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## The Pedagogy Principle: Teaching Agile Leaders How to Teach

by Jeff Dalton

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# The Pedagogy Principle: Teaching Agile Leaders How to Teach

by Jeff Dalton

You are not a leader until you have produced another leader who can produce another leader.

— Simon Banks

Agile is all about learning. But do Agile leaders know how and what to teach?

Inadequate teaching skills leave the leadership chain open to the most treacherous of all Agile anti-patterns — an *organizational type mismatch* where teams are embracing agility but multiple levels of management lack basic knowledge of Agile values, ceremonies, and techniques, creating an impediment to enterprise Agile transformation.

Why aren't we teaching Agile leaders how to teach?

While Agile adoption has grown exponentially, much of this growth has been horizontal (across teams), not vertical (throughout the leadership chain). This phenomenon makes sense. Leaders spend their careers honing the traditional techniques of management — long-term planning, command-and-control leadership, and task management and tracking — only to learn that those tools are losing ground to self-organization and self-subscription business models like Scrum and Holacracy, where tasks are selected and executed by team members themselves with limited oversight. Leaders who don't recognize this and take steps to self-correct inadvertently impose a firewall to the adoption of Agile values and frameworks beyond the project team.

In this article, I present the Agile Performance Hierarchy, which provides a basic framework and curriculum for teaching Agile leaders. It is accompanied by a set of rubrics for defining and evaluating effectiveness and content in order to help guide aspiring Agile leaders in their transformation from low-trust task managers to high-trust teachers, coaches, and stewards of Agile values.

## A Pedagogy Primer

Of all the reasons for technology leaders to embrace agility, the power of continuous learning should be at the top of the list. No one knew this more than Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), the progenitor of modern pedagogy. His innovative research on the science of learning is still in use today and has enjoyed a renewal among Agile leaders.<sup>1</sup> Born exactly 60 days prior to the signing of the Declaration of Independence and more than 200 years prior to the signing of the Agile Manifesto, Herbart rooted his work in philosophy and psychology and recognized the connection between empirical learning and practical application and their benefits to society as a whole. Pretty Agile.

*Of all the reasons for technology leaders to embrace agility, the power of continuous learning should be at the top of the list.*

*Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines pedagogy as “the art, science, or profession of teaching.” Its focus is on the theory of learning and providing guidance for teachers to impart knowledge, not just information, to their students. One of the earliest known forms of pedagogy is the Socratic method, a technique in which the teacher acts as both coach and inquisitor, using a series of questions to drive out inconsistencies in order to help students self-realize what they *know* based on their own experiences.

Herbart built upon the Socratic method by focusing on the end — helping students achieve fulfillment by becoming better and more productive members of their own societies. His contributions led to the creation of the “liberal arts” education as the staple of modern educational systems.

Herbartianism provides a framework for learning that includes:

- **Preparation** — the sharing of subject-related information that is familiar from the student’s own experiences, thereby inspiring interest in learning more
- **Presentation** — the presentation of history, technical concepts, and other ancillary information that provides the student with a base of knowledge they will need to understand the subject
- **Association** — the comparison of information from the preparation and presentation phases in order to spur conversation and debate about the differences
- **Generalization** — the expansion of information into other related areas of knowledge to demonstrate its broad applicability to other disciplines
- **Application** — the use of simulations, games, hands-on exercises, and coaching and mentoring systems to demonstrate the applicability of the information in real-world situations

*Leadership training should be experiential, iterative, and incremental, with a strong focus on hands-on learning.*

In the face of the explosive growth of technology and global competitiveness in the 20th century, Herbartianism began to fall behind a more utilitarian vocational education based on a new model, Bloom’s taxonomy.<sup>2</sup> This model resulted in an approach characterized by large-scale lectures, testing, and on-the-job training, features that most leaders are familiar with today. Bloom deprioritized Herbart’s liberal arts focus in favor of a more direct, technical approach to knowledge transfer. This “vo-tech” style of learning was intended to improve the prospects for direct employment, with less emphasis on the collaborative, interpersonal, and analytical skills that were a hallmark of Herbart and are so important for successful Agile adoption.

Proving that what is old is new again, Jeff Halstead challenges this shift to Bloom in his revolutionary 2011 book *Navigating the New Pedagogy*.<sup>3</sup> Halstead theorizes that in order to reignite interest in learning, a return to

experiential and inquisitive teaching is essential. He is hardly alone. By the time his book was published, Agile organizations were already turning back to Herbart.

It’s no coincidence that Halstead returns to the people over process, continuous learning, and collaboration set forth in the Agile Manifesto. Both the explosive growth of Agile adoption and the return to collaborative and experiential learning are part of a larger global transformation whereby people are seeking to cast off authority in exchange for autonomy and peer collaboration.

## The Six Performance Circles of the Agile Performance Holarchy

As Halstead advises, leadership training should be experiential, iterative, and incremental, with a strong focus on hands-on learning. Evaluation of performance should be based on observation, not examination, with a bias toward the use of the Socratic method so new leaders can form their own thoughts on the *value and purpose* of the lessons. The result will demonstrate the difference between *knowledge* and *information*.

In order to ease the transition back to Herbart, it’s useful to employ a learning holarchy — a nonhierarchical collection of nested circles, or holons, to represent the content and evaluation of leadership learning (see Figure 1). The term “holon” was first proposed by Arthur Koestler in his 1967 book *The Ghost in the Machine*.<sup>4</sup> Koestler observed that complex systems were made up of autonomous self-reliant entities that can, like mature Agile teams, react without asking for permission or direction.

Each “performance circle” in the Agile Performance Holarchy has its own set of related holons that are essential to leading an Agile organization. Each can be taught, practiced, and observed independently as leaders move through the three stages of learning capability:

1. **Adopting.** The leader and organization demonstrate knowledge of the concepts and are observed demonstrating their application on a small scale.
2. **Transforming.** The leader teaches the concepts to other leaders, both internal and external, and observes adoption throughout the enterprise.
3. **Mastering.** The leader is a steward of Agile values and continually sponsors learning and adoption for both internal and external stakeholders.

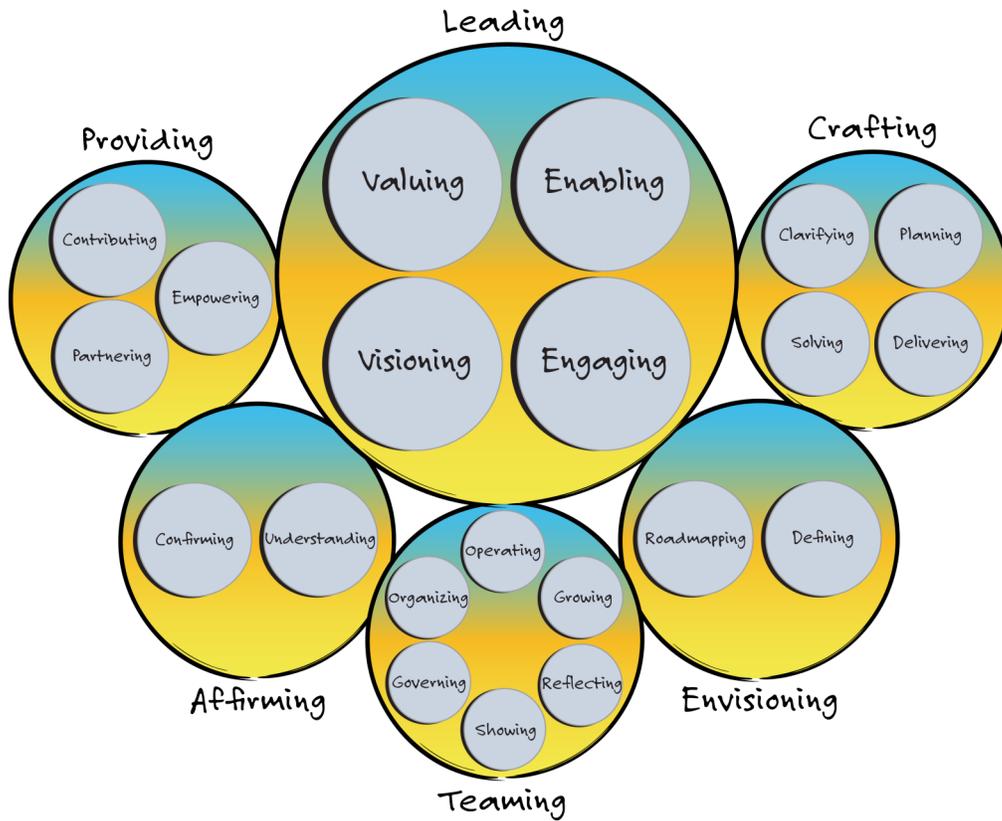


Figure 1 – The Agile Performance Hierarchy.

## Leading

The Leading performance circle describes actions, roles, and outcomes that address leadership at all levels of an Agile organization.

In many companies, it is common to observe leaders who are unaware of Agile values yet encourage their product and service teams to “do Agile” by adopting the daily stand-up, sprints, and retrospectives. These ceremonies are often performed in a vacuum, only at the team level, and are completely unattached to customers, cross-functional departments, or leadership. “Customer proxies,” “Project Manager/ScrumMasters,” and “normalized points” are all too common, the result of leadership decisions made without sufficient understanding of values.

Current and future Agile leaders will benefit from learning to adopt, embrace, and deploy Agile team values<sup>5</sup> and cascade them throughout the leadership chain as they prepare to transition to a self-organizing leadership model (see Table 1).

## Providing

The Providing performance circle describes actions, roles, and outcomes involved in providing an Agile infrastructure.

The organic nature of Agile adoption has led some to believe that the leader has little responsibility to provide an infrastructure. However, experienced leaders have learned that providing a solid infrastructure and a resource model that “separates role from soul”<sup>6</sup> is essential to scaling Agile across the enterprise (see Table 2).

## Crafting and Envisioning

The Crafting performance circle describes actions, roles, and outcomes that address the capability lift and craftsmanship required to deliver high-quality products and services.

The Envisioning performance circle describes actions, roles, and outcomes that address the definition and requirements architecture required by high-quality products and services.

Action	Adopting	Transforming	Mastering
<b>Projects Agile team values</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of Agile team values and their projection to the organization	Teaches, observes, and coaches both vertically and horizontally	Is a steward of Agile culture; observes and rewards adoption of Agile values
<b>Demonstrates alignment with Agile team values</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the connection between Agile team values, frameworks, ceremonies, and techniques	Adopts alignment within the organization under their control	Is an ambassador for alignment across organizational boundaries, including business customers and support teams
<b>Effectively communicates</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of organic multi-layered communication methods and the use of visual information management (VIM) using large, highly visible signs and other information radiators	Teaches, observes, and coaches line managers and teams to communicate using organic, multi-direction methods and visual information indicators	Consistently communicates Agile team values and alignment using organic methods and VIM techniques (“big sign” techniques)
<b>Engages with teams</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of expected team behaviors in a healthy Agile environment	Teaches, observes, and coaches line managers and teams to perform their roles in alignment with expected behaviors	Continuously engages with internal and external teams, as well as suppliers, to evaluate and help improve their adoption of Agile team values and alignment
<b>Empowers teams</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the business architecture and self-organization frameworks required to enable Agile team empowerment.	Teaches, coaches, and mentors line managers and teams on the business architecture and self-organization frameworks that support successful Agile teams	Evangelizes with external partners and seeks enterprise-wide self-organization and business architectures that support successful Agile teams

Table 1 – Evaluation rubric for the Leading performance circle.

The software craftsmanship movement, ignited by Andy Hunt and Dave Thomas in their 2000 book *The Pragmatic Programmer*<sup>7</sup> and Pete McBreen in his 2002 book *Software Craftsmanship*,<sup>8</sup> has been enjoying a renaissance in the second decade of this century. This is a welcome development in a business that has seen unprecedented growth in the awareness of technologist *behavior* (as evidenced by the plethora of competing behavioral frameworks, including Scrum, XP, Kanban, CMMI, ITIL, and others) but not nearly enough focus on building *professional competency*.

That said, the software craftsmanship movement is focused almost entirely on software code and development. And while this is important, it isn't where most defects are injected, nor where the most elegance is achieved. Agile solutions — or any other kind, for that matter — are about more than great code. They must also include great craftsmanship in product visioning, requirements, epic and story development, and more.

Agile leaders need to teach craftsmanship to their own organization, but also to other organizations within the

Action	Adopting	Transforming	Mastering
<b>Deploys Agile contracts and SLAs</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of Agile methods and lifecycles that affect partners and suppliers	Teaches, observes, and evaluates procurement, purchasing, accounting, and legal staff alignment with Agile methods and lifecycles, deliverables, and contracts	Deploys SLAs and contracts to all suppliers and partners, interacting with product and service delivery teams
<b>Colocates teams or provides virtual alternatives</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of open workspaces and collaboration tools (including VIM tools) and transforms the leadership workspace	Teaches, observes, and mentors line managers and teams on the use of collaborative workspaces and tools; removes impediments to adoption	Deploys and maintains enterprise-wide collaborative workspaces and virtual tools; deploys these beyond Agile teams to suppliers and partners
<b>Provides automated tools for testing and continuous integration</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of processes and actions throughout the organization that can be optimized by an automated tool chain	Builds competency in developing and delivering communications and training tailored for each functional team; deploys pilots and limited implementation of tools; teaches line management how to evaluate effectiveness	Sponsors enterprise adoption of an automated tool chain and provides effective training for teachers, coaches, and mentors to embed the tool chain's use in the culture
<b>Provides resources for enterprise ceremonies and techniques for continuous improvement</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of how enterprise ceremonies can improve organizational performance	Builds competency for execution of organizational ceremonies and information processing; teaches line managers how to capture, select, and deploy improvements	Deploys enterprise ceremonies across all teams, partners, and suppliers; teaches external stakeholders how to interact and collaborate on improvements

Table 2 – Evaluation rubric for the Providing performance circle.

product or service value stream. Customers, procurement, and sales all have a role to play, and for technologists to be successful with Agile, leaders from those organization need to learn to improve craftsmanship across organizational lines (see Table 3).

## Affirming

The Affirming performance circle describes guidance, actions, and roles that address the observation of team performance.

Missing from the Agile conversation has been the idea of *behavioral quality*. A strong focus on “high trust” and “self-organization” has been interpreted by some to mean that leadership has no responsibility to ensure that team member behavior is well aligned with values.

In some ways, this is by design. Weighed down by traditional low-trust methods of process verification (often based on the CMMI’s Process and Product Quality Assurance process area), early Agile advocates went the other way, relying instead on interpersonal skills that focused on learning. This made sense given their experience with the audit-based models popular at the time.

Action	Adopting	Transforming	Mastering
<b>Deploys Agile techniques such as pair programming and test-driven development</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of Agile techniques that promote code quality	Teaches, observes, and evaluates line management while they deploy code craftsmanship techniques to the product and service organizations	Deploys a full range of craftsmanship techniques across all products and services; trains and evaluates across organizational lines
<b>Establishes a requirements and story architecture</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of requirements theory and the effect requirements have on product or service quality	Charters the development of a requirements architecture that teaches the entire organization a method for reducing requirements defects	Engages with multiple levels of the customer community to teach them how to integrate a multi-level architecture for the efficient management of requirements, epics, and stories
<b>Establishes a clear set of criteria for the acceptance of high-quality requirements, epics, and stories</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the effect of requirements defects and is able to recognize their impact on the product or service	Teaches, observes, and evaluates the performance of line managers as they teach teams how to identify high-quality requirements and stories	Sponsors requirements/user story architecture training and coaching for business customers who serve as product owners or members of change control boards to help identify defects prior to sprint or iteration planning
<b>Establishes coding and design standards</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the importance of coding and design standards and how they affect product cost for development, maintenance, and reuse	Builds a foundation for craftsmanship through the deployment of standards that teach teams their effectiveness in reducing cost and risk and increasing reuse for future development	Sponsors an expansion of coding and design standards horizontally across the enterprise and vertically into business analysis, architecture, data management, and testing
<b>Engages with business customers as product owners and as contributors in relevant ceremonies</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of how Agile team values relate to customer collaboration and how collaboration affects project risk and success	Interacts with and teaches business customers outside of the delivery organization about the value of collaboration and owning the vision, ROI, and purpose of the service or product	Engages with business customers and technology team members to build a requirements and delivery value stream that crosses organizational boundaries

Table 3 – Evaluation rubric for the Crafting and Envisioning performance circles.

But as Agile has become more popular, its growth has been slowed by difficulties in scaling the interpersonal components that have made it so appealing. After all, how can you successfully value “people over processes and tools” when you are an insurance company with over 250 Agile teams spread across a dozen product lines and locations? That requires infrastructure and verification.

Agile leaders need to teach current and future managers techniques for useful, yet lightweight, evaluation of team behavior (see Table 4).

## Teaming

The Teaming performance circle describes actions, roles, and outcomes that address Agile teaming.

Of all of the content that Agile leaders need to learn, teach, and deploy, none is more commonly written about than teaming. The vast majority of Agile books, conferences, and speeches have focused on “the team.” However, less has been written on the leader’s role in nurturing healthy Agile teams at scale.

Action	Adopting	Transforming	Mastering
<b>Observes Agile team behavior</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of gembu walks and other observation-based techniques and how they differ from audit-based methods	Teaches, observes, and evaluates self-subscribed volunteers from the line manager group to perform gembu walks and behavioral observations	Relies on data from an enterprise observation program to drive changes in processes or behavior
<b>Prioritizes information gathered from observations and converts it into backlog items for improving training and processes</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the management of improvement data as a backlog item and how to write user stories related to improvements in team behavior	Teaches, observes, and evaluates the performance of line managers as they, in turn, teach their teams how to identify high-quality requirements and stories	Develops and deploys an improvement backlog that is posted on a task board using VIM
<b>Improves training, mentoring, and processes based on observations</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of managing and upgrading an organizational process set and how to effectively deploy, train, and evaluate behavioral improvements	Recruits current and future managers to serve as designers, teachers, and mentors to help deploy future versions of the improved behaviors	Deploys teachers and training to the enterprise on a periodic basis to ensure a solid and high-performing Agile culture
<b>Manages collaboration at the integration points “around the edges” and across the organization</b>	Demonstrates a clear understanding of the integration points for collaboration	Facilitates ceremonies that bring together stakeholders from organizations outside of the development team	Builds a culture of cross-functional collaboration and integration

Table 4 – Evaluation rubric for the Affirming performance circle.

Agile leaders have an opportunity to replicate the successes of core Agile teams throughout the organization. Common ceremonies like the daily stand-up, retrospectives, sprints, sprint demos, and backlog grooming — the staples of any Agile team — are almost completely foreign to leadership within technology, marketing, operations, finance, infrastructure, or (most seriously) purchasing functions.

Agile leaders will need to craft Agile team agreements that align with values across all leadership levels and organizations, conduct regular retrospectives beyond the development team to identify successes and improvements, deploy coaching and mentoring

enterprise-wide, and establish a ceremony-based, high-trust culture that embraces Agile values (see Table 5).

## Agile Learning Makes Agile Leaders

An experiential and iterative pedagogy, first introduced by Herbart and then revived by Halstead, is perfectly suited for teaching leaders to effectively learn to lead Agile organizations. The Agile Performance Hierarchy provides a basic framework and curriculum for guiding Agile leaders as they grow and expand capabilities both vertically and horizontally across related organizations.

Action	Adopting	Transforming	Mastering
<b>Roles and accountabilities are separated from job titles</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of role management in a self-organizing environment	Teaches, observes, and evaluates line managers and teams on self-organizing role definition	Adopts enterprise role management strategy and tools that support a diverse set of teams
<b>Teams practice self-subscription for tasks and responsibilities</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the alternatives to traditional task management with an Agile team	Teaches, observes, and evaluates line manager performance to ensure consistency in role definition	Expands self-subscription model beyond product and service teams into other supporting functions
<b>Teams continuously learn and improve</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of the components of the Agile team agreement and how it aligns with Agile values	Adopts the use of retrospectives in their own teams; demonstrates, teaches, observes, and evaluates line managers and teams as they deploy team agreements	Deploys an organizational team agreement that demonstrates traceability to both Agile values and all Agile ceremonies, techniques, and teams
<b>Team continuously learns and improves</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of team and organizational retrospectives	Adopts the use of retrospectives in their own teams; demonstrates, teaches, and observes line managers and teams as they deploy retrospectives	Adopts the use of enterprise retrospectives across both thread-based cross-functional teams and across core Agile teams
<b>Visual information management is deployed by each team</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of VIM and a clear definition of what to display	Adopts the use of VIM in their own teams; demonstrates, teaches, and observes line managers and teams as they deploy VIM	Adopts the use of VIM across the enterprise

Table 5 – Evaluation rubric for the Teaming performance circle.

As the world barrels towards self-organization, established leaders can either embrace it or resist. Let's prepare and learn how to accomplish the former.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Herbart, Johann Friedrich. *The Application of Psychology to the Science of Education*, translated by B.C. Mulliner. Scribner, 1898.

<sup>2</sup>"Bloom's taxonomy." Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom%27s\\_taxonomy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom%27s_taxonomy)).

<sup>3</sup>Halstead, Jeff. *Navigating the New Pedagogy: Six Principles That Transform Teaching*. R&L Education, 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Koestler, Arthur. *The Ghost in the Machine*. Macmillan, 1967.

<sup>5</sup>The Agile team values of openness, courage, visibility, focus, commitment, sense of humor, and respect are derived from: Rawsthorne, Dan, and Doug Shimp. *Exploring Scrum: The Fundamentals*. Dan Rawsthorne and Doug Shimp, 2011.

<sup>6</sup>"Separating role from soul" is an approach to roles and accountabilities that supports successful self-organization. It was introduced in: Robertson, Brian J. *Holacracy: The New Management System for a Rapidly Changing World*. Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Hunt, Andrew, and David Thomas. *The Pragmatic Programmer: From Journeyman to Master*. Addison-Wesley, 2000.

<sup>8</sup>McBreen, Pete. *Software Craftsmanship: The New Imperative*. Addison-Wesley, 2002.

## Recommended Reading

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