THE PROFESSIONAL AGILE LEADER

THE LEADER'S JOURNEY TOWARD GROWING MATURE AGILE TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

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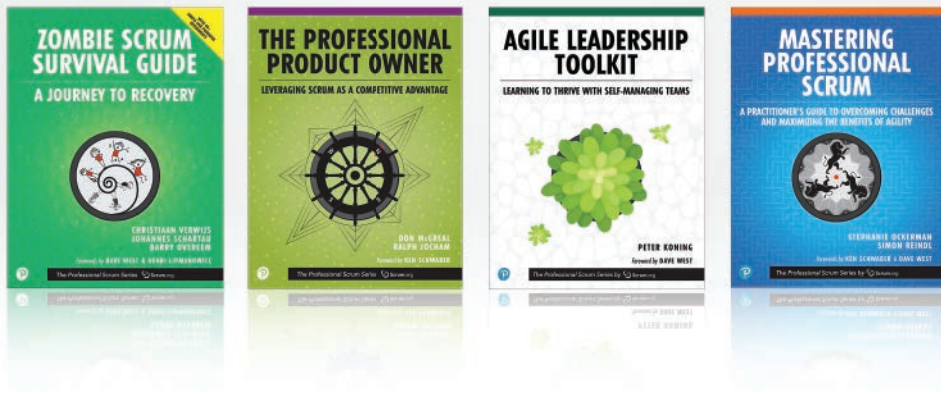**LAURENS BONNEMA**

Foreword by **DAVE WEST**

The Professional
Agile Leader

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The Professional Agile Leader

The Leader's Journey Toward Growing Mature Agile Teams and Organizations

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FOREWORD

I recently was talking to an executive about their agile transition. He described a series of great successes and disappointing failures. As we talked about these situations, picking at the "why?", the "what", and the "how could we have done better?" I was struck by a single truth: The failures were never about the Scrum Team or Teams; the failures were always about the friction created by agile teams within an existing, industrial-minded organization. And many of these failures were ultimately about leadership and the missteps they made as they tried to navigate the disconnect between these two paradigms.

One story, in particular, stood out to me. The story was about a Sprint Review that did not go well. The Sprint Goal was poorly formed, the team did not really understand what they were trying to deliver on, and the most important stakeholders and management were invited and actually showed up. The Sprint Review did what it was meant to do: It exposed the challenges the team faced and highlighted their misunderstanding, but it also showed how lacking the whole organization was in support of the ultimate Product Goal. It was not a fun or pleasant event. And everyone not only felt upset afterward but also questioned their contribution and work during the Sprint.

What happened next, however, was worse. The senior leader involved came after the Scrum Team both as a group and individually. He told them that "he never wanted to be embarrassed like that again," and that "many of them need to think about their career choices." He asked for them not to engage with senior stakeholders and to allow him to manage all interactions with those stakeholders. In that one response, he not only destroyed any motivation the Scrum Team had but also their desire to use an empirical process, to be agile.

You can guess what happened in the next Sprint Review. Everything was "great," no senior stakeholders were invited, and it really was just a progress report for the senior leader who was present. The project slowly disappeared as the Scrum Team members found other projects that were more important.

This example is extreme, but in many subtle ways, this happens frequently as the leadership in an organization tries to protect their image, or ensure that everything is working the way they want. And it makes sense. Traditional approaches encourage structured communication channels and the importance of political capital. They encourage everything green or amber on your executive dashboard. It is easy to see what that senior leader did wrong when talking about that particular Sprint Review, but how does an agile leader do things right? What does it take to be an agile leader?

When I talk to managers and executives at large organizations, I am often asked, "The Scrum Guide has no role for me. What do I do now?" This one question is actually two questions. The first question is, what is the practical reality of the impact of Scrum on their situation. What happens to their existing responsibilities and accountabilities, and what does that mean for the Scrum Team and the problem they are solving. The second question is much deeper. What is the role of leadership, and what is leadership in the postindustrial world?

This book actually provides materials for both questions. By drawing on their vast experience, Ron, Kurt, and Laurens have described the reality of many situations, teasing out the practical tips and patterns for good leadership.

They provide guidance on how a leader can help shape the environment for agile teams to succeed. They cover some hard topics, including the importance of purpose and mission, how to change to an outcome-focused rather than output-focused organization, the power of servant leadership, and even the thorny topic of the value of leadership. Many of the lessons they describe resonate with me from my own experience and what I observe in others. The narrative style of the book makes it easy to read, and I am sure that there will be many times that you see yourself in Doreen and the friction that is created between the agile and traditional approaches to value.

Ron, Kurt, and Laurens have written a book that tells a story about how traditional, industrial organizations need to change to take advantage of and survive the digital age. They focus on leaders and the harsh reality that many of the truths that traditional management encourages need to be rethought when change is the norm, opportunity is everywhere, and disaster is just around the corner.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I did and that you take a few things with you as you try and change the world and thrive in that change.

—Dave West
CEO, Scrum.org

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Preface

The bookshelves of the world abound with books on leadership. Authors of diverse backgrounds serve up a steady stream of titles that inspire admiration and imitation of the examples set by great leaders. And yet, despite all this, many still strain against the yoke of bad leaders, toiling pointlessly toward uncertain goals and wondering, "When will things be different?"

We think there are two problems with most literature on leadership. First, focusing on the behavior of great leaders gives little insight into how leadership develops. We rarely see their uncertain early steps, the difficult choices and circumstances that led them to make different choices, or the price they paid for choosing a different way. We see the leader-hero in their maturity, haloed in myth, but never as the stumbling student or the uncertain professional taking their first steps toward the person they later become.

The other problem with the cult of the leader-hero is that it overshadows the daily acts of leadership that make progress possible. Leaders are not superheroes. Leaders, in our view, are everywhere. Or, rather, opportunities for leadership are everywhere, waiting to be seized.

We don't think that leaders are born with some special qualities that make them great leaders. The great leaders with whom we have worked are regular

people who care deeply about helping others to achieve shared goals, and who have had the good fortune to have had experiences that have shown them a different way to lead people. We believe that leadership is a learned response to challenges in the world, and that everyone can lead at different points. To meet the challenges in our complex world, we, in fact, need everyone to lead at different times.

This book is about how people learn to embrace their leadership potential, how they let go of their preconceptions about what leaders do, and how they learn from each other how to work together to reach a better future. Our goal is to share what we have learned about what leaders do, how they think, and, most importantly, how they got there. We hope it helps you in your own leadership journey.

—Ron, Kurt, and Laurens
April 2022

INTRODUCTION

"Do not follow in the footsteps of the wise.
Seek what they sought."

—Matsuo Basho (1644–1694)

The world over, even the most successful organizations are scrambling to keep pace with unrelenting change. No matter their past success, their future isn't guaranteed the way it once was. Past success, in fact, tends to make people complacent at a time they most need to change. As customers and competitors respond to change, markets shift, tastes change, and dominant market positions can disappear overnight.

The phrase we most often hear from executives is that they want their organizations to be more agile. Nimble. Responsive. Because the disruptions they feel are most often in the digital parts of their business, they often turn to agile development frameworks like Scrum for inspiration in their change. These frameworks certainly help development teams achieve agility. And yet, the executives say that either they can't scale the change beyond a few teams or the change doesn't seem to stick. Something is missing.

Agility, or as we prefer to call it, responsiveness, results from deep changes to the culture of the organization. *Culture* is a simple word for a subtle and complex combination of norms, values, and situational responses. Changing culture is not easy, nor should it be, for it acts like a force that binds together the people in a society, a group, and even an organization.

Leaders transmit the culture within their organizations—not in explicit ways, and not by dictum or directive, but rather by demonstration: By modeling appropriate and desired behaviors, they shape the culture that, in turn, guides their organizations. So, to help their organizations become more responsive, the leaders in the organization need to change.

P URPOSE OF T HIS B OOK

Leaders have a tough challenge: While they strive to create greater team engagement and ownership, their organization's culture usually rewards compliance and fault-prevention instead of creativity, self-organization, and autonomy. And they live in an unforgiving spotlight and cannot rely on trial and error, our natural means of learning new things. Lacking mentors who can show them the way, they have few places to turn.

Our goal is to describe the journey of typical leaders in an organization as they face the challenge of changing their own organization while also changing themselves. The journeys they take are far from perfect; expect them to experiment, make mistakes, learn, and to adapt. While the journey in this book is fictionalized, the stories are all based on real situations the authors have either lived or witnessed. And while the stories don't deal with every possible situation you might encounter, they include the most common ones that nearly every leader faces.

Every agile leader's journey is different; each takes a different path, and each faces different challenges. Yet each shares a singular goal: to help their

organization achieve resilience and flexibility while seeking success in a changing and challenging world. In this book, we share, in various forms, our own experiences on our own journeys. While we can't claim to be the wise people to whom Basho referred, by sharing our experiences, we hope to give you ideas, approaches, and techniques that will help you on your own journey. But you will have to find your own way, and find what works for you and your organization.

By the end of this book, we hope that you will take a different approach to the leadership challenges that you face. While we can't tell you what to do, the scenarios described in the book will help you to find your own way to help your organization to adapt and improve.

Who Should Read This Book

This book provides leaders, at any level, with or without formal authority, with strategies and mental models that will help them to support and grow agile teams in their organization. Managers of teams and managers of functional areas that support teams will find strategies for overcoming the challenges they face and the journeys they need to travel to achieve their full potential as leaders. Senior executives will gain a greater understanding of the challenges their managers face in changing not only the way they work, but also the way they regard their role in the organization. Finally, Scrum Masters, Product Owners, and team members will gain a greater appreciation of the challenges that managers in their organization face, and how they also need to exhibit leadership to help their managers, teams, and organization grow.

How This Book Is Organized

This book follows the journey of a CEO who is leading the acquisition of a fast-growing company as she seeks to learn how her own company can

become equally successful. Readers will watch the struggles that this leader works through as she also works to change herself and the organization around her. The story is a fictionalized amalgamation of the authors' own experiences and those of our clients and peers; any resemblance to actual people or specific events is accidental.

The story describes typical challenges that leaders confront when they help their organizations shift toward agility. As in many of the real-life situations, you will discover quite late in the story that real agility requires a shift in culture (Chapters 5 and 8). After reading this book, you will be ready to start your agile leadership journey by applying the lessons from these late chapters. In this way, you can avoid many of the pitfalls and frustrations in Doreen's story and be a better leader to your agile teams.

Although the authors are all deeply engaged with the Scrum community, this book does not require knowledge of Scrum. We have deliberately avoided using Scrum-specific terms, events, and roles, and have opted for more general descriptions to emphasize that the approach described in the book can be used with any agile approach.

The main action takes place in an old, large-scale, traditional energy company. The narrative journey of the organization is interspersed with commentary and reflection on the challenges most organizations face, and discussion of strategies they can take to meet those challenges head-on. The intention is not to provide a complete narrative for the examples shown; rather, the vignettes simply illustrate critical events in the journey of the agile leader.

At the end of each chapter is a sketchnoted visual summary (by Laurens) showing the chapter's key lessons, from the perspective of Doreen, the protagonist agile leader. These visualizations aim to remind and reinforce the concepts presented in the chapter using a fresh style. These sketchnotes are collected in Appendix B.

Chapter 1: An Organization at a Crossroads describes a once-successful organization that has lost its way. It can no longer survive by depending on its

traditional business model, and it is struggling to be more responsive to customers and competitors. Infighting and frustration are limiting the organization's ability to respond, and the steps it has taken toward agility have been largely ineffective. The CEO is in charge of acquiring a company with the intention of adapting its strategy to get back in the game. The way forward is not clear.

Chapter 2: Forming Teams and Discovering Purpose describes how empowering cross-functional teams is the starting point for agile change. Finding the right people, with the right skills, attitudes, and motivations, is an essential but often overlooked starting point. Once formed, these teams first have to rediscover why they exist and what they are trying to achieve. As most organizations discover when they try to do this, it's harder than they expected. Everyone thinks they know what customers want and who their real customers are, yet the scant data they have does not support this. They quickly realize they need better data, fresher insights, and faster feedback.

Chapter 3: Shifting from Output to Impact describes how the teams and their leaders struggle to shift their focus from performing work to achieving results. Measuring work was easy; they just watched what people did and compared it to the plan. But now they realize that measuring to the plan told them nothing about the impact their work had on customers and on business success. As they improve their delivery frequency, they start to realize how far off the mark their plans really were, and they are filled with both despair and hope. It's an important turning point for everyone.

Chapter 4: Learning to Let Go describes how the teams and their leaders are changing by becoming more feedback-driven. To act more rapidly on that feedback, the teams take on more responsibility for making their own decisions, but that doesn't sit well with some of the former managers, who feel their authority and status are being undermined. Even some team members struggle with where they fit into the organization and how to move ahead. Those who overcome this discomfort find new ways of contributing and new sources of satisfaction.

Chapter 5: The Predictable Existential Crisis describes what happens when nascent agile teams, experiencing successes but also still struggling with their own issues, feel growing pressure from the parent organization over the changes they are making. Managers in other parts of the parent organization feel threatened by the results the teams are achieving, and they are putting pressure on the CEO to make the agile organization "play by the rules." But the CEO likes the progress she is seeing and wants to understand more about what the agile teams are doing that is different.

Chapter 6: Leaders, Everywhere describes how team members also learn how to lead, and why cultivating leadership at all levels helps the organization to become more responsive and resilient. Leadership is an activity, not a role, and the mission of leaders is to help other leaders to grow. As the organization learns how to embrace self-organization, growing leadership at all levels is a key enabler.

Chapter 7: Aligning the Organization describes how, as organizations grow their agility, team by team, product by product, they come to a point where they must either fully commit to continuing their agile journey or they will fall back to the old ways of working. Organizations can continue for a long time with two different operating models, one agile and one traditional, coexisting side-by-side. But they cannot maintain these two models forever; eventually they have to choose. This chapter is about how they make those choices to prevent themselves from sliding back to old ways of working.

Chapter 8: Aligning the Culture describes how the final, and most impactful, challenge the agile leader faces is changing the culture of the organization. Culture encompasses the social behavior and norms that people in the organization exhibit, including their beliefs and habits. In changing the organization's culture to embrace and embody agility, the agile leader ensures that agility will survive and thrive in the face of future disruptions.

Appendix A: Patterns and Anti-Patterns for Effective Leadership describes traditional leadership behaviors that are less effective in helping teams to develop effective self-managing behaviors, alongside behaviors that agile leaders can adopt to help their teams develop effective self-managing behaviors.

This provides a quick reference to which agile leaders can refer to help to catch themselves from falling back into old habits.

Appendix B: Doreen's Sketchnotes collects the sketchnote summaries presented at the end of each chapter to provide a quick visual reference for the book as a whole.

Our intent is to take you on the typical journey that agile leaders take, to help you to experience, vicariously, the leadership transformation that we, our clients, and our peers have gone through. Our hope is that as you read these experiences and our reflections upon them, you will find the stories and commentary useful in helping you on your own agile journey.

To help you begin planning your own leadership journey, the last chapter contains a few concrete guidelines. These guidelines will help you get started and better prepare you to learn from the mistakes we made. But don't skip ahead; these recommendations will be more meaningful in the context of the journey described in the preceding chapters.

Without further ado, it's time to begin where nearly all agile journeys begin, with an organization struggling to reinvent itself in a changing world.

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