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ETHOS

"WE WANT PEOPLE TO STAND UP TO THE SMALL-MINDEDNESS THAT THEY SEE AND WE WANT THEM TO CALL OUT WRONGDOING WHEN THEY SEE IT"

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THE SHAPE
OF WATER

SOMEWHERE, IN MOST KEYNOTES, THE WORD 'AGILE' CROPS UP AND THE AUDIENCE NODS SAGELY. BUT DO WE REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT AGILE MEANS IN PRACTICE AND, MORE PERTINENTLY, WHAT IT TAKES TO LEAD IN AN AGILE ENVIRONMENT? WE NEED TO FIND A BALANCE FROM THE QUICK DECISION-MAKING IN A CRISIS, TO A SUSTAINABLE LONG-TERM MODEL THAT GIVES ORGANISATIONS PACE WITHOUT THE PANIC.

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The McKinsey *Agile Tribe* identified five trademarks of agile organisations. In an agile organisation, the North Star is embodied across the organisation, supported by a network of empowered teams. There are rapid decision and learning cycles and a people model that ignites passion. All this is supported by enabling technology*. A key aspect of being agile is the ability to make quick decisions and pivot, but operating in an agile environment is not easy. The ability to adapt and change quickly is at the centre of this - and people don't like change that much - so it is important to look at how we can avoid ending up in ambiguous situations that eventually impacts on people's resilience. Humans are designed to dislike ambiguity, it makes us uncomfortable because we can't predict what is going to happen. We don't feel safe and we move into a threat response. This is all linked to our brains and how we work as human beings so being able to cope well with ambiguity takes resilience.

There are three key leadership traits that are essential to being agile and they centre around resilience. The first is adaptability - leaders need to be more like water in a stream - the water will flow around a rock, it won't just stop. The water moves seamlessly around the obstruction and this is the key. It's not about being chaotic, it is about being structured, but fluid enough to shift. There is always a way forward and there is always a solution, it's just about discovering it and having the right people in the room to assist. Humour is also essential - that doesn't mean we don't take things seriously, but it's a good coping strategy when it comes to change. Being able to bring the right amount of light-heartedness in is essential to building cohesive teams. As a leadership team, as you work together, having a few laughs along the way is important.

The final trait is having a sense of hopeful equanimity. This is about the need to balance hope, optimism and realism. Attaching hope to external circumstances you cannot control will end in disappointment.

Being agile is all about holding the tension between creating a clear overarching vision, while implementing a strategy that allows for flexibility. Any leadership team needs to have a clear, strategic narrative to align people to - this needs to come first - as engagement cannot be achieved without it. This alignment to the strategy must exist, in order to lead effectively in an agile environment. It could be argued that being agile is to be in a constant state of change, but in reality, organisations should be evolving constantly. We just need to remember that being human means we don't naturally like it. Research tells us that there are six things that concern people when it comes to change and to take people on the journey, we must address information, personal, implementation, impact, collaboration and refinement concerns and make sure they are all addressed throughout any significant shift. Every organisation has a rhythm that supports agility and pace of movement. Often people say, "we work at pace around here", while operating in an organisation riddled with inefficiency. Without elements like infrastructure - in terms of meetings, having the right people in the room, or the right success measures - it's going to be difficult to make it work.

REFERENCES

*https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations

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