Leadership Behaviors and Scrum Master Empowerment in Agile Success:
A Cross-Cultural Comparison in India, China, and the West

Venkatesh Rajamani
 https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3041-8778
Girne American University, Cyprus

Nasrullah Nasrullah
Metropolitan School of Business and Management, UK

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the reasons behind the resistance to the agile leadership ways of working primarily in Indian bureaucratic organizations, examining leadership attributes including team, situational, and super leadership. It reveals that for agile leadership to be practical, the significance of team and situational leadership cannot be dispensed with, while downplaying the role of scrum master slows down the progress. A survey of 250 Indian information-technology leaders indicates that team leadership development and the turning of scrum masters into champions yield better agile performance. The study concludes with the need for the development of leaders in hierarchical cultures and proposes limitations of this study as a focus for further investigation.

KEYWORDS

Leadership Behaviors, Team Leadership, Super Leadership, Agile Transformation, Scrum Masters

INTRODUCTION

By their characteristics, "agile" transformations encourage flexibility, quick decision making, and a self-organizing team structure often positively affecting organizations and their members. However, in organizations with high-power distance, especially in countries like India, studies show that paternal relationships, religious values, and the caste system heavily influence the dynamics in Indian organizations, making it difficult for agile transformations to succeed without addressing these cultural factors (Mathew & Taylor, 2019). Agile principles often clash directly with the traditional management style, leading to partial or failed transformations (Gupta et al., 2019; Paasivaara et al., 2018). A significant reason for these failures is that "scrum masters" in high-power distance cultures may face challenges in providing direct feedback, so addressed by promoting indirect feedback channels and cultural sensitivity in agile transformations (John et al., 1997). Scrum masters in high-power distance cultures face challenges in communication and team dynamics. Strategies like cultural awareness, work-practice sharing, and language management can address these issues effectively (Silva et al., 2022). This research addresses how leadership behaviors affect the role of

the scrum master and the success of agile transformation in hierarchical organizations, focusing on team, situational, and super leadership.

What Are we Talking About?

The discussion focuses on agile transformation in hierarchical cultures such as India, how these cultures impact various leadership styles, and the scrum master role's contribution toward agile effective practices.

What is Known?

In the literature, it has been demonstrated that agile transformations perform well in flat hierarchies. Still, they rarely, if ever, thrive in high-power distance cultures due to limitations in self-management by the people and in team management.

What Might we be Getting Wrong?

One of these is that, in high-power distance cultures, the more traditional agile leadership models may downplay the impacts of a scrum master in an agile transformation, or rightly so. Current leadership approaches are at odds with what agile practices should be about. This is the promise of the paper, leading to the research question.

The Mechanism (Theoretical Angle)

The paper proposes that changing leadership culture and leading by adopting the scrum master role in hierarchy-based organizations ease the agile change process through innovative leadership theories.

Research Questions

1. How does culture, such as hierarchy, influence leadership behaviors in an agile transformation?
2. What is the perception of the scrum master in the context of agile transformations in high-power distance culture?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Change is an inevitable element of every organization that seeks to thrive in its respective business environment. Organizations are bound to undergo an agile transformation to embrace change and stand out from competitors. It makes organizations more flexible and adaptable to the changing market. Leaders drive the initiative and transformation process (Das & Gary, 2021). However, they face many challenges and difficulties in transitioning through the process and achieving desirable results. At the forefront of these challenges is the resistance from employees, who want to continue doing the same job role and are not ready to experiment with innovative work techniques.

Like an enterprise-wide transformation, agile is a complex process, and about 47% of companies fail to deploy this process. Another survey respondent mentions that the company culture is unsuited to agile values, so agile adoption fails. About 30% of employees reveals that agile transformation fails due to insufficient training, making them aversive (Poth, 2021). Despite the growing recognition of the role of leadership in agile contexts, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the specific mechanisms through which leadership influences the success or failure of agile transformation efforts. Traditional leadership theories, such as transformation and transactional leadership, cannot fully capture agile environments' demands.

Agile requires a different approach to leadership, which is adaptive and flexible enough to understand iterative processes and self-organizing teams. While some research has examined

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