How Does Pervasive Leadership Improve Agility?

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Abstract

Agile team members and those who embody the organizational infrastructure around them have, by and large, been raised in a culture that has taught them to follow and ask permission rather than lead and take the risks inherent in leadership. Every pause for permission is a delay that impacts decision latency. Organizational leaders have been enculturated to direct rather than coach which often leaves them in the position of making more decisions than necessary. This impedes important decisions due lack of access to them as deciders or due to allowing decisions to be made by default, which impacts decision quality. Pervasive leadership has been designed to address both decision latency and decision quality by focusing leadership at the locus of the most appropriate decision point.

Pervasive leadership is based on the following three principles:

- Change your mental model of I and Thou.
- Act locally; think holistically.
- Enact empathetic stewardship.

This paper discusses the details of pervasive leadership, expanding upon the author's January 2015 InfoQ article. The paper examines two short case studies wherein introducing pervasive leadership immediately improved an organization's ability to execute and addresses why this approach to leadership has the outcome of improved agility.

Biography

Jean Richardson is an Agile coach and process consultant and a consulting project and program manager. She also provides individual development and leadership coaching. She has been an instructor or adjunct professor at Oregon Graduate Institute, Portland State University, and Marylhurst University. She contributes to the community in her roles as Vice President of Professional Development for the Portland Chapter of the Project Management Institute, member of the Agile Alliance user group AgilePDX, and for the last 17 years as a mediator in the Multnomah County Court Mediation program. She is immediate past vice president of professional development for the Portland Chapter of the Project Management Institute and past president of the Portland Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

1 Introduction

I have been developing pervasive leadership since the early 2000's when I started researching the thesis I published in 2012, *In Your Own Hands: The Individual's Experience of Work Life*. Since then I have tried and tested it with clients, presented it for theoretical interrogation in 2014 at the Association for Graduate Liberal Studies Symposium, and presented it to various audiences including a door-busting Project Management Institute Audience in December of 2015. I am the innovator of this leadership approach. What is presented is evolved based on my experience, experiments, and thinking. It's greatest contribution to is address the limitations of servant leadership, which has been the dominant model in the agile community to date.

I noticed the challenges to agility in the servant leadership paradigm early in my Agile coaching career. While I valued the model, it was clear to me that it still limited individual ability to grow and lead from wherever you are in the organization, and, most importantly, it was still a power-over model while agility requires power-with models.[1] So, I developed and started experimenting with pervasive leadership and found that it has value almost immediately wherever I am able to expose the concepts. The key value delivered is in waking people up to their own ability and accountability to lead and waking leaders up to the value of having those they think of as follower, or "the led," lead.

2 Where Pervasive Leadership Sits Among Agility-Supporting Models

Pervasive leadership is among the newest agility-supporting models. It is an embodied leadership model and draws on the presence and character of the leader. It is presented as an alternative to servant leadership, the most-often recommended model for agilists because of the problems with and limitations of servant leadership I and others have noted.[2]

In the last several years, I have presented the pervasive leadership model at an Association of Gradual Liberal Studies conference where it was praised by social workers and labor organizers alike for its value to both organizations and the workforce; I have published an article on InfoQ to allow industry feedback; I have published several blog posts on the topic; I have presented the model to a gathering of over 200 project managers and received very positive feedback, and I have success in formally introducing it into two very challenged software organizations. In both cases where the model was formally introduced and taught to both teams and managers, the value of the model was sustained in my absence and after my departure.

2.1 Problems with Servant Leadership

More and more is being written about the problems with servant leadership, a model created by Robert K. Greenleaf in the middle of the 20th Century. Some people believe that the notion of the "servant" disempowers the leader.   Mitch McCrimmon in "Why Servant Leadership is a Bad Idea" asserts that servant leadership is paternalistic and gets in the way of employee engagement. Neil Kokemuller in "Problems with the Servant Leadership Model" echoes much of what McCrimmon says but also raises concerns about what he regards as the special role of the manager in creating vision. Minnis and

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[1] Power-over is a relationship between two people or groups of people where one has or exerts power over the other. This is a characteristic of competitive interactions and authoritarian relationships. Power-with is a relationship between two or more people or groups of people where power is not only balanced but typically used for mutual benefit. This is a characteristic of collaboration and facilitative relationships.

[2] http://www.management-issues.com/opinion/6015/why-servant-leadership-is-a-bad-idea/, http://smallbusiness.chron.com/problems-servant-leadership-model-50586.html, http://www.ufhrd.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/8_4.pdf

Callahan, in their paper "Servant Leadership in Question: A Critical Review of Power within Servant Leadership," claim that the model has been "defined through engendered language and a Judeo-Christian lens which implies certain values and leaves little space for questioning the theory."

My concern has to do with the power-over implementation of servant leadership which is far too common. In technology environments, I have observed that servant leadership has often been implemented as a form of doing for and to others what is best for them. Many self-identified servant leaders are completely unaware of the philosophical basis of the model and are also unaware of the "best test" that Greenleaf himself created to determine the presence of a servant leader. It is:

> Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?[3]

This test indicates to me that no one can self-identify as a servant leader, though many do. And, the typical implementation of servant leadership is to, in the eyes of the servant leader, kindly do what the leader thinks is best for the led. As I often say, I see more Soylent Green than Greenleaf in most servant leadership implementations.[4]

3   Purpose of Pervasive Leadership

Pervasive leadership is designed to decrease decision latency and increase decision quality through emphasizing the responsibility of everyone in the organization to lead from where they are and actualizing principle-based relationships that foster individual leadership at all levels. For instance, when a team member makes a local leadership decision based on his or her best judgement at the time and the outcome is not as effective as the management system would have liked, the focus is completely on validating that the individual took the best action they knew how to and on harvesting learning to ensure a higher quality decision next time.

In alternative medicine, healers have a notion of a "shadow heart" that pumps the lymph through the body, thereby keeping the immune system in good order while the physical heart pumps the blood. In the context of pervasive leadership, the management system is the shadow heart always on the alert to compassionately share its expertise and support the product teams as they focus on pushing the highest quality product out the best way they know how.

3.1   A Dialogic Stance

Pervasive leadership depends very much on a dialogic stance. When I refer to "stance" I am referring to how the leader orients to others both internally and externally.

A dialogic stance is not simply two-way communication or open communication. Dialogue is a form of conversation that is best contrasted with debate in terms of its premise, goal, attitude, focus, listening, inquiring and advocating behaviors; as well as the perceived role of the speaker. This is more specifically described in Table 1 below.

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[3] Robert K. Greenleaf; Larry C. Spears. Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness 25th Anniversary Edition (Kindle Locations 352-354). Kindle Edition.

[4] Soylent Green is a dystopian science fiction film and is also the name of a type of food made by a corporation depicted in the film. At the end of the film we learn that Soylent Green is made of human beings.

	Debate	Dialogue
Premise	One right answer, usually mine.	Many right answers; mine may be one.
Goal	To win, be right, sell, persuade, or convince.	To understand the other person from their point of view.
Attitude	Evaluating and critical	Curious and open
Focus	"What's wrong with this picture?"	"What's new? Of value? What can I learn?"
Behaviors	Listening • Accept nothing at face value. • Hear advocacy as a challenge to be met. • Listen judgmentally. • Listen for errors and flaws. • Plan your rebuttal • Talk more than listen.	Listening • Accept what is said at face value as true for the giver. • Hear advocacy as an opportunity to deepen understanding. • Listen for their story and without judgment. • Listen more than you talk. • Reflect instead of react.
	Inquiring • Interrogate the other person. • Ask questions that support your perspective and challenge the other person's view.	Inquiring • Ask questions in order to clarify and deepen your understanding and understand what another's ideas mean to them. • Explore taken-for-granted assumptions.
	Advocating • Assert your own position. • Describe flaws in other perspectives. • Justify your position. • Defend your assumptions as truth.	Advocating • Offer your ideas as yours only. • Explore alternative points of view.
Role of Speaker	Devil's Advocate or Truth Sayer	Walk in Another's Shoes

Table 1. Debate Compared to Dialogue[5]

4 Pervasive Leadership's Guiding Principles

Pervasive leadership is based on three principles:

• Change your mental model of I and Thou.
• Act locally; think holistically.

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[5] This table is a summary of Flick's work. See reference list at the end of this paper.

- Enact empathetic stewardship.

4.1 Change your mental model of I and Thou.

Pervasive Leaders see themselves as being in a dialogue with everyone in their work group, or, if the organization is small enough, everyone in their organization. They have something to learn and something of value to offer. Where they are granted power-over authority, they use it extremely rarely. They have learned to function in a way that makes that kind of authority largely unnecessary.

4.2 Act locally; think holistically.

Pervasive Leaders realize that patterns and problems they see in their immediate work group are also likely arising elsewhere in the organization. They solve them locally and offer the solution to the larger organization. They also seek solutions elsewhere because someone else may have spotted and solved the problem first. Their objective is always to help the organization move forward and fulfill its stated purpose as fully as possible as quickly as possible.

4.3 Enact empathetic stewardship.

Pervasive Leaders realize the importance of empathy and the risks of compassion fatigue. They realize also that, while each individual is uniquely valuable, the organization as a whole is the ship we all travel in, so they are careful to advocate for the needs of the organization in balance with the needs of the individual.

5 Appropriate Application of Pervasive Leadership

As I have developed and worked with this theory over the years, I have begun to consider the question of where pervasive leadership should and should not be used. My career spans thirty years in technology, primarily software development. Most of my engagements have been turnaround engagements where either the project or the team was in need of support and improvement. Many of these engagements have been red project turnarounds. Red projects are projects where the key indicators, usually schedule, cost, and quality, indicate that the project is highly likely to fail; extreme measures are typically required to get these projects back on track. For example, indicators on red projects may include such things as a project with a forecasted delivery date that moves out consistently week-over-week or month-over-month while the budget burn rate remains the same or a multi-phase project where customer satisfaction was extremely low in phase one but those quality indicators have no plans for remediation in succeeding phases.

Clearly, in a red project situation, it is frequently important to, after as brief as possible an analysis phase, propose and enact a get-well plan. I use a modified Delphi method (Kerzner, p. 724) heavily in the analysis phase and prefer that the team be involved in evolving the get-well plan. However, under extreme situations, a directive leadership style is at least briefly often necessary. This period should be as brief as possible and to the greatest degree possible, the turnaround leader should be "working out loud" so that knowledge transfer is happening during the turnaround. Other than such turnaround situations and critical failure threat remediation, I have not identified a time when pervasive leadership would be contra-indicated in most organizations. Given the state of the world today, it is clear that the society-healing benefits are of value and critically needed. Just as we all have a responsibility to lead in our organizations, we have a responsibility to lead in the broader world.

6 Two Pervasive Leadership Cases

The following two cases come from my own consulting practice and illustrate the value and use of pervasive leadership.

6.1   A Team with Heart, Music, and Dogs

One team that comes to mind is a more recent example. When I joined the effort the team was supposedly using agile methods, Scrum specifically. My first day with them was a day-long immersion interview. I watched while the technical lead berated the team, and some individuals, mercilessly. They had just hired a trained and experienced Scrum Master, and their Product Owner was in the process of leaving. The backlog was a stack of defects. The team had been sequestered on site with the co-development partner by their customer because their delivery reliability had been so poor. The customer's response was to monitor and task them at a lower and lower level.

This, of course, wasn't working.

In short order, and to the relief of everyone but his manager, the berating technical lead resigned. We talked among ourselves and the team decided they wanted to take their destiny back into their own hands.

The team decided to build a fort to keep themselves safe in the face of a tremendously challenging project:

- Focus
- Openness
- Respect
- Trust

Their FORT would be their protection as they started their recovery.

Together we looked at our inability to generate testable builds, and applauded ourselves for the great team dynamics we had even in the face of the kind of ill treatment and disrespect we had experienced. After proving we could deliver and did care about the customer's integration deadlines, we escaped from the client site where we were housed under very uncomfortable conditions and returned to our own offices where the team could have their dogs and their music, and where they could speak freely.

I remember being impressed with the team's eagerness to learn. Their Scrum Master was dedicated to teaching them "Scrum by the book," so they could get a taste of that before they started embroidering it with what they *thought* Scrum was. A new Technical Product Owner was hired, and the true state of the backlog was made clear, as was the state of the skills on the team. The team was under-skilled for the challenge in front of them.

The team was eager to learn, so management negotiated with their business partner to loan us their technical practices coach. One day of technical practices coaching had a lightning rod effect on the team. Suddenly they realized more about where they were in comparison with where they wanted to be. This both sobered and excited them. Then they started working together more closely and working more strategically. They wanted to understand how cross-functional communication could bring them a bigger payoff. They learned about pervasive leadership, which woke them up to their own value as leaders and the imperative of their assuming leadership. And, they took ownership of the project.

Impediments that would have stopped them in their tracks previously, such as running out of tasks or difficulties in scheduling, were easily moved by the team themselves. When things went wrong, such as a broken build, they called for help from other team members and went to work on the problem, whereas before, they would have wasted cycles in unproductive fretting rather than productive problem solving. Management stood back in frank surprise.

Everyone learned that there are technical practices in Extreme Programming that are vital to keeping a Scrum Team building good software. Everyone learned about pervasive leadership, which woke them up

to their own power and responsibility to lead. In a matter of days, they were solving problems, helping each other, focused on the customer, and beginning to understand how to lead the project as well or better than the managers they were looking to for leadership in all things previously.

For example, the relationship between the team's organization and their business partner's organization was very rough. This was affecting interorganizational team dynamics and wasting time in getting the work done. The team could see this for themselves and raised a number of things they wished they had done sooner, for instance, integrating the two organization's (the client and the vendor) teams for troubleshooting.

The team reached out directly to their colleagues at the team level in the partner organization and invited them to come onsite on an as-needed basis where they could work as an integrated team in a dedicated team room. The team made the decision to do this and did almost all of the negotiation themselves as well as scheduling the visits. They only escalated when managers on the business partner's organization blocked their requests, which they did, at first. As part of this co-working arrangement, the team worked hard to repair the relationship between the two companies while appropriately retaining confidentiality for their employer.

Quickly the team demonstrated eagerness to participate in strategic decisions that would directly impact them, and they provided valuable feedback to management about proposed courses of action. They were particularly concerned about, and took action, to heal the relationship with their business partner.

6.2   The Teams That Were Coached Backwards

Another group of three teams had developed an increasing pattern of failing over a three-year period. They were working on re-coding and enhancing their already successful flagship product on another technical stack. They were "using Scrum," and had been coached by someone who "taught us the philosophy and then told us to go figure it out." The company had shrunk fifty percent through voluntary and involuntary terminations during the time they were "doing Scrum" based on this person's coaching. The pattern of forcing work into the team had become so routine that, when I led the first thorough retrospective some team members were shocked to learn that they were supposed to understand the work they were taking in before they committed to it.

I suggested everyone read the Agile Manifesto and Principles and that at least the Scrum Masters, but preferably everyone, read the Scrum Guide. They learned that they were missing a role and the entire review meeting as well as most of the intent of the retrospective. They learned that there was such a thing as Scrum Theory. They learned that there were strategies and tactics for turning around a failing sprint; they didn't have to just submit to imminent failure and disappointment again.

They decided to make some big changes, and we started inserting targeted learning and coaching opportunities into their sprints and looking for opportunities to bring learning from the last sprint into the current sprint. The management team learned that, while the team is the engine of the organization, the heart that pumps the blood, the management team is the shadow heart that pumps the lymph fluid through the body of the organization and keeps the immune system in good order so the team can thrive as it pursues agility.

Specifically, the management team learned to stop over-helping but, instead, to focus on clear high level requirements and being approachable for assistance. They learned to expect transparency, ask for it, and facilitate it. Transparency helped them step back and stop hovering over the team which behavior had the additional outcome of causing them to jump in to direct ad correct more often than was necessary, both for learning and for a good outcome. They learned to ask coaching questions to support growth. Learned that rescuing would only result in more rescuing in the future. They learned also to focus on creating a work context for good work outcomes and to expect those good outcomes rather than to fear poor outcomes.

As part of a series of short "pop-up" trainings, I formally introduced to engineering and product management organizations to pervasive leadership's purpose and principles, which I had been coaching senior members of the management team on in separate sessions. The feedback from the management team was that the introduction of these ideas to the teams rapidly changed the nature of the conversations they were having and highlighted for everyone the potential of their ability to execute and certain key organizational impediments.

7   Theoretical Underpinnings of Pervasive Leadership

Pervasive leadership combines aspects of servant leadership, chaordic[6] leadership, existentialism, facilitative leadership and personal leadership. This is an embodied leadership model, which means that it engages through the character and affect, or embodied presence, of the practitioner. It is operationalized through tools and techniques drawn from the facilitation, mediation, and agile software development communities as well as conversational models in existentialist practices, specifically, Peter Block's stewardship model. It assumes that "leader" does not presume follower in the traditional sense, and that true followers cannot be forced to follow. It also recognizes everyone in the organization has leadership potential and responsibility. Pervasive leadership draws from and distinguishes itself from the following existing models:

- Servant leadership, drawing the desire to support the evolution of the follower but has a greater emphasis on power-with.
- Personal leadership, drawing in the emphasis on individual accountability and integrity.
- Chaordic leadership, aligning with the notion that a true leader cannot be bound to lead. A true follower cannot be bound to follow.
- Facilitative leadership, emphasizing a facilitative stance and a broad range of facilitation tools to operationalize the philosophical orientation toward others and objectives

8   Apparent Efficacy of the Model

We have known for some years that managers in most contexts can no longer know the work as well or better than those they lead. This is especially true of those that rely on cross-functional teams as modern software development does. However, effective managers have been trained and have learned through experience how their organizations work and what tends to generate high quality output. Given the pace of the work and geographical distribution of team members as well as the thousands of micro-decisions line-level workers need to make today, it is extremely important that decisions are made at the time and location that the need for them emerges. Waiting for advice and permission wastes precious time. Frequently, there is not so much a "right" answer as there is a "best" answer based on what we know at the time.

Pervasive leadership encourages leadership at the locus of the need for decision and action while working to distribute power and knowledge across all levels in the organization to improve business outcomes. Managers distribute vision, policy, and "how we get things done here" information while line workers in teams distribute technical expertise, feasibility of vision implementation, and progress to outcome information. The communication loop must always be open, and it is to the benefit of all stakeholders to learn and practice a dialogic stance as well as to find way to effortlessly collect data about the work and the business context and make it transparently available to all stakeholders as well as to

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[6] The term "chaordic" was created by Dee Hock, who led the creation of the Visa card and created the chaordic leadership model. The term refers to order which arises from chaos and has characteristics of both.

take point-in-time measures for the purposes of tuning and adjusting work processes and further developing relationships.

9 Opportunities for Further Development

Pervasive leadership has developed to the point where additional testing and development by others is important. If I am the only person testing the model, the tests prove only marginal durability of the model. It could be asserted that the model is specific to my individual practice. I am seeking a greater durability for this leadership model. Testing is also important because data persuades executive stakeholders, and this model should be spread not just for the sake of business but for the sake of society.

Pervasive leadership has the potential to create a better world. We are present in the world as our work teaches us to be. To create a better world, we must increase our awareness and noticing skills and reflect on how our presence also participates in creating our context. Our work processes effect everyone involved and those effects are carried out into the broader world.

9.1 Case work

It's important to develop a body of cases which show that other people can adopt the model to their and their organization's benefit. If you adopt the model, I'm interested in posting your brief case descriptions to my web site and, if it's mutually beneficial, helping you write the cases and find forums for discussing them. Cases can be as brief as a few paragraphs in this paper, more extended cases that describe metrics tracked while the case was evolving would also be welcome.

9.2 Methods/techniques

Currently, most of the methods and techniques that a pervasive leader might use come from the facilitation, mediation, and agile communities. They have only been briefly assembled in a set of leadership cards I have drafted and am trying to bring to prototype form. These cards need to be tested and possibly expanded through practice and guide providing background on them should be developed as a teaching tool. A prototype of the cards will be available at the presentation of this paper.

10 Conclusion

Pervasive leadership is a model offered as an alternative to servant leadership. It provides benefits that servant leadership cannot because it works to dismantle the power structure that can arise in the practice of servant leadership and which is resident in most organizational leadership roles today. It is an embodied power-sharing and power-with model designed to nurture leadership at all levels.

Having been scrutinized by scholars in the Association for Graduate Liberal Studies and introduced to a large number of project managers and two software development organizations, it is important that the theory be evolved and tested more broadly by more practitioners.

Pervasive leadership appears to apply booster rockets to agile adoptions by waking up everyone in the organization to their responsibility to participate in the leadership of the organization, by emphasizing that we are all born empowered, by inspiring individuals to take action and the management team to reorganize around its principles such individuals are not disciplined for leading from where they are but are coached to lead such that decision latency is minimized and decision quality is maximized.

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