

Developmental Agile Leadership: How Sponsors, Project Managers, and Team Members Lead Differently¹

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This is the second article in our two-article series. Astute leaders use tried-and-true ideas from the past, such as project management and total quality management, and newer ideas that have come from Agile. Leaders remain responsible for delivering results, but they rely far less on command and control and far more on inspiration and facilitation. In our Developmental Agile Leadership approach, we describe several levels of leadership and how each can lead from different positions, emphasizing different behaviors. Leaders can actively practice and improve their behaviors to benefit their teams, processes, and results. Building on the framework introduced in our companion article, this article explores how those concepts translate into practice across three key roles.

“When leaders remove barriers and build trust, teams take ownership, solve problems, and drive success — step back, empower, and watch your teams rise to the challenge” (Kloppenborg & Jugdev, 2025, p. 103).

Sponsors and Product Owners operate mostly at the strategic level; **Scrum Masters and Project Managers** work mostly at the team level; and **Team Members** function at the individual level and with collaboration at the team level. People can serve as transformational leaders from the front, servant leaders in the middle, and developmental leaders from the back. For convenience, in this paper, we will refer to sponsors and product owners as sponsors. We combine these roles as both represent stakeholders and make decisions (PMI, 2025). We refer to scrum masters and project managers as project managers. The scrum master role, as developed in Agile, is more facilitating and less directive. We think that is good for project managers also, and so we combine the roles.

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² Tim Kloppenborg and Kam Jugdev are the authors of the book *Developmental Agile Leadership: Empowering teams in a changing world*. Learn more in their author profiles at the end of this article.

Sponsors work more from the front, but significantly in the middle. Project managers work extensively from all three positions. Team members often work collaboratively in the middle, but individually from behind a fair amount.

Regardless of their role or leadership position, we found that all leaders need to engage in four overarching sets of behaviors: communication, trust, courage, and understanding. These behaviors are often practiced differently by role. A sponsor exercising trust will look different from a team member exercising trust. The challenge is knowing **how to** practice the behaviors effectively from one’s position within the organization. Developmental Agile Leadership offers a practical roadmap on this. As these four sets of behaviors are interdependent, alignment matters...When a link in the chain is weak, it affects the entire system.

Exhibit 1 displays these with two specific suggestions for each. We elaborate in the remainder of the paper.

Sponsor	Project Manager	Team Member
<u>Communication</u> Set direction Work with stakeholders	<u>Communication</u> Communicate with stakeholders Communicate with team	<u>Communication</u> Be transparent Seek feedback
<u>Trust</u> Start the project Trust team	<u>Trust</u> Empower team Create safe environment	<u>Trust</u> Take ownership Deal with risks
<u>Courage</u> Make decisions Maintain accountability	<u>Courage</u> Protect the team Remove barriers	<u>Courage</u> Demonstrate accountability Adapt
<u>Understanding</u> Remember the big picture Engage in reviews	<u>Understanding</u> Deal with constraints Lead improvement	<u>Understanding</u> Develop yourself Actively participate

Exhibit 1: Communication, trust, courage, and understanding by role

Note: The behaviors identified for each role are derived and adapted from Anantatmula & Kloppenborg (2021), Kloppenborg & Jugdev (2025), and Kloppenborg & Laning (2012), with role-combining conventions consistent with PMI (2025).

Project Sponsors

A sponsor provides resources, represents stakeholders and the project team, makes timely and major decisions, prioritizes work, and is co-responsible with the project manager to deliver results.

On a consulting engagement, the sponsor of a major healthcare project authentically displayed communication, trust, courage, and understanding. He started with the project charter, passionately describing the need, stating a couple of non-negotiable points, and then actively participating in charter creation without using any undue influence. He showed courage in making key decisions—even when they were not popular. And he listened actively during project reviews.

Sponsor Communication

Setting direction includes clearly and convincingly describing the project's purpose, its strategic direction, and expected outcomes. Convincing participants and stakeholders with clarity and passion can get a project off to a great start and help maintain momentum throughout.

Sponsors **work with stakeholders** by representing them to the project team and vice versa. They are the single, accountable voice championing the project. Sponsors engage stakeholders regularly and incorporate their feedback. Armed with stakeholder input, sponsors prioritize work based on business value and risk, clarifying requirements and acceptance criteria.

Sponsor Trust

Effective sponsors establish trust with their teams and stakeholders. This trust goes both ways—sponsors need to be trusted, and they need to trust. Sponsors set the overall direction, communicate non-negotiables, and authorize the project charter.

Trusting a team is not always easy or immediate. Sponsors select team members and progressively empower them so that decisions can be made close to the work being performed. Wise sponsors start new teams by enabling them to make easy decisions so both can develop confidence. They encourage experimentation and responsible risk-taking—not blaming people if a risk event happens but learning from it. Sponsors show presence and respect through active listening, constructive feedback, and consistent support.

Sponsor Courage

The sponsor **makes big decisions** and delegates smaller ones. The sponsor retains accountability for all decisions and needs to work with the project manager and team members enough to know how much they can be trusted to make good decisions. When decisions are escalated, sponsors need to resolve them promptly to avoid slowing project progress or escalate them to an appropriate level if they cannot be resolved.

When sponsors **maintain accountability**, they hold themselves accountable for the work and decisions they should make and hold others accountable for their results without micromanaging. They show commitment, meet their responsibilities, challenge assumptions, and support their team.

Sponsor Understanding

Sponsors **remember the big picture** when they ensure projects remain aligned with the organization's strategic goals and stakeholders' needs. While sponsors are typically champions of their projects, they have a responsibility to be the first to question the project's ongoing viability if it no longer serves broader business goals. They strive for short-term results but are more concerned with delivering products that customers can use effectively, creating value for both the parent organization and the customer.

Sponsors deepen their understanding when they conduct **reviews**. By actively listening and questioning, sponsors continue to learn more about their projects and how they are progressing. They seek and consider stakeholder feedback, technology improvements, and market conditions to validate assumptions, adapt, and learn.

Sponsors and product owners set the tone for everything that follows. When they communicate purpose clearly, build trust progressively, make courageous decisions promptly, and stay connected to the big picture, they create the conditions for project

managers and teams to do their best work. When sponsors are hard to reach, slow to decide, or disconnected from stakeholder realities, the chain weakens at its first and most critical link.

Project Managers

A project manager leads planning, communications, obstacle removal, and process improvement; guides team member work and development; and is co-responsible with the sponsor for delivering results.

On a manufacturing consulting project, the project manager was key in helping the team prioritize work, ensure the product made sense, and then guided the team in presenting the findings in an organized manner that the client found useful. This project manager helped the team members grow while simultaneously delivering actionable solutions to the client.

Project Manager Communication

A project manager's role in **communication** includes communicating with both stakeholders and the project team. **Communication with stakeholders** is enhanced by transparently showing and reporting on work progress. Project managers can invite key stakeholders into their war room where they visually display progress and plans—including incomplete plans and work. Stakeholders prefer to know the true situation—even when it is not what they had hoped. This transparency builds trust. Project managers ensure progress by tracking work against key milestones and commitments and promptly reporting true status.

Project managers **communicate with their team** by continually describing the project vision, making their commitment to that vision visible and personal, and showing optimism. They foster collaboration among team members. They address personal conflict quickly and use task-related conflict to develop better solutions and to develop the team. Project managers celebrate progress to keep motivation high and to develop resilience.

Project Manager Trust

Project managers **empower their teams** by supporting them, progressively delegating responsibilities when individuals or the team are ready, and providing the resources necessary for success. Effective project managers help their teams improve their work processes. They provide clear expectations and then let the team take charge. They clarify roles and ensure everyone understands their personal responsibilities, their teammates' responsibilities, and the team's collective responsibilities.

Project managers **create a safe environment** where people can share ideas—even partial ideas—and take calculated risks. Project managers then reward reasonable risk-taking rather than punish it when it occurs. Shared decision-making also builds trust.

Project Manager Courage

When project managers **protect their teams** by acting courageously, they inspire trust, hope, and a desire to learn in team members and stakeholders. They protect their team from external disruptions and distractions. They remove impediments that hinder team progress. Part of protecting a team is quickly escalating problems to the sponsor and/or other governing bodies, as problems identified early can often be solved more quickly. They protect the team from political interference and resolve issues between various parts of the organization and various stakeholders. Project managers build collective hope, which helps teams develop the resilience needed to overcome setbacks.

Project managers show courage by monitoring progress toward their defined objectives while remaining **adaptable**. They lead with core values, whether in a transformational style from the front, a service style in the middle, or a developmental style from behind. Over time and with experience, project managers learn when to lead, support, or guide their team members. They use a mix of styles to achieve project results and to develop the team and its members individually. They adapt their leadership style based on what the team needs most.

Project Manager Understanding

To develop a better understanding, project managers manage **constraints** and lead improvements. Project managers learn which constraint (time, cost, quality, or scope) is most vital to their project and balance the other constraints to ensure the primary constraint is satisfied without exceeding the limits of any constraint. They encourage

constructive conflict and productive dialogue to develop better solutions together. They align and assign team members and resources accordingly. When they have a mature and empowered team, they collaboratively make these assignments.

An important part of the project manager's role is to **lead improvement**. Project managers can do this by embracing a growth mindset, valuing learning, resilience, and shared success over individual recognition. They use integrity, confidence, and compassion to support individual and team growth.

Project managers are the critical link between strategic intent and team execution. When they communicate transparently, empower their teams progressively, protect their people courageously, and balance constraints with understanding, they keep the project moving and the team growing. When project managers are directive rather than facilitative, or protective rather than developmental, they become a bottleneck rather than a bridge.

Project Team Members

A Project Team Member is an individual who performs work individually and collaboratively with teammates to plan, develop useful solutions, achieve project goals, improve, and work toward becoming a self-organizing, cross-functional team.

On a recent service project, the leader of our vendor's organization described with pride how pleased he is with a junior team member. This person is proactive and transparent, looking for things to do to help accomplish organizational work beyond assigned tasks and how to improve both as an individual and as an organization.

Team Member Communication

Team members need to communicate actively and transparently with each other. When each team member is clear and open to everyone, the team makes better decisions. Team members communicate progress openly and in time for recipients to react and make good decisions. Team members promptly share information regarding risks. They share incomplete thoughts as teammates may help clarify their thinking, lead in a different direction, or build upon a germ of an idea.

Engaged team members continually **seek feedback** and respond appropriately to improve individual and collective performance. If a person reacts in a hostile manner to unpleasant feedback, they may not get any more useful suggestions. Feedback with proper reflection helps develop critical thinking. A terrific team member continually asks how they can help inspire their team.

Team Member Trust

One good starting point for developing trust is **taking ownership of outcomes**. This helps foster optimism by encouraging teammates to trust in their collective ability to achieve their goals. Team members build collective hope and unity by sharing goals and supporting each other. Team members empower each other by valuing their contributions and through teamwork and shared leadership.

Team members also develop trust by **being accountable**. They continually practice being personally accountable—someone who can be counted upon. They act ethically and stay true to their values. They now have the credibility to hold their teammates accountable.

Team Member Courage

Team members show courage when they show **commitment**. This commitment extends to assigned work, personal commitments, and proactively seeking ways to help the team deliver useful solutions and to grow. They support agreed-upon processes and standards yet challenge them when they impede work. Team members practice self-regulation rather than relying on external controls. They seek additional tasks to do, yet they model and encourage their teammates to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Team members **adapt** to changing priorities and requirements. They experiment and act upon the experimental results. Team members help their teams develop resilience by bouncing back from setbacks and remaining focused on solutions.

Team Member Understanding

Team members strive to develop and share **understanding**. **Developing yourself is an important directive for team members who wish to contribute and succeed**. It starts with identifying one's abilities and interests. Then the team member should seek opportunities to develop and encourage their teammates to do the same. They engage in

continuous learning and skill development and embrace cross-functional work to broaden their skills.

Team members who **actively participate** improve their understanding. They fully engage in project planning. They contribute their knowledge, experience, and ideas to defining and meeting project objectives. They fully participate in retrospectives and improvement efforts. They are enthusiastically open-minded, so that they can embrace new ideas and learn from mistakes. They listen inventively to diverse perspectives, both for the stated idea and to understand the thinking and experience behind it. They show empathy toward others and develop working relationships, including with those whose personalities may challenge them.

Team members are the final link that determines whether the chain holds. When they communicate openly, take ownership accountably, show courage in adapting and committing, and develop their understanding continuously, they transform a group of individuals into a self-organizing team. When team members await direction rather than seeking it, no amount of strong sponsorship or skilled project management can compensate.

Your Leadership Journey Continues

Sponsors, project managers, and team members each practice communication, trust, courage, and understanding differently, but they share one common responsibility: to avoid being the weak link that limits their team's success. The role you play shapes how you lead. The behavior determines whether it works.

When leaders at all levels seek to understand using two-way communication and exhibit courage in staying true to their project's vision despite challenges and needed adaptations, they inspire trust, individual, and team growth, and project success.

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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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