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How Roche Helps Leaders Achieve the Power of an Agile Mindset

A Conversation With Cris and Tammy



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Agile results from a mindset, Roche's leaders believe -- and Roche takes its leaders' agile mindset very seriously.

The global pharmaceutical company (officially F. Hoffman-La Roche Ltd.) sends leaders -- almost 6,000 of them by now -- to a four-day internal program named Kinesis that gives people a deep dive into the mindset and practice of agile.

Leaders spend those days learning, talking and thinking about their own leadership style and how their mindset can help make Roche more agile.

This approach has created a multiplying effect that has generated significant momentum for Roche's agile transformation, Roche's CHRO, Cris Wilbur, and its Global Head of Talent Innovation, Tammy Lowry, tell Gallup Managing Director Larry Emond in the following conversation. And it has made Kinesis a critical component of Roche's efforts to get diagnostic tests and medicines to patients even more quickly.

Emond: *We've had great conversations about Roche's outlook on agility -- speed, stability, flexibility, your business challenges. Tell me how you talk about those things with Roche's leaders.*

Wilbur: Well, the primary elements of an agile organization are certainly speed and flexibility, but at Roche, we also include stability.

Those three staple elements influence mindset, as you mentioned, the kind of mindset that allows us to consistently focus on "doing now what patients need next." Establishing that is a big part of our Agility program for our leaders. They get the concept about the mindset that they have today and the mindset they need to bring.

The program mobilizes leaders in our organization and their teams to think in a dramatically different way from the very first day.

Emond: *Tell me what happens on that first day.*

Lowry: Kinesis provides an opportunity for leaders to explore, ask questions and understand more about the leadership shift that is required to lead an agile organization. It builds on your own experiences, but also opens you up to where you want to be looking forward.

On the first day, we have a structured process that grounds all the conversations in a business context and what Roche means by agility. When you come into the room, you sit knee to knee with a partner and have two minutes to interview, with some guidance from us, that person about their business challenges. Then you pair up with another person and do it again, with five or six other people. This exercise sets a clear business context for the need for change.

After that, we talk about the three pillars of agility -- speed, stability and flexibility, like Cris mentioned.

From that clear business grounding, we then get into the two basic mindsets of leadership, creative and reactive, and why agile requires a more creative mindset.

We use the Leadership Circle Profile to talk about the advantages of demonstrating a more creative mindset -- both for the organization and for the individual leaders. We highlight how leadership mindsets and behaviors that have worked before are not going to work in the future.

Then, we deep dive into each individual's personal leadership mindset. We do this somatically -- there is a huge leadership circle mat on the floor, and leaders physically move around the mat and explore how it feels to operate from a different place. There is real vulnerability to this.

We don't force anybody to share anything they don't want to, but there's not a lot of places to hide in this discussion either. And we have found that there is real power in leaders seeing that they are not alone in their current leadership profile.

Wilbur: It's very experiential, very reflective, so that people can really understand how this thinking and, ultimately, their behaviors, manifest in solving problems or making decisions. You learn to think about what gets in people's way or consumes more energy than it should.

We have a lot of smart people in our organization, an incredibly dedicated group of individuals, but it's important to take time and look at, for example, to what extent does a reactive mindset around being a perfectionist really enable a team to perform to its highest level? How does a leader's thinking impact those situations?

Lowry: That's a really important aspect, even on the first day. After dinner, we put people in peer groups to share a couple of critical life experiences that shaped them as a leader. It's completely up to them to share what they want.

But because they've spent so much time talking and thinking together, four or five leaders and a facilitator can really get into the experiences that have shaped the leadership mindset they demonstrate today.

In the beginning, we really weren't sure how much leaders would step into that, but we are finding that it is a crucible experience -- an opportunity to connect in a very different way with your peers.

Emond: *I can see why. What's the second day like?*

Lowry: Day Two starts by looking at our collective leadership pattern and the culture it is creating for us as a company. We start with a team-based physical exercise that brings to life our cultural patterns -- which are, for us anyway, grounded a lot in planfulness and perfectionism.

We then repeat the exercise using the same exact instructions but highlighting the shift to a creative mindset. It is incredible, in the space a few minutes, that the same group of leaders generate a completely different outcome.

Again, it is a physical exercise and experience that helps us understand ourselves as leaders, both individually and collectively.

Emond: *And so far, no lectures.*

Lowry: Zero lecture -- this is a fundamental principle in how we designed the program.

At the end of the second morning, we do a gallery walk with posters, videos and presentations from a diverse set of companies who have implemented an agile culture. None of them "do agile" the same way. We ask leaders to pay attention to and talk about what they're seeing as they move through the gallery.

The idea is to prompt ideas -- not answers.

After the gallery walk, we give them some guidance around principles for designing agile organization (this is a hand-out). These principles are based on fundamental shifts in thinking -- away from control and towards greater value creation. With the hand-out, we split the group up and give them an assignment: take a fictional, old-school company and apply the agile principles in practical ways.

Throughout the second day, we continue peer groups, constantly weaving in the individual leadership work. We challenge the participants to build an awareness of how their reactive or creative mindset is contributing to ideas and thoughts about agile organizations. We ask them to further explore the shift that would be required to lead in an organization demonstrating the agile principles.

Emond: *Remind me, how many people are in a class?*

Lowry: Well, theoretically it's around 24. But honestly, there's so much demand that we usually end up with about 28 to 30.

We originally targeted key position holders -- the top 450 leaders in the company. We were through this population by Q3 2018, but the demand has been so great that we are now continuing the program and have had over 700 participants so far and another six programs planned in 2019.

Emond: *I get how that happens. So, by now, all of this has happened in just two days?*

Lowry: Yes. By the beginning of the third day, we apply everything to Roche. We give them the chance to reimagine any aspect of the company that they think would benefit from being more agile.

This is done in a completely open space way. Any participant can stand up and say, "I'm interested in reimagining the way we do R&D," or digital, or compensation, or any other topic that comes to mind. Any other participant who is interested in working on that can join. They get together and think about fully applying the agile principles to that topic, knowing it's a very real application to Roche.

"It isn't about processes or practices, it's a fundamental change in the way our organization works together. It's a revolution."

The key to this exercise is that we are not starting projects from the Kinesis program. Participants can work on topics that are relevant for them, and then take ideas away to potentially implement later in their own areas.

It is all driven by the participants, so it is highly applicable and relevant to work they are already doing. And by the end of the day, basically wherever they are in their thinking, they are.

Emond: *It's like applying agile in real time.*

Lowry: Exactly. And the next morning, a member of the executive committee joins to hear what they have been thinking about and learning. We leave it to the participants to decide what and how they want to share with the executive.

It's a fascinating exercise. Groups do very different things, but very rarely do they simply present their reimagining ideas. They will often bring in their ideas, but not in a traditional presentation format. The executive is prepped to just go with whatever the participants plan. Which means it's an exercise in agility for the executive as well, and they absolutely love it.

Wilbur: The various "reimagining" ideas are also shared with the entire executive committee on a regular basis to provide the broader perspective of what is on people's minds. But they are not presented for approval.

As Tammy says, the participants are encouraged to take their ideas forward, to experiment and collaborate across organizational boundaries.

Lowry: And again, we continue to weave in the individual leadership work.

In fact, at the end of the last day, in their last peer group, they identify the one big area of their own leadership they want to focus on. We also invite them to run a similar "Kinesis" session with their own leadership teams after the program.

This is not mandated, but we offer it. When we started this, we thought we might get 5% to 10% of leaders taking us up on it. Currently, we are at about 95% of the participants opting to run sessions with their own teams.

And as a result, we have brought the Kinesis concepts to over 6,000 leaders at this point.

Wilbur: A key element of the intact workshops is encouragement to experiment. To think about reimagining their own part of the business. You don't have to go back out there and create a big change effort, that's not really the agile way of going about it.

We actually did this in our HR organization with the way we were rewarding and recognizing people. We started looking at it a different way -- were we getting the lift in the amount of spend that we had towards our full compensation program?

And the general answer was no. So, we did a sprint on that with a team of different experts with different inputs to figure out the sticking points. Usually, that would take a year or more of review and analysis and evaluation, but conception to board approval only took seven months. And it was effective at the time of the announcement, no more work needed.

This is happening all across Roche. So many people are talking about this, what they're trying to work on, what's getting in their way. They've said it's a phenomenon. I think it's just another indicator that we really hit on something here that is resonating well for all of

our people.

Lowry: I get stopped all the time by leaders saying, "You've changed my life." Because if you're doing agile well, you're releasing energy in the organization. And also for yourself as a leader, because you're not desperately trying to control everything anymore.

Wilbur: And what we're finding now, because of the empowerment and shared accountability, is that we need to look at the people on the other side of that equation. Their leaders come back fundamentally different and now everybody has to catch up with that. Everyone is getting into agile everywhere, all the time now.

Lowry: That is so true. For example, we've shifted all of our core talent practices over the last two years to be much more flexible -- we haven't even fully rolled them out yet, and we're already challenged to shift them yet again, as the organization moves into true agile structures.

I mean, it's not just leaders who are impacted by this -- 6,000 leaders in a 97,000-person company isn't that much. But it's the way agile is getting integrated in enough places and the way that people are seeing fundamental changes that shows we're way past the tipping point.

Emond: *But there's nothing in this course about formal agile, like teams and sprints.*

Lowry: Nothing.

Emond: *That's what makes this so unique.*

Lowry: Because we go about it mindset first. We don't talk about teams or Kanban or sprints at all. That is not even *part* of what we teach.

Because when you talk about an agile mindset and an agile organization, it has nothing to do with sprints or all that other kind of stuff. From a technical perspective, it's more about clear platforms that give you simplicity around those things that need to happen regularly, fluidity in roles to enable flexible resource utilization, simplicity in governance processes, etc. Scrums, design sprints and stand-up meetings are really just practices that may be employed for certain types of work.

It's really only been in the last six months that we've begun to see a big demand for more of the technical agile methodology. So we are now building more capability internally around that. But the response, the real love for this, has just been around thinking about how we can work differently.

Emond: *Yeah, I'm seeing more and more that really key decisions are happening closer to the front-line people. What impact do you see that having on the practice of leadership?*

Lowry: This is not incremental change. I think it used to be that the world moved slow enough that we could trick ourselves into thinking that as leaders, we could direct and control. We had the answers, right? In the world we're moving into, we can't even trick ourselves about that anymore.

So, the only way to effectively lead is to empower the people around you. And I don't mean empowerment like, "Go away, and when you come back, I'll tell you if you got it right." I mean empowerment like you give people full accountability for what they're working on.

"So, the only way to effectively lead is to empower the people around you. That means your leadership role shifts from being director or approver to being a support function."

That means your leadership role shifts from being director or approver to being a support function. But I want to be clear, it's not only coaching and support, leaders still need to set clear guardrails and offer vision. You still need to give purpose. You still need to provide inspiration.

But now you're trusting the people around you and the system to figure out the potential answers, to learn and to adjust. You *really* have to trust the system.

Wilbur: And that gets back to the stability element and our values of integrity, courage and passion -- they help you trust the system. We have an extremely strong culture that we have enabled to be adaptable, but stable.

Everyone is able to move with greater speed and flexibility because they have solid ground to maneuver from. Being 120-plus years old, many people would say it's got to be very difficult for us to be agile because we have a lot of traditional elements. Maybe.

But we also have a very clear purpose -- our patients. And very stable values: integrity, courage and passion. The combination of all of those stable elements is an incredible anchoring point that enables us to move with speed and flexibility, but also with absolute clarity.

Lowry: With that history and clear purpose, combined with a focus on shifting leadership mindset and implementing some agile organizational principles, we are seeing our organization become more agile every day.

It isn't about processes or practices, it's a fundamental change in the way our organization works together. It's a revolution.

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