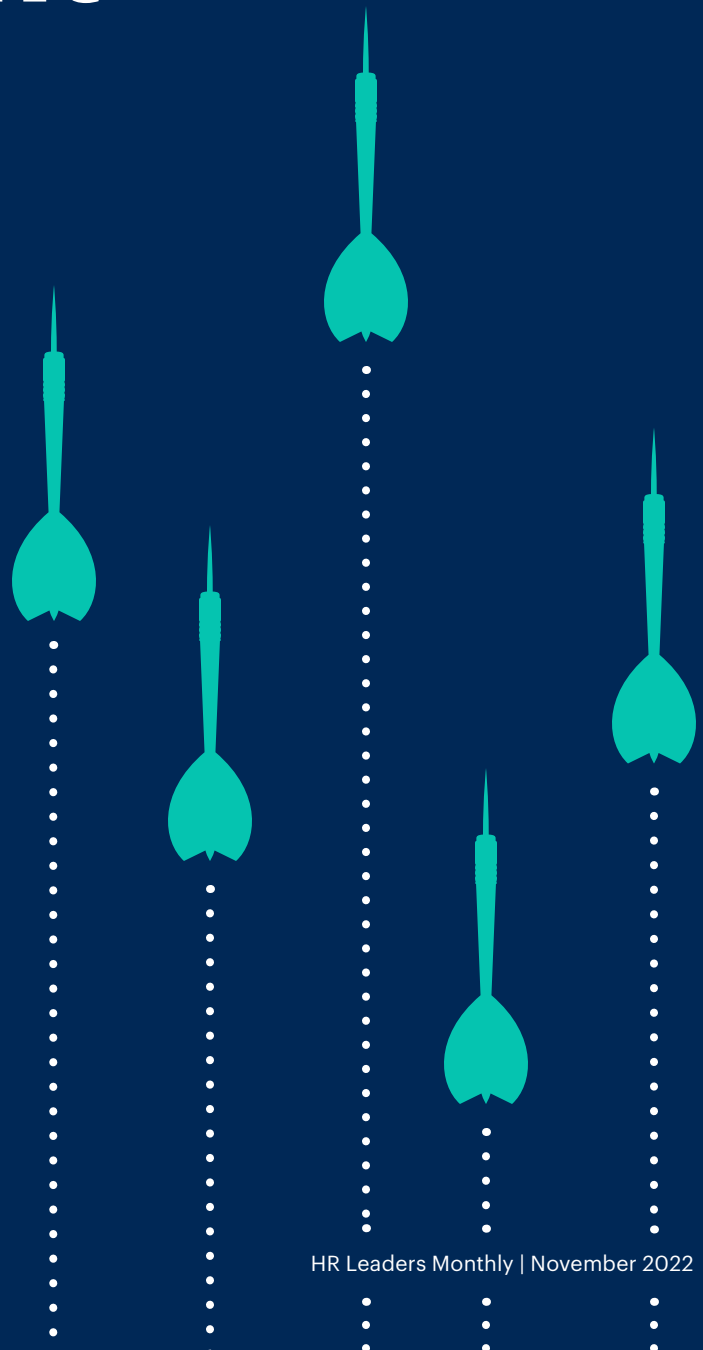# 5 Agile Learning Principles to Improve Leadership Development

by Lee-Anne Vallée

A disrupted business environment makes developing effective leaders even more challenging. L&D leaders can apply agile learning principles to design and deliver more effective leadership development activities that align with organizational objectives and leaders' day-to-day work.

Leaders today are expected to optimize team and business performance in an environment of social and political turbulence, work-life fusion and hybrid working. To help leaders address these challenges, nearly half of organizations (48%) have updated their leadership models to account for new skills and capabilities leaders and managers need to develop. Furthermore, 81% of organizations have converted in-person leadership development programs to virtual formats for remote and hybrid work environments.[1]

Despite these adjustments, HR has struggled to engage leaders in development. Leadership development remains a priority for organizations, with two-thirds of organizations increasing spending on leadership skills offerings in 2021.[1,2] However, over half of L&D and talent management leaders say their organization's leaders are neither motivated to prioritize self-development (57%) nor have the time to participate (55%).[1]

Leaders may have outdated expectations of leadership development, seeing it as a formal, structured program requiring time away from their workplace, or as episodic and irrelevant, detached from the reality of their everyday work and not flexible or tailored enough to meet the dynamic needs of their role.

The challenge of designing and delivering dynamic, impactful learning is not limited to leadership development, and L&D functions are addressing it by implementing the values and principles of agile learning (see Figure 1). Agile learning is a mindset and method of skills development, via iterative short bursts, applied in the flow of achieving outcomes, that can dynamically adjust with changing needs. For more details on agile learning principles and methods, read our Agile Learning Manifesto.

Agile learning offers an effective way for employees and organizations to acquire new skills, thrive amid disruptive and dynamic shifts, and achieve business outcomes.

To address the leadership needs of both the organization and individual leaders in a postpandemic environment, L&D leaders should pressure-test existing and future leadership development activities against the four agile learning values and eight principles. As a starting point, HR leaders can apply five agile learning principles to improve leadership development.

Figure 1. Values and Principles of Agile Learning

Values

☆ **Business outcomes**
over knowledge gained

☆ **Growth mindset**
over current skill set

☆ **Real-time embedded**
over training time offline

☆ **Community compounding**
over individual practicing

Agile Learning
Earning Curve
Learning Curve
#FreeSkilling!

Principles

1 Learning to earning
2 Motivation multiplier
3 Just-in-time microbursts
4 Dynamic pathways
5 Progressive layering
6 Flow of value delivery
7 Data-driven, AI-enabled
8 Socially amplified

Source: Gartner

Principle No. 1: Learning to Earning

To develop intentional (not accidental) leaders, HR must ensure leadership development is aligned with the organization's business and talent strategies, as well as its leadership model, if one exists. To demonstrate the ROI of a development intervention, L&D leaders should partner upfront with line stakeholders. This will enable them to identify the associated strategic objectives, understand the factors that influence those objectives, and select meaningful metrics based on those factors to measure progress and impact (see Table 1).

> The enterprise's financial performance and the individual's professional advancement are connected and codependent, both inextricably linked to the rate of skills advancement.

For example, Santander launched its Young Leaders' Program to address three key questions, all aligned with the organization's strategic objectives:

- What opportunities can we offer that will engage and retain young employees?
- How can we use the younger generation's digital knowledge to support senior leaders?
- How can we create a more transparent, agile, equitable, diverse and effective development program?

To gauge how effectively the program was supporting these objectives, Santander asked employees and managers how much they agreed with statements such as:

- "The program is effectively creating channels to contribute to Santander's strategy."
- "Participation in the program has a positive impact on development."
- "The program increases employees' motivation and reduces retention risk."

The extent to which employees and managers agreed with these statements gave Santander valuable data to gauge the program's success and impact on core business objectives. Improving employees' development and enabling greater contributions to strategy impacts business performance, while increasing motivation and reducing retention.

Table 1. Identification of Success Metrics for Leadership Development

Step	Example
1. List Strategic Objectives — What must L&D deliver to help the business achieve its strategic priorities?	Build high-quality coaching capabilities in leaders
2. Determine Factors that Influence Objectives — What actions, behaviors, or initiatives will enable L&D to achieve each objective?	Coaching development program
3. Select Detailed Measures — Which metrics will be most helpful to track (e.g., leading indicators, quantitative vs. qualitative or subjective measures)? What tradeoffs are needed to focus only on the most important metrics and avoid tracking too much?	Employee engagement
4. Identify Raw Data Measures — What data can be defined, disaggregated and captured consistently in the relevant areas?	Employee retention, discretionary effort

Source: Gartner

Principle No. 2: Motivation Multiplier

To motivate leaders to learn, aim to create an effortless learning experience in which leadership development content is easy to access, easy to consume and highly relevant to the leader's current role and future career. To make learning more relevant, create leader profiles or personas to better understand leader learning needs, identify the frameworks and workflows leaders are familiar with (such as design thinking, hackathons or interviewing) and integrate them into your leadership development programs.
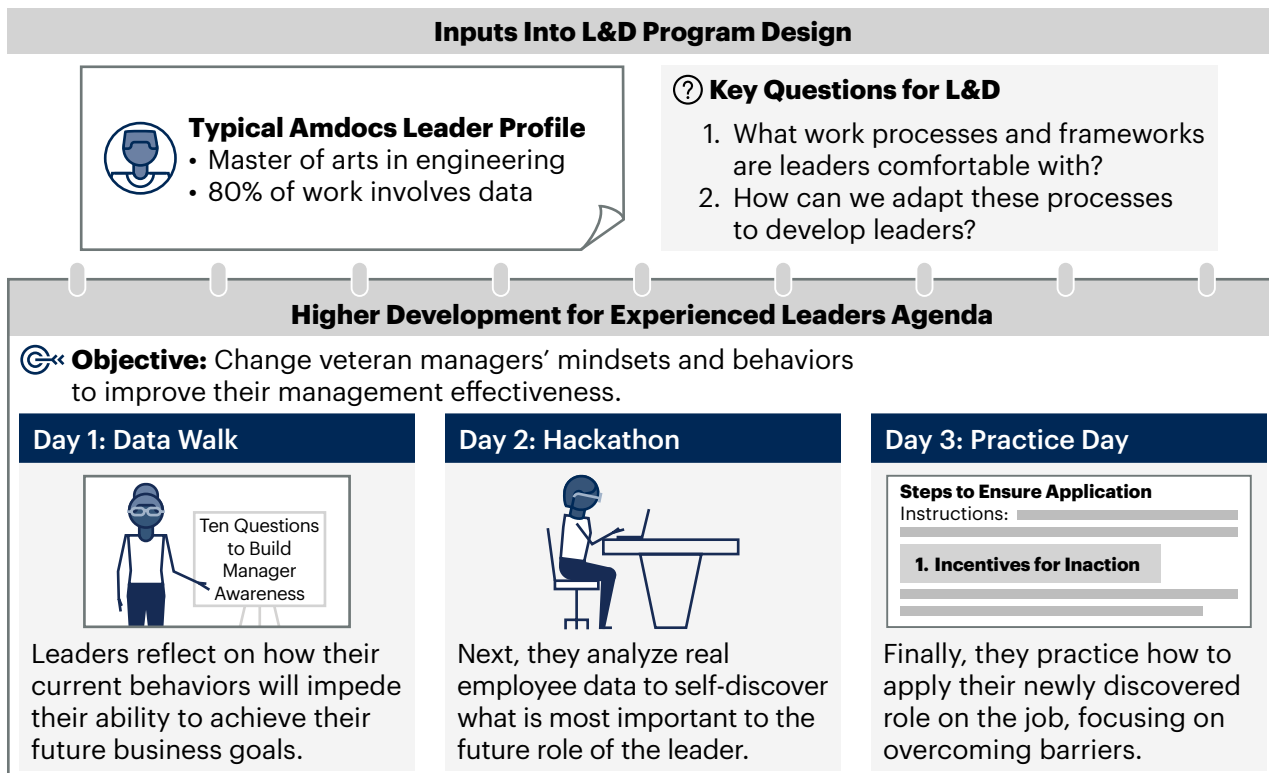
For example, the L&D team at Amdocs reconsidered its leadership development strategy after realizing that they needed to allow managers to self-discover the need for change in their mindsets and behaviors. Rather than providing coaching and development frameworks, Amdocs created a leadership development program

Easy access to learning, consumable content and being able to apply it to their careers motivate learners. Motivated learners are the most successful at skills acquisition, are more engaged and higher-performing.

that leverages leaders' own work processes. Recognizing that most of the company's leaders were promoted from engineering and technical roles, Amdocs tailored the program to the work processes these leaders were already familiar and comfortable with (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Using Leader Work Processes to Change Mindsets

Inputs Into L&D Program Design

Typical Amdocs Leader Profile
- Master of arts in engineering
- 80% of work involves data

? Key Questions for L&D
1. What work processes and frameworks are leaders comfortable with?
2. How can we adapt these processes to develop leaders?

Higher Development for Experienced Leaders Agenda

Objective: Change veteran managers' mindsets and behaviors to improve their management effectiveness.

Day 1: Data Walk

Ten Questions to Build Manager Awareness

Leaders reflect on how their current behaviors will impede their ability to achieve their future business goals.

Day 2: Hackathon

Next, they analyze real employee data to self-discover what is most important to the future role of the leader.

Day 3: Practice Day

Steps to Ensure Application
Instructions:

1. Incentives for Inaction

Finally, they practice how to apply their newly discovered role on the job, focusing on overcoming barriers.

Source: Adapted From Amdocs

Principle No. 3: Dynamic Pathways

As leaders work in increasingly dispersed environments, many organizations find it challenging to scale their leadership development programs. Typically, these programs are designed for individuals with similar roles and delivered to small, in-person cohorts. Scaling this traditional model can be difficult, as leaders' access to development experiences may differ based on geography, development may be siloed within business units and leaders at different levels may have varied skills needs.

> Microburst content is rapidly recomposed into different learning pathways. Each person finds their own best path to the learning outcome.

Using the principle of dynamic learning pathways, L&D can reimagine the design and delivery of development programs to provide consistent experiences while also addressing leaders' unique needs. In this way, each leader can find their own best path to the desired learning outcome, and pathways can be easily adapted when enterprise needs and learning goals change.

To design dynamic pathways to leadership development, L&D leaders should:

- **Design Modular Content —** In contrast to content designed to be delivered as a package in a specific order or format, modular learning content can be rolled out incrementally and repurposed in other programs as needed.

- **Blend Synchronous and Asynchronous Formats —** Asynchronous programming reduces the intensity of demand on L&D resources and is easier for geographically distributed leaders to consume. Synchronous experiences, meanwhile, facilitate peer learning and connections among leaders. These synchronous sessions also give participants the opportunity to interact across geographies.

- **Empower Participants to Personalize Their Learning Path —** Leaders can access the learning topics they need when they need them. Manager involvement helps contextualize learning for participants.

Principle No. 4:
Flow of Value Delivery

L&D leaders should design and deliver development with an understanding of how and when leaders will apply it in their roles. A short burst of learning in the moment when it is most useful can be more impactful than a more extensive training activity that takes place outside the flow of work.

> Learning delivers the most impact when woven into people's everyday work so that it powers their achievement of personal and business objectives.

For example, when a hiring manager opens a new job requisition, you can embed a link to microtraining on how to effectively engage candidates. Similarly, you could build interpersonal skills development into the process of preparing for performance reviews by having leaders plan not only what feedback to give, but also how they will deliver it.

HR can work with line partners to identify high-impact experiential learning opportunities, focusing on the attributes outlined in Table 2.

To select impactful on-the-job learning activities, L&D leaders should consider the following litmus tests:

- **Beyond the Comfort Zone —** Does the activity force the leader to stretch themselves beyond what they already do well?

- **Accountability —** Is the leader required to take responsibility for the outcomes of the activity, positive as well as negative?

- **Lesson Visibility —** Does the activity contain lessons that will become readily apparent to the leader?

- **Lesson Relevance —** Are the lessons contained in the activity of significant importance to the leader?

Table 2. Attributes of High-Impact On-the-Job Learning Activities

Activity	Attribute
Access to Best Practice	Orient around demonstrated success — Leaders should engage in activities that clearly illustrate the right approach to a problem.
Scope Expansion	The power of stepping up — Leaders should engage in activities that increase the scope of their responsibilities for more than a brief period.
Change and Adversity	Capitalize on turbulence — Leaders should be involved in turbulent situations to build flexibility and adaptiveness.
Challenging Relationships	Drive portable interpersonal skills — Leaders should be involved in situations that develop broadly applicable relationship-building skills
Persuading and Teaching	Knowing before showing — Leaders should engage in activities that require active preparation to successfully communicate their ideas.
Making Difficult Decisions	Raise the stakes — Leaders should engage in decision-making activities where the cost of making mistakes forces deliberate reflection.

Source: Gartner

Principle No. 5: Socially Amplified

To embed this principle in leadership development, L&D leaders should engage peers to support and sustain leader learning. For example, to upskill managers on managing in a flexible working environment, the HR team at Rentokil identified internal manager-tested best practices and then used a manager-led learning approach to scale the learning across the organization.

Managers who were applying these practices successfully shared their lessons learned with other managers in regular, microburst learning sessions called "30-Minute Thursdays" (see Figure 3). These were followed by opt-in peer cohort sessions wherein five to seven participants collectively brainstormed solutions to managerial challenges to apply these best practices in context. The cohorts then piloted the brainstormed solutions on their teams, allowing for low-risk experimentation.

Finally, the cohorts regrouped (via virtual meetings, messaging, emails, etc.) to discuss what worked and what did not in their team contexts, creating a lasting community of continuous support.

> Social connections power people to help each other learn. Skills and confidence spread virally via learning communities.
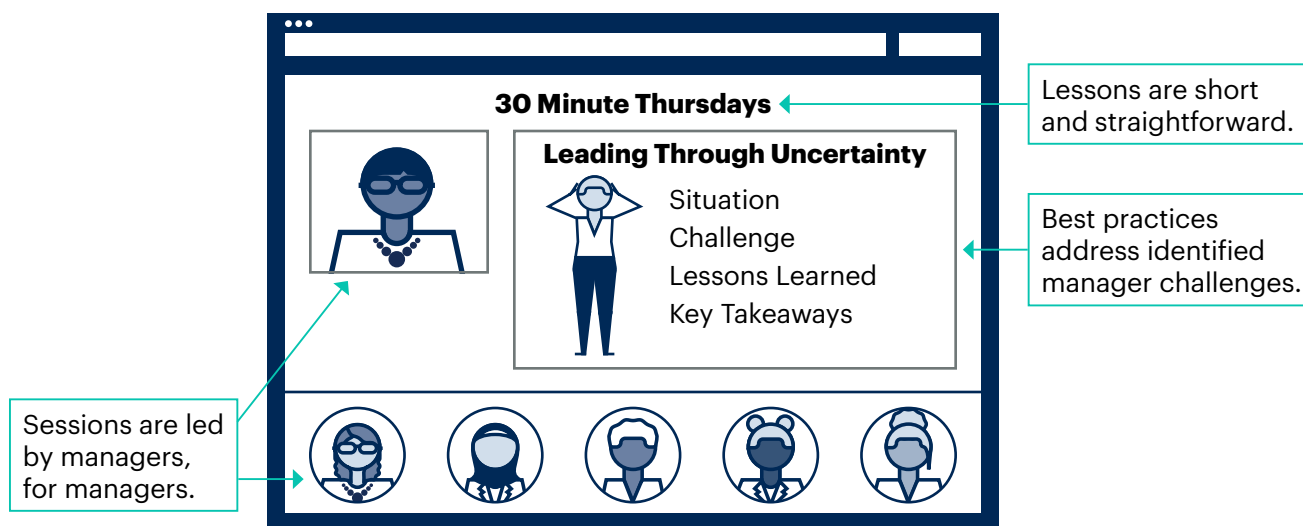
Despite continued investment and focus on leadership development, HR struggles to engage leaders. Adopting agile principles can help deliver effective, dynamic and relevant learning experiences to leaders as part of their everyday roles. Agile learning allows leaders and organizations to acquire new skills and achieve business outcomes in a disruptive and dynamic postpandemic environment.

[1] 2021 Gartner Leadership Effectiveness Survey. This survey includes responses from 42 L&D and talent management leaders across a range of geographies, industries and organization sizes to try to understand how organizations are approaching leaders, managers and high-potential talent development in 2021. The survey was designed and developed by Gartner's HR Practice research team.
[2] 2021 Gartner Learning Culture Heads of Function Survey. This survey was conducted online from 15 June through 6 July 2021 and contains responses from 30 L&D leaders. The objective of the survey was to understand the current standing of various aspects of organizations' learning cultures. The survey design and development, administration and data analysis was done by Gartner's HR Practice research team.

Figure 3. Leader-Led Learning at Rentokil

30 Minute Thursdays

Leading Through Uncertainty
Situation
Challenge
Lessons Learned
Key Takeaways

Lessons are short and straightforward.

Best practices address identified manager challenges.

Sessions are led by managers, for managers.

Source: Adapted From Rentokil

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