

»practice«  
Whitepaper #03

**THE »ALIGN – EMPOWER«  
MODEL OF AGILE LEADERSHIP**

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## What are the benefits of reading this paper?

- You will learn about a comprehensive framework connecting the »why«, »how«, and »what« of agile leadership.
- This model helps you discuss agile leadership with others and move toward a shared understanding of how to define agile leadership in your organization.
- It works as a road map or compass for your leadership activities and may help you embrace your leadership role with more clarity and engagement.
- It may also help you critically reflect your current approach to agile leadership and point your attention to areas of adaption or improvement.

You will learn about a comprehensive framework connecting the »why«, »how«, and »what« of agile leadership

## Summary

We are introducing the »Align – Empower« Model of Agile Leadership, a framework that seeks to integrate the various ideas that have been floating around the agile leadership concept. It can be summarized as follows:

- The **»why« (purpose)** of agile leadership – enabling people and teams to meet performance expectations or stakeholder/customer demands in task environments that are charged with »VUCA« and where process knowledge (»How to produce desired results?«) is weak
- The **»how« (guiding principles)** of agile leadership – fostering divergence and convergence simultaneously; put differently, balancing means and actions that boost responsiveness, flexibility, and speed with means and actions that foster alignment
- The **»what« (practices)** of agile leadership – embracing six different leadership practices, three »alignment« practices (»motivate«, »infuse«, and »focus«) and three »empowerment« practices (»facilitate«, »coach«, and »innovate«)

**Like** everything agile, »agile leadership« has become a popular buzzword in business and organizational life. Despite its frequent use however, agile leadership is a fuzzy concept still. “Something about self-organization and servant leadership”, is the answer you usually get when asking around. The conceptual vagueness leads organizations to discuss agile leadership without a comprehensive and differentiated understanding of the agile leadership landscape. This can lead to misconceptions, frustration, and conflict in agile transformation and related leadership development initiatives and may eventually hamper organizational effectiveness.

In this whitepaper, we aim to succinctly discuss the various ideas that have been floating around the concept and based on that introduce a comprehensive framework, the »Align – Empower« Model of Agile Leadership.

## Lack of Concept Clarity

Various reasons add to the fuzziness of agile leadership as a concept. We will discuss them here. You may skip this section, if you are primarily interested in the structure and contents of the »Align – Empower« Model of Agile Leadership.

- Agile leadership is a hybrid concept involving building blocks from various sources. More specifically, it borrows from well established constructs such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, empowering leadership, psychological safety, etc. That's probably why academic researchers consider it unworthy of scientific attention – it's not novel, unique, and conceptually clean. In fact, to this date no authoritative conception of agile leadership has emerged from academic research. Because of that the concept has not yet undergone the structuring and standardization that comes with empirical research.
- At the same time, various consultants and consultancy firms have introduced models of agile leadership or related concepts. Since consultancy firms are eager to gain profile with their very own conceptions and products, no authoritative model has emerged from this domain either – competition counters the need for concept standardization.
- Another aspect that adds to the ambiguity of agile leadership is the mingling of conceptual perspectives. Typically, the frameworks introduced by consultants and consultancy firms are hybrid clusters of diverse elements – namely leadership

principles, tasks, and behaviors but also attitudes, mindsets, and personality traits – not structured along a coherent theory or guiding model.

The mingling of concepts is present even in sophisticated frameworks such as the IMD model (Institute of Management Development in Lausanne; Neubauer, Tarling & Wade, 2017) which is the conceptual backbone of Hogan's Agile Leader Assessment. This model defines seven aspects of agile leadership; four aspects are attitudinal or mindset-related: »humble«, »adaptable«, »visionary«, and »engaged«; three other aspects are focused on leading business (in terms of navigating the organization and optimizing its environmental fit): »hyperawareness«, »informed decision-making«, and »fast execution«. Note that the IMD model refers to managerial or business-related capabilities while the term »leadership« is actually and usually applied to different aspects of navigating, engaging, and developing people and teams (for the IMD concept, »agile management« would have been a much better term).

In the remaining parts of this article, we will discuss the »Align – Empower« Model of Agile Leadership. There will be three different sections, one dealing with »why« (purpose), another one dealing with »how« (guiding principles), and a third one dealing with »what« (leadership practices and actions).\*

\* This »why, how, what« distinction borrows from Sinek's Golden Circle (2009), of course.

## The »Why« of Agile Leadership: Dealing with »VUCA«

There is much consensus about the »why« of agile leadership: Its purpose is to enable people and teams to perform effectively in highly dynamic business environments. »VUCA« has become the standard term to describe such business environments:

1. volatile (accelerated speed and dynamics of change),
2. uncertain (lack of predictability of events),
3. complex (number, diversity, and interdependence of variables influencing events),
4. ambiguous (lack of clarity of information).\*

In environments extremely charged with »VUCA«, process knowledge remains immature. Process knowledge is what a team or organization knows about how to produce desired results. To the extent that boundary conditions such as customer demands, technology, or competition are highly dynamic and impossible to predict and control, process knowledge is in flux because yesterday's insights about if-then relations may not (fully) apply to the challenges of today let alone tomorrow.

»VUCA« environments and related process knowledge immaturity require a much higher level of adaptiveness in dealing with business challenges and customer demands. And that's what agile leadership is about:

\* On our website, you will find a tool to determine the level of »VUCA« in your team or organizations. Go to <https://cidpartners.de/inspiration/downloads/fostering-agility.html>

enabling responsiveness, flexibility, and speed to meet performance expectations or stakeholder/customer demands where business environments are charged with »VUCA« and process knowledge is immature.\*\*

Some authors are much more specific in their conception of agile leadership (and its purpose, specifically) but tend to confuse the »why«, »what«, and »how« of it. In doing so, they narrow down the scope of agile leadership practices, paradoxically adding to the confusion surrounding the concept. The most dominant of these conceptions: Agile leadership is building environments that foster self-organization or autonomy (see for example, Koning, 2020).


In fact, enabling self-organization is a crucial element of agile leadership but adds to the »how« of it as one of many elements that must be combined with one another.

The same applies to conceptions that equate agile leadership with servant leadership. Servant leadership – put simply: giving support – has been described by many »evangelists of agile« as the model style for leading agile teams and organizations.

\*\* Some people would argue that the main purpose of agile leadership is to meet customer needs since this has been declared the main goal of »agile« from day one (see the first principle in the 2001 »Agile Manifesto« [<https://agilemanifesto.org/>] or Denning's »Law of the Customer«, 2018). However, meeting customer needs is easy in rather stable environments because process knowledge is solid and mature. It becomes challenging to the extent that »VUCA« accelerates and clear processes are not at hand anymore. Hence, the main challenge of agile leadership is helping people and teams deal with »VUCA«.

## The »How« of Agile Leadership: Balancing Divergence and Convergence or Empowerment and Alignment, Respectively

To cite an essential source, namely Schwaber and Sutherland's »Scrum Guide«: »The Scrum Master is a servant-leader for the Scrum Team« (2017, p. 7). Or this statement, on behalf of many others: »I particularly like to emphasize the benefits of servant leadership in an agile organization. As it turns out, the culture built through servant leadership is ideal for an organization trying to implement Agile or sustain their agility« (Milner, 2018). Again: Giving support is an import element of agile leadership, but it is only one of many elements that must be combined with one another.



**Agile leadership aims to create work environments where people and teams can meet performance expectations despite »VUCA« making their work much more difficult**

Agile leadership aims to create work environments where people and teams can meet performance expectations or stakeholder/customer demands despite »VUCA« making their work much more difficult. To achieve this, an agile leader needs to arrange for two things: adaptiveness and overall alignment (across teams and with goals and standards).

Let's have a look at ways to foster adaptiveness, first. Here are the major ideas that have been discussed in the professional world so far:

- Give **autonomy** or decision-making discretion so people and teams can act on changes quickly and in ways well adapted to the situation at hand. This seems to be the most common understanding of agile leadership (Koning, 2020; Medinilla, 2012).\*

\* Koning, for example, gave his book on agile leadership (2020) the programmatic subtitle »Learning to Thrive with Self-Managing Teams« and continued to say: »Agile leaders lead their teams in a totally new way. They lead because they create precisely the environment that the teams need to grow and improve. Within this environment, the teams optimize the processes themselves, increase their own effectiveness and efficiency, and make all kinds of decisions on a daily basis. That makes these teams self-managing. They organize their own work and they have all the skills to do so. ... The agile leader is the architect of this environment«.

- Provide **support** – task- or process-related as well as emotional – to help people overcome barriers and setbacks. This idea is represented by the »servant leadership« concept, initially developed by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018).
- Enable an **iterative or explorative approach** to problem-solving. This involves moving toward a solution by spiraling between prototyping and feedback or experimentation and reflection, respectively. These ideas are featured in all major agile frameworks (Scrum, Design Thinking, OKR).
- Use **tension** – that is, friction, conflict, disruption – productively, namely as a driving force for optimization and innovation. In his conception of agile leadership, Hayward (2018) underscores the need for agile leaders to disrupt the organization, that is, to challenge the status quo and spark new ways of thinking. Dealing with tension in productive ways is also a key feature in »Holacracy« (Cowan, 2018).



Agile leadership  
involves balancing  
divergence and convergence  
and making this balance  
useful for the organization

## The »What« of Agile Leadership: Six Leadership Practices

From our point of view, there is a common denominator to these aspects, namely: allowing, enabling, and fostering divergence – that is, room for maneuver, decision-making discretion, multitude and diversity of options and possibilities, creativity, contradiction and dissonance, rethinking – to expand options for action and boost adaptiveness. We are using the term »empowerment« to reference this idea since its more descriptive and well established in current discourse.

Divergence however needs direction and alignment to support overarching goals or purpose and to function as a driver of organizational effectiveness. Teams and organizations can thrive on autonomy, exploration, and tension only to the extent that there are »guard rails« in place that help align the activities within and between teams toward a shared purpose – put differently: to the extent that there is convergence at the same time.

Convergence or alignment can be established through different mechanisms:

- Through elements that create a shared mental model within and between teams. **»Shared mental model«** refers to a shared understanding of work-related goals and processes. This can be established through coordinative elements such as objectives and key

results, rules and regulations, protocol and performance standards, review meetings and retrospectives, minutes etc.

- Through **shared values or beliefs**, that is, a common and emotionally infused understanding of what is true, important, valuable for the organization.
- Through **emotional engagement**, that is, emotional attachment to and identification with other people, one's team, and the organization as a whole.

In our view, agile leadership involves balancing divergence and convergence or – to use more descriptive terms – empowerment and alignment and making this balance useful for the organization.\*

\* The idea of shifting between divergence and convergence is carried by yet another buzzword in agile, namely »aligned autonomy« (coined by Henrik Knieberg, former agile coach at Spotify). But as discussed, granting autonomy is *just one* of at least four pathways of fostering adaptiveness and speed. That's why we refer to the present framework as the »align – empower« (and not »aligned autonomy«) model of agile leadership.

The generic leadership framework we introduced in previous publications (e.g., Solga, 2021b; see green box and Figure 1 below for a short summary) provides an excellent foundation for bringing structure to the »what« of agile leadership, that is, to the different practices and corresponding actions. In fact, the agile leadership model can be seen as a specification of the broader »3x2« Leadership Framework.\*

### The »3x2« Leadership Framework in a Nutshell

- As a generic framework of team and people leadership, »3x2« defines three overarching leadership challenges – »navigate«, »engage«, and »develop« – that are in specific ways linked to three purposes: driving goal achievement (»deliver«), inspiring voluntary/discretionary pro-organizational behavior (»commit«), and boosting learning, innovation, and agility (»grow«).
- Each of these challenges involves two aspects – »support« and »challenge« – reflecting the give and take in a manager's cooperative exchange with team members. »Challenge« practices are focused on advancing organizational interests, »support« practices are focused on supporting the reciprocal needs and expectations of employees.
- This yields  $3 \times 2 = 6$  distinct leadership practices that we refer to as »motivate« (giving esteem, inspiration, and care), »infuse« (nurturing value-orientation), »facilitate« (giving task-related support and leeway), »focus« (giving direction, creating alignment), »coach« (supporting capability and career development), and »innovate« (fostering critical thinking and exploration).

\* See Whitepaper: <https://cidpartners.de/inspiration/downloads/3x2-framework.html>

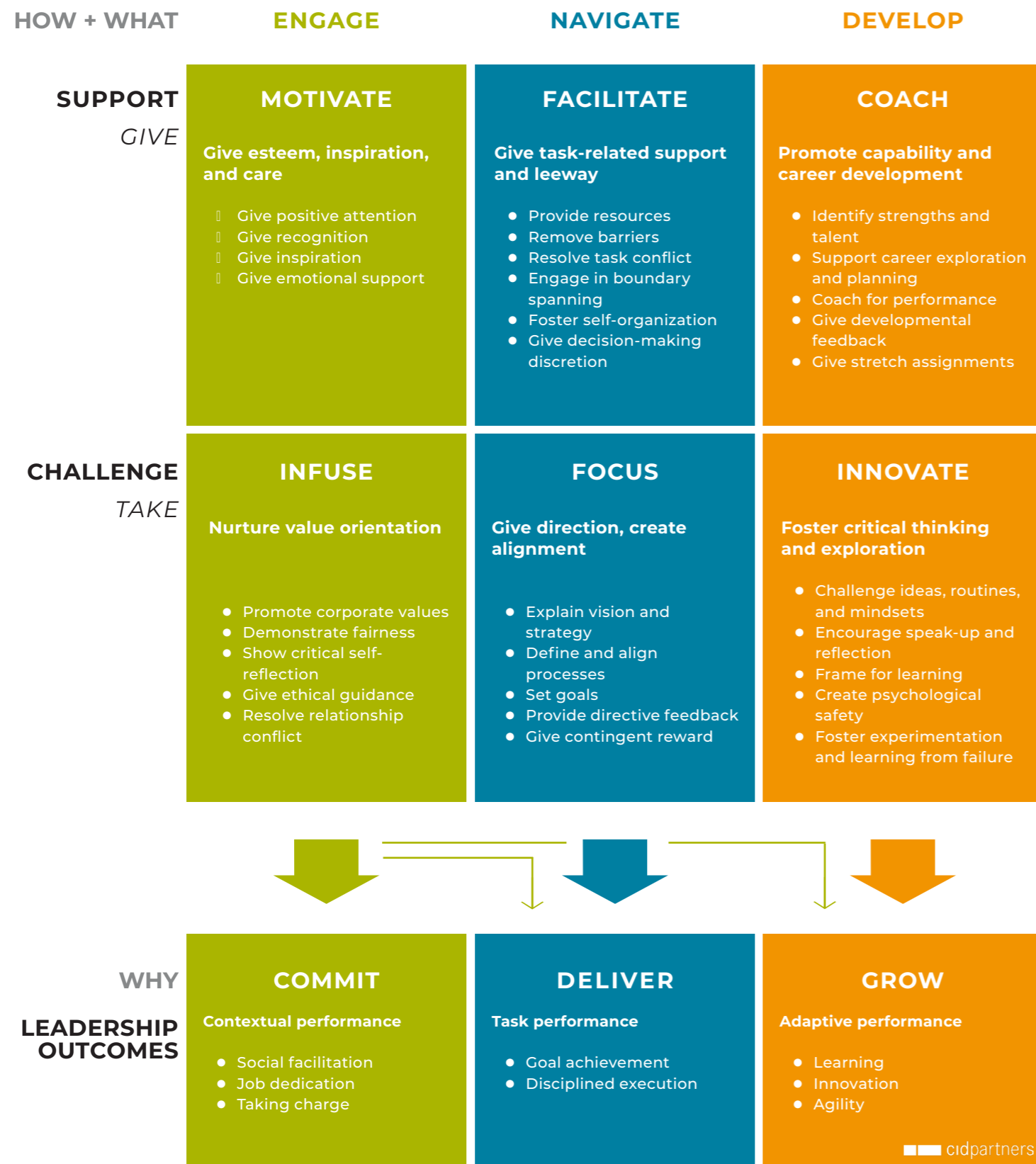


FIGURE 1: »3X2« LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

So, agile leadership involves six practices carried out to create an environment of »aligned empowerment«. The common purpose of these practices is to help people and teams solve problems, deliver results, and meet stakeholder or customer demands in business environments that are charged with »VUCA« and entail a strong need to act on challenges and changes flexibly and with speed. Three practices are focused on promoting alignment, three other practices are focused on giving empowerment. These practices and corresponding activities are described below and are summarized in Figure 2:

### »Alignment« Practices

- **»Motivate«:** Giving esteem, inspiration, and care to inspire emotional engagement and, with it, »emotional alignment«. This is based on the following rationale: We protect and support what we feel emotionally attached to. The acronym »PARIS« specifies what this practice is about: Give **P**ositive **A**ttention, **R**ecognition, **I**nspiration, and emotional **S**upport.
- **»Infuse«:** Creating value orientation and commitment to the purpose and values of the organization (»normative alignment«). Here, acting as a role model is crucially important and making fairness tangible in all its aspects is key (from inquiring about others' expectations to taking decisions in a well balanced and principled way to creating transparency to treating people with respect).
- **»Focus«:** This practice is about creating a shared understanding of goals and priorities, roles and responsibilities, processes and practices, and crucial boundary conditions. Its focus is on »task alignment« within teams and across the organization.

### »Empowerment« Practices

- **»Facilitate«:** This practice is about providing resources, removing obstacles, enabling self-organization, and giving decision-making discretion. With it, its focus is on »structural empowerment«.
- **»Coach«:** This practice is about promoting effectiveness through coaching. In comparison to »facilitate« which is focused on building boundary conditions in a structural sense, the »coach« practice is focused on enabling people and teams to operate effectively and efficiently within these boundary conditions. Its focus is on »competency- or effectiveness-focused empowerment«.
- **»Innovate«:** This practice is about enabling an explorative or iterative approach to problem-solving and task delivery, respectively. Also, it is about promoting a constructive approach to handling tension (»development drivers«). Since all this aims at expanding options and possibilities to foster improvements and novel solutions, its focus is on »innovation empowerment«.

**»ALIGN«**  
TO ENSURE CONVERGENCE

**FOCUS**

Create **task/goal alignment** within teams and across the organization (procedural alignment)

**INFUSE**

Create **commitment to the purpose and values** of the organization (normative alignment)

**MOTIVATE**

Give esteem inspiration and care to inspire **emotional engagement** (emotional alignment)



**»EMPOWER«**  
TO USE DIVERGENCE

**FACILITATE**

Provide **resources**, remove **barriers**, enable **self-organization**, give **decision-making** discretion (structural empowerment)

**COACH**

Provide **coaching** to boost effectiveness and efficiency (competency -focused empowerment)

**INNOVATE**

Foster **exploration, iterative work** and **tension-based development** (innovation-focused empowerment)

FIGURE 2: THE »ALIGN – EMPOWER« MODEL OF AGILE LEADERSHIP



## Conclusion

We run across the term »agile leadership« on a day-to-day basis in our projects. Inquiring about people’s notion of agile leadership, we regularly realize that there is no shared understanding of what agile leadership is about. At the same time, we find that people tend to understand agile leadership in ways that favor single elements (»giving autonomy« or »acting as a servant leader«, respectively) and mistake them for the whole of agile leadership – an approach that will sooner or later hamper team and organizational effectiveness.

We hope to offer a conception that broadens your understanding of agile leadership

and to provide a foundation and starting point for you to create with others a more sophisticated and shared understanding of what agile leaders shall focus on and do in your organization.

In essence, an agile leader’s job is to enable people and teams to meet performance expectations or stakeholder/customer demands in business environments charged with »VUCA« and, to this end, balance means and actions that boost adaptiveness (»empower« ) with means and actions that foster alignment (»align« ). Figure 2 defines the leadership practices agile leaders need to embrace accordingly.



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### »practices« Whitepaper Series #03

Published 2021 December | Bonn, Germany  
German version also available.

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Design: Agnieszka Erlenbusch

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