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LEADING AGILE TEAMS TO HIGH PERFORMANCE IN A GLOBAL FINANCIAL TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently
and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors
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has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 21,535 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

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ABSTRACT

Agile businesses are able to adapt to internal and external environments and through this gain larger market share. While agility is well-researched in software development, organisations need all functions to be agile to achieve organisational agility. When companies have created a suitable environment for agile teams to thrive it is up to leaders on different levels to enable their teams to reach high performance in this environment. The aim of this research was to understand how leaders can help an agile team reach high performance and as a result, provide a practical guideline to achieve this goal.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the experiences of ten high-performance leaders in Wise Payments Limited and inductive content analysis was used to analyse the data. The functions of an agile leader were found to be making sure business needs are covered, enabling goal setting and delivery, role modelling behaviours and values, and supporting team members. High-performance enablers in an agile environment were divided into themes of culture, goal setting and delivery, team's ways of working, and team design, supporting people and role modelling. Each theme was described by categories of focus and specific actions for leaders who are looking to build agile high-performance teams. Some examples include the importance of role modelling, balancing skills and competencies in the team, providing trust and freedom to team members, supporting mistakes by helping the team learn from them, creating team rituals to enable bonding, knowledge sharing and collaboration, and aligning the team goals to the company and stakeholder targets.

Keywords: building agile teams, building high-performance teams, agile leader's function, agility enablers, high-performance enablers

INTRODUCTION

In the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) world companies are struggling to meet market demands and gain market share as the competition is more intense than ever (Baran & Woznyj, 2020). Some keywords that characterise business in the 21st century are massive advancements in technology, globalisation trends, volatility in the business setting, tumultuous socio-political and economic environments and increasing complexity. Traditional companies are slowed down by rigid hierarchies and performance control systems (Nold & Michel, 2016). More companies are looking to become agile and the emerging start-up culture is encouraging agility from the creation point. Around 95% of companies attending the 15th State of Agile survey (Digital.ai, 2021) reported that they have adopted some degree of agility, most of it in IT and software development teams.

Agile companies are able to react quickly to changes in internal and external environments (Carter & Varney, 2018). Through this property those enterprises are able to meet customer needs and seek out opportunities, and as a result gain market share (Teece *et al*., 2016). Agility also enables more efficient teamwork, higher overall happiness, and future-proofing the business (Ciric *et al*, 2022). Agility is the core for an organisation to be innovative and successful (Bianchi *et al*., 2020). It allows businesses to excel in a changing environment. Agility doesn't have a unified definition across literature but generally, it comes down to being able to change direction quickly (Conforto *et al*., 2016). Organisational agility can be achieved through agile leadership (Akkaya & Tabak, 2020) that provides psychological safety (Thorgren & Caiman, 2019), autonomy (Moe *et al*., 2021), customer focus, and knowledge sharing (Baran & Woznyj, 2020).

Agility can be viewed on different levels: company, team, and individual. Each is needed for the company to succeed in implementing agile methods (Gren, 2017b). This research is focused on the team or function performance level while keeping the company-level involvement in mind. In an agile environment, the expectations towards leaders are different from a traditional company (Bojar and Rzepka, 2020). Teams are often forming and dissolving to solve specific customer problems (Gren, 2017a). The environment creates a need for teams to reach the high

performance point quicker than in traditional companies where the ecosystem is more stable. Leaders play a large role in supporting the teams to reach this point (Akkaya & Tabak, 2020).

The agility phenomenon is more researched in software development teams and project management (Moe & Mikalsen, 2020). It has been stated that organisations could potentially benefit from learning how to increase agility in all teams (Theobald *et al.*, 2020). There's a possibility that some of those learnings can be directly or indirectly applied to other teams (Ciric *et al.*, 2019).

The problem is that leading teams to a high-performance state quicker in agile environments such as start-ups is needed to gain market share, but achieving high performance in this environment needs a different approach compared to a traditional company. The aim of this research is to understand how leaders can help an agile team reach high performance and as a result, provide a practical guideline to achieve this goal. The research is carried out by looking to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How to describe the function of leadership in agile teams?
- RQ2: How can a team achieve high performance in an agile work environment?
- RQ3: How can leaders help teams accelerate the process of reaching high performance in an agile working environment?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with different level leaders, sampled through a non-probability purposeful method, in Wise Payments Limited, an agile international financial technology company with more than 5000 employees worldwide. The sample group was chosen from different departments (operational, product, finance, marketing, etc.) based on the feedback of senior leadership. The goal was to seek patterns based on the experiences of leaders who have built high-performing teams or led them for a longer period of time. Inductive content analysis was carried out on the interview transcripts to establish larger themes from their experiences and provide examples of actions that can be taken by leads who are looking to build high-performance agile teams.

The theoretical background focuses on agile leadership challenges, agility enablers in a team, and how a leader can impact the process of reaching high-performance agility. The goal is to understand the challenges and antecedents to succeed in building agile teams. The methodology chapter describes Wise Payments Limited as the object for the research, the sampling process

and the inductive content analysis used to recognise patterns from semi-structured interviews. The aim of the results and analysis chapter is to present the themes that emerged as a result of coding the raw data and categorising it. Each theme is discussed through smaller categories and specific actions a leader can take to enable the creation of agile high-performance teams. Previous research is connected to and discussed in alignment with relevant concepts from interviews. The final goal is to propose practical guidelines for leaders for each larger theme.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter is focused on exploring different concepts of agility and leadership from previous research. As team agility has been heavily researched in software development teams and less outside of it (Moe & Mikalsen, 2020), most of the theory is connected to this. Although most of the research is based on software development and project-based teams, human and group psychology remain the same beyond it. Three subchapters explore the peculiarities of leadership in an agile working environment, enablers of high performance in agile teams, and the role of the leader in enabling agility and high performance.

1.1. The challenge of leadership in an agile environment

The expectations towards and ways of working for the leader have changed through time, and are different in traditional and agile environments (Greineder & Leicht, 2020). In fast-paced working environments, there is the concept of self-organisation and autonomy (Werder & Maedche, 2018), which a leader needs to account for and act according to. In addition, there's added complexity deriving from the business setup and culture, and whether it supports agility (Holbeche, 2019).

1.1.1. Expectations for the leader role

The business environment is constantly changing and there has been a drastic shift going from the 20th to the 21st century. There's a whirlwind of changes including but not limited to expanding cultural reach, instantaneous communication, focus on unique skills and responsibilities, new kinds of organisational structures, and virtual teams (Harvey & Buckley, 2002). All those changes create a need for a shift in expectations towards leadership and their best practices.

The role of a leader has carried varied meanings and expectations throughout history. Johns and Moser (1989) put forth the idea that some men are born to lead, such as Napoleon and Alexander the Great. The following trait theory (Malakyan, 2014) stated that those born leaders need to

have qualities such as expertise, intelligence, and integrity. As leadership became more of a corporate term, two theories were born: Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960). The first one states that people don't like their work and need to be controlled and the second one explains that people like to work and crave responsibility. The style of leadership depends on which theory the leader follows. Today, in more traditional corporations the word manager holds the meaning of someone with a focus on the controlling function (Harvey & Buckley, 2002). Otley (1994) argued a long time ago that controlling management has outlived its purpose as the business environment is changing.

In an agile organisation the leader needs to be capable of coordinating and supporting the work of autonomous teams and team members, acting as enablers rather than controllers (Denning, 2016). Some concepts that describe contemporary leadership are transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2008), self-leadership (Neck *et al.*, 2019), ethical leadership (Howard, 2010) and authentic leadership (Gardner *et al.*, 2021). These ideas revolve around the fact that the expectation for a contemporary leader is to be self-aware, authentic, ethical, empowering by putting followers first, and exposing them to new ways of thinking. The needed capabilities of a traditional manager and an agile leader are different and not always transferable. Dybå & Dingsøyr (2008) have described this difference through the lens of management of software development. Traditional development is managed through command and control while agile development thrives through leadership and collaboration. Akkaya and Tabak (2020) have shown that applying agile leadership methods will increase the agility and success of the organisation. These methods revolve around building a relationship between the leader and the follower, giving individuals the feeling of purpose, and serving the needs of their followers to help them achieve results. Greineder and Leicht (2020) compiled a comparison of leadership in agile and hierarchical organisations, which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Leadership in hierarchical and agile organisations

Levels	Leadership in hierarchical organisations	Leadership in agile organisations
Mindset/ attitude	Increased efficiency and clear division of tasks for maximum output	Understanding environmental change as a permanent state
Leadership role	Decision maker, sole responsibility of the leader	Empowering the team, creating appropriate conditions, shared responsibility
Team organisation	Clear hierarchical positions and distribution of roles between the leader and follower, responsibility at leader	Self-organised teams, flat hierarchies, independent working methods, focus on collaboration, shared responsibility
Management practice	Process view, sequence of different activities	Common vision, teamwork, collaboration, simple rules, open flow of information (e.g. through Scrum, Kanban or Lean Management)

Source: Greineder and Leicht (2020)

Greineder and Leicht (2020) showed differences in attitude, leadership role, structure and management practice. In their view, to become agile, change needs to become a fundamental part of the culture, and a leader needs to go from sole responsibility holder to enabler. Instead of hierarchy and rigid processes, the focus should be on autonomy, shared responsibility, common goals, and transparency.

1.1.2. Self-organising teams

Boehm and Turner (2005) described some challenges of implementing agile processes in traditional companies and one of them is the challenge of life cycles. This means that agile processes have the goal of shipping functionality fast while more traditional processes are aimed at longer-term optimization. This thought is in line with a problem that Gren explored in 2017, shown in Figure 1. Project development and group development cycles are out of sync in agile companies because of the need to react quickly to market needs. Gren *et al*. (2020) have also shown that more mature teams are more successful in implementing and following agile practices. They propose 12 focus areas to consider to increase team maturity: goals, roles, interdependence, leadership, communication and feedback, discussion, decision-making and planning, implementation and evaluation, norms and individual differences, structure,

cooperation and conflict management, shared responsibility, and organisational support. Ramírez‑Mora *et al*. (2022) also proved that group maturity impacts the team's ability to be effective while also stating that group cohesiveness plays a larger role in maturity than the age of the group.
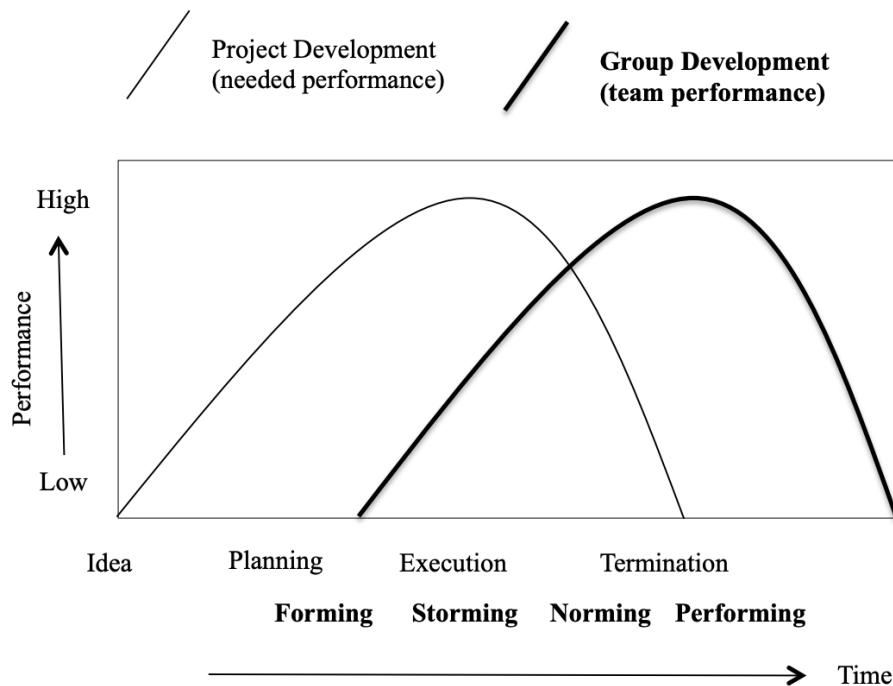
Figure 1. Project and group development lifecycle problem
Source: Gren (2017a)

One way to possibly close the gap between project and group development life cycle is to consider self-organising teams. Werder and Maedche (2018) noted that agility is a result of self-organisation. According to Gren (2017a), teams will need more guidance when they are immature. As the teams mature they grow the ability to be self-organised and more effective in reaching their goals. It is important to allow and guide the team to mature before expecting true agility (Kadenic *et al*., 2023). Scrum Master is one of the most well-known agile leader roles. Spiegler *et al*. (2019a) have described the nine different roles that a Scrum Master plays in an agile software development team and how trust and freedom for team members to take over the leadership roles enables the performance of a self-organising team. If a team is able to set their own goals instead of being put together after the goals have been predetermined then the gap between project and group development disappears. Psychological empowerment and intrinsic

motivation through meaningful and self-driven work enable teams and organisations to achieve agility (Muduli & Pandya, 2018).

Spiegler *et al.* (2019b) found that the possibility for autonomous teams to proliferate can be easily shut down by higher levels of management interfering with goal setting. If the whole company culture doesn't support self-organising teams, it's very hard for them to succeed. Spagnoletti *et al.* (2021) have also identified a tension between self-organising teams and the control needs of management teams, which is a blocking point to achieve agility. As possible solutions, they offer multilevel feedback processes to ensure the quality of products and alignment to company objectives, and a shift in management style to mentoring instead of control. When Salameh and Bass (2019) analysed the Spotify model, which encourages the balancing between cross-functional alignment and team autonomy, they found three new themes to enable team efficiency. In addition to having an adaptive structure and inter-team coordination, autonomous teams benefit from knowledge sharing, including discussions on mistakes, and mission-based planning. In addition, the assigned team lead carries a large importance in whether self-organisation can be successful (Licorish & MacDonell, 2021).

Denning (2016) states that the main challenge for agile leaders is to coordinate masses of self-organising teams and enable autonomy. Championing the agile principles by leaders is a defining factor of success for the organisation. Servant leadership, where the leader puts their focus on coaching and supporting the followers, has been shown to have a positive effect towards the efficiency of agile Scrum teams (Holtzhausen & de Klerk, 2018). Nauman *et al.* (2022) have come to the conclusion that servant leadership causes a collaborative environment on an individual level which is directly correlated to team performance. In order for leaders to be successful in supporting those teams they need to shift from "people-pulling" to "people-nurturing" (Muduli & Pandya, 2018). According to Licorish and MacDonell (2021), self-organising teams benefit from information sharing, discussion and scaffolding. To successfully implement self-organising teams, they need coaching, good relationships between team members and the ability to set their own goals (Weerheim *et al.*, 2019).

1.1.3. The role of organisational culture and agility

It has been shown that teams can only hope to achieve true agility if the company with its management is on board with the idea of achieving it (Gren, 2017b) but also willing and able to build a culture around it (Holbeche, 2019). All levels of leaders need to support agile values in order to make an agile work environment (Crnogaj *et al*., 2022). Agile methodologies don't work well with a hierarchical setup (Iivari & Iivari, 2011). According to the 16th State of Agile Report, (Digital.ai, 2022) the largest blocker to adapting agile methodologies outside of software development is leadership participation and general organisational resistance to change. Menon and Suresh (2021) defined management support as the largest influencer of workforce agility as it enables other drivers of agility. From a process perspective, one of the main barriers is that agile is clashing with some aspects of the company culture (Digital.ai, 2022). Whitworth and Biddle (2007) also found that when the company culture or leadership styles don't follow agile values, it becomes a blocker to team agility.

Mkoba and Marnewick (2022) connected the ability to adopt agile methods to five aspects of company culture: how management inspires and enforces goals, encouraging innovation and bold thinking, focusing on customer relationships and needs, and embodying values that create the right mindset. Holbeche (2019) suggests multiple things that a company must do in order to become truly agile: develop agile leadership practises, practise strategizing with stakeholders instead of giving set plans, create a collaborative and relationship-driven environment, allow risk-taking and failure, and create supporting new human resources policies such as rewards, coaching and development opportunities. Petermann and Zacher (2020) describe organisational culture, purpose and structural factors to be the main company-level influencers of agility. They think that in order for an organisation to become agile they need to shift away from the view that employees are a resource without an opinion towards embracing individuality. They suggest six ways of advancing the agile ways of working in a company including but not limited to developing leaders in the new and different ways of leadership, matching human resources processes to agile methods, creating a culture where employees feel safe and supported, and providing resources needed to implement new methodologies.

A clear key to building an agile organisation is creating an agile workforce (Muduli & Pandya, 2018). This includes attracting, hiring, developing and retaining top talent. Petermann and Zacher (2021) described ten behavioural dimensions that make up agility and can also provide a

good understanding of what to look for in talent: accepting changes, decision making, creating transparency, collaboration, reflection, user-centricity, iterating, testing, self-organisation and learning. Ajgaonkar *et al*. (2022) gathered the drivers of an agile workforce in Figure 2.
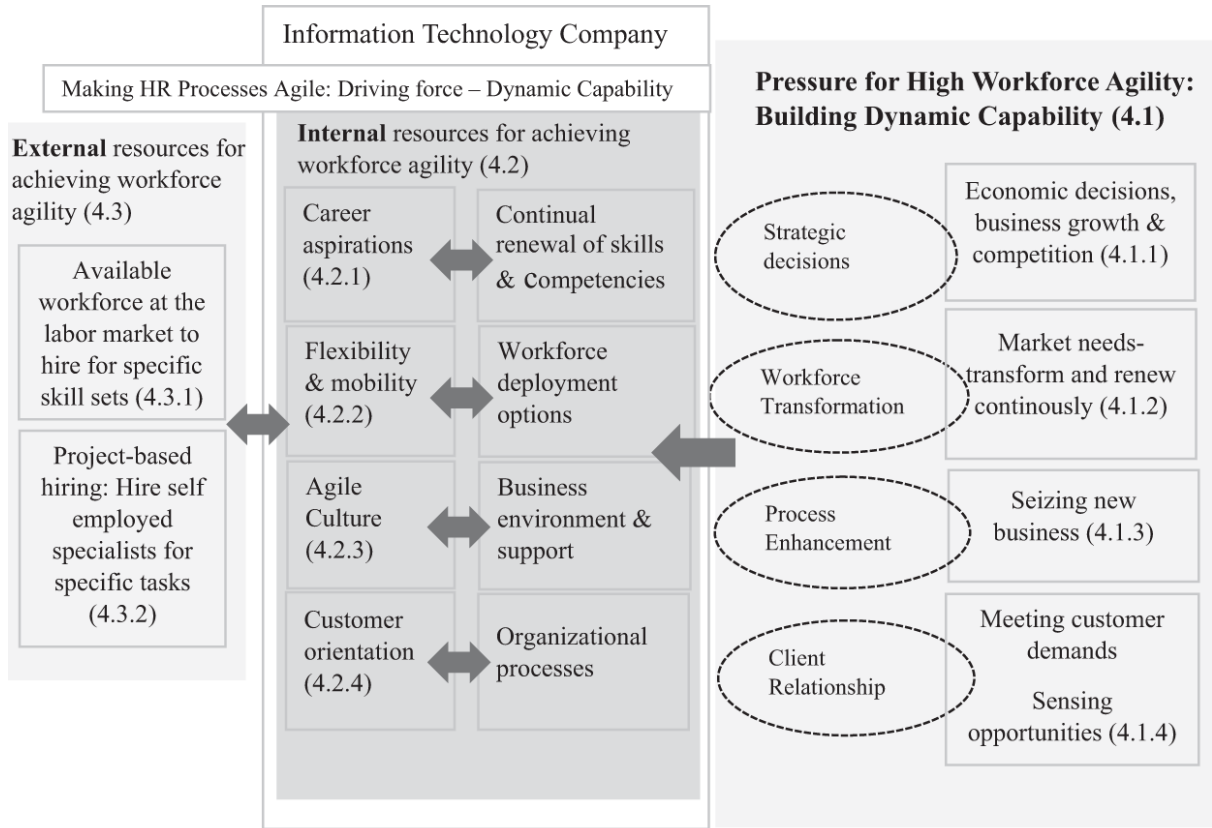
Figure 2. Drivers of an agile workforce
Source: Ajgaonkar *et al*. (2022)

While bringing the right talent to the company is important there are also internal talent management processes that need to take place and adjust to the pressures of agility. An agile human resources strategy is the foundation of gaining a competitive advantage through getting and keeping empowered employees with the right skills and behaviours (Junita, 2021).

1.2. High-performance enablers in an agile environment

According to the 16th State of Agile Report (Digital.ai, 2022) the best practices for high-performing agile teams are cross-collaboration and communication, and they practice continuous improvement techniques. Those teams tend to have people-centric values, clear

culture, tools, and leadership empowerment. The most used tools seem to be Atlassian Jira and Miro, and the most popular frameworks are Scrum and Kanban. In the following subchapters, the author will describe some of the more relevant high-performance enablers in agile teams.

One of the central documents of agile teams is the Agile Manifesto (Fowler & Highsmith, 2001) which outlines the following principles:

- individuals and interactions over processes and tools;
- working software over comprehensive documentation;
- customer collaboration over contract negotiation;
- responding to change over following a plan.

Although the Agile Manifesto is focused on software development, a lot of the concepts in it, such as alignment, fast iterations, communication, and team autonomy, can be applied to other areas of business as well.

1.2.1. Knowledge sharing and knowledge management

Knowledge sharing is one of the key pillars of agile and innovative organisations (Papa *et al.*, 2018) as it allows teams and businesses to perform on a higher level, and increase ideation capability and entrepreneurial orientation (Ahmad & Karim, 2019). Knowledge management practices have the power to provide a consistent flow of information to support fast change (Oliva & Kotabe, 2019). Nonaka (1994) divided knowledge into two dimensions: explicit knowledge, which can be transferred more easily through means such as documentation, and tacit knowledge, which originates from action and experience, and is much harder to transfer. Anwar *et al.* (2019) put together an overview of known barriers to and facilitators of knowledge sharing in development teams (Appendix 1) and showed that the most frequent factors are poor company culture, language barriers, cultural differences, and organisational support.

Khalil and Khalil (2020) researched knowledge management in an agile environment and created a model to describe how it impacts the outcome and how agile practices enable it. Their main findings include that daily team meetings and other daily rituals allow for more informal communication which enables the transfer of tacit knowledge, and iterative development practices, such as retrospectives, serve as a knowledge creation platform through rapid feedback. Knowledge depositories are mentioned as beneficial tools to document, find and explore

information. Ouriques *et al*. (2019) have also described the benefit of informal communication to convey tacit knowledge and codifying information for information storage, while 81% of the beneficial processes revolve around the first. While tacit knowledge plays a larger role in knowledge management success, it also contributes to explicit knowledge sharing, with cooperation and trust as enablers (Santos *et al*, 2023).

The main barriers to knowledge management in agile companies, as described by Oliva and Kotabe (2019), are connected to the scarcity of resources and time, but it has also been noted that these barriers are not major problems for an agile business. Most popular practices to overcome the mentioned barriers mostly involve frequent formal and informal communication, idea sharing, standardised operating procedures, and key performance indicators creation (Oliva & Kotabe, 2019). Hemon *et al*. (2019) suggested some new practices to help with knowledge sharing at scale including rotating the facilitator for team cross-functional team rituals, and sprint planning along with backlog grooming. Structuring of teams can also play a role in how well knowledge is shared across the organisation. As an example, Spotify, and many other companies, are using guilds, or communities of practice, to enable the flow of information (Smite *et al*., 2019).

1.2.2. Agile team rituals and collaboration

As discussed in the previous chapter, different team rituals have a large impact on creating, retaining and sharing knowledge in an organisation, but this is only a part of the benefit they can provide. Whitworth and Biddle (2007) found that agile team rituals allow teams to keep each other accountable, increase awareness of the goals and progress, and increase psychological safety. The classic agile project management practices include iterations, planning, daily standup meetings, and retrospectives (Alam & Gühl, 2022, pp. 123-150). Žužek *et al*. (2021) showed that those rituals allow for better problem-solving, faster identification of errors, improved communication, and quicker adaptation to change. Agile meetings that include heavy involvement in discussion and active listening play a large role in creating new ideas (Redlbacher *et al*., 2022). While agile meeting rituals have a positive effect on autonomy and support in the team, they are also connected to having more pressure and workload (Rietze & Zacher, 2022). Ozkan *et al*. (2020) propose that fixed team rituals such as sprints can be restrictive to true agility as feedback loops should be available as soon as the target has been reached instead of after a certain period when the meetings have been preset. On the other hand,

Kadenic *et al.* (2023) found in their study of Scrum that being successful in this requires agile rituals to take place.

Daily meetings, sprints, and retrospectives are shown to improve the communication skills of agile teams (Alqudah *et al.*, 2023). Kusuma *et al.* (2019) connected agile rituals to agility enablers such as workforce agility, competence, speed, responsiveness, knowledge management, learning, organisational culture, and cooperative teams. Implementing agile rituals outside of software development has also proven to be successful. For example, in academia, Ochoa *et al.* (2021) reported higher engagement and commitment to the goals, and participants reported better team communication. Kelly *et al.* (2022) managed to show increased cooperation and ownership in a humanitarian organisation thanks to agile rituals. Oprins *et al.* (2019) concluded that the most useful agile rituals outside of software development would be iterations, daily team meetings, retrospectives, and sprint-based working (including planning, review and backlogs).

A large body of studies has labelled communication and collaboration as one of the most important success factors of agile teams (Noteboom *et al.*, 2021). It's needed as agile teams often have numerous stakeholders and dependencies on them (Moe *et al.*, 2019b). Good communication and collaboration lead to the exchange of ideas and knowledge (Tan, 2016) which can bring forward new learnings and advancements (Menon & Suresh, 2021). Agile communication is transparent, open and conversational, and collaboration is enabled through open space physical workplaces (Denning, 2016). Face-to-face communication serves as the best method of conveying information (Rad & Rad, 2021b) and increasing agile performance (Peeters *et al.*, 2022). Agile teams choose informal communication methods over formal ones, which has a positive effect on enabling agility (Nascimento *et al.*, 2022). Small world communication patterns, where people are surrounded by a close network, have been shown to have a positive impact on performance and quality in agile teams (Shafiq *et al.*, 2019).

Rallying around a common goal, instead of personal ones, improves collaboration in the team (Petermann & Zacher, 2020). Ramírez‑Mora *et al.* (2020) showed that agile processes, such as working in iterations, improve communication and decision-making. Agile rituals allow for fast information exchange and feedback loops from peers and stakeholders (Petermann & Zacher, 2020). People with more experience contribute highly towards good communication (Ramírez‑Mora *et al.*, 2020) and understanding of shared goals (Moe *et al.*, 2019b) in the team.

Teamwork is one of the central concepts of true agility and team orientation plays a large part in this (Strode *et al*., 2022). Team orientation means taking others into account and having the belief that the common goals of the team are superior to individual ones (Salas *et al*., 2005). It's similar to the definition of cohesion which revolves around the motivation to work with the team towards common goals thanks to forged social relationships among other factors (Casey‑Campbell & Martens, 2009). Figure 3 further unpacks what plays a role in achieving effective teamwork, stating that all of the components of teamwork are coordinated by shared mental models, mutual trust, and communication.
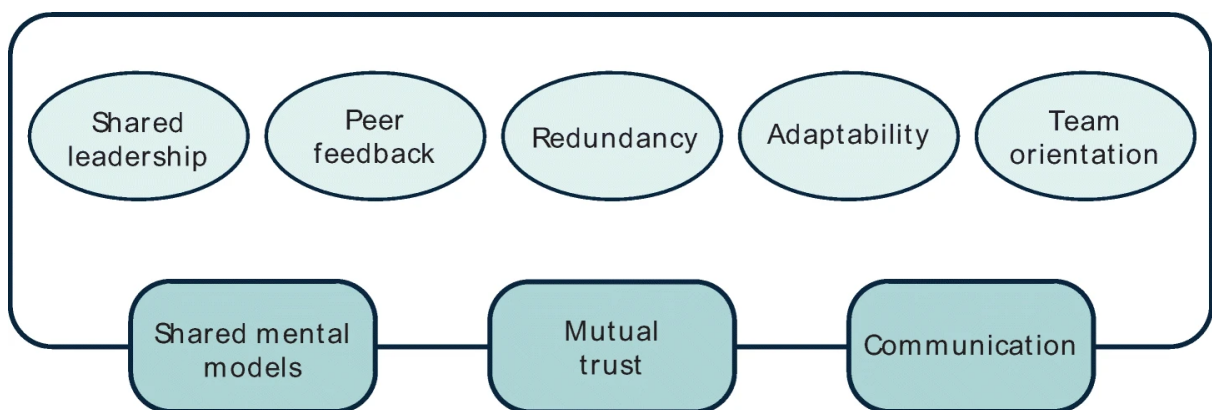
Figure 3. Teamwork effectiveness model in agile teams
Source: Strode *et al*. (2022)

Whitworth and Biddle (2007) discussed that daily team rituals allow for more cohesive teams as they are able to discuss everything important to the team, create awareness around the common goal, and keep each other accountable while also supporting each other. Both, cohesion and communication, enhance collaboration in agile teams (de Souza Santos & Ralph, 2022). Having a purpose and a common goal is connected to having stronger relationships in the team which leads to higher effectiveness of the team (Arora *et al*., 2023).

Trust is one of the most important aspects that help increase self-organisation, collaboration, and motivation in a complex agile environment (Gomes Silva *et al*., 2022). Buvik and Tkalich (2022) proved that although autonomy is important to achieve high performance in an agile environment, trust influences it even more. Trust is a defining component of psychological safety as it's needed to speak up, collaborate, and experiment (Perrmann-Graham *et al*., 2022). Psychological safety directly increases team effectiveness and reduces conflict (Verwijs &

Russo, 2023). Buvik and Tkalich (2022) showed that psychological safety, like trust, has an impact on agile team performance and that psychological safety is enhanced by autonomy. Peeters *et al.* (2022) proved that agile ways of working lead to higher performance through the mediating effect of psychological safety. To sum up, the effects are two-fold: trust and psychological safety are needed to enable agility but at the same time agile ways of working can create it.

According to Moe *et al.* (2019a), lack of trust is one of the main inhibitors of autonomous agile teams. When people feel safe to try and fail they are more likely to adopt agile ways of working (Petermann & Zacher, 2020). Psychological safety also has a complex relationship with agile rituals. When psychological safety is high then agile rituals are an efficient way of bringing forward its effects, if it's not then implementing agile rituals carefully can increase it (Hennel & Rosenkranz, 2021). Castro *et al.* (2022) suggest that having frequent 1-on-1 conversations with employees about their needs and aspirations, and helping identify blockers and help them overcome them increases psychological safety. Tyagi *et al.* (2022) compiled a framework for building trust in a team, as depicted in Figure 4.
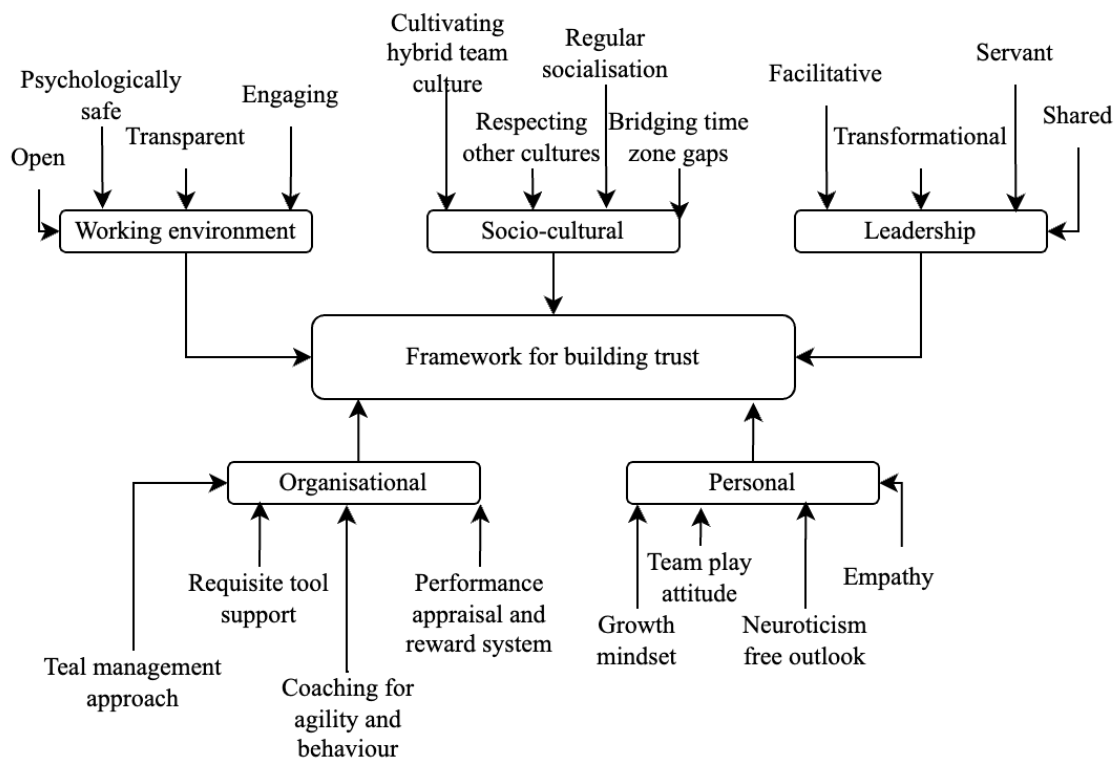
Figure 4. Building trust in distributed agile teams
Source: Tyagi *et al.* (2022)

Tyagi *et al*. (2022) discuss that in order to build trust there are elements in the working environment, socio-cultural setup, leadership, organisational and personal level that need focus from the team, their leader and the business as a whole.

1.2.3. Organisational learning and individual growth

An often described term when it comes to agility and learning is the learning organisation which describes a cultural value for the whole business rather than the mindset of a team or an individual. Learning organisation is one of the main enablers of agility outside of software development (Oprins *et al*., 2019) as learning new skills allows for more creative solution finding (Gomes Silva *et al*., 2022). It's also one of the foundations of an agile workforce (Alavi *et al*., 2014). Collaboration and communication through agile and iterative processes increase the learning capacity of people (Gomes Silva *et al*., 2022). An environment that encourages learning, for example through retrospectives and sharing knowledge across teams, is shown to have a positive impact on agile team effectiveness (Verwijs & Russo, 2022).

Armanious and Pagett (2021) reconfirmed the importance of agile learning strategies when it comes to competing in a fast-paced environment. They also described the importance of individual learning paths for employees to build the width of competency of the whole organisation. Informal and formal communication, for example in the form of daily meetings or coffee talks, have a large impact on knowledge creating capacity and knowledge management systems in saving it and making it accessible (Armanious & Pagett, 2021). Annosi *et al*. (2020b) have described the importance of different routines around knowledge sharing, such as daily updates, reflections, and peer/stakeholder feedback loops, to impact the ability of individuals and teams to learn.

It might be that the lack of psychological safety inhibits people from engaging in learning behaviours (Buvik & Tkalich, 2021). Learning is enabled through feedback and giving advancement opportunities to individuals (Rad & Rad, 2021b). Matching business needs with employees' personal ambitions to learn and grow to create those opportunities promotes agility (Ajgaonkar *et al*., 2022). Being able to complete a variety of tasks in different roles increases the learning and development of individuals (Menon & Suresh, 2021). Nejatian *et al*. (2019) showed

that in order to achieve strategic agility businesses should invest in learning and growth for their employees. They should be trained to be self-aware and able to use agile methods and tools (Petermann & Zacher, 2020).

Agile teams are made of people who carry agile values. Finding these individuals starts with recruitment that is focused on hiring agile talent who might be viewed as open to new experiences, driving for change, power and achievement, have a positive mindset towards learning and change, and are intelligent and resilient (Petermann & Zacher, 2020). Aghina *et al*. (2019) showed that being able to handle ambiguity and agreeableness are the most impactful traits for individuals in agile teams. Talent management practices play a large role in retaining good employees which directly influences business performance (Das *et al*., 2022).

Keeping individuals motivated and engaged defines whether they are willing to do the work and go the extra mile (Nascimento *et al*., 2022). Their commitment determines if they are motivated to contribute to the common goals (Menon & Suresh, 2021). Building trust between the leader and the employee results in better performance on an individual level in an agile setting (Kamal & Ul Hassan, 2022). Amorim *et al*. (2020) described that a healthy communication environment contributes to individual happiness which in turn contributes to positive team performance. One-on-one communication between a leader and a team member is an influential way to create trust and psychological safety on an individual level which is a foundation of a high-performing team (Lapshun & Fusch, 2021). People should be empowered to take risks and fail in order for them to become truly agile (Rad & Rad, 2021a). The first step towards building an agile team is aligning personal goals with common goals (Laussen & Sutanovac, 2021).

1.2.4. Autonomy and goal setting

Autonomous teams are essential to agile organisations as they are better equipped to respond to stakeholder needs and build a continuous improvement culture (Verwijs & Russo, 2022). Although autonomy is of high importance there is a need to find a balance between managerial control and team-level autonomy. Moe *et al*. (2021) propose that this could be done by implementing communes similar to clans (Kirsch *et al*., 2010) which enables alignment and being included in the decision-making process on a team level. Increase in team autonomy leads

to the ability to make better long-term decisions, have a better understanding and overview of company goals, and allow helping other teams with dependencies (Gustavsson *et al*., 2022).

Being able to choose your own way of working and communicating as a team provides psychological empowerment to them which in turn leads to innovative behaviour (Malik *et al*., 2021). It can also attract talent to the company (Koch & Schermuly, 2020). Empowering employees will lead to higher levels of workforce agility (Cyfert *et al*., 2022) through enabling organisational learning (Nadhira Putri & Mangundjaya, 2020). Generally, creating a human-centric working environment increases the agility of the organisation (Kiziloglu *et al*., 2023). Leaders play a large role in empowering employees which in turn leads to higher levels of commitment and job satisfaction (Eilers *et al*., 2020).

Although autonomous teams are a powerful tool for achieving agility, there are a number of obstacles on the path to creating successful self-sustained groups. Some of the factors that hinder autonomous teams are dependencies on other teams and lack of trust (Moe *et al*., 2019a). Mikalsen *et al*. (2019) suggested that agile structures should be created while making sure to include as few dependencies (including resources for skills and technology) as possible as these are very time-consuming to solve in day-to-day work. Khanagha *et al*. (2022) discuss that peer pressure can lead to a reduction in innovative behaviour in autonomous teams. They suggest that this could be mitigated through optimising targets when peer pressure is high and frequent interaction and guidance by the manager when it's low.

Moe *et al*. (2019b) described how important it is for teams to have a shared goal. More often than not, goals that are set by the higher management, are not fully understood by teams which, in turn, leads to the team setting unaligned goals. A similar sentiment, that teams need to be allowed to set their own goals in order to enable team autonomy, was shared by Manz and Sims already in 1987. Although it is known, it's not the most common way of working today (Moe *et al*., 2019b). Individual goals should be derived from team goals and help the team progress toward them (Annosi *et al*., 2020a). Currently, a popular method of goal setting is Objectives and Key Results (OKR) which have been proven, if done right, to enable alignment to business goals and team objectives, and make progress towards the goal trackable through success measurements (Stray *et al*., 2021). OKRs also increase knowledge sharing and transparency (Stray *et al*., 2022).

It's important that business needs are connected to the goals that teams set and aim to deliver (Darino *et al.*, 2019). To determine whether moving towards the goals is progressing, measurements should be put in place. According to how well the performance indicators are defined, they can either have a positive or a negative effect on performance (Franceschini *et al.*, 2013). Korpivaara *et al.* (2021) proposed an initial model on how to measure agile performance on different levels, shown in Figure 5. Although performance management on an individual level is necessary, an agile way of working requires team-level performance management as well to empower self-driven teams (Darino *et al.*, 2019).

Organizational level	Category	Purpose	Dimension	Objective examples	
Group	Primary Performance Objectives	Measurement of outcomes and external impact	Financial value	Sales or turnover, Production cost	External, lagging
Unit			Customer value	Customer satisfaction, Product quality	
Hubs	Secondary Performance Objectives	Measurement of internal performance with respect to delivering	Internal process efficiency	Productivity, Predictability, Quality of development and production	
Agile release trains					
Agile teams					
Teams and individuals	Performance Enablers	Measurement of capabilities and resources	Collaboration	Employee engagement	
			Learning	Knowledge-sharing	Internal; leading

Figure 5. Framework for performance measurements in agile organisations
Source: Korpivaara *et al.* (2021)

Quality of work in agile teams is impacted by continuous improvement practices on a team level and a growth mindset on an individual level (Alami *et al.*, 2022). The continuous improvement approach was dubbed as one of the central team-level prerequisites to becoming an effective agile team (Verwijs and Russo, 2022). It doesn't matter if the team is born agile from the start (Big Bang Approach) or introduced to agile methodologies step by step (Gradual Introduction Approach), they benefit from entering into a cycle of continuous improvement to iterate on their ways of working, as represented in Figure 6 (Julian *et al.*, 2019). Continuous improvement is enabled by psychological safety which allows people to speak up without fear of judgement, and team rituals that help facilitate discussions and create action plans for improvement (Verwijs and Russo, 2022).
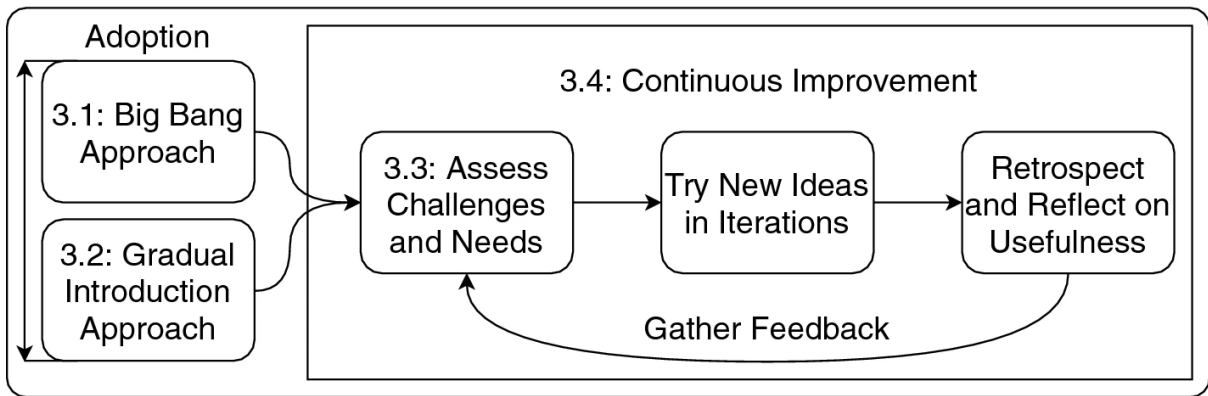
Figure 6. Agile process evolution
Source: Julian *et al*. (2019)

Continuous improvement is a large part of the agile mindset (Mordi & Schoop, 2020; van Manen & van Vliet, 2014) which is generally focused on learning, collaboration, empowered self-guidance, and customer orientation (Eilers *et al*., 2022). Sometimes growth mindset takes on the same meaning as an agile mindset (Sathe & Panse, 2022) as it revolves around daring to take on new challenges, welcoming change, and treating failure as an opportunity to learn (Eilers *et al*., 2022). Eilers *et al*. (2022) showed that adopting the agile mindset increases the performance levels of the business.

1.3. The role of leadership

If the company-level prerequisites have been met, it is up to the leader of the team to enable them to achieve high performance and remove blockers. Agile teams have a concept of shared leadership Strode *et al*. (2022), which is not present in traditional teams. Although leadership is shared in some sense, formal leadership is a pillar of team success (Weichbrodt *et al*., 2022).

1.3.1. The role of a leader in enabling the high performance of agile teams

Dingsøyr and Lindsjørn (2013) put together workgroups to understand what impacts the performance of agile teams. The findings indicated that team leadership is the most impactful variable in the mix with subcomponents of planning, shielding from interruptions, work

processes, adequate resources, and infrastructure. According to Crnogaj *et al.* (2022), the main impact of a leader in an agile environment comes from role modelling agile values and continuous improvement. They also conclude that the job of an agile leader is to unblock barriers, motivate individuals to come to work just as they are, and enable team orientation. In an agile environment, the goal of leaders becomes to unblock the path, enable communication and collaboration, and make sure the team is reaching their targets (Rad & Rad, 2021a). Leaders are able to encourage learning and development by focusing on removing barriers on all levels instead of micromanaging the team or the individual (Armanious & Pagett, 2021). Doyle (2022) concluded that the role of a leader in agile transformation specifically is to enable transparency and set expectations in addition to supporting self-organising teams and helping people switch to a more independent way of thinking. In 2020, Baran and Woznyj outlined a comprehensive model (Appendix 2) on how to manage the agile work environment and what steps leaders could take to enable agility. The suggestions include communication, knowledge sharing, an iterative approach, customer focus, role modelling, and alignment.

Gren and Ralph (2022) compiled a framework to describe the components of effective leadership in agile software development teams, as shown in Figure 7. The main categories are shared leadership, social constructs, and organisational culture. Uwadi *et al.* (2022) expanded their conclusions to agile middle managers and described five central roles that they need to play: planning and coordination, continuous improvement and change, agile and technical leadership, monitoring, and capability building.
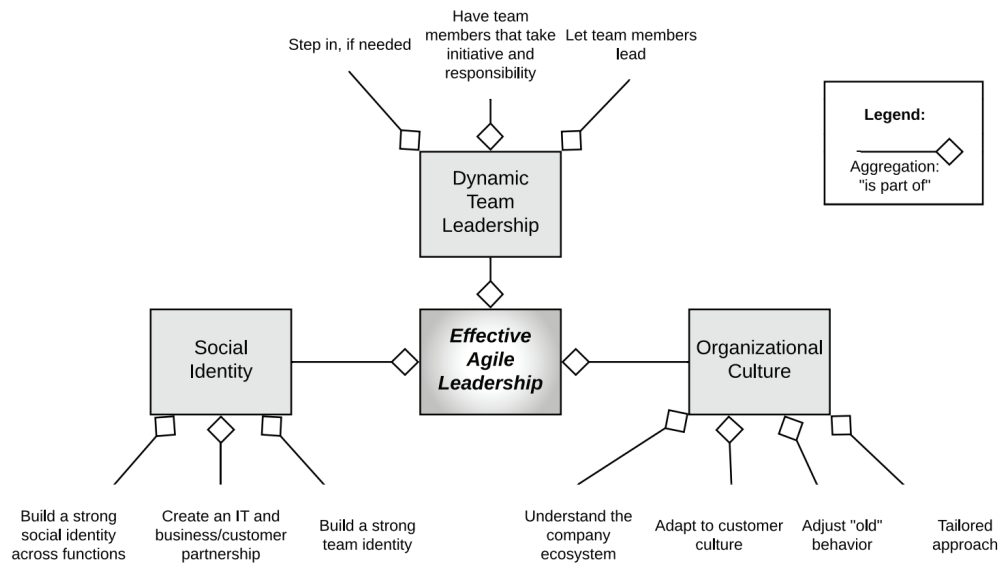
Figure 7. Components of effective agile leadership in software development teams
Source: Gren and Ralph (2022)

Shared leadership is quite a unique concept to agility and self-organised teams. Strode *et al*. (2022) define shared leadership as the "ability of the team to direct and coordinate their activities, assess team performance, assign tasks, develop team knowledge, skills, and abilities, motivate one another, plan and organise, and establish a positive atmosphere" as opposed to having this set on responsibilities only on the formal leader. Gren and Ralph (2022) found that shared and dynamic leadership is the main pillar of agile teams, and leaders hand over responsibilities as people are ready to take them on. They should be allowed to take initiative and take over leadership roles (Gren & Ralph, 2022). Shared leadership increases knowledge sharing and team cohesion and through this impacts the performance of the team (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). It increases team performance and work satisfaction if people identify with each other (Edelmann *et al*., 2022). Another benefit of shared leadership is the increased flexibility of the team (Dionísio *et al*., 2022). Han and Hazard (2022) compiled a literature review to bring together the prerequisites and benefits of shared leadership in virtual teams, which is visualised in Figure 8, which aligns well with previous research on agile teams.

Antecedents

Individual
- Provision of accurate and up-to-date communication.
- Respect for team members' competencies.
- Experience working in a dispersed team setting.
- Congruent and positive perception of shared leadership.
- Self-leadership by individual team members.

Dyadic
- Adjustment of leadership behavior dependent on interpersonal relationship among team members.
- Realization of individual and group reliance.
- Autonomy of team members and team.
- Encouraging leadership actions among team members.
- Adjustment of leadership to unique challenges.
- Division of responsibilities.
- Willingness of team members to lead and follow.
- Trust between team members.

Social Structure
- High commonality among team members.
- Teams with horizontal collectivism or horizontal individualism values.
- Higher female-to-male ratio in team.
- High national diversity within team.
- Increased team isolation from rest of organization.

External
- Willingness of leaders to share leadership responsibilities.
- Authentic decision-making power.

Shared Leadership in Virtual Teams

Outcomes

- Increases team members' predicted satisfaction
- Increases team members' intended performance
- Increases team members'
  - Confidence
  - Ownership
  - Investment
- Increases performance:
  - Financial outcomes
  - Business
  - Ranking
- Facilitates virtual teamwork

Figure 8. Antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership in virtual teams
Source: Han and Hazard (2022)

As formal leaders still play a large part in agile team management (Weichbrodt *et al*., 2022), they are the most helpful if they focus on empowering their team members to take on leadership roles and make their own decisions (Edelmann *et al*., 2022). Weichbrodt *et al*. (2022) say that more of the directive leadership roles will be shared in agile teams while the empowering function stays with the formal lead. Without coordination shared leadership can lead to negative results (Nordbäck & Espinosa, 2019). According to Nordbäck & Espinosa (2019), there needs to be implicit coordination to make sure everyone knows what their peers are responsible for, and behavioural coordination to determine which leadership activities take place in the team. Leaders can leave intentional leadership gaps over time the team becomes more mature in order to allow team members to take over those roles (Spiegler *et al*. 2021). Vogel (2022) proposes that investing in the relationship skills of the team members, creating the ground for higher levels of engagement, and shifting focus from leaders to the concept of leadership are some good first steps to take to enable shared leadership.

In agile methodologies, the most widely accepted format is Scrum and the most common example of leadership is a Scrum Master. Ereiz and Mušić (2019) confirmed that Scrum teams without a formal or informal Scrum Master are more likely to fail. According to Spiegler *et al*. (2019a), Scrum Masters have nine roles, as laid out in Table 2.

Table 2. Nine roles of a Scrum Master

Role	Purpose
Method Champion	Distributing expertise on agile methodologies, helping with goal formulation and information visibility
Disciplinizer on Equal Terms	Making sure that rules are followed, focus is in the correct place and meetings attended
Coach	Helping to unlock potential of individuals to close the gaps in the team
Change Agent	Role model to change ways of working and inspire newcomers
Helicopter	Seeing the bigger picture to help the team align
Moderator	Facilities rituals and understandings
Knowledge enabler	Allowing the team to upskill in areas where it's needed
Networker	Connecting the team to stakeholders and experts
Protector	Shielding the team from irrelevant requests from other teams or stakeholders

Source: Spiegler *et al*. (2019a)

In 2020, Spiegler *et al*. showed that some leadership roles (Method Champion, Coach, Moderator) are more relevant to Scrum Masters while product-centric roles (Discipliniser on Equal Terms, Helicopter, Knowledge enabler) are more easily adopted by team members. Figure 9 indicates the process of handing over roles to team members through the leadership gap as the team matures (Spiegler *et al*., 2019a).

| Scrum Master | demonstrate role | leadership gap | support if needed |
| Team Member | observe role | claim and grant role | play role |
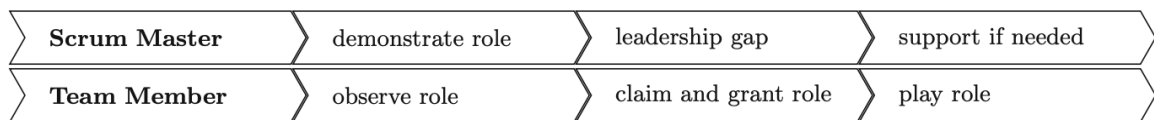
Figure 9. Role transfer process through the leadership gap
Source: Spiegler *et al*. (2019a)

A Scrum Master can help the team reach the most effective point by making sure that relationships inside the team are functioning well and processes are in place (Karabiyik *et al*., 2020). Scrum Masters need to be granted sufficient power to shield their teams while they mature and one of their most powerful tools to help the leadership transfer process is retrospective meetings, which help build a common understanding about what roles are needed (Spiegler, 2021). Some of the more impactful styles of leadership found in Scrum Masters are servant leadership (Holtzhausen & de Klerk, 2018) and transformational leadership (Karabiyik *et al*., 2020).

1.3.2. Agile leadership styles and competencies

Some of the more discussed leadership styles in agile teams are servant leadership, transformational leadership, emergent leadership, shared leadership, and visionary leadership (Greineder & Leicht, 2020). In addition to the named methods, Pontillo *et al*. (2022) also mention directive, catalyst, resonant, authentic, and distributed leadership styles that are related to agile teams. Akkaya (2020) concluded that agile and transformational leadership can enhance the agility of an organisation. No style of leadership strongly interferes with the self-management of agile teams (Gutiérrez *et al*., 2022). While democratic leadership is the most common type of leadership in agile teams, Gutiérrez *et al*. (2022) showed that authoritarian leadership styles support alignment in an autonomous team. Gren *et al*. (2020) described how a leader should adapt their way of working as the team matures, similar to a Scrum Master: more directing in the beginning phases and stepping back gradually into a consultancy or coaching role. Good agile leaders are able to adjust their leadership style according to the needs of the team and the phase of the life cycle (Fischer & Charef, 2021). In order to enable true organisational agility, there needs to be empowering leadership and agility competence in addition to creating new team

structures (Langholf & Wilkens, 2021). The main leadership styles connected to agile team leading are broadly explained in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of leadership styles related to agile teams

Leadership style	Main characteristic	Source
Servant leadership	Value based leadership - trusting the team, appreciating others and empowering them to be the best versions of themselves	Russell (2001)
Transformational leadership	Focus on the individual to inspire and encourage them to achieve business goals	Bass and Riggio (2006)
Emergent leadership	Emergence of team members who are perceived to have leader-like abilities without having the formal role	Hanna *et al.* (2021)
Shared leadership	Leadership roles are executed by team members	Fletcher and Kaufer (2003, pp. 21-47)
Visionary leadership	Ability to create a compelling vision to motivate and rally employees around it (a subcategory of transformational leadership)	Nanus (1992)
Directive leadership	Giving commands to and setting goals for the team to work towards	Pearce *et al.* (2003)
Catalyst leadership	Inspiring people through setting innovative goals and empowering them and their development	Joiner (2009)
Resonant leadership	Inspiring commitment through showing emotion and empathy towards people	McKee & Massimilian (2006)
Authentic leadership	Being true to one's values, beliefs and strengths to inspire followers	Gardner *et al.* (2011)
Distributed leadership	The central pillar is the leadership practice and who does it is not relevant, whether they have a formal role or not	Spillane (2005)
Democratic leadership	Sharing responsibilities with team members and empowering them to make the decision while helping facilitate democratic discussion and decision-making	Gastil (1994)
Authoritarian leadership	Focused on the controlling function of leadership through hierarchy and power perception of the role	Pizzolitto *et al.* (2022)
Empowering leadership	Supporting autonomy and development of team members to empower them to make their own decisions	Amundsen & Martinsen (2015)

Source: Author's summary based on literature review

Attar and Abdul-Kareem (2020) describe agile leaders as people who are able to align to external and internal environments in their plans, unlock the potential of others, and bring forward change without large negative consequences. Joiner and Josephs (2007) identified four competencies for leadership agility: context-setting agility to understand the environment they are in, stakeholder agility to enable alignment, creative agility to solve problems in innovative ways, and self-leadership agility to understand one's own emotions and behaviours. Bushuyeva *et al.* (2019) described a set of behavioural competencies in flexible leaders, as visualised in Figure 10. Sae-Lim (2020) determines that a successful agile leader possesses a mix of soft and hard skills, including communication skills, building team engagement, network building, setting a competitive advantage vision in the short and long term, critical thinking, digital literacy, and forecasting abilities. Although everyone has the potential to be an agile leader, Şahin and Alp (2020) describe that people who have a proactive approach are more likely to succeed in this.
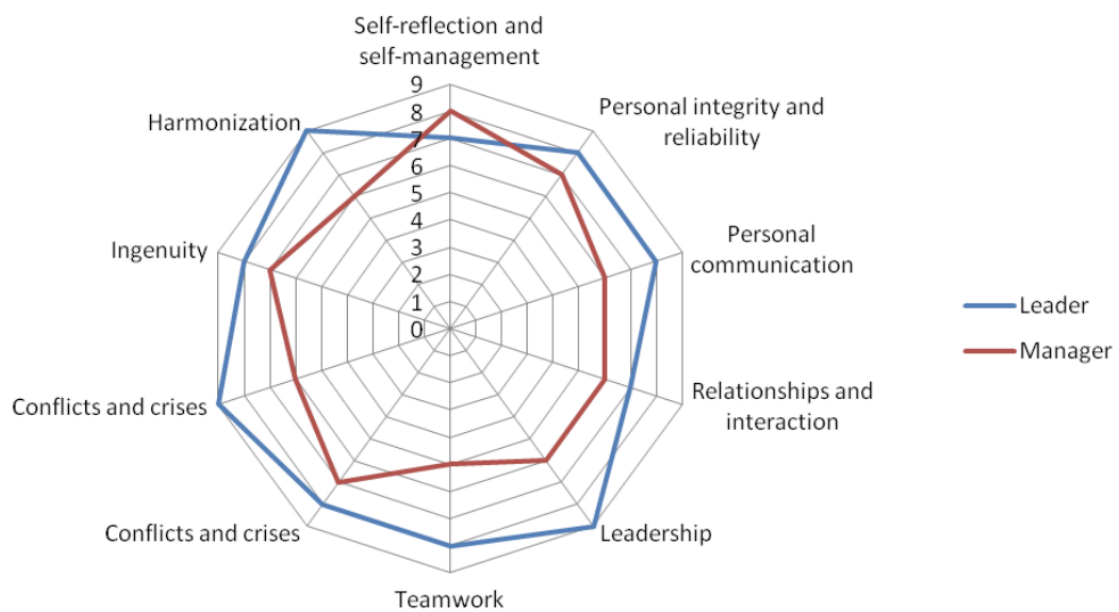
Figure 10. Patterns of behaviour in agile leaders and managers
Source: Bushuyeva *et al.* (2019)

Some common themes between different agile leadership styles are leadership ability, social skills, learning agility, and analytical skills (Greineder & Leicht, 2020). Specific challenges that an agile leader needs to be able to overcome are adjusting to the level of team maturity and changing their leadership style accordingly, designing the team initially to allow for self-management in the future, and fostering a new agile mindset and culture in the team (Gren

& Lindman, 2020). In a case study by Langholf and Wilkens (2021), it was shown that true agility was only achieved after bringing in agile expertise in the form of an agile coach, which shows that knowledge and understanding of agile methodologies are fundamental to this change.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter is focused on describing how the research was carried out and the results established. The goal of this work is to explore the practices of leaders in one large financial technology company, thus the company background and main principles are discussed to give insight into the accompanying environment of the interviewed leaders. This is relevant as leaders can only impact the successful formation of an agile high performance team if the company-level criteria are met. This chapter also includes a discussion on the chosen method, sampling procedure, and analysis approach.

2.1. Company description and reasons for choosing it

Before a leader can take action with individual teams or functions to enable high performance, some company-level requirements need to be met. Leadership must be fully on board with an agile culture (Crnogaj *et al*., 2022) and participate in its creation (Holbeche, 2019). Supporting functions, such as human resources, must define their processes around agile workforce creation (Junita, 2021). The company culture must support the development of the right mindset while setting an inspiring end goal to strive towards (Mkoba & Marnewick, 2022). Self-organisation (Werder & Maedche, 2018) and autonomy (Muduli & Pandya, 2018) must be supported for agility to be able to thrive throughout teams.

Wise Payments Limited (Wise) is a large company with more than 5000 employees distributed globally. Everyone is united by the same mission: "We're building money without borders — making it move faster, more conveniently, and eventually for free. Powering money for people and businesses: to pay, to get paid, to spend, in any currency, wherever you are, whatever you're doing." (Wise Payments Limited, 2023a). The culture is built around four values (Wise Payments Limited, 2023b) that the company as a whole lives up to according to the experience of the author:

- this isn't just a job, we're a revolution - encouraging innovative and bold thinking, and collaboration;
- we get it done - inspiring ownership and accountability;

- customers > team > ego - rallying employees around a customer-centric approach and calling them out to stay humble;
- no drama. Good karma - vouching for transparency, honesty, respect, and sincerity.

The culture is not only built by written values but also in the ways leadership role models it, talks about it and the rituals built around it. For example, twice a year the whole company gathers for Mission Days where the progress towards the mission is reviewed together (Lembo, 2019).

Some of the core principles of working in Wise are autonomous teams, customer focus, and feedback (Wise Payments Limited, 2023c). Working in autonomous teams means that every team is empowered to figure out their own way towards creating impact as long as it moves the needle on the main mission. Every team is expected to collaborate cross-functionally and hire all the skills they need. The culture also drives the teams towards creating customer impact, measuring it, and being able to defend it to anyone in the company at any time. Everyone is expected to challenge concepts they doubt constructively and share feedback whenever they feel it is necessary. Hiring is very strongly value and behaviour based, which enables hiring an agile workforce.

In summary, Wise is a public company of more than 5000 people that is listed on the United Kingdom stock market and operates globally. With more than 24 physical offices around the world, the company is using a hybrid working model and the chance for employees to work abroad 90 days per year. Wise is a company with a mission. Instead of focusing on only the financial side, most of the communication in the company is around making the world a better and fairer place, when it comes to international money movement. Wise ramped up 223.5 million British pounds of revenue in the first quarter of 2023, which means a 45% year-on-year increase (Briers, 2023). Through all of this growth, Wise has managed to keep its culture agile and supportive of autonomous teams. The author concludes, according to their experience working in Wise and the resources available, that this company is suitable to explore how a leader can impact agile high-performance team creation, as the business level criteria to enable it have been met.

2.2. Research design and data analysis method

The final goal of this research is to provide practical suggestions to leaders about how to build an agile high-performance team. To collect data the author aimed to interview leaders who have built those teams and understand their experience and perception. Qualitative research methods allow exploration of how those leaders have achieved this goal (Hammarberg *et al*., 2016). The chosen data analysis method is inductive content analysis to find themes and patterns in their experience which would allow transferability of the results (Kyngäs, H., 2020, pp. 13-21).

As the goal of this study is to create insights from a specific group of people and not everyone has the opportunity to be involved, non-probability sampling was used, more specifically purposive sampling, where the researcher defines the selection criteria and sets out to find those people (Etikan *et al*., 2016). High performance is not defined in a unified way and depends on the perception of senior management. To find leaders who have built and lead agile high-performance teams the author asked for input from senior and other higher levels of management, which means snowball recruiting was used (Stratton, 2021). Since agility and its enablers is a well-researched topic in software development, the aim of this research was to expand this knowledge beyond it. This is a less researched area (Moe & Mikalsen, 2020), although there is the knowledge that organisations would benefit from it if the goal is to have a fully agile organisation, instead of just agile software development (Theobald *et al*., 2020). The sample of ten leaders was collected from departments, such as finance (1), financial crime (3), product development (1), payment operations (1), customer support (2), and human resources (2). In Wise, different management levels are used to describe the hierarchical level of the leader. Those levels span from four to ten, four being the lowest level that manages specialists or agents and ten being the executive level. In many functions, level five also manages specialists or agents directly, while higher levels are managing leaders. The sample group consisted of the following management levels: five (2), six (1), seven (5), and nine (2). Four leaders in the level seven category had moved through all the lower levels during their time in the company, giving additional assurance of their high performance and expanding the actual management level coverage variety. In short, the sample group consisted of multiple functions outside of software development and spanned across different management levels. A limitation for creating the sample group was connected to the availability of high-performance leaders as their schedules tend to be very fast-paced and their time very valuable for the business. As a result, not all functions of Wise are covered in this research. The chosen sampling technique creates a

limitation, where the results cannot be generalised to a larger population (Stratton, 2021) and more research is needed to enable this.

The chosen leaders attended a one-on-one semi-structured interview with the author either face-to-face or over Zoom. All the interviews were conducted in English and lasted 73 minutes on average. This method was chosen to allow them to expand on their thoughts and deep dive into topics that they find relevant while still creating some common ground for searching patterns (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Guiding questions were formed according to the three main research questions to gather raw data on the function of leaders in an agile environment, enablers and blockers to achieve high performance with the team, and the specific actions selected leaders have taken to form agile high-performance teams. The main themes and guiding questions can be seen in Appendix 3.

The interviews were transcribed using different automatic transcription tools as a starting point and then manually checked and fixed. The full transcript (link available in Appendix 5) was uploaded to QCAmap for inductive content analysis, with the goal of finding themes and patterns in the experiences and perceptions of chosen leaders, and their connection to theory, to form practical suggestions. Inductive content analysis was chosen as it allows the researcher to gain meaningful insight from unstructured data (Kyngäs, H., 2020, pp. 13-21), such as interviews. To create the narrative, a method outlined by Vaismoradi *et al*. (2016) was used. It encompasses four main steps: coding units in the transcript to create a level of abstraction, categorising and comparing the initial codes to reorganise and describe the theme, reorganising after distancing and connecting the themes to other themes and theory, and narrative creation to describe the results. Inside the broader themes, examples of smaller categories of actions and concrete actions are provided to form the recommendations for leaders who want to build high-performance agile teams.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The goal of this chapter is to open up the results of the interviews and summarise the findings into useful recommendations. Semi-structured interviews were held with ten leaders from different functions and management levels across the company. The focus of the interviews was to understand their idea of the function of leadership in agile environments, describe enablers and blockers to achieving high performance with the team according to their experience, and explore the actions they have taken to lead their teams to high performance. In addition, background information was gathered, such as how accountability is created for leaders, the differences between agile and traditional leadership, the definition of high performance, and the qualities of an agile leader. Interviews are fully anonymised, when making references to quotes INT1, INT2, INT3, etc. are used. The results are divided into chapters according to the research questions. A visual summary of the results can be found in Appendix 4, which outlines the connection between all of the research questions: the functions of an agile leader, the definition of agile high performance, high-performance enablers and blockers, and actions a leader can take to bring an agile team to high performance.

3.1. Functions of leadership in an agile environment

The background and path to leadership varied among the interviewees. Some only became a leader in the company (INT1, INT4, INT6), some had a strong military background (INT5, INT10) and some had a very diverse background in both agile and traditional companies (INT2, INT3, INT5, INT7, INT8, INT9). Despite the differences in experience, there was a clear pattern of thought in the main functions of agile leadership: making sure business needs are covered, enabling goal setting and delivery, supporting and empowering people, and role modelling values and behaviour.

The function of business focus can manifest in multiple ways but most interviewees mentioned this theme as one of the base expectations towards the leader. (INT9): "I am focused on what the organisation is trying to achieve as a business as opposed to what I want to get out of my own personal function." In the same way that individual goals should be aligned with team goals

(Annosi *et al*., 2020a)*,* team targets should be delivering business needs. Although most interviewees described alignment to business needs in a more general way, in some cases it means aligning the team to some specific goals that the company is trying to achieve. It could mean "good regulatory compliance for customer support" (INT5) so that the company stays legal in their actions or "providing a good customer experience because we're still a customer-facing team" (INT1) to enable excellent customer service as a business.

The largest and most unanimous theme discussed by interviewees was connected to the job of helping the team set meaningful and relevant goals as well as enabling them to deliver on those targets. There is a lot of work that goes into this function. It starts with creating the vision and feeling of purpose in the team. (INT3): "Constantly building connections and narratives, helping the team understand where they're coming, from where they are going and constantly connecting their past with their future in a way." From there it moves towards tactical decision-making and goal-setting. In agile organisations collaboration between teams is necessary which means that goals need to be aligned according to dependencies and expectations. As agile teams tend to have more dependencies, this becomes increasingly important (Moe *et al*., 2019b). While focusing on setting impactful and relevant goals is an important prerequisite, high performance is dependent on delivery. According to multiple interviewees the first expectation towards an agile leader is to "make sure your teams deliver" (INT10), "get things done" (INT8), "being able to hold them accountable" (INT2) and "being able to effectively work day-to-day" (INT1).

When it comes to supporting individuals and empowering their growth, most interviewees mentioned this as one of the main jobs of an agile leader. Research from Crnogaj *et al*. (2022) confirms that one of the roles of the agile leader is to empower team members and unblock their path. The goal of this function is to make sure that people have all the resources they need to do their jobs and are on a growth path to develop their skills. (INT2): "Leadership as a whole means to me to be able to empower people to really take on meaningful problems and utilise their strength in the best ways." It's a leader's responsibility to make sure that team members have the support they need in order to succeed. While making sure that people have what they need to succeed in their roles, there is also an emphasis on enabling growth by "doing everything to help a team to go to the next level" (INT6) and "understanding what people enjoy working on and empowering them to do it" (INT8).

The last area of agreement among interviewees emerged in the significance of role modelling as confirmed by Crnogaj *et al.* (2022) who say that this is the main function of the agile leader. When it comes to role modelling the most importance was placed on being a hands-on leader and being willing to do the same things as the team. (INT8): "No matter which level you join in the team, you should prove to the team that you can actually deliver yourself." The other aspect of role modelling is embodying the values and behaviours the leader wants to see in the team, such as vulnerability and accountability. (INT10): "Sometimes leaders feel like they have to pretend they know all the answers. Sometimes you need to be humble and say you know what I don't know."

In addition to understanding the main expectations towards the role of a leader in an agile environment, it's useful to gain insight into the surrounding context. During this research, some emphasis was also on recognising where these expectations come from and how is accountability for these created. In the experience of the interviewees, the expectations for the role are shaped by company-level structures and processes, the team's own goals and also intrinsic motivation. On a higher level, accountability and expectations are created by culture and values, hierarchy, peers and stakeholders and job descriptions. On a team and individual level the expectations are derived from team members, goals set by the team and most importantly - intrinsic motivation. (INT5): "I keep myself accountable for it."

The other focus area to understand for context was the differences when it comes to the functions of leaders in a traditional and agile environment. The main pattern indicated that, in an agile environment, leaders are expected to enable and empower continuous change and improvement. In contrast with agile businesses, traditional organisations expect leaders to embody the existing values and ensure work based on proven processes. As opposed to a traditional leader, the agile leader needs to put greater focus on empowering and growing people, in addition to performance monitoring.

3.2. Enablers and blockers to team agility and high performance

Before looking into the factors that enable teams to reach or block teams from achieving high performance, it's useful to discuss the meaning of high performance in the context of this

research. In the available research, high performance in teams has been measured in very different ways. An example from very quantitative methods is a formula with different performance variables, such as financial, marketing, market, and investment (He & Hu, 2021). From a more qualitative perspective, questions and statements along the lines of "How would you compare the performance over time to other similar companies?" (Zavyalova *et al*., 2020) and "This team delivers high quality." (Peeters *et al*., 2022) have been used. When seeking out the sample group the author defined high performance as consistently delivering on targets but didn't limit it to this when asking for references. The interviews included discussions about what high performance means to interviewees and how they measure it. The main patterns indicated that high-performance teams are ambitious in their goals, able to adapt to external and internal environments quickly, deliver consistently on their targets, and communicate clearly in all directions. (INT3): "Teams that are able to pivot their role and pivot to what they're focusing or pivot even sometimes what their understanding of their role in itself is. Teams that are able to say: "Wait! Are we really set up to do the best work we can in this domain? Should we reshuffle?" So those teams like that are able to change and adapt and tackle constantly the best opportunities." (INT7): "The only team that meets that goal is a middle-performance team. A really high-performance team and a really poor-performance team both would look very similar from a very far distance because neither of them would ever meet their goals." The definition of high performance as a flexible and adaptable team is confirmed by Rostami and Neshati (2019). As more agile companies are adopting OKRs, it can also be concluded that ambition and target delivery define high performance in those organisations as these are some of the main goals of the framework (Stray *et al*., 2021). Doblinger (2022) has described adaptability, communication, ambition, and achieving goals as some of the outcomes of team performance.

According to the experience of the interviewees, there are a number of factors that affect a leader's ability to lead their team to high performance or the team to achieve high performance. In a macro view, the dependencies emerge in culture, expectation and goal setting, team's ways of working, supporting people and their growth, team design, and leadership.

3.2.1. Culture

Culture is a rather vague concept but it holds a lot of gravity as an enabler and blocker, depending on how it supports agility. (INT3): "You don't need to spend all the time trying to be

super precise on choosing the right person because you know that anyways, the culture will help keep the team healthy and at high performance." The research of Petermann and Zacher (2020) confirms that culture plays a large part in achieving agility and in the context of this research, high performance. During interviews, the main culture-related notions were connected to attitude, growth mindset, continuous improvement, company culture and the importance of leadership in it, team culture, feedback culture, and trust. The latter together with psychological safety has been deemed very significant by researchers such as Gomes Silva *et al*. (2022) and Buvik and Tkalich (2022). If the team feels safe and secure, it paves the way for other enabling factors such as collaboration. (INT10): "And if you will trust one another they become vulnerable and when you become vulnerable, you become open to other people's perspective. You become open to challenges and critique, and you automatically get better at what you do."

Some other aspects described by interviewees have also been confirmed to have an effect on agility and effectiveness, such as the importance of leadership and their commitment to a culture that enables agility (Crnogaj *et al*., 2022). Continuous improvement and a growth mindset have also been shown to have an impact on team effectiveness by Alami *et al*. (2022), and Verwijs and Russo (2022). (INT2): "Perhaps the answer is not being better but doing something differently." A feedback culture is important for the sake of learning and development as also discussed by Rad and Rad (2021b) and continuous improvement. Feedback is also one of the inputs into setting goals. A part of feedback culture is being able to challenge others and respond to the challenges of others. It's also about praise and rewards, as well as constructive criticism. If feedback culture is well embedded within the company and the team, feedback is always a source for new learning and more innovation. (INT2): "In order to be successful continuously, you have to be constantly challenging."

Cultural topics were also mentioned as possible blockers to high performance. Holbeche (2019) found that agility is dependent on leadership and how willing and able they are to build a culture around it. If the company culture is not there, it is very hard for teams to succeed in creating it individually. In an agile business, the main threats to culture include too high expectations and moving the bar often, failed communication of an aligned vision, and lack of trust. (INT4): "Then there's the culture, which is built internally. If it's not healthy and it's not there to support each other. Then that's definitely also going to slow down a performing team."

3.2.2. Expectation and goal setting

Expectation and goal setting are a large part of what defines the success of the team. There are a couple of different perspectives to consider as enablers of high performance. The first aspect is that a team needs a common vision and a purpose to set meaningful and impactful goals. The importance of a shared goal on team success was also shown by Moe *et al*. (2019b). To create a meaningful vision and goals the team should have a good balance between being ambitious and realistic to make sure that the goals have a significant impact but are still achievable, otherwise motivation can be damaged as a result. (INT5): "You always need to be ambitious but yet refrain from unrealistic targets while accounting for the uncertainty and ever-lasting change."

When it comes to setting the team level goals it is crucial to align with the vision and purpose of the team and understand the tactical actions that need to be taken to achieve the larger goal. This activity should be customer focused with the intent to provide better services and products to them. Input should also be included from a team health perspective. It's important to consider what is in the team's control and what is reasonable to focus on. One of the tools to help with goal setting is OKRs as also discussed by Stray *et al*. (2021). (INT1): "Focus on things that are in our control. If these are out of control, we should be able to explain it to the team members." Teams don't function in a vacuum and an agile environment means that most teams are constantly changing the product or the service. This creates a need to manage expectations and dependencies across teams in order to make sure that all teams can function in an agile way as also shown by Moe *et al*. (2019b). This means information exchange on planned goals, challenging other teams on their work and being ready to be challenged, and gaining buy-in from stakeholders. (INT9): "Understanding your stakeholders' perspective and views, and your sponsor's perspective and views, and making sure that they get something out of the process as well".

Good goals help leaders set the expectations for the team and individuals. Clear expectations on roles, structure, ownership, and actions keep the team aligned among themselves and stakeholders, and create accountability to deliver on the goals. (INT): "If you're talking about accountability then you have to agree on the expectations". The final aspect of setting expectations and enabling the delivery of goals is to understand what success looks like and how to measure it. Korpivaara *et al*. (2021) proposed an initial framework to understand some agile performance measurements but the OKR framework encourages measuring the specifics of the

goals to track progress towards it Stray *et al.* (2021). In addition, when creating success measurements it's important to account for the context of the situation and the goal itself. (INT10): "You set milestones for this high performance team, so they know if they are on track and if they are not on track." Delivery of goals often produces a change in processes and ways of working and in an agile business constant change can be draining. Although change is an expectation in and of itself, teams should give themselves and others time to adapt. (INT9): "What people don't realise is that there is this difference between building and launching an initiative, and then embedding it. And you know, getting people to adopt it."

When it comes to goal setting there are a couple of pitfalls to watch out for, that can block high performance if they materialise. The goal of an agile team is to react to new data points and pivot their actions if needed. This means that uncertainty is an expected phenomenon and it can hurt a team's ability to perform if it isn't accounted for. Whether it's about people leaving the team, lack of data, or the business environment, it's necessary to account for some uncertainty. (INT1): "We had our data back then but, all of a sudden, all of the subscriptions that our customers started to use, they didn't have effective tools to manage them. And that's how backlogs started to accumulate." Another threat to goal setting and delivery by the team is alignment with stakeholders. Moe *et al.* (2019b) noted that agile teams tend to have a lot of collaborators to account for and their success is connected to their collaboration. If targets are not aligned it might happen that dependencies are not completed and the delivery of set goals doesn't work towards the larger vision. (INT2): "Whereas looking at what teams that are not very high functioning, everyone does things in silos and then puts a lot of energy later on aligning with that."

3.2.3. Team's ways of working

A lot of enabling factors are connected to the way the team works together. This includes autonomy, shared leadership, knowledge sharing and management, team rituals, change management, and collaboration. According to multiple researchers, such as Gustavsson *et al.* (2022) and Verwijs and Russo (2022), team autonomy increases agility through better collaboration with stakeholders and the ability to adapt to conditions quicker. This essentially means that the team is allowed the trust and authority to decide, prioritise, and change direction as needed. It includes giving general direction and expectations to the team or team members,

and allowing them to work out how to achieve the goal. (INT6): "Specialists are self-driven to make those improvements. And being self-driven and independent is definitely a key to building a high-performance team." As team members have more autonomy it's also possible to look into the concept of shared leadership as they are more willing and able to take on different roles in the team. According to Imam and Zaheer (2021) shared leadership increases knowledge sharing and team cohesion which leads teams to high performance.

Knowledge sharing is another important enabler of successful teams. This includes informal knowledge sharing, such as learning about each other's tasks and projects, and discussions around ongoing work, but also more formal sharing, like documentation and training. According to multiple researchers, such as Ouriques *et al*. (2019), informal knowledge sharing is the key to agility and team efficiency. Knowledge sharing practices enable learning but also play a large role in conveying mindset and culture. (INT5): "I need to retain the knowledge because I will not be able to restore this quickly because the entire environment changes. You need a certain mindset, you need certain knowledge prior to entering the market."

How a team works together depends a lot on their rituals and routines. This can include bonding and socialising as well as formal and informal discussion around goal progress, knowledge sharing, and goal setting. Most interviewees agreed that "you have a very good set of routines" (INT2) in order to enable a high-performance agile team to deliver and collaborate. The benefit of agile team rituals has also been shown by Whitworth and Biddle (2007) but it doesn't necessarily have to be only agile ones to create the benefit. In order for a team to work towards a goal successfully they need to collaborate effectively within themselves and with other teams. This means having a common goal, empathy towards each other, and supporting one another. The importance of collaboration has been shown by many researchers (Noteboom *et al*., 2021), and it has been shown to have a positive effect on innovation (Menon & Suresh, 2021) and knowledge sharing (Tan, 2016). (INT7): "One of the most important things that high-performance teams need to go through is one really challenging problem that they go through together and solve it."

3.2.4. Team design, supporting people, and the role of leadership

In order to start with creating a high-performance agile team, there needs to be an understanding of what the goal is and what kind of structure and skills are needed to achieve this goal. A lot of the interviewees mentioned the importance of understanding the needed skill set, creating the balance of different skills, and making sure to have the right people in the team. It's critical to find people who share agile values and exhibit necessary behaviours. Gren and Lindman (2020) have outlined team design as one of the challenges of agile leaders as it has an especially large importance when the team is forming. A part of it is making sure the resources and the capacity match the requirements. It's important to keep in mind that team design is not only done when the team is forming but also ongoingly as the goals and team members change. (INT5): "In my team I have the problem solvers and strategists. I have dreamers and I have philosophers of some sort, and all of them need to work together. The right combination of the key elements and key figures on your team will drive it forward." Making sure that the team has the correct capacity and enough resources was highlighted as one of the possible blockers to team success. When people leave the team or goals change it's important to adapt the necessary resources and skill set of the team.

Intentionally designing the skills and resources of the team isn't the only enabler. As well as being mentioned as one of the functions of leadership in an agile environment, supporting people and their growth has also been brought out as one of the enablers of high-performance teams. Once people are in their roles, there is a difference in whether they are engaged and willing to contribute to the common goals or not. Nascimento *et al*. (2022) showed that well-engaged individuals are the ones who are willing to go the extra mile. It's important to understand individual motivations, connect to people on a personal level and understand what their strengths are to utilise them. In case of underperformance, it's important to understand the blockers at hand and help them find solutions to the root cause. Considering team health should be a priority for a leader who is building a high-performance team. (INT5): "We're working with people, not processes."

If team members don't buy into the vision or purpose, it can be an obstacle to the path of high performance for the team. Not everyone in a team needs to be a high performer but if people opt out of the larger goal, it can hurt the motivation of the team. Two reasons were highlighted for lacking buy-in: either the leader is not able to convey the purpose well enough or the impact

from their personal lives prevents people from focusing on the purpose of their work. It's also important to consider the effect of constant change in an agile environment on team members and their motivation. (INT3): "Things that touch on the identity of the team. Those are big challenges for making sure that the team can perform." Gren and Ralph (2022) have emphasised the importance of team identity creation as one of the jobs of the agile leader.

According to Crnogaj *et al*. (2022), leaders enable agility and high performance through role modelling values and behaviours. Leaders mediate and enable all of the processes described in this chapter, including culture creation, expectation and goal setting, the team's way of working, making sure the right people are in the right place, and keeping them motivated and engaged. The next chapter is focused on what actions a leader can focus on to enable the creation of high-performance agile teams.

3.3. Actions a leader can take to guide agile teams to high performance

In an agile organisation a lot of the responsibility for creating a necessary environment for agile teams to thrive rests on the company level. It is mostly up to senior leadership and the human resources function to set the principal culture and processes in place that enable teams to have a chance of agile high performance. (INT9): "Cheesy saying, which I think is incredibly true, but it's like "culture eats strategy for breakfast" and it's so true." Gren (2017b) contemplated that without senior management commitment to the culture it's nearly impossible to establish an individual agile team. The responsibility of enabling the creation of an agile workforce relies strongly on human resource management capabilities (Junita, 2021). If the company-level requirements are there, leaders of different levels can take specific actions to enable their teams to reach high performance. This chapter is focused on outlining the patterns of actions that emerged from the interviews to enable culture, goal setting and target delivery, ways of working for the team, team design, supporting people and role modelling as a leader.

As background information, this research also aimed to understand the skills and general qualities that help a leader in creating and maintaining high-performance agile teams. Some of the most mentioned characteristics, either directly or indirectly, were connected to adaptability,

resilience, clear communication, business understanding, being bold and self-driven, curiosity, humility, people orientation, self-awareness, and willingness to be a role model.

3.3.1. Culture

If the company culture is well calibrated for the high performance of agile teams, the rest comes down to the team's internal culture and how it interacts with the company culture. This research established three main categories where leaders can take action to enable beneficial team culture: general team culture, trust and psychological safety, and feedback culture. Figure 11 depicts a summary of some possible actions for leaders to take.
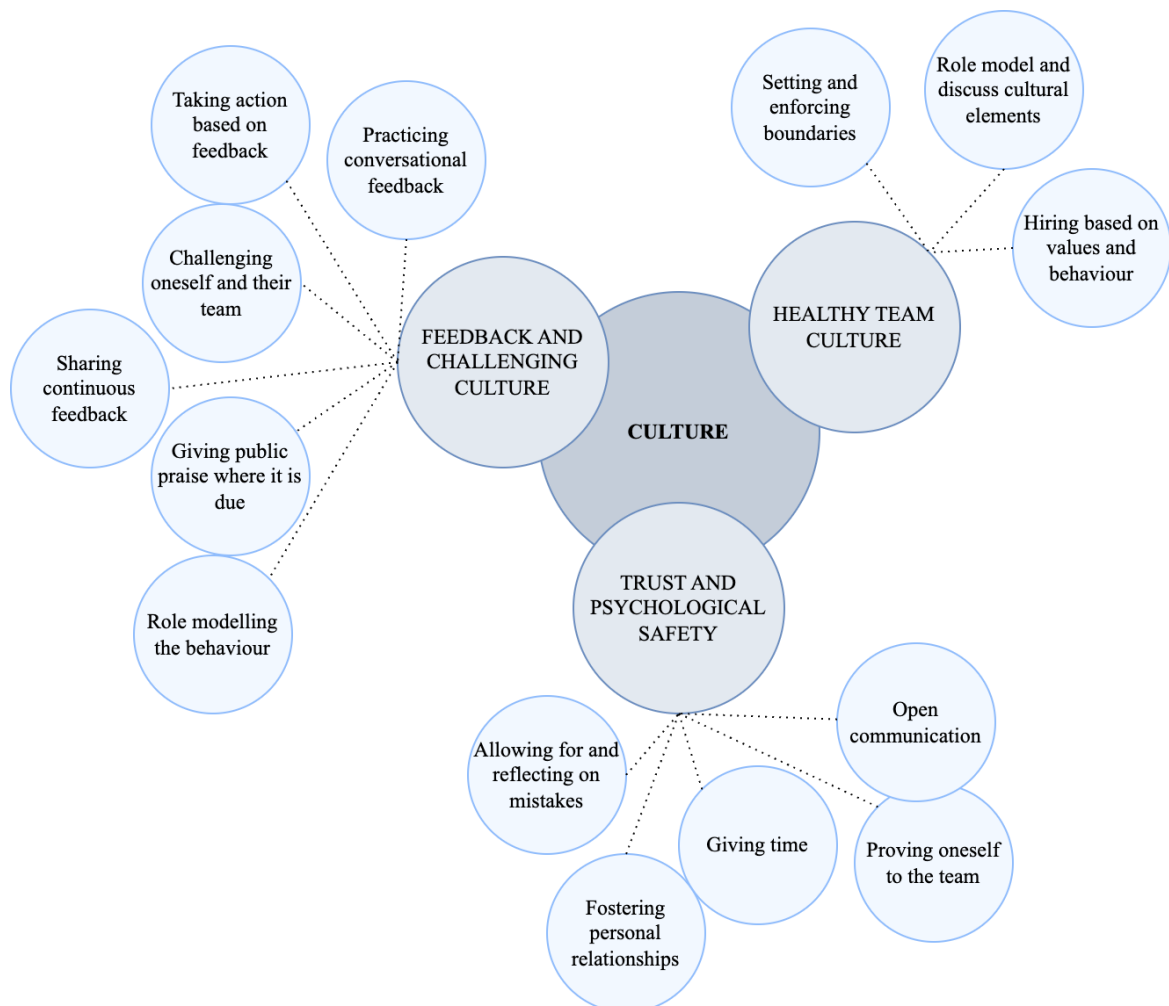
Figure 11. Summary of focus categories and actions for leaders to enable high-performance culture.
Source: Author's summary based on interviews

The general culture of the team impacts what kind of people it attracts, how work is approached, and sets the expectation on values and behaviours. Although most of the culture is based on how the existing team and their leader behaves, there are some areas of focus that the leader can take. Crnogaj *et al*. (2022) said that the main value of leadership is role modelling. Interviewees felt that a lot of this role modelling is conveyed through communication. As this is the main tool of leaders there are a lot of approaches one can take with it, for example being intentional around the word they use, fostering information communication, and constantly repeating the themes around expected values and behaviours. Another way to set culture is by setting stern boundaries, communicating them clearly, and holding people accountable for them helps with the intentional establishment of a certain culture. (INT5): "If I hear, let's say, any racist joke on my team, this person will go away immediately and it is well understood it will not be tolerated." Although some parts of culture can be implemented, most of it depends on who are the people in the team and what are the values that they hold. It's up to the leader to make sure, when hiring, that there is a fit value-based fit as well as the necessary skills. (INT7): "The first person who comes in is unique and they're the only person. The second person who comes in, now there's two of them. So that starts becoming a team. By the time you're the fifth or the sixth person coming in there is already a set culture. And then now this person has to assimilate into that."

A massive part of culture is whether it can foster the trust and psychological safety that is needed for a team to reach high performance. Multiple research teams, such as Perrmann-Graham *et al*. (2022), Gomes Silva *et al*. (2022), Buvik and Tkalich (2022) and Verwijs and Russo (2023), have shown the importance that these factors have on agile team success. To increase trust and psychological safety the interviewees suggest proving that you are up for the job and able to lead them. For example, spending some time listening before acting, and keeping behaviour consistent so they know what to expect. It also requires giving time for trust to form between team members themselves and their leader. (INT7): "Usually trust, the way it builds is that I do something for you and you, in your head, believe me, that "okay, this person is trustworthy" and then you do something for me. And likewise, we do this over a period of time and we start trusting each other. I mean that's the most natural way, transparent. So that takes time." It also comes down to how the leader communicates with the team members. All of the micro-interactions are an opportunity to make people feel seen, heard and valued. Another part of communication that creates trust is transparency by the leader which creates the understanding that nothing is hidden. A lot of it comes down to the personal level. People trust the people that

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they know more about. Many of the interviewed leaders agree that it's important to get to know people on a personal level and spend time talking about everything outside of work as well. (INT10): "Get to know them from a personal point of view. This is very basic, but take them out for a beer, take them away from the work environment, on a personal type level." Research by Castro *et al*. (2022) confirms that one-on-one communication with team members increases the feeling of psychological safety. Another important theme is around allowing people to make mistakes and use them as a learning point through reflection. The leader should trust their team with a task and if there is a mistake, it's important to help them reflect and gain learnings from it, rather than punishing it. (INT8): "If there is a mistake, I think they should feel that the team supports them, that it doesn't feel like "Hey! You made a mistake". I think they need to essentially understand that it's okay to make mistakes and we're not going to let them fail. So when something goes wrong we usually approach it as a team." This leads to a growth mindset and continuous improvement (Verwijs & Russo, 2022), which defines the quality of the team's work in the long run (Alami *et al*., 2022).

The third larger topic of culture that was on the mind of interviewed leaders was the attitude towards feedback. It's a needed base to enable continuous improvement and learning (Rad & Rad, 2021b). According to Buvik and Tkalich (2021), psychological safety enables feedback so the first important step the leader can take is making sure the trust is there. It's important to focus on both sides of feedback, positive and negative, and do it continuously. (INT10): "Feedback shouldn't just happen when it's asked for. Feedback should almost be the team culture. It should happen whenever it's needed." Good work should be acknowledged publicly and as soon as possible. Any improvement suggestions should be shared continuously, as opposed to only during performance reviews. Feedback should be a conversational exchange of information, instead of one-sided statements. (INT9): "It's not a case of like "do you have five minutes?" /../ It's like "I want to talk to you about something and I've observed something and from my perspective, this is what I see and I wonder whether you've thought about approaching a slightly different way when the output will be different. What do you think? Talk me through your approach."" Feedback should feed into setting goals around change if needed. This can include adding team-level goals based on engagement surveys or adding personal goals after getting feedback on a project or behaviour. As with any cultural part, the leader can impact it by role modelling the behaviour. In this case, a good option is asking for feedback and taking action based on it. Something to avoid is taking offence and getting defensive about any that is shared as this will create a reverse effect. (INT3): "I ask very often "Am I making sense? Does this

make sense?" I keep asking all the time, sometimes even annoyingly so. But just to make sure that I always communicate that I'm not sure if I'm making sense all of the time. I'm just creating the feeling that it's okay to challenge." Another step that a leader can take to enable a feedback culture is to keep challenging themselves, the team and the stakeholders. This can be done by asking the tough questions about the goals the team has set, the method of delivery, impact or anything else to help others realise if they are on a track that is the best fit. For example, "are we truly performing the best that we could?" (INT2).

3.3.2. Goal setting and target delivery

During the analysis six main categories emerged for leaders to impact goal setting and target delivery: creating a vision and purpose for the team, enabling goal setting, setting clear expectations, aligning team goals to stakeholders' and company goals, measuring success, and enabling delivery on set targets. The categories and possible actions for this theme have been summarised in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Summary of focus categories and actions for leaders to enable goal setting and delivery in high-performance agile teams
Source: Author's summary based on interviews

Any goal and expectation setting should start from a vision, which creates purpose for the team and serves business needs at the same time. Darino *et al.* (2019) emphasise the importance of aligning goals to the business vision while Moe *et al.* (2019b) give an overview of why a team needs to have a common purpose to work towards in an agile environment. Although most interviewees agree that alignment with company goals is necessary, most of their focus is on how it's communicated to the team and whether there's a buy-in and feeling of purpose. (INT2): "If the teams do not adopt this core reason why a team or company has come together, they will

forever be driven by extrinsic motivators, all of which are rather short-term influencers." The actions that a leader can take include storytelling, building narratives around the mission, and communicating often and clearly, to create this purposeful feeling in the team.

When the team starts to set their goals there are a couple of ways the leader can step in. There are many methods and tools used for goal setting, such as brainstorming, OKRs, mapping out the gap between reality and desired future, and working backward from a "blue sky" dream. The leader can help facilitate this discussion depending on the chosen tools and methods. It's important to keep the goals ambitious while also realistic to keep motivation high. Design thinking principles can be useful to foster problem-solving. The leader should create a focus for the team though helping the team understand what is in their control and what are the areas with the most impact. (INT1): "Leads should be quite clear about being able to explain what is in our power and what is outside of our power." The leader also holds the decision-making power where needed. It's up to them to make sure that the goals align well with business needs and will create an impact. It's important to make the decisions, instead of delaying them until all information is available. (INT9): "You need to be at ease with what you're doing because a lot of the decisions you make might turn out right or wrong. You don't know. But if you fixate on whether they're right or wrong. You're already going down the wrong route." A part of defining targets is setting clear expectations. From the leader's perspective, it's important to make sure expectations match the team's motivation to deliver. It might also mean that there's a need to dilute the leader's own expectations to make sure motivation is not affected by unrealistic ones. The other part of expectation setting is clear communication about what these expectations are so the team members can align their approach and behaviour.

As agile teams often function in collaboration with other teams according to Moe *et al*. (2019b), there's a need to put effort into alignment between stakeholders when setting goals. It's important to establish rituals with stakeholders, such as shared planning sessions or recurring catch-ups to share progress and realign. This will also enable information and expectations to be exchanged between parties. (INT6): "We are constantly in collaboration and communication with product and engineering teams. We have a strong relationship with them. We are considered partners." The leaders should make sure that they can define the correct stakeholders, keep up consistent communication, take part in their rituals, and are clear on their expectations and needs while accounting for theirs as well. As important as it is to communicate the team's perspective, it's also relevant to gain buy-in from stakeholders, which can be achieved by connecting the

expectations to the impact on common goals or business needs. While one side of stakeholder alignment is expressing the team's expectations and needs, it's necessary to shield the team from distractions and unnecessarily high expectations. (INT7): "To shield my team from chaos. And what I mean by that is that in the beginning, you have too many things, especially before the product-market fit. /../ So like there's too many existential questions and any of those questions going wrong means the lights are going to go out the next day. And in all of that set-up trying to just inject the right amount of uncertainty to your team. /../ So you want to inject enough so that there is challenge and motivation to continue but you don't want to push so much to the team that they just can't deal with it and break down."

In agile environments, it's necessary to track team-level performance as opposed to only individuals (Darino *et al*., 2019). If targets are agreed on and the expectations clear, success should be defined in order to track progress towards it. This can be done through using relevant data, visualising it, and making it accessible. Depending on the relevance and quality of the measurements it can have a positive or negative impact on delivery (Franceschini *et al*., 2013) so it's worth the effort to make sure the measurements are in line with the goals. In addition to data, context should be considered, as it increases the quality of the measurement. (INT4): "That's how I definitely evaluate this, whether we are matching the criteria that we have but also whether the people understand what work is going into there and why we're failing." Success and performance metrics should be well aligned to company-level indicators to ensure impact when targets are delivered, as also confirmed by Darino *et al*. (2019). The datasets should feed into decision-making on an ongoing basis and the next goal-setting cycles.

Although setting goals is a time-consuming and important task, the actual impact comes out of delivering on targets. The leader plays a large role in making sure that the team is able to adapt ongoingly and solving any blockers on the way. The same conclusion has been reached by multiple research teams, such as Armanious and Pagett (2021), Crnogaj *et al*. (2022), and Rad and Rad (2021b). The leader can have the most impact on delivery by unblocking the path for their team. (INT3): "It is unrealistic to expect that all the operational teams are always able to be within SLAs but you should make sure that they are performing well. Even if they are not, they should have a very clear path to go back to performance." The other critical part of the delivery is adjusting goals as needed. It's futile to be rigid around set targets if they stop making sense. The team and the leader should be willing to switch out goals or adjust them to deliver the most business impact. Delivery of goals often creates changes in processes and in this case, it's needed

to acknowledge the relevance of change management. Change can produce resistance, so it's important to consider "the difference in building and launching an initiative and then embedding it" (INT9). The whole flow from vision to delivery is summarised in Table 5 with specific guides for leaders.

3.3.3. Team's ways of working

A team's agility and performance are largely a result of how they work. Although autonomy is a base pillar for agility, the leader can largely impact reaching higher levels of autonomy, shared leadership practices, knowledge sharing, change management, collaboration, team rituals, keeping the customer in focus, and introducing agile methodologies. A summary of all the categories and suggested actions is brought out in Figure 13.
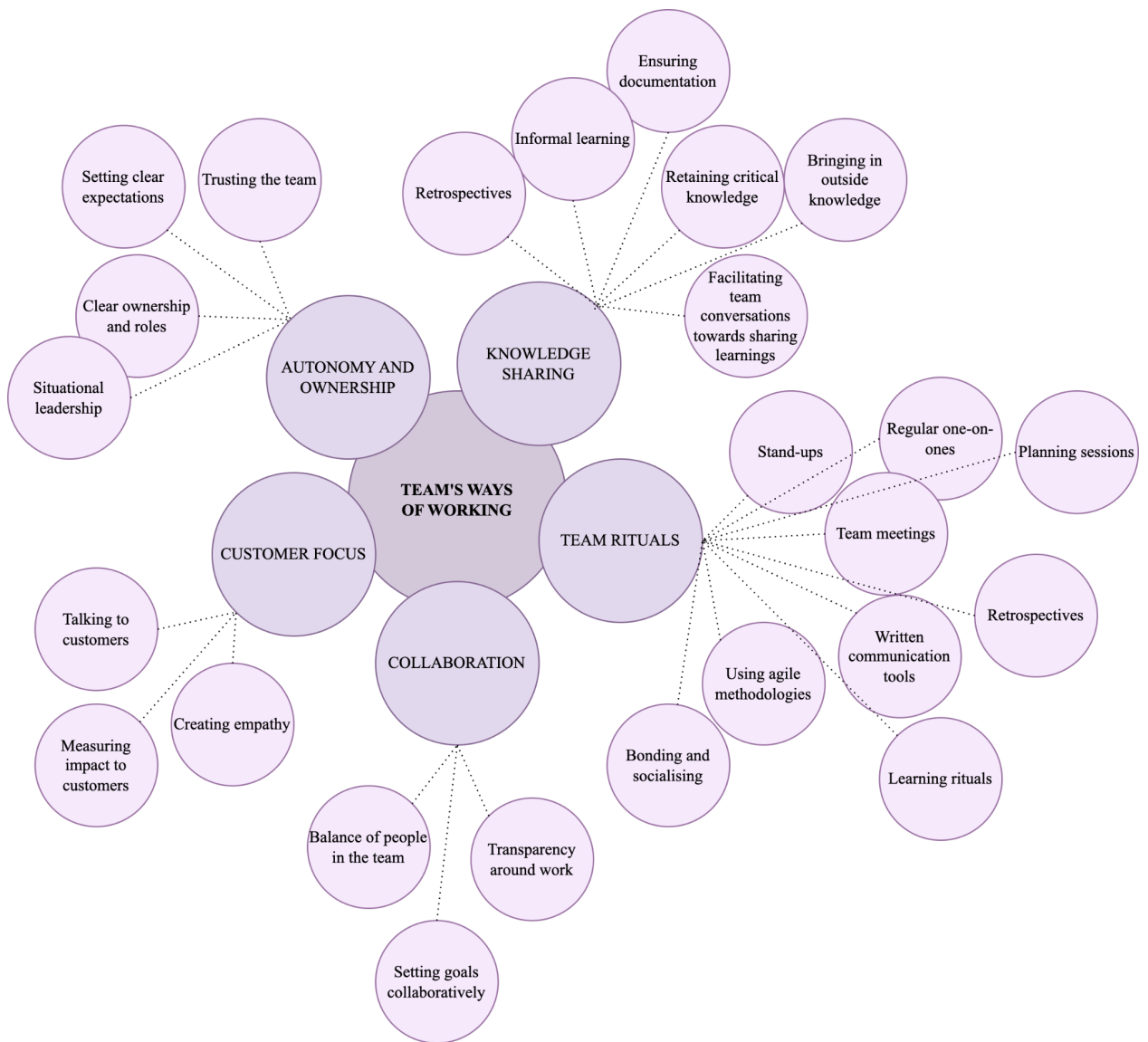
Figure 13. Summary of focus categories and actions for leaders to help their teams find and implement agile ways of working

Source: Author's summary based on interviews

Autonomy is essential to the functioning of an agile high-performance team (Verwijs & Russo, 2022). While it's necessary to achieve success, psychological empowerment produces more content and happier employees according to Eilers *et al*. (2020). A leader can enable team autonomy by placing trust in them. (INT9): "I prefer to give my leads the flexibility to run their teams the way that they see fit to focus on the goal." Moe *et al*. (2019a) confirm that a lack of trust inhibits autonomy. It's important that when trust is placed in the team, clear expectations are laid out. The goal is to set a direction and boundaries, and communicate them very clearly. When

expectations are clear the team should have the freedom to choose how they will approach achieving this target. According to Malik *et al*. (2021), this way of working will lead to innovative behaviour. To help keep the ownership in place some interviewees practise single ownership, meaning that each team member has their own responsibility area and no goals have multiple owners. If people are passionate about what they do, they are more willing to take ownership. As the team matures they start taking more ownership of different leadership roles as well. (INT6): "I think delegation is the keyword so the team wouldn't be dependent only on you. When maturity grows in the team, they are the ones who are running the team in some sense." Most interviewees tied the importance of situational leadership to enabling autonomy. When the team is forming or new members joining, there needs to be more direction. As skills improve, people feel more comfortable in their roles, and trust increases, the leader should step away and assume more of a coaching role. This is well in line with what Gren (2017a) suggested about the role of a leader depending on the maturity of the team. Interviewees focused on the individual maturity level rather than a team one. (INT8): "When they started, there was a big investment because it's such a complex world. So you have to spend time with them and sometimes it's a little bit frustrating. /../ But if you give them the grounding and then at some point you start to pull back and you start to ask the questions, but not in a mean-spirited way or very authoritative way, but rather to understand how they think. Then they're just going to be excited about solving problems themselves." As maturity increases, the team can become more self lead as people are willing to take more ownership of leadership roles, as Spiegler *et al*. (2019a) described as well.

How teams share and consume knowledge defines a large part of their success as it enables agility and innovation (Papa *et al*., 2018), and an entrepreneurial mindset (Ahmad & Karim, 2019). Although informal knowledge sharing practises are more impactful (Ouriques *et al*., 2019), leaders should make sure that documentation has enough focus in the team as well. All day-to-day processes should be well recorded, with someone in charge of keeping them up to date. All projects and their current state should be available. There's also a benefit to making commonly asked questions and their answers visible to the larger group. (INT6): "All questions, not only for newbies but also everyone in the team is going to one channel, so we can actually see what the questions are so that we can improve our onboarding. So everything is actually visible for everyone." Documentation is an efficient tool for knowledge retention. In addition, leaders can encourage knowledge retention by having multiple people well-versed in the same tasks or having backups on projects. Informal learning is supported by some team rituals such as retrospectives, where the team looks back on a certain time period with the intent of identifying

what has been working, what hasn't, and what could be done to improve. Retrospectives have been described as a useful tool by Khalil and Khalil (2020). Hemon *et al*. (2019) place importance on not only having team rituals internally but cross-functionally as well to create a good platform for the exchange of knowledge. In a similar way, interviewed leaders placed some emphasis on gaining insight from peer teams and stakeholders. (INT1): "It's really good to know the relevant experience from other teams. So I'm just essentially connected with other operational teams across the domain." Importance is also allocated to any other means of informal knowledge sharing in and outside of the team, such as brown bags, which are focused on sharing what one is currently working on, side-by-sides, where one person can try out another person's job, buddy systems for newcomers, and any means of creating and organic conversation. A leader can use all kinds of written platforms and daily rituals to remind people to share their learnings and direct the conversation towards it, as they tend to have the best overview of what team members have done and learned. (INT9): "When we have a monthly team meeting I try to pull out some of those things. I'll go back and go "Hey! On the second of November Phoebe in APAC did this early careers event. And this is what she learned. Did you guys see that in Slack and are there any questions?""

Team rituals have a large impact on how a team communicates and collaborates, and a leader has a large role in defining those rituals. Some of the most talked about rituals during the interviews were connected to socialising and bonding as a team, such as team events, informal lunches and dinners, competitions, and bonding exercises before planning sessions. Malik *et al*. (2022) proved the hypothesis that team building is positively connected to team success in agile teams. (INT8): "I underestimated how much people like to socialise among the people that they work with." Some of the more commonly named agile rituals included sprints, planning, retrospectives, and stand-ups. Other rituals mentioned were weekly or monthly team meetings and weekly one-on-one conversations between the leader and a team member. One-on-one conversations are used to build trust and help unblock the path to high performance. Another goal of those conversations is to make sure that the needs and growth of individuals is taken care of. Lapshun and Fusch (2021) have described the importance of these conversations on psychological safety which directly ties into the success of the team. The other routines bring the whole team together to discuss goal setting, progress, learnings, and updates. These rituals enable knowledge sharing and collaboration, as well as give the leader opportunities to communicate cultural aspects (Kusuma *et al*., 2019). (INT8): "I started to do stand-ups with analysts. It's not normal. Normally you don't do that with analysts. So we did it every day for

half an hour. At some point, COVID passed and I thought that they were getting annoyed by me checking with them every day. You know, asking them silly questions at 9 am. So I was telling them we can cancel this and they actually didn't want to cancel it because they found it useful because that's where the team comes together and you get to talk through things." Generally having knowledge of agile practices was mentioned as a good thing to have.

Agile teams need to collaborate well among themselves and with other teams. To enable collaboration, the first thing a leader should consider is who are the people on the team and how to help them understand each other. (INT1): "Lots of new people. The culture changed in terms of getting new ideas and new approaches to how we work on our tasks. It was one of the factors that we needed to get used to each other, basically understanding how we work together and how we overall complete our goals." The more they work together, the more mature the team and the relationship becomes, which leads to stronger collaboration. Solid routines and processes help team members understand how the team functions together. Ramírez‑Mora *et al*. (2020) have shown that agile rituals help with communication. Psychometric testing and discussions around it can also help individuals understand their own and others' behaviour. Another large leverage for a leader is involving the team in decision-making and goal-setting processes. This creates stronger buy-in into the purpose and people want to collaborate to make it happen autonomously as a team. Moe *et al*. (2019b) have described this as a problem in agile teams, where goals are set by the management, not the team themselves. This should be avoided. (INT7): "When they have gone through something difficult together and solved it on the other end, they're going to feel like they can take anything. That sort of shared challenge is super critical." To enable collaboration a leader should focus on creating transparency in the team and making sure information on the current working log is freely available. There are tools to create visibility into what team members are doing, like Jira and Trello, but it's even more important to communicate if the leader sees people working in silos. This helps create collaboration bridges between parties working on similar tasks or projects, or between people who need each other's knowledge.

Agile business success is, in part, defined by how well they are able to respond to customer needs (Teece *et al*., 2016). This means that teams within the organisation need to put effort into understanding their customers and set goals based on their benefit. A leader can help their team become more customer-focused in their work through creating empathy towards customers. (INT8): "You ask the right questions. Essentially "What are we trying to do? How would the customer respond to that?"" Success should be defined with a benefit to the customer and their

experience accounted into performance metrics, such as Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). As a first step, it's necessary to understand who the team's customers are. In the case of servicing teams, it might be easy to identify the customer of the service or product as the customer of the team. In the case of supporting functions, it might be different, for example, the customers of the recruitment team are all the potential and existing employees of the company. Once the relevant customers are defined it's important to talk to them. (INT7): "We need to understand the business user persona and what we've been doing for that is just having more customer conversations and we started off with formal interactions. But what I'm starting to realise is that they have a limited value. The more informal interactions we can have with our customers, the more value we can derive from it."

3.3.4. Team design, supporting people, and role modelling

While the previous themes are focused on how a team works together, the final theme revolves around some specific responsibilities of the leader which are harder to hand over to team members. These responsibilities include designing the team, supporting individuals, and role modelling the values and behaviours needed in the team. The necessary actions are visualised in Figure 14.
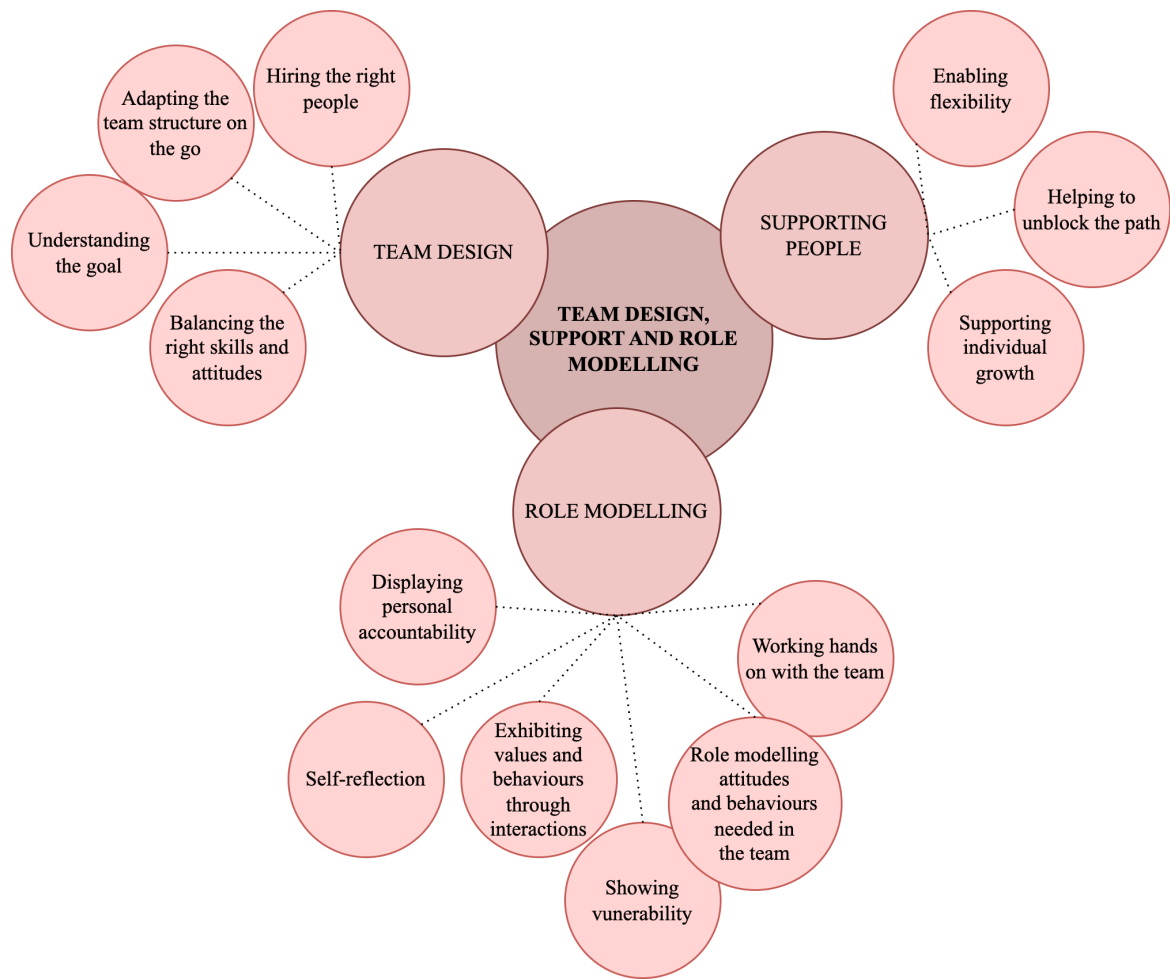
Figure 14. Summary of focus categories and actions for leaders to have the right people in the right roles, supporting them on an individual level, and role modelling behaviours and values
Source: Author's summary based on interviews

The team's culture and ways of working together depend a lot on individual team members. It is a leader's responsibility and challenge to design a team in a way that team members have a good ground for collaboration and achieving their goals. Gren and Lindman (2020) have shared their results on how creating an initial structure for autonomous teams is essential for them to become self-governing in the future. Interviewees suggest that the starting point should be around understanding the goal of adding people to the team. It could be about forming a whole new team around a new goal, in which case it's necessary to understand what skills are needed to reach the target. It could also be about new goals or growth arising in an existing team, which requires a new skill set. (INT5): "If I notice that the team is doing okay, but missing on communication, I'll step in this role and act as a communicator to the very max. This will fill in the gap in performance and grant me authority through a quick win. However, once I have the opportunity I will reshape the team so I give away this role to someone else, either upskill

someone or add to the team, and take over my natural role which is Directing or Problem-Solving to avoid demotivation and burn out myself." It's important to consider not only individual skills and qualities but how to create an effective balance of the right people. The ratio of different kinds of mindsets should be present, such as risk takers, conservative people, dreamers, philosophers, strategists, problem solvers, and experienced team members, depending on the nature and goals of the team. Hiring the right people in the right roles is critical for the high performance of an agile team. Petermann and Zacher (2020) outlined some of the qualities to look for in the process: openness to new experiences, drive for change, power and achievement, having a positive mindset towards learning and change, and possessing intelligence and resilience. The balance of the team should be maintained and adapted as the team grows, people change and goals shift. If approached as a continuous cycle, instead of one-time action of formation, the team is able to become and stay agile through change. (INT2): "I have to be constantly challenging myself. Who am I hiring? And what is the objective for that? So the people we hired in 2016 and the people we hired in 2019 were for specific types of needs in the team, including what thinking we require and what we want from them in 2016 versus in 2022." An important part of this adaptation is realising and acting when team members are not a good fit for the team.

The leader's impact on the team's performance doesn't end with making sure there are the right roles and the right people in those roles. Nascimento *et al*. (2022) and Menon and Suresh (2021) have proven that the motivation and commitment of individuals determine whether they are willing to contribute to the common cause and go the extra mile. It's necessary to provide flexibility for a healthy work-life balance and working with teams across different time zones. This can include providing time when needed or recording team meetings. The largest spontaneously covered topic during the interviews drew a pattern of enabling and supporting the growth of individuals. The leader can help people understand the direction they want to grow into in the future, help them develop the necessary skills through providing time, resources, mentorship and coaching, and provide opportunities to work on relevant projects and tasks. (INT9): "My personal goal for my team has always been whether you work with me for a short, medium or a long period of time, I hope to get you to a point where /../ when you go for that external interview you overachieve and what you think you can be getting. So maybe it's a lead role and you get a director role." The other side of supporting people in their roles includes helping to unblock their path to success. It's necessary for the leader to understand when their team members are frustrated or unable to move forward towards the targets. In this case, they

need to step in to help them realise the root cause and possible next steps. (INT8): "If you really approach people from the perspective that "okay, they want to get things done" then you essentially just need to figure out why they're struggling. So if you have somebody who cannot do something, you just really need to understand why and then help them through it."

As discussed by Crnogaj *et al.* (2022), the main impact of a leader comes from role modelling certain values and behaviours. This contributes a lot towards culture creation in the team. Some of the values that are worth role modelling knowingly, that were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews, were vulnerability and accountability. This often means admitting to one's own mistakes and taking ownership of the consequences publicly. (INT10): "It's key to make sure that you stick to your word and your actions are very loud and clear. That's how people know they can trust you." Any attitude that the leader expects from the team should be well shown by the leader as well. A lot of the role modelling takes place in different interactions with the team, whether it's a water cooler chat or a team meeting. There's an opportunity for the leader to identify the values and behaviours the team would benefit from and display them in their ways of working, communication and informal interactions. Another theme that emerged from the interviewed leaders was the importance of working together with their teams "in the trenches" (INT7) and not asking anyone else to do something they themselves are not willing to do. A useful tool for leaders is self-reflection. This allows them to understand their own strengths and gaps in skills, actions, and behaviour. And this in turn allows leaders to support teams and be role models in a more genuine way. (INT3): "The deeper I go within myself on this reflection and understanding. The deeper I can go with the people I lead. If I'm not able to be uh super honest with myself on certain topics. I'm not going to be able to lead people on those and help those people on those topics as much or at least not genuinely."

3.4. Recommendations to leaders for building high-performance teams

The aim of this work is to provide leaders, who want to build high-performance teams in an agile environment, with themes and actions to focus on. The recommendations are broken down into four main themes: culture, goal setting and target delivery, team's ways of working, and team design, supporting people and role modelling. Figure 15 shows a simplified process of building agile high-performance teams outside of software development.

BUILD A HEALTHY CULTURE AS THE FOUNDATION

Focus on team culture creation through communication, hiring and boundries

Foster personal relationships and give time for trust to form

Give and seek continuous conversational feedback and hold open conversations

Challenge yourself and the team continuously

CREATE PURPOSE AND ENABLE MEANINGFUL GOAL SETTING AND DELIVERY

Enable a meaningful vision with ambitious and focused goals, and clear expectations

Create alignment with peers, stakeholders and the company while shielding the team

Establish success measurement and tracking for data-based decision making

Eliminate blockers to delivery and adapt goals as necessary

IMPLEMENT TEAM'S WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Enable autonomy through putting trust in the team while having clear expectations and roles

Ensure informal knowledge exchange as well as documentation

Set up rituals to socialise and to work together in an agile way

Enable collaborative goal setting with the focus on customer impact

TEAM DESIGN, SUPPORTING PEOPLE, ROLE MODELLING

Understand the goal and hire a good balance of skills and attitudes to achieve the goal

Adapt team structure as the goals change

Support individuals by helping them unblock the path to delivery and enabling their growth

Role model values and behaviours, such as vulnerability, personal accountability and hands-on problem solving

Figure 15. Building agile high-performance teams outside of software development
Source: Author's summary based on interviews

The model describes the process starting with healthy culture creation in the team, with a focus on trust and feedback. Personal relationships and role modelling expected behaviours are some of the key elements of creating a good team culture. From there the team can move into collaborative goal setting, where a leader can provide vision, purpose, focus, ambition and clarity in expectations. All goals should be well aligned with peers, stakeholders and company goals. Success should be described and progress measured. The leader can help unblock the path and goals should be adapted as new information arises. To enable the delivery of targets, the team should have efficient ways of working together, which can include social and agile team rituals and informal methods of knowledge sharing. For a team to become autonomous, trust needs to be placed in team members while clear expectations and roles are in place. Autonomy levels should be in sync with the maturity of the team and its members. The customers should be kept in the centre of decisions in the team. The whole process is supported by how well the team is designed by the leader. There needs to be a balance of different skills and attitudes and the structure needs to be adapted as goals change. People should be well supported in achieving their goals as well as their personal growth. The leader should put a lot of effort into what and how

they role model, with the focus being on hands-on work, vulnerability and personal accountability.

In conclusion, the leaders who aim to build agile high-performance teams should focus on creating a suitable culture, enabling quality goal setting and target delivery, providing effective ways of working together for the team, making sure the right people are in the right roles, providing ongoing support for them, and intentionally role modelling the values and behaviours they would like to see in the team. Different aspects of what a leader does tie together and influence each other. For example, setting up useful team rituals will increase levels of cohesion and collaboration as well as knowledge sharing. Good role modelling will impact multiple subcategories of culture. When expectations are clearly set and communicated, it will have an impact on culture, goal setting and enable autonomy. It's an ecosystem where each action can impact multiple necessary foundations, which means that taking the right steps can speed up the formation of a high-performance agile team.

CONCLUSION

Agile ways of working enable organisations to respond to internal and external environments. Adapting to market and customer needs and limitations allows businesses to gain market share. While agility is a well-researched area in software development teams, companies need all functions to be on board with it in order to achieve true agility. In order for teams to have the chance of being agile, some company-level requirements need to be met, such as a culture that is supportive of agile methodologies and mindset, human resource processes that allow building and maintaining an agile workforce, support and buy-in of leadership on all levels, and structure which is built around autonomous, self-organised teams. If mentioned prerequisites are present, it is up to team leaders on different levels to enable agility in their teams.

The aim of this research was to determine leadership functions in a fast-paced environment, enablers and blockers to team agility, and specific actions leaders can take to help their teams reach high performance in such a company. The goal was to explore beyond software development and provide a guideline to leaders who are looking to build and maintain agile high-performance teams in any function. In order to do this, three research questions were formed:

- RQ1: How to describe the function of leadership in agile teams?
- RQ2: How can a team achieve high performance in an agile work environment?
- RQ3: How can leaders help teams accelerate the process of reaching high performance in an agile working environment?

Theoretical background was obtained from previous topical research and other sources. This created an understanding of important thematics, which was an input to research design. The goal was to explore the experience of leaders who have built high-performance teams in an environment where the prerequisites had been met. For this purpose, Wise Payments Limited was chosen as the research object and ten high-performance leaders from different functions and management levels were interviewed in a semi-structured way to collect raw data. The latter was analysed using inductive content analysis, to form a new understanding of actions they have taken to build agile high-performance teams.

The job of a leader in an agile environment was broken down into four main themes. One of the goals of a leader is to make sure that business needs are covered, which can be achieved by aligning the goals of the team and individuals with those of the company. Although setting relevant targets is important, even more importance was given to the fact that the leader is there to make sure that the team delivers on their promises. This can be done through two remaining larger functions of leadership: role modelling and supporting people. The leader can have a large impact on how their team acts through role-modelling the behaviours and values they want to see in the team. Their most powerful tool in this is working beside their team in a hands-on way. While role modelling is one side of enabling how a team approaches their work, another one is supporting their team members. There it is the leader's job to make sure people have the resources they need for growth and overcoming any obstacles on their path to goal delivery.

A healthy and agile culture is one of the themes in enabling team performance. It is championed by leadership and provides a foundation for the right attitude in the team. This culture needs to build trust between the team to enable psychological safety, and create an environment where feedback is natural and challenging is accepted to enable continuous improvement and growth mindset. To create a healthy team culture, it is the leader's job to set boundaries and enforce them. They need to role model the behaviours and values that they want to see in the team, mainly through how they communicate. It also helps to screen for the values and behaviour of team members before hiring them. To create a psychologically safe environment, leaders should prove themselves to the team, as well as establish personal relationships with followers. Teams and individuals should be given time for trust to form. Mistakes should be supported and reflected on with the team. A leader's best tool to create this environment is communication and different interactions with the team and its members. To enable a culture of feedback, all positive and negative feedback should be shared when it emerges continuously and in a conversational manner. It is important to role model the behaviour by seeking out feedback and taking action according to it. Agile leaders should constantly challenge themselves, their team members, the team's ways of working, and their stakeholders.

If the culture is there, one of the most impactful areas for the team and their leader is connected to how they set goals. The process should start with a clear vision and feeling of purpose which the leader can establish with the team and communicate clearly. Goals should be set in discussion with the team. While being ambitious and customer-focused, they should account for some level of uncertainty. The team's focus should be where they can have the most impact. The

leaders can guide and facilitate the whole process while working together with the team. It's important to make sure clear expectations are set at every step of the process. It is necessary for the leader to balance goals between ambition and reality, and communicate them very clearly. The goals need to be aligned with company and stakeholder targets to reduce misalignment within the company. It is important to set expectations and share information with stakeholders, which is more easily done when rituals have been created for it. Gaining buy-in from stakeholders is beneficial in this process. The leader should also always consider how to shield their team from unnecessarily complex work and tight deadlines from stakeholders. Targets need to be measurable to enable tracking of progress towards the goal. While specific indicators are needed, context should be accounted for. Measurements should align with company-level indicators and decision-making should be based on data. The main value of the team comes from delivering on set targets. Leaders can enable delivery by being willing to adapt goals on the go, eliminating emerging blockers and accounting for change management, as agile teams usually aim to bring change when setting their goals.

How a team works together to deliver on their targets is largely defined by their ways of working. In an agile environment, some enablers in this theme included autonomy and ownership, knowledge-sharing practices, collaboration and team rituals. The latter helps with creating a suitable foundation for other ways of working to emerge. Leaders can enable autonomy by providing trust, clear expectations, and leveraging situational leadership as the team matures. Ownership areas for teams and individuals should be clearly communicated. To increase knowledge sharing in a team, the leader should establish retrospectives and other rituals to encourage informal communication sharing, as well as bringing in outside knowledge to the team. Formal knowledge sharing in the form of documentation should also be in focus. It's useful if team members have enough knowledge to cover for each other when needed. Collaboration can be enhanced by setting goals together and creating transparency around each other's work. Collaboration increases as team members are together longer and are compatible. Different team rituals have an impact on how a team works together as well as the culture. Bonding rituals, such as team events and competitions are important to help people create more personal relationships, while more formal routines, such as daily stand-ups, team meetings, retrospectives, and one-on-one conversations allow for knowledge sharing, progress tracking, and many other aspects that are important to an agile high-performance team. Customer focus in the team can be created through talking to customers, having empathy towards them, and measuring the team's impact on them.

To enable an agile high-performance team, it is necessary to have the right skill set and the proper people. When it comes to designing the team, the focus should be directed toward understanding the necessary skills for achieving the goals, hiring the right people into the roles to create a balance of different capabilities, and ensuring sufficient resources. Team structure and setup should be adapted over time according to the targets the team needs to achieve. When correct people are in the necessary roles, they need to be supported continuously. Leaders should enable flexibility, support their growth, and help them unblock any issues that come up. Topics connected to team identity need to be considered as whether people are on board with the vision or not can enable or block the team from achieving high performance. One of the most impactful functions for a leader is role modelling. The most powerful way to do this is through working together with the team and being hands-on in problem-solving. Leaders should exhibit vulnerability, personal accountability, and other behaviours and values they would like to see in the team. The main tools for doing this are the way they communicate in different interactions with the team, as well as deep self-reflection skills.

The goal of providing leaders with possible guidelines to form agile high-performing teams in an environment where preconditions are met was reached through this research. As the sampling was done by a non-probability purposive sampling method in one company, the results cannot be generalised to the larger public. The contribution of this research to the existing body of knowledge was creating an overview of how a leader can enable agility and high performance in functions and teams outside of software development, as the latter is heavily researched while the former is needed for true organisational agility. Further research should be done with larger sample groups from different companies to bring more insight into the matter.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Knowledge sharing barriers and facilitators

Source: Anwar *et al.* (2019)

Appendix 2. Managing VUCA

Top 10 disruptive trends in the environment and in how it gets done

- Tools for collaboration across locations
- Economic cycles/ recession
- Influence of government on business
- Increasing demands upon leaders
- Using Big Data
- Accessing talent in new geographies
- Differences in working styles across generations
- Cyber security
- Predictive analytics
- Work-life balance expectations

Leaders sense needs and opportunities for change

Obstacles to managing VUCA

- Inertia of the Status Quo
- Time and organisational design barriers
- Unresponsiveness to customer needs
- Growing pains
- Slow communication and bureaucracy
- Outdated processes

Recommended practices for managing VUCA and overcoming obstacles

- Communication and transparency
- Knowledge sharing and team work
- Fostering agile behaviour
- Iterative improvement and learning
- Deep customer focus
- Leadership and role modelling
- Strategic alignment and managing talent

Increased organisational agility

Source: Baran and Woznyj (2020)

Appendix 3. Interview questions

Theme	Questions
General	Can I record the interview and use the responses in my master's thesis?
	What's your background and road to leadership?
	What's your management level?
	How long have you been with the company, the function and the team?
RQ1: How to describe the function of leadership in agile teams?	What does leadership mean to you?
	What are the expectations in your role as a leader in an agile company?
	How is it different from a traditional company?
	From where do those expectations originate?
	How is the accountability for those expectations created?
RQ2: How can a team achieve high performance in an agile work environment?	How would you define a high-performance team in an agile environment?
	How do you measure performance in your team?
	How often does a high-performance team reach their targets?
	What do you think are the main contributors to form a high-performance team?
	How have you approached creating a high-performance team?
	What have you learned from leading a high-performance team?
	What are the external blockers or enablers to creating a high-performance team?
	How much guidance or training did you have in the process or before?
	How long did it take for your team to reach the point of high-performance? Why?
	How do you think it would have been possible to speed up the process? What would you do differently the next time around?

Appendix 3 continued

Theme	Questions
RQ3: How can leaders help teams accelerate the process of reaching high performance in an agile working environment?	How do you build trust and psychological safety in the team?
	How do you build a feedback culture in the team?
	How do you use the situational leadership approach to guide your team to results through different maturity stages?
	How do you enable knowledge and experience sharing?
	How do you drive customer focus in the team?
	What kind of agile processes does your team follow (retros, sprints, stand-ups, etc.)? What other rituals are there?
	How does your team align to the rest of the company?
	What were the main blockers and difficulties on the way to achieving high-performance as a team for you?
	What actions would have helped you get there faster as a team?
	What kind of skills and knowledge does it take from a leader to reach this goal?
	What kind of personality/behaviour does it take from a leader to reach this goal?

Appendix 4. Visual representation of interview results

These figures show how the results of different research questions from interviews tie together.

RQ1	RQ2			RQ3
Functions of leadership	Definition of high performance	Enablers	Blockers	Actions

Culture

	attitude		Team/company culture
	company and team culture (leadership)	Leadership & culture creation	setting boundaries
			communication
			right people
	trust		proving yourself
			communication
			giving time
			allowing and reflecting on mistakes
			personal relationships
	growth mindset		acknowledgement/ praise
	continuous improvement		challenging yourself and the team
	feedback		conversational feedback
			taking action
			role modelling
			continuous feedback

RQ3 Culture sub-categories: Team/company culture, Trust, Feedback & challenging

RQ1	RQ2				RQ3	
Functions of leadership	**Definition of high performance**	**Enablers**	**Blockers**		**Actions**	
Expectation & goal setting					**Goal setting and delivery**	
		vision			Vision/ purpose	alignment to company goals
						vision & purpose creation
Enabling goal setting and delivery	Ambitious goals	ambition	Accounting for uncertainty		Goal setting	creating focus
		goal-setting				ambition
		customer focused goals				decision-making
						design thinking
						methods
						automation
		clear expectations			Expectation setting	clear communication
						balancing expectations
Business need coverage	Clear communication in all directions	alignment to other teams and stakeholders	Managing dependencies & collaboration		Alignment	information exchange
						expectation setting
						rituals with stakeholders
						shielding the team
						getting buy-in
		measuring success			Measuring success	outcome/performance indicators
						accounting for context
						alignment
						data-based decision making
	Ability to adapt goals and actions to ensure delivery				Delivery	adapting goals
	Delivery on targets					eliminating blockers
		change management				change management

RQ1	RQ2			RQ3
Functions of leadership	Definition of high performance	Enablers	Blockers	Actions

Team's ways of working

Enablers	Actions (Team's ways of working)	
autonomy & shared leadership	**Autonomy & ownership**	trust
		clear expectations
		ownership
		situational leadership
knowledge sharing & consuming	**Knowledge sharing**	knowledge retention
		informal learning
		retrospectives
		documentation
		bringing in new knowledge
		facilitating conversations
collaboration	**Collaboration**	team design & maturity
		setting goals together
		transparency
team rituals	**Team rituals**	agile methodologies
		learning rituals
		bonding & social
		team meetings
		written communication
		planning
		retrospectives
		stand-ups
		1:1 conversations
	Customer focus	measuring impact
		talking to customers
		analytics & empathy

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RQ1	RQ2			RQ3

Functions of leadership	Definition of high performance	Enablers	Blockers	Actions

Team design, supporting people and role modelling

Team design, supporting people and role modelling

				Self-reflection

Role modelling				Role modelling	Hands-on working
					Vunerability
					Personal accountability
					Attitude
					Interactions/ communication

Supporting people			Identity of the team & buy-in	Supporting people	Enabling flexibility
					Unblocking the path
					Supporting growth

		Understanding the needed skills		Team design	Understanding the goal
		Having the right people			Balancing skills
					Hiring the right people
		Sufficient resources	Lack of skills and resource		Adapting the team

Appendix 5. Link to full transcript

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pdnzfTeqO2JGYL2Q952vLk9XZEnt0TQoKZFNaak4PNA/edit?usp=sharing

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