

# Developmental Agile Leadership: Navigating a VUCA World<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: The Power of Adaptive Mentorship

(by Kam Jugdev)

This is the first article of a two-article series. When I was invited to co-author an applied book on leadership, I did not know what to expect. Let us begin with the short story of guidance and mutual trust to exemplify **Developmental Agile Leadership**.

For years, I was most comfortable writing conceptual and empirical academic articles on project management topics with my collaborators. I had never authored an applied book. In 2024, when I was approached about this collaboration, I felt overwhelmed by my existing workload. So when this opportunity arose, I welcomed it, but it compounded my sense of being overloaded. Through the tension between academic demands and a novel growth opportunity, I learned a great deal about adaptive leadership.

Tim and I had just over 20 virtual meetings during which we brainstormed and worked on the book. This was not a hierarchical relationship but a process where he sometimes stood alongside me as a supportive partner, quietly observing as I found my bearings with applied writing. Along the way, I was nudged to take the lead on sections. This created space for me to express my ideas and receive guidance when I stumbled.

This process embodied Developmental Agile Leadership, which involves leading from behind to empower others. It demonstrated *trust* by allowing me to make mistakes (such as my initial drafts that were too academic for an applied book), *patience* by letting me find solutions at my own pace (such as prioritizing the book into my workload and feeling

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okay when I declined other commitments), and *wisdom* in knowing when to step in and when to step back. The process involved personal growth and confidence-building.

We suggest that our collaboration exemplifies how developmental leadership combines with Agile principles to create something greater than either approach alone. We quickly created drafts and exchanged them, making it feel synchronous. Our rapid, iterative exchange illustrated agile practices. We constantly adapted and refined our ideas, allowing the work to evolve.

## Leading in a VUCA World

Turning to our applied book, we know that workplace challenges and difficulties are unavoidable. These days, demographics, economies, politics, environments, societies, and technologies continue to shape, shift, and shake our world. Individuals, teams, and organizations must be more adaptable and agile. The term VUCA captures the aspects of change as *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*. People and organizations continually strive to adapt, enhance their strengths, mitigate weaknesses, and identify opportunities and threats.

Changing environments demand that leadership styles adapt as well. Our response to these challenges is Developmental Agile Leadership. This approach integrates developmental and Agile principles to build adaptability and resilience. In a world where VUCA challenges persist, Developmental Agile Leadership empowers leaders to trust, adapt, and grow alongside their teams.

This journey illustrated what Developmental Agile Leadership requires: situational adaptability. Just as I experienced discomfort in moving from academic to applied writing, leaders today must shift from their comfortable leadership styles.

## Three Leadership Approaches for Adaptive Leadership

Three complementary approaches enable leadership adaptability. *Transformational leadership* operates from the front, inspiring teams to pursue a greater purpose through vision and strategic direction (Kloppenborg & Jugdev, 2025). *Servant leadership* involves leading from the middle by supporting and facilitating teamwork through cooperation and service. With its origins in human resources literature, *developmental leadership* involves guiding from behind. Nelson Mandela described developmental leadership as follows: “A

leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the nimblest go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind” (Mandela, 1995). Tim embodied this approach with me.

These leadership approaches apply across three key stakeholder groups. Most *Sponsors and Product Owners* operate at the strategic level. They often use transformational leadership to set direction. *Scrum Masters and Project Managers* work at the team level. They frequently adopt the servant leadership approach to support incremental/daily progress. *Team Members and Engaged Stakeholders* function at the individual level. They develop personal leadership capabilities to enable effective group work. The most effective leaders adjust their approach based on situational requirements. Effective leaders lead from the front when visionary leadership is required; from the middle when support is most important; and from behind when development is the priority.

### **Three Core Concepts of Developmental Agile Leadership**

Our Developmental Agile Leadership model involves three interconnected concepts to help leaders and teams navigate the VUCA world. The concepts overlap and reinforce each other dynamically, and shift based on context, organizational level, and stakeholder needs.

The first concept is an adaptive stakeholder-focused culture, based on learning agility, trust, and hope. This type of culture creates an environment where developmental leadership flourishes. The second concept is continuous learning, reflection, and growth. This mindset enables rapid adaptation through feedback and reflection. The third concept is empowering individuals and teams, in which principles and mindsets translate into action through personalized development, shared decision-making, and self-management.

Culture is the bedrock concept that enables everything else, as it reflects an organization’s vision and mission. Culture shapes how organizations support operational practices from human resources and project funding perspectives. Without this foundation of learning agility, trust, and hope, teams cannot develop the psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) that is needed for experimentation, reflection, and shared leadership. Let us explore these three concepts in more detail.

## **Concept 1: Adaptive Stakeholder-Focused Culture**

Agile is both a philosophy (mindset) and a software development methodology. As a way of thinking, being agile means embodying adaptability and responsiveness. As a methodology, Agile delivers valuable products through teamwork and open communication, guided by principles such as customer collaboration and responsiveness to change (Beck et al., 2001). An adaptive stakeholder-focused culture manifests through specific behaviors and mindsets that leaders model, and teams embody across three key stakeholder groups.

Learning agility requires a growth mindset, the belief that abilities develop through dedication and effort rather than being fixed traits (Dweck, 2006). Leaders with a growth mindset embrace challenges, persist through difficulties, learn from their mistakes, and find inspiration in others' success. "Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships" (Covey, 1995). Trust builds through consistent behavior, particularly when leaders show vulnerability by sharing incomplete work and openly acknowledging mistakes. Hope is a motivational state combining clear goals, pathways to achieve them, and the agency to act.

These three virtues converge when leaders across all roles prioritize stakeholder value and model honesty, respect, and collaboration. Regardless of our roles within the organization, we can learn to model the behaviors and mindsets that create this culture.

## **Concept 2: Continuous Learning, Reflection, and Growth**

In Agile, teams seek early and frequent feedback because rapid learning cycles drive improvement (Beck et al., 2001). Agile teams value sharing incomplete work with customers to minimize major course corrections later. It is hard to respond to feedback without feeling defensive. Responding to feedback requires active listening and a willingness to accept and make changes. Agile team members understand that stakeholder requirements change progressively, and that their deliverables evolve accordingly.

Honest reflection transforms experience into learning. Examples of modeling key behaviors include humility, relationship building, active listening, self-compassion, and sharing credit. Rapid learning cycles enable teams to experiment, evaluate results, and

iterate quickly using approaches like plan-do-check-act. Leaders reframe failure as a learning opportunity. In doing so, leaders create a psychologically safe environment for calculated risk-taking.

Drawing on learning theory, individuals and groups can reflect by asking ‘What do I know?’ ‘What am I doing?’ and ‘What am I reflecting on?’ (Kolb, 2014). Since reflections at the individual versus collective levels vary, what makes feedback psychologically safe for one role may feel threatening in another, especially in organizational contexts and in relation to positional power.

### **Concept 3: Empowering Individuals and Teams**

When leaders cultivate adaptive cultures and support continuous learning, they create the conditions for empowering individuals and teams to lead.

As leaders form strong relationships with each person, they develop an understanding of their unique needs, strengths, and aspirations. Sharing decision-making builds trust and capability as teams show effective judgment. This enables leaders to increase individual responsibilities gradually. When leaders reframe challenges as opportunities for development, they create opportunities for others to respond positively. This allows for conversations in which they receive support and guidance as they navigate a project challenge and experience leadership development.

Self-managing teams represent the culmination of Developmental Agile Leadership. These teams decide collaboratively, hold each other accountable, and achieve superior results (Kloppenborg & Jugdev, 2025). Self-managing teams require minimal direction because they understand the project vision, trust each other, and have the capabilities to execute effectively.

It is one thing to understand what empowerment means, but another to know how to create it in practice. The steps involved differ depending on whether you are setting strategic direction, facilitating daily work, or contributing individual expertise.

### **Foundational Behaviors: The Center of the Model**

While the three concepts of an adaptive stakeholder-focused culture, continuous learning and reflection, and empowering individuals and teams each have distinct characteristics,

they share four common foundational behaviors that enable them to work together: communication, trust, courage, and understanding.

**Behavior 1: Communication** connects the three concepts discussed earlier. Clear and transparent communication keeps everyone aligned and enables better decisions. Open, honest, and timely communication builds trust, even when conversations are difficult. As leaders communicate clearly about vision, feedback, and expectations, they create the conditions for culture, learning, and empowerment to flourish.

**Behavior 2: Trust** is the glue that holds all relationships together. Trust develops through consistent behavior, particularly when leaders show vulnerability by sharing incomplete work and openly acknowledging mistakes. When team members trust each other, they feel safe sharing ideas, taking risks, learning from mistakes, and making decisions. Trust requires respect, support, positive communication, and honesty.

**Behavior 3: Courage** enables leaders and teams to challenge the status quo, question existing practices, and create space for innovation. Courage means stepping into new and uncomfortable situations, taking on challenges that push abilities, and confronting fears while inspiring hope. Team members can take courageous steps in safe environments—leaders who act with courage model the willingness to experiment and learn that developmental agility requires.

**Behavior 4: Understanding** manifests through relationship building and active listening. Leaders develop a deep understanding of each person's unique needs, strengths, and aspirations. This understanding enables the co-creation of individualized leadership development plans and helps leaders know when to lead from the front, support from the middle, or guide from behind.

Communication, trust, courage, and understanding reinforce each other. Trust grows through consistent communication. Courage builds when understanding creates psychological safety. Understanding deepens through honest communication. Together, these behaviors create conditions in which adaptive cultures thrive, continuous learning occurs, and individuals and teams feel empowered to lead.

Regardless of your role within the organization, you can learn and model these behaviors. These behaviors apply whether you are setting strategic direction, facilitating daily work, or contributing individual expertise. By practicing these behaviors, you create an environment where Developmental Agile Leadership can take root and grow.

## The Dynamic Nature of Developmental Agile Leadership

These behaviors lie at the center of our Venn diagram, where the three concepts intersect to form Developmental Agile Leadership (Figure 1).

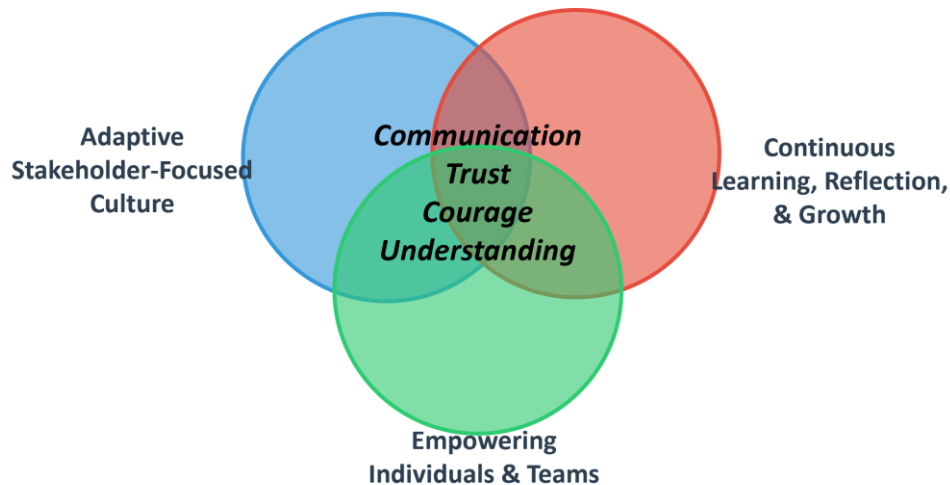


Figure 1: Developmental Agile Leadership Framework

Although the diagram appears static, we envision these concepts to overlap dynamically. Picture the circles shifting and changing based on context, time, and organizational level. For example, in some circumstances, an adaptive stakeholder-focused culture might align more with continuous learning, reflection, and growth when a team needs to build psychological safety before practicing leading. In other circumstances, continuous learning, reflection, and growth may exhibit more overlap as teams translate feedback into self-directed action. What works at an individual level differs from what works at a team level, which differs from what works at an organizational level. External stakeholders add another dimension of complexity to this figure.

### Your Leadership Journey Begins

In summary, navigating VUCA environments requires more than technical expertise. It requires leadership that adapts, learns, and empowers. Developmental Agile Leadership offers a framework for this leadership, integrating culture, learning, and empowerment across all organizational levels.

You do not need to hold a formal leadership title to practice these concepts. Whether you are a sponsor setting strategic direction, a project manager facilitating daily progress, or a team member contributing expertise, you can cultivate learning agility, build trust, foster hope, embrace feedback, reflect on your experiences, and empower those around you. Leadership emerges from behavior and mindset, not position.

The dynamic nature of Developmental Agile Leadership makes it adaptive. Leaders do not use a formulaic approach. Leaders take time to assess each situation, each person's developmental needs, reflect on how they can help individuals and groups lead, and adjust their approach accordingly—the core of Figure 1 anchors the three concepts. However, the path to it will depend on where individuals and teams are in their development journey and on the unique challenges they face. To capture this idea, we used the book cover to portray a duck swimming alongside and behind the ducklings.

Our companion article puts these concepts into practice. It explores how sponsors, project managers, and team members each practice communication, trust, courage, and understanding differently, and *why* alignment across all three roles is important. When every link in the chain is strong, individuals adapt, develop, and succeed. We encourage you to read it and reflect on how these behaviors apply to you.

“Trust fuels collaboration, learning agility drives growth, and hope sustains momentum — embrace these foundations, and watch your leadership transform those around you”  
(Kloppenborg & Jugdev, 2025, p. 31).

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**AI Disclaimer:** *Claude AI used to support editing, refinement, and language clarity. All substantive content is the authors' original work.*

**Declaration of Interest:** *The authors declare that the primary work cited in this article — Kloppenborg, T. J., & Jugdev, K. (2025), *Developmental agile leadership: Empowering teams in a changing world* (Business Expert Press) — was co-authored by both authors of this article. This relationship is disclosed in the interest of transparency.*

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Their book — *Developmental agile leadership: Empowering teams in a changing world* — was published by Business Expert Press and can be found [here](#). It has been accepted for co-distribution by Harvard Impact (formerly Harvard Business Publishing) and will appear on Harvard's website in 2026.