

HOW TO ATTRACT, DEVELOP, AND RETAIN TOP TALENT  
IN AN EVER-CHANGING DIGITAL WORLD



THE



DIGITAL

AGILE



LEADER



MANISHA DHAWAN

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# PREFACE

We are in the midst of a renaissance where disruption is happening on a global scale and old paradigms are crumbling down to make way for the new. The world is changing and so is consciousness. This is not the first time in history, and it will not be the last. To survive and thrive in a new era, we need to learn, unlearn, and relearn new mindsets and behaviors.

In parallel, many of us are coming to a reckoning with our values, hopes, and dreams for ourselves, our loved ones, and the world at large.

As change continues, advancements across artificial intelligence, extended reality (XR), automation, quantum computing, and other technology will expand and evolve. The way we learn, live, and lead will shift in the coming years.

The question is: how prepared are you?

While there are many unknowns and we cannot always prepare for the unexpected, we can become more adept at anticipating, navigating, and embracing change.

This book is the culmination of over two decades of consulting, coaching, and leading digital transformation and change management initiatives for clients across different industries.

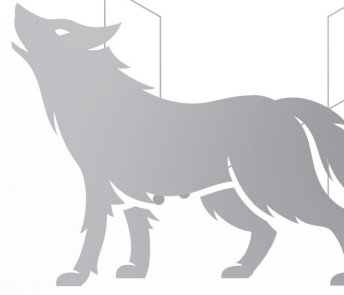
My purpose in writing this book is twofold:

1. To share lessons, strategies, and tools so you may feel empowered in the face of change.

2. To inspire more conscious, courageous, and agile leadership.

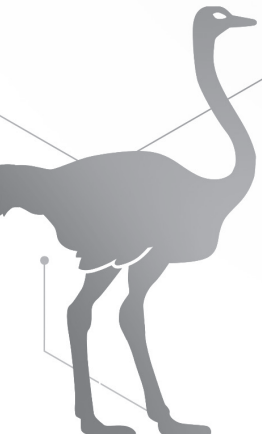
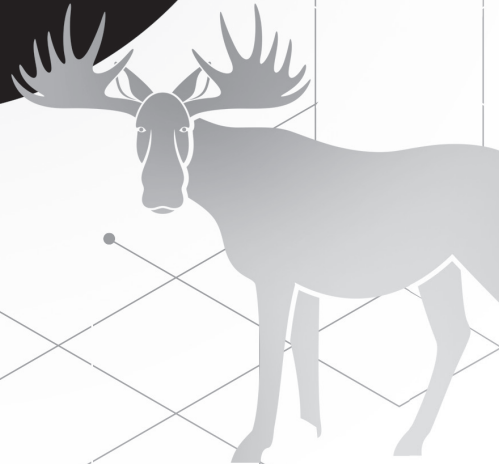
Throughout this book, I refer to “employers” and “employees” (note “employee” encompasses all talent, including full-time, part-time, consultants, contractors, freelancers, etc.). However, this book is not about employees versus employers. We do not want to create an “us versus them” mindset. We need to come together to solve the world’s challenges and pave our way into the future.

Thank you for joining me on this journey. I hope you find my work helpful. As you read this book, take what resonates and leave the rest. Keep an open mind and reflect on how this may apply to your situation. While much is uncertain and remains to be seen, digital agile leadership can usher us into a brighter future.



1

THE CHANGING WORLD  
OF WORK





## CHAPTER 1

# WHY DIGITAL AGILE LEADERSHIP MATTERS

To thrive in the new world of work, you need to become a digital agile leader.

Digital agile leaders are self-aware, forward-thinking, curious, and adaptable. They question the status quo and have empathy for themselves and others. They recognize each person is on a unique journey of awareness, resistance, and acceptance.

Digital agile leaders are good listeners, question-askers, and big-picture thinkers. They understand that adaptability is chronic, not once-and-done. They are curious about technology and the change it can bring.

### HOW MUCH TIME AT WORK?

One-third of a lifetime. This is the amount of time the average person spends at work.<sup>1</sup> As medical advancements prolong our life span, that duration could increase. Given how much time we spend at work, it makes sense to want some of that time to feel meaningful and enjoyable.

Yet, according to a 2022 Gallup survey, 60 percent of people are emotionally detached at work and 19 percent are miserable.<sup>2</sup>

Leaders can examine what is happening beneath the surface and evaluate if there are ways to make work more engaging, or at least *less miserable*.

With the rapid acceleration of technology combined with the pressure to influence societal change, leaders like you are grappling with how to attract, develop, and retain talent. There are many unknowns and no one-size-fits-all playbook. While you may not be able to retain every employee, you can take steps to improve the experience and lean into change. At the same time, you do not want to burn out and sacrifice your well-being.

How do you want to be remembered as a leader? How will you lead others through change?

## NAVIGATING A CHANGING WORLD

The answers are not easy and neither is change. Think about what is changing in your life. Perhaps you are relocating, reinventing yourself, or reevaluating where you spend your time and energy. As you embark on a new path, you might look for signs of encouragement and ask yourself: *Where am I headed? How will life be different? Who do I want to be?*

As you drift through periods of intense transition, it can feel disorienting and overwhelming. Patterns are disrupted, routines crumble away, and emotions run heavy. During transition, you might need to rest, process your thoughts, and grieve loss. This could mean grieving the loss of a loved one, friendship, job, a time in your life, or “the way it was.”



The world is in a continuous state of transition. It is normal to feel disappointed and unsure of where you fit in a new world. Despite any disappointments, you can find a renewed sense of hope and forge new beginnings. Again, the solutions are neither quick nor easy. It requires courage and strength to begin anew.

### **RISE, FALL, THEN RISE AGAIN**

Michelle was recently promoted to senior director in a technology company. As she was getting ready one morning, she looked past her reflection in the mirror and pushed away uncomfortable emotions that surfaced. Finding coveted quiet time to process her emotions was challenging when she had other priorities. Besides, if she did not leave soon, she would miss her flight.

The year was 2022 and like billions of other people, Michelle had been through a whirlwind of disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was one of several events destined or designed to shake up the world. The shakeup could be felt in every corner of the earth. It exposed and exacerbated mental health issues, long-standing inequities, supply chain deficiencies, and misinformation.

Yet, the pandemic was not the first global shakeup, and it will not be the last. From wars to plagues, injustices, and political unrest, it seems as if the world is in a constant state of upheaval. Beyond the pandemic, social and economic turmoil left people feeling blindsided and disheartened, as if we were regressing backward instead of progressing forward.

Despite the fallout, not all was lost. Opportunities for reinvention and innovation emerged. People made courageous life pivots and used their voices to inspire deeply rooted change.

## LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

For Michelle, this was one of the hardest and most confusing times to be a leader. Leadership was not a new concept for Michelle but leading through high levels of volatility was unsettling. She was not sure how to address questions, such as: *How can we tackle new supply chain issues and competitive threats? How can the team be more collaborative and connected? How do we balance an increasing workload with well-being? How will we retain our people? What will happen in the future?*

After eating her usual oatmeal for breakfast, she made her way through the usual airport. Only, this time, things did not seem so usual. Something was different; it was in the air. The energy had shifted, and she was mulling over exactly what it was.

Could it be that more change was around the corner in her personal life, and she felt terrified? Or because the current situation demands more courage and agility than ever before?

*How do I feel?* she thought. *Scared? Yes. Disconnected, perhaps? Or languishing, I think?* The harsh realities of the world had engulfed her spirit and dulled the spark in her eyes. She was keenly aware of the shifting energy, and it became harder to feel hopeful. She did not want to feel like a failure and disappoint anyone.

*Maybe I'm not cut out for this.*

Michelle was accustomed to change but lately change seemed relentless. Beyond the multilayered trauma from global events, she experienced a painful divorce that left her emotionally devastated, newly single, and financially drained.

Michelle boldly decided to move across the country and start a new chapter. Each day, she rediscovered her identity and rebuilt her life. Some moments she felt lost, followed by days of hope and excitement for the future. Today was not one of those days.

Michelle glanced at a list of her goals, including paying off debt, buying a house, and building a family. It all seemed out of reach. As she boarded her flight, she felt exhausted, but she still had to show up for her team. Michelle gazed out the windows as the crew prepped the planes. Passengers boarded one by one, and she wondered, what was their story? When they returned home, where would they go next? Where would she?

### **CREATE A NEW PLAN**

Over the next two weeks, Michelle's plan to launch a new initiative at work went completely sideways. Funding was slashed, projects were postponed, and the landscape was rapidly changing.

Michelle feared more good employees would leave when they heard the news, and realistically, she could not retain everyone. It did not help that the management team was fractured, causing additional strain on the culture.

The situation called for a new caliber of leadership and a new plan.

## MOVING FORWARD

When I first met Michelle through a mutual friend, she was still mourning the loss of her old life when things seemed simpler.

We met at a quaint coffee shop near the coast, and dense fog had already blanketed the ground. She was in a mental fog as well, uncertain whether she should quit her job.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“I feel like I’m in a boat and it used to be fun. But now the boat is sinking. There are more pinholes every day and I cannot seal them fast enough.” We paused in mutual understanding. So much had changed, and it was overwhelming to think about what could be next.

“I’m good at what I do. Or at least, I used to be,” she continued. “Lately I feel like my hands are tied and I don’t even know if I like my job anymore.”

After further dialogue and introspection, she decided to stick through it a while longer. She acknowledged the need to be flexible as things quickly changed.

“Wherever I go, I will encounter challenges. I want to try to turn things around before I throw in the towel.”

I asked her to consider the following:

- What do you need? Where can you get it?
- How have you navigated change in the past?
- Get a pulse from the employees. What do they care about?
- Reframe what is happening. Is it a catastrophe or a setback?
- Where do you go from here?

- What would a new plan look like?
- How can you lead the team through this new lens?
- How can you take care of yourself in the process?

Michelle allotted time to improve her well-being. She started by going for a five-minute walk before work and sleeping one hour earlier each day. Sleep is important to recover and rebuild strength. One sleepless night can impair performance as much as a blood alcohol level of 0.10 percent, beyond the legal limit to drive.<sup>3</sup>

Even with these small steps, Michelle noticed big differences and felt better equipped to deal with the challenges ahead. She met with her team to develop a new baseline plan.

“We will get through these challenging times together and come out the other side even stronger and poised for success. This is going to require extraordinary collaboration and execution. I will work alongside you as we lay the foundation for our future growth.”

The road ahead was still bumpy. But on the other side awaited new beginnings and opportunities.

## **MOVE THROUGH THE FOG**

Leaders like you can have rough days. You might even have rough weeks, months, and years, and getting through the day is an accomplishment.

When you are headed in one direction, things can suddenly shift and knock you off your feet. As Michelle experienced, plans can go sideways and require an agile response.

If your plan goes sideways, what do you do? How can you find a sense of security and stability in a time of chaos? Try to find stability within yourself first. Take a moment to rest, reflect, and reprioritize. Seek support from others and figure out what a new plan might look like.

As the weight of the world grows heavy, it becomes increasingly difficult to show up as a leader. Trying to make sense of it all can be exhausting. Whatever emotions you feel, know that you are not alone. Be kind and compassionate with yourself and others as you navigate new waters.

Leading through change is hard. It is also a choice, a responsibility, and often a necessity. If you lead with courage, collaboration, and compassion, you can find your way through the fog. Perhaps this is idealistic, but it is my hope.

The premise of this book is that a digital agile leader can improve retention in the new world of work and lead effectively through change. The next chapters examine how leaders attract, develop, and retain talent.

## TAKEAWAYS AND REFLECTIONS

**CHANGE IS ONGOING.** As you enter new phases of life, you may find extended periods of transition wear on you. Take time to rest and recover and find support along the way.

**LEADERSHIP IS HARD.** It is also a responsibility. Your ability to navigate change and bring others along is key. How can you show up better for yourself and others?

**ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL.** Consider any emotions you might be avoiding and how you can replenish your energy. Give yourself the time, space, and grace to process everything you have been through. Do the same for others.

**SELF-CARE IS MORE THAN A BUZZWORD.** It is an important tool in your arsenal to last as a leader. In a digital age, we are “always on” and connected to our devices. How can you establish better boundaries, disconnect, and recharge?

By demonstrating a commitment to self-care, you can model healthy behavior for others. Keep in mind practicing self-care does not mean to become self-centered.