

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

3 ways agile taught me to be a better leader

By Kimberly Davis

The federal IT landscape is constantly evolving, adopting some of the latest skillsets in software development. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotic process automation are discussed in nearly every agency, while safe and responsible cloud migration strategies are at the top of everyone's minds. What's behind all of that is something I've dedicated much of my career to – agile – as a mindset and process to build capabilities and enable a learning environment where collaboration leads to faster, better-informed decisions and is a critical component of leadership.

While often associated with software development, agile can be applied to much more. It's a set of principles and practices and "a way of working that is iterative, incremental, and highly interactive," according to the Agile Government Handbook. Everyone has a role in creating and delivering value for users and customers, and agile fosters collaborative engagement and ownership from start to finish.

Agile software development was designed for a specific purpose, but the foundational components – the principles, core values and mindset – can serve as a guide for broader professional and personal development. With the increasing speed of digital disruption and the need for affordability and efficiencies, it's imperative that we embody these principles to cultivate dynamic, engaged, innovative,

transparent and collaborative leaders at all levels of government.

The core agile principles for leadership development

The core of agile rests on a set of principles and best practices that shifts mindsets for evolving organizational cultures, yielding increased efficiencies and supporting incremental value delivery. That said, the components of agile leadership that truly taught me to be a better leader are celebrating small wins, maintaining respect for people and culture and striving for relentless improvement.

1. Celebrate the little victories. Professional sports tends to emphasize the big victories, but agile focuses on the quick wins and small victories that happen along the way and that are instrumental in gaining support from stakeholders.

In any organization, there will always be an underlying resistance to change. In many cases, modernization can be complicated, time-intensive and expensive, and some individuals will question if the effort is worth the end result. Leaders who implement an agile mindset lead by example and demonstrate how these practices create benefits in order to accomplish quick wins early and gain buy-in to support the big victories that will follow.

2. Respect people and culture. People are a part of everything we do, everything we create and, ultimately, use the solutions we provide. Considering this broad and diverse spectrum, we must stay open-minded so our teams have the culture and the environment they need to be successful. Government teams have a huge appreciation for the value they provide to the nation and citizens. This motivation is more than benefits and a paycheck; it's serving a greater purpose. It unlocks the intrinsic capabilities with which people are naturally wired. Purpose, coupled with a people-thriving environment that's supported by opportunities and decentralized decision-making, allows time for innovation, failure without fear, celebration of learning, access to latest technology and more. It builds a powerful culture for driving value to the nation, but it is only possible when leaders show the utmost respect for people and culture.

3. Strive for relentless improvement. Legendary NFL quarterback Steve Young once said: "The principle is competing against yourself. It's about self-improvement, about being better than you were the day before."

There is always room to grow and improve; those who do not will be surpassed by those who can adapt. Leaders with an agile mindset look ahead to constantly modernize and relentlessly improve. As a leader, building this kind of culture yields innovation, supports collaborative problem solving, understands effective prioritization and creates collective ownership.

When striving for relentless improvement, leaders can create a safe environment for team members where they can collaborate, "fail fast, learn fast" and organically practice retrospection. This allows teams to develop differentiated abilities and optimizes how the organization builds, evaluates and deploys solutions. Teams are only as strong as their weakest link, so it's critical team leaders encourage improvement to remove blind spots.

In my career, I've learned that agile leadership requires deep involvement in the transformation as any other member of your organization. In government, many different organizations support one overall mission, so leaders must be partners and coaches to create a "badge-less society" where all share responsibility for meeting the same agency goals – ultimately guiding all the players on the team to victory using agile principles.

About the Author

Kimberly Davis is an agile solutions architect with ASRC Federal.