ARTICLE
LEADERSHIP

The Best Strategic Leaders Balance Agility and Consistency

by John Coleman
As a former consultant, I have a deep and abiding love for the use of 2×2 matrices in business strategy. My favorites are those that highlight two factors that seem, at first glance, in conflict. I find these particularly relevant to personal development, as individuals often must resolve the tensions between competing values and traits and must carefully monitor their own strengths so those strengths don’t lapse into weaknesses.
I’ve recently been thinking about this with regard to how leaders can be more strategic, able to effectively execute the core of their business while remaining open to trends in the market and adapting to meet them. I’ve begun to view this as the ability to hold two specific traits in balance: consistency and agility. You can picture it like this:

### Strategic Leaders Must Be Agile and Consistent at the Same Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Consistency</th>
<th>High Agility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfocused</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid</td>
<td>Low Agility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreliable and uninspired</td>
<td>Low Consistency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE**  JOHN COLEMAN  

*Find this and other HBR graphics in our Visual Library*
The best performers are, of course, consistent. Consistent leaders work hard and show up on time. They set goals for themselves and their employees and they achieve them. They plan diligently and produce excellent products and experiences for clients time and time again. They are diligent and possess resilience and grit. Consumers expect consistent products; people appreciate consistent management.

But if organizational leaders are merely consistent, they risk rigidity. In changing environments, they can struggle to adapt and may cling to old habits and practices until those practices become counterproductive, distracting them from the more important new work that needs to be done.

On the other side of the spectrum, great leaders are agile. Markets demand that companies and people adapt and change constantly. By one analysis, 88% of companies appearing on the Fortune 500 list in 1955 were not on it in 2014 (having merged, gone bankrupt, or fallen off the list). As we know, buggy whip makers and telegraph companies must evolve or die. And the most-successful managers must change similarly as they assume additional or different responsibilities through their careers, moving from head of sales to COO or from CFO to CEO. These leaders must pivot when needed, and agility requires that they be intellectually curious, ready to learn from others, communicative, collaborative, and willing to change.

But just as consistency can become rigidity, agility can become a lack of focus when it isn't tempered by consistency. Purely agile leaders may be visionaries and change agents but lack the single-mindedness and dedication to execute their visions. They often turn to new projects before they've finished prior projects, and, in extreme cases, force their teams or organizations into chaos and instability.

It’s in the combination of consistency and agility that leaders can become strategic, performing an organization’s purpose with excellence but changing course when the situation demands. These leaders have high quality standards, achieve goals, and expect consistency, but they are also open to change, keep an eye on the external environment, and understand when old ways of working no longer pass the test of the market in which they compete. They stay the course until it no longer makes sense and combine continuous improvement with ideation and strategy.

Of course, few individuals are equally consistent and agile, just as few people are ambidextrous. So how can leaders hold these traits in balance?

First, to paraphrase Socrates, “know thyself.” Are you more prone to consistency or agility? Are you more naturally capable of deep focus or ideation? Do you thrive in situations of chaos and rapid change or in periods that require relentless pursuit of a clearly defined goal? If in doubt, ask a spouse, best friend, or close work colleague — they almost always know. Understanding and accepting our tendencies is the foundation for growth.
With that understanding in hand, surround yourself with others who complement your traits. For managers, it’s wise to find a strong “number two” who can check your worst impulses and enhance your strengths. Are you an agile visionary? Find a structured, methodical, and disciplined deputy or peer. If you are a consistent operator, find a strong voice for agility on your immediate team or a mentor to push your creativity, no matter how frustrating that might be. And empower those people to speak up and challenge you.

Complement this organization model with operational process. To ensure consistency, develop strong dashboards and balanced scorecards to assure outcomes are consistently reached and continually improving. To assure agility, develop a fluid planning model that allows the organization to change outside of the formal annual planning process and create an annual strategic planning process that looks outward to the external environment and forces the organization to contemplate big ideas. As an individual, do this for yourself, perhaps as an end-of-year exercise, to make sure you’re pointed at the right goals and aspirations for where you are as a leader.

Finally, with these people and processes in place, seek to learn and grow. If you’re naturally an agile thinker, you may never be the most consistent operational manager (and some research would argue against attempting it), but you can get better. And you can often do so simply by consciously observing what’s working around you and then forcing yourself to learn and grow. Make note of those traits you admire in others — those that complement your own — and find ways to practice them.

As leaders, all of us will be forced to balance consistency and agility in our careers and in the organizations we serve. Are you doing so today? If not, do you understand yourself and have you thought about the people and processes around you that can help move you into greater balance?

John Coleman is a coauthor of the book, *Passion & Purpose: Stories from the Best and Brightest Young Business Leaders.* Follow him on Twitter at @johnwcoleman.