Agile organizations need to offer choice

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For years managers have driven efficiency into their operations. Projects focused on cost savings, quality enhancements, or productivity improvements. In today's fast-paced and volatile environment, efficiency is the 'table stakes' but not sufficient to compete when change is a constant. Flexibility and speed are needed – agility as the organizational capability for the new era.

Agility is a holistic organizational capability that brings together people, culture, leadership, and systems as articulated in their norms, beliefs, and the operating model. Choice, next to trust, awareness, and focus is one of the four prerequisites for people to flexibly react to early signs, act on them quickly to capture relevant opportunities.

The ability of people to have choice is a fundamental principle of responsibility. It means to have autonomy to decide and the freedom to act on information. Choice as a managerial principles is not a given. In fact, most of us have experienced the opposite – the 'command and control' approach that is still deeply embedded in today's leadership practices. Agility requires creativity and initiative to flourish. "Being told what to do and how to do it" blocks all innovation. Creative people need choice to apply their knowledge, skills, and ambitions in the most productive way. This is the reason why agility needs choice.

Choice sound so obvious, but it seems that we are far from using its potential. Embedding choice as a dominant leadership practice is not easy as our dominant behavior to "tell people what to do" has been deeply anchored in our habits. Embedding choice into the leadership culture requires that all managerial

principles are designed in ways to offer choice rather than standard operating procedures. For example, performance management needs to be designed as a thought model rather than a detailed prescription of what to do. Management by Objectives should be a principle to work from rather a detailed set of forms and predetermined employee conversations…

The advantages of choice as a prerequisite for agility are evident. Principles that offer choice can cope with an ambiguous future as people know how to think about a new situation rather than to follow a process that does not meet the specific context and problem. Having choice means using responsibility, being agile – capture relevant opportunities and acting on them.

Enabling choice first requires change in institutional principles and then change in individual leadership behaviors. Following this order prevents that organizations spend millions in leadership development with little success. It is more effective to change the fundamental rules that guide effective leadership than trying to fix individual leaders within an inadequate environment.

How do your principles and leadership practices enable choice in your organization? Use the Agile Diagnostic to measure, decode and develop your organizations ability to cope with a volatile and ambiguous future.

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