

ARTICLE

The Agilist mindset: How leaders are putting agility to work to thrive in volatile times

Leaders' agility can have a multiplier effect across their organizations. Here's how some are putting it to work.



Among distinctions in the modern world, few are more widely admired than the Nobel Prize, awarded for achievement in science, literature, economics, medicine, and—most notably—the pursuit of peace. It's well known that Alfred B. Nobel, the Swedish explosives manufacturer who invented dynamite, directed in his will that his fortune endow this annual recognition of "those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind." What's less often mentioned is how a guy who got rich making weapons of war made his name synonymous with the highest hopes of humanity.

You might say that Alfred Nobel had an unusual form of luck. When his brother Ludvig, an oil industry pioneer known as the "Russian Rockefeller," died, in 1888, a newspaper mistakenly ran an obituary of Alfred.¹ Seeing his legacy described as being little more than a merchant of death spurred Alfred to reimagine his obituary and fill it with service to high ideals.

What business leader has ever made a faster or more successful pivot? This is a clarion example of gaining self-awareness² and having the agility to put it to use. In less dramatic ways, every leader has opportunities to show agility—because they have learned something new about themselves or because an ever more demanding and volatile business environment requires it.

Agility isn't easy. Colleagues at Heidrick & Struggles have analyzed thousands of 360-degree executive assessments and have found that fewer than 40% of leaders are rated as highly performing on agility. In most organizations, I've found two basic types of people: *agilists* and *conformists*. The agilists are always looking out to the horizon for what could go wrong, even during the best of times—forever questioning, respectfully, and planning for change. The conformists, on the other hand, are comfortable with the status quo and seem more interested in not straying from the herd, individually and organizationally. Conformists are more common, in my experience; agilists often stand out, which can be a burden in the short term though it leads to long-term benefits. (The story of Darren Woods, now the CEO of ExxonMobil, which I relate later in this article, highlights both outcomes.)

Nonetheless, our research at Heidrick has also found that no other leadership capability is more impactful than the ability to discern a wrong direction, master one's circumstances, and fundamentally change course. No less than 92% of business leaders agree, other research has found.³ In an ever-changing business landscape, agility can be an indispensable skill, one that can have a multiplier effect across an organization.

No other leadership capability is more impactful than the ability to discern a wrong direction, master one's circumstances, and fundamentally change course.

1 Colin Schultz, "Blame Sloppy Journalism for the Nobel Prizes," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 9, 2003, smithsonian.org.

2 For more on the value of self-awareness and how to develop it in less dramatic circumstances, see Les Csorba, "Too aware to fail," Heidrick & Struggles, August 1, 2024, heidrick.com.

3 "Achieving Greater Agility," Forbes Insight, The Project Management Institute, 2017, pmi.org.

Agility today

CEOs and board members around the world recently cited economic and geopolitical volatility as their top two concerns for the second year in a row.⁴ That ongoing volatility, combined with today's interconnectedness of global systems, places a special premium on agility in leadership. One unforeseen event in one country can drive events, or even upend lives, in many other places. Just one example is the security software update in the summer of 2024 that led to outages and disruption felt by airlines, banks, and media outlets around the world.

The pace of change is also increasing. A prime example is the operational impact and ethical complexity of artificial intelligence, which has already caused leaders in all kinds of organizations to make some quick pivots, even in the essential skills they look for in hiring.⁵ By one 2023 estimate, up to two-thirds of jobs in the United States and Europe are exposed to some degree of AI automation, and generative AI could substitute up to a quarter of all current work.⁶ One thing AI will not make obsolete is the heightened awareness that leaders will need as what some call an “era of perma-crisis” continues.

At Heidrick, we view agility as a combination of foresight, learning, adaptability, and resilience. Based on my own experience, I add a fifth element: execution. The Heidrick leadership model treats execution as a separate, broader capability, but in this context, I see value in underscoring the need to act decisively. Without action, grasping the urgency of a pivot can be like dashing for your car to make a last-minute journey but then idling in the driveway.⁷ Jamie Dimon has said to me that while “self-awareness is fundamental in leadership” it can take you only so far. A leader must also adapt to new information—and at that point, says Dimon, decisiveness and execution are everything.

The acronym “**FLARE**,” for me, conveys a sudden burst of energy and light that can help leaders find their way forward:



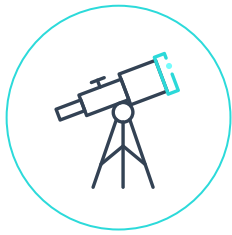
⁴ “CEO and board confidence monitor 2025: Persistent concerns, pockets of increased confidence,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 5, 2025, heidrick.com.

⁵ For more on AI's effect on corporate functions and hiring, see [Heidrick & Struggles' Insights on Artificial Intelligence](https://heidrick.com), heidrick.com.

⁶ Jan Hatzius, Joseph Briggs, Devesh Kodnani, and Giovanni Pierdomenico, “Global Economics Analyst: The Potentially Large Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Economic Growth (Briggs/Kodnani),” Goldman Sachs, March 26, 2023.

⁷ A noted military strategist, Air Force Colonel John Boyd, created another useful way of thinking about agile leadership: the “OODA Loop” of decision-making, comprising “observe, orient, decide, act.” With OODA, it's all there—self-awareness, agility, and execution. Jamie Dimon is one of many executives who have applied this framework with great success.

Foresight



Our analysis shows that executives are notably weak in foresight: not even 15% of those Heidrick has assessed were proficient in the capabilities underlying foresight.

When I think of foresight, Wil VanLoh comes to mind. At age 28, Wil founded the private equity firm Quantum Capital Group, and over the last 25 years, he has become admired for building a culture of integrity and performance while also making timely investments that have yielded billions of dollars in value for his limited partners (primarily pension funds for firefighters, teachers, and university endowments). Quantum now has over \$35 billion in enterprise value in its active funds.

When we conducted a 360-degree assessment of Wil as part of his leadership development program at Quantum, he got the top rating in the foresight category. Colleagues observed that “Wil has a gift for decoding signal from the noise,” and that he “can quickly get to the root of any issue more than most.”⁸ Wil was among the first to see major investment potential in renewable energy. Without pivoting away from traditional oil and gas investments entirely, he started the Quantum Innovation Fund in 2017 to navigate the complex transition to a low-carbon future, setting a standard that many other investors have adopted.

Foresight, like prudence, is often gained through experience, but it can also be consciously cultivated. Wil’s voracious appetite for information, relentless curiosity, and commitment to continuous learning have sharpened his ability to think ahead and anticipate what others overlook. By actively seeking knowledge and questioning assumptions, he has trained himself to see around corners, recognize emerging opportunities, and navigate uncertainty with confidence—skills that allow him to see openings when others don’t.⁹

Learning



With a learning mindset, we are aware of what we know and of what we don’t know, which allows for quick adjustment and self-correction. It is also another area where our analysis finds most executives lack proficiency. On the other hand, Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, was renowned for his commitment to learning. Jim Collins has recounted the story of a Brazilian businessman who wrote to the CEOs of 10 US retailers in the 1980s requesting a visit to observe their operations. Everyone turned him down, except Walton. Walton not only met with the CEO, but met his plane himself:



When the Brazilian and his colleagues stepped off the plane in Bentonville, Ark., a white-haired man asked if he could help. “We’re looking for Sam Walton,” they said, to which the man replied, “That’s me.” Walton led them to his truck and introduced his dog, Roy. As they rumbled around in the front cab of Walton’s pickup, the Brazilian billionaires were pummeled with questions. Eventually it dawned on them: Walton had invited them to Bentonville so that he could learn about South America. Later Walton visited his friends in Sao Paulo. Late one afternoon there was a phone call from the police. Walton had been crawling around in stores on his hands and knees measuring aisle widths and had been arrested.”¹⁰

Sam Walton by then was already a man who could have rested on laurels for the rest of his days. Yet at heart he remained the small-town shop owner that he was in the beginning, always interested in what changes could be made to win a few more customers, meeting anyone who could teach him something. Agile leaders thirsty for new ideas and innovation are humble enough to understand that in any kind of business, there is always more to learn, and they seize every opportunity to do so.

8 Based on Wil VanLoh’s LAQ 360 assessment report on March 24, 2022.

9 Interview with Wil Van Loh, July 17, 2024.

10 Jim Collins, “The 10 Greatest CEOs of All Time,” *Fortune*, July 21, 2003, jimcollins.com.

Adaptability



Adaptability relies on keen awareness. To pivot quickly with precision, leaders need to heighten awareness of old mental models as well as biases that pervade their organization.

It is usually habitual learners, of course, who are quickest to adapt and course-correct when plans go awry. Adaptability relies on keen awareness. To pivot quickly with precision, leaders need to heighten awareness of old mental models as well as biases that pervade their organization. To adapt successfully, we've found at Heidrick, also requires what we call social agility, a mix of attributes such as assertiveness and self-confidence balanced with empathy and personal warmth.

Empathy, for one, doesn't come naturally to some CEOs. Reaching the top job calls on the harder virtues, and people who are more sensitive often never get there. Yet the best leaders of our time show a disposition to adapt, to bring toughness and empathy into balance. This helps them recognize and address people's fear of change. The most effective leaders don't just drive transformation—they bring their organizations along, balancing resolve with empathy to create trust, alignment, and momentum.

Jamie Dimon has done so for almost 20 years as CEO of JPMorgan Chase. Reflective, yet decisive. Tough, but empathetic. Empathy, he has told me, was instilled early on by the example of his parents, who, he remembers, treated everyone with courtesy and respect.

Dimon also credits his direct, straight-talking manner to his Greek American mother, who, he says, had a way of teaching by asking questions about basic assumptions and motivations.¹¹ This Socratic method sharpened his intellect and made him more independent and objective in his approach to questions and problems of every kind. Still today, he is not drawn in by fuzzy thinking or corporate groupthink. Rather, Dimon considers curiosity to be a healthy "form of humility" that requires people to ask questions on the usually safe assumption that no one has all the answers. Another tactic Dimon uses to ensure he knows enough to have clear foresight is what the company calls his "heartland bus tour," an annual trip to visit with JPMorgan Chase employees, clients, and other stakeholders. This keeps him alert to what's in the air and helps him understand how to adapt to changes other executives might not see coming.

In his 2024 shareholder letter, he stressed the importance of "strategic thinking, leading with heart, and *adaptability*." The success of the bank during recent black swan events, Dimon wrote, could be credited to resilience and adaptability.

Resilience



The oil and gas industry is one I know well, and it's one that offers particular examples of resilience. Among leaders I've known in that industry, one of the most impressive is Doug Lawler. When he took over at Chesapeake Energy in 2013, he faced what was considered the greatest leadership challenge in the oil and gas industry. The company was then the second largest natural gas producer in the country, and on the brink of bankruptcy, with a mountain of debt, deteriorating morale, and Wall Street's disfavor. Not only that, shortly after joining, Doug told a gathering of industry leaders that "what I found when I got inside the company was much, much worse than I thought."

Activist shareholders and volatile commodity prices created ongoing complexities. But to Doug's credit and his team's credit, the company successfully emerged from bankruptcy in early 2021, and optimism abounded. Yet instead of being celebrated for his perseverance and strategic agility, Doug was let go by the board.¹² He landed on his feet, joining Continental Resources in 2022 and becoming CEO less than a year later.

¹¹ Interview with Jamie Dimon, July 25, 2024.

¹² When Chesapeake Energy closed its acquisition of Southwestern Energy on October 1, 2024, it was renamed Expand Energy and continues to be led by Nick Dell'Oso, Doug's CFO and the person the board named to replace him.

How did Doug have the resilience to get through all that? The short answer is that he is a man built for tough times. Back when he was starting out as a petroleum engineer, Doug's wife, Heidi, was diagnosed with brain cancer not long after giving birth to their daughter. After three years of surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy, she died. Doug's determination to "make the most of every moment" with his daughter—which included bringing her flowers every week—became the defining commitment of his life. "My prayer," he said, "was that God would help me do the very best for her."¹³

When a man or woman has walked through a wall of fire like that, the pressures of professional life will never get the best of them. Doug's focus on the things that matter most kept him grounded and oriented, forging his resilient spirit.¹⁴

Another example of resilience under extraordinary duress is my Heidrick colleague Tatiana Furtseva, the managing partner of our firm's office in Kyiv, Ukraine. She has led her team through her country being under brutal attack. I've traveled to the country several times during its war with Russia and have seen for myself how optimistically Tatiana handles both her professional and personal responsibilities—including the care of her son, who has been gravely ill—under relentless pressure. She told me, "I didn't realize the strength I had within me to lead and care for others."

Tatiana's resilience is remarkable, but not uncommon in Ukraine right now. In 2022, several colleagues there interviewed 15 Ukrainian CEOs leading large-scale businesses to better understand how they were navigating crisis leadership, and how the experience had shaped them. The powerful common theme was that they had all but forgotten personal ambition and made the well-being of others their priority, determined to keep going and manage their own emotions regardless of external circumstances.¹⁵ This shared spirit was reflected in the way one Ukrainian leader poignantly put it on one of my visits to Kyiv: "We all sleep under the same blanket." Cheli Nachman, who leads our firm's Tel Aviv office, has also exemplified extraordinary agility and unwavering optimism in both her professional and personal leadership during wartime. Her bravery and resilience in ensuring business continuity amidst uncertainty have inspired her team, strengthened client relationships, and resonated with colleagues worldwide.

Though these stories highlight how extreme adversity can build resilience, most leaders—luckily—must do so under more normal circumstances. Training themselves to respond with creativity to sectoral boom and bust cycles, for example, or managing thorny relationships with bosses or team members, are common areas where self-aware leaders can learn to boost resilience.

Execution



Being adaptable and resilient does not, of course, mean losing focus on the demands of day-to-day execution. Leaders who have the combination of being quick on their feet, adaptable, and durable, with an ability to execute plans, are the leaders who deliver sustained performance.

By those measures, few CEOs have records to equal that of Darren Woods of ExxonMobil. In October 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the total market value of ExxonMobil was less than that of Zoom Video Communications for a brief time. Even industry veterans, accustomed to uncertainty, were a bit rattled by the extent of the volatility and hardship oil and gas companies faced then.

¹³ Interview with Doug Lawler, August 30, 2024.

¹⁴ I'm happy to note that Doug married again, had triplet daughters and a son, and that his first daughter not long ago had a child of her own, a girl she named "Heidi."

¹⁵ Oleksandr Kosterin and Kateryna Soroka, "Lessons from Ukraine's wartime CEOs on leading through crisis," Heidrick & Struggles, July 18, 2023, heidrick.com.

Yet far from panicking, Darren kept his eye on the fundamentals: very little in the modern economy would exist without the energy and materials produced by companies like ExxonMobil. So he pivoted and adopted a counter-cyclical investment strategy, trimming \$5 billion from annual operating costs and making targeted investments while energy prices were low. Darren executed with confidence and, sure enough, by September 2024, ExxonMobil was trading at around \$550 billion market cap, compared to Zoom's \$17 billion. No one in the fall of 2020 would have predicted such a recovery for ExxonMobil.

ExxonMobil had long been known for its operating discipline and accountability culture; when he became CEO, Darren added greater transparency and consistency. This focus has helped him deliver performance through collapsing commodity prices, shareholder activism, and ongoing economic volatility.

The Agilist vs. the Conformist

The agilists are always looking out on the horizon for what could go wrong, even during the best of times. They're the most likely to ask, "What's working and what's not?" Or "What can we be doing differently?" And even "Are there opportunities in crisis?"

[The conformists] invite trouble because they are so prone to groupthink, discounting, and pushing away objective, independent judgment.

The elements of FLARE—foresight, learning, adaptability, resilience, and execution—define agility in leadership. The alternative is conformity. Most leaders fall somewhere in the middle, proficient in some elements of agility, and less so in others.

The agilists are always looking out on the horizon for what could go wrong, even during the best of times. They're the most likely to ask, "What's working and what's not?" Or "What can we be doing differently?" And even "Are there opportunities in crisis?" They are forever questioning and planning for change, self-reflective, inclusive, innovative, creative, and productive, collaborative and team players. Darren Woods's reinvesting in oil exploration when prices were collapsing and Jamie Dimon's hyper-focus on maintaining balance-sheet flexibility during the financial crisis and buying other banks on the cheap highlight the value of being comfortable examining preconceived notions and keeping doors open to hear contrarian views.

The conformists, on the other hand, are comfortable with the status quo and seem more interested in not straying from the herd, as when banks followed other banks headlong into sub-prime mortgages, or when energy companies invested in non-core businesses during the Enron era, putting their balance sheets in jeopardy. They invite trouble because they are so prone to groupthink, discounting and pushing away objective, independent judgment.

Darren Woods's story exemplifies the power of being an agilist in a sea of conformists. Seeing him at the helm today, you'd never guess that he almost quit his first job at Exxon (as it was then known). He was an electrical engineering graduate of Texas A&M and had earned his MBA from the Kellogg School at Northwestern University. After he joined the company as a planning analyst, his boss told him that the way to succeed at Exxon was to "keep your head down"—to conform. Darren didn't like the sound of that advice and remembers telling his wife that he was starting to feel he might be working in the wrong place.

Darren's father had worked with the military, with all the relocations that usually involves. Adjusting to one school after another wasn't easy; there was bullying, a feeling of always being the outsider, and constant attempts to fit in. Yet somehow, as Darren recalls, the sum effect was to give him a certain self-assurance that's clear to anyone who meets him. He treats people as he expects to be treated and refuses to simply conform to the thinking or the ways of others. As he put it, long ago Darren decided "I was going to be me and do what is right."¹⁶

So, Darren rejected the people-pleasing tendencies his boss recommended. He didn't keep his head down, but instead handled each assignment in his own way, pushing back when necessary, and producing results that gained him both attention and regular promotions. The conflict his approach created in those early years would sow the seeds for the operating chops and resilience required not only to be named chair and CEO of ExxonMobil in 2016 but also to be named "one of the top CEOs" in America.¹⁷

One final thought on agilists. When Darren was offered the top job at ExxonMobil, he insisted that he really didn't need or aspire to be the company's new leader. To which the outgoing CEO, Rex Tillerson, replied, "That's why you are the perfect man for the job."¹⁸ Agilists, in my experience, have the advantage of heightened self-awareness—knowing not only their own blind spots and superpowers, but also being far better attuned than conformists to organizational vulnerabilities and emerging opportunities. Striving to increase awareness, they don't fall into the trap once described by Ann Landers as accepting "your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful."

Although he established no prize for agility, Alfred Nobel would have grasped its meaning at once—no doubt with some self-recognition. He had the unique experience of reading the verdict on his life before it was over, and surely his was one of the great pivots in history. What aspiring leaders don't stand to learn from that example, in striving to use their time, talents, and opportunities to the full?

17 "CEOs of the Year," Barrons, 2022 and 2024.

18 For more on why the best CEOs may not be those who aim for the role, see "[Route to the Top | Today's CEO: The growing importance of character, learning, and leading in a contested world](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, February 28, 2024, [heidrick.com](#).

About the author

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