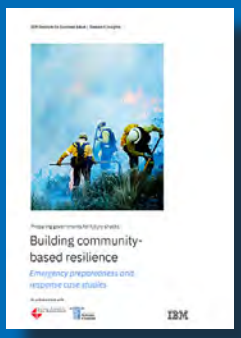

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