



Gartner for Marketers

CMO Perspective: 7 Key Practices to Successfully Lead Today's Agile Marketing Organization

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Many CMOs are building agile organizations to meet expanding responsibilities and rapid marketplace shifts. To lead agile teams, you must adapt and evolve your leadership skills. Old methods of leadership won't work in today's innovation and transformation-driven organizations.



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Upshot

Building an agile marketing organization is very different from leading it. Although agile methods are well documented, most CMOs haven't built successful careers leading agile marketing teams. CMOs can use this research to advance their leadership through seven different practices to lead successful agile teams.

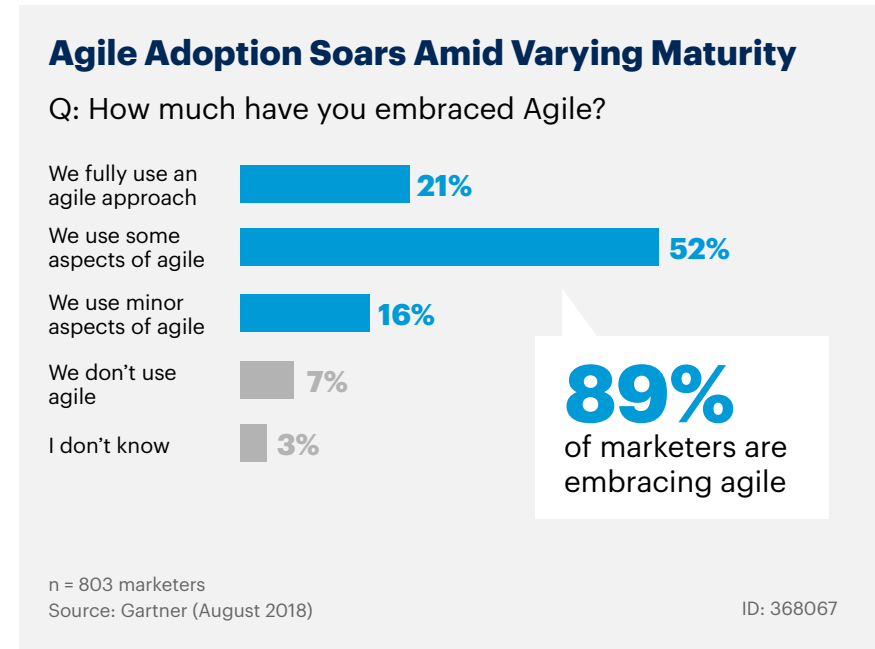
Analysis

The Rise of the Agile Marketing Organization

In response to unanticipated opportunities and threats from emerging technologies, competitors and newcomers, many CMOs report building agile marketing teams. Going agile is an approach — when done properly — that empowers CMOs to act and respond to the changing business environments quickly and effectively. As more companies fuel innovation efforts, agile adoption continues to climb.

Only 10% of marketers report they don't use agile (or, even worse, don't know if they do), signifying that a majority has embraced the method, from using a full agile approach to minor aspects (see Figure 1). Although agile methods are well documented, most CMOs haven't built successful careers leading agile marketing teams (see [“4 Steps for Building an Agile Marketing Organization”](#)).

Figure 1. Agile Adoption Is Soaring and Varies in Maturity



Going Agile Requires Different Leadership Practices

Building an agile marketing organization is very different from leading it. CMOs that have built careers using authority, hierarchy and traditional change management practices will not be successful in today's business environment. Traditional leadership is rooted in traditional command and control versus more modern collaborative styles.

Today, the old approach to managing teams and change simply won't work. Leading the next-generation workforce requires an agile and collaborative leadership approach (see "[Leading the Next-Generation Workforce: A Marketing Perspective](#)"). Marketing initiatives are growing in scope and complexity, requiring more collaborative, cross-functional and interdependent activities. Facilitating these ways of working requires soft skills like communication, resourcefulness and creativity. In fact, Gartner's 2017 Marketing Organization Capabilities Survey illustrates that marketers rank soft skills such as adaptability and collaboration as critical or more critical to marketing success than hard skills (see Figure 2).

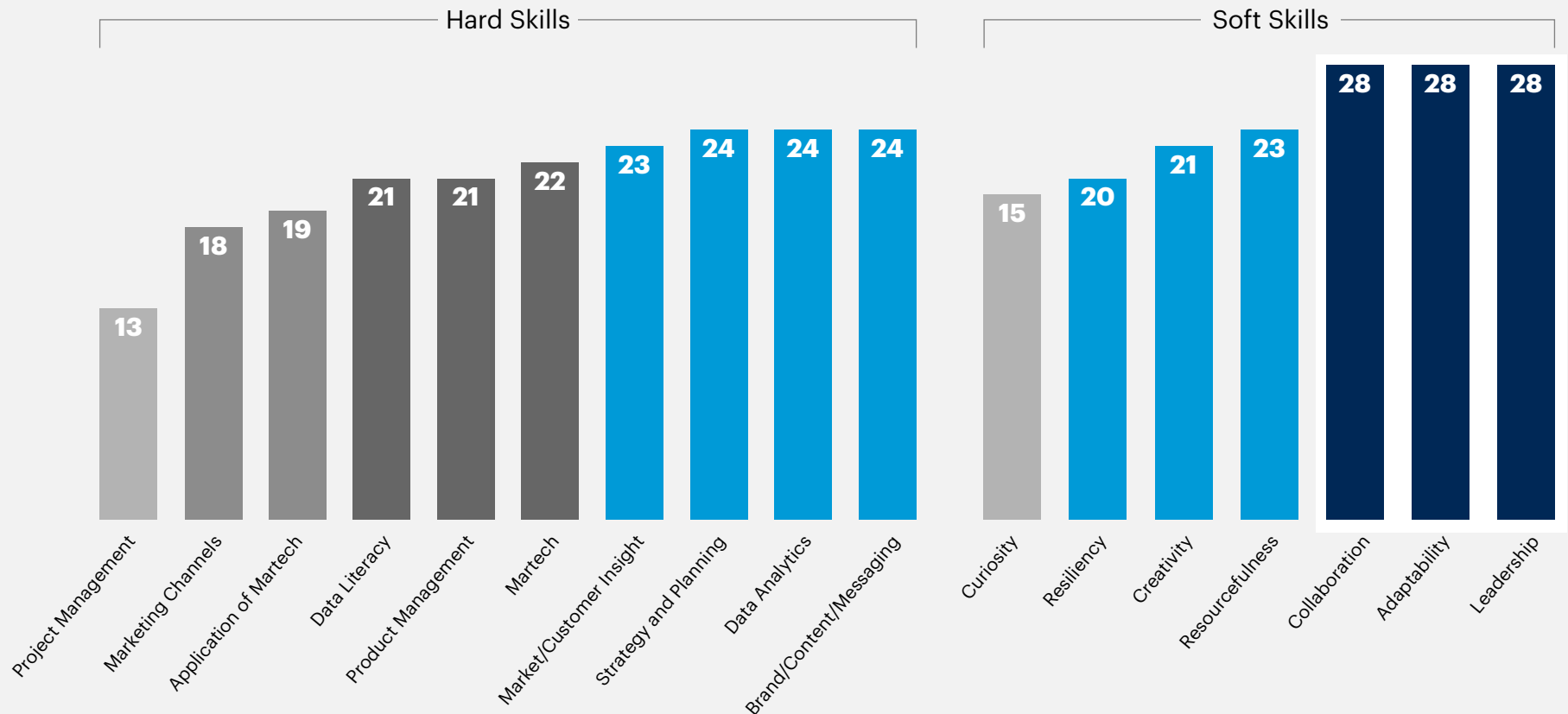


Traditional leadership practices are not going to drive the change you need to survive in these uncertain times.

Figure 2. Soft Skills Are Critical for Marketing Success

Skills and Capabilities Needed for Success

Top Box Percentage of Respondents Shown (5 rating on a scale of 1 to 5)



Base: All respondents, n = 300

Q. How important is it for members of your marketing team to have each of the following skills/capabilities to support marketing success?

Scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = Not at all important; 5 = Critical to success

Source: Gartner (August 2018)

ID: 368067

The agile approach is still new for most tenured CMOs as evident in Gartner inquiry volume on the topic. Many have built successful careers using methods that mirror and reward a prioritization of hard skills. Although these skills are still imperative, they must be balanced and flexed with soft skills. Hard skills are often easier to teach than soft skills, which develop over a longer period of time and can align with natural aptitudes.

Seven Practices to Adopt and Evolve Agile Leadership Skills

Modern CMOs must be capable of awakening, harnessing and developing trust and commitment from their organization. Lead by example: Embrace, exercise and communicate these seven practices:

1 Develop trust: Building trust must be an ongoing, instinctual effort for successful leaders. A team that trusts a CMO will move heaven and earth if it knows that individual — not just the company — is sincere and supportive. Without a strong level of trust, solid relationships cannot develop and effective collaboration is impossible. CMOs must foster the development of trust between team members and — equally important — themselves and peers. A way to build trust is to get rid of secrets and focus on transparency. You can also invest in trust-building off-site programs designed to break down barriers and get individuals to solve problems through collaboration.



CMO tenure is notoriously short — with pressure to make immediate impacts to the bottom line — so don't waste time by playing it safe.

2 Create and share vision: Every CMO must craft a vision to sell into the organization to drive change. Visions must be authentic and clear (see “[CMO Perspective: Develop a Digital Vision That Sticks](#)”). Employees only develop a sense of purpose to support the vision when their role and the goals are clearly defined. Failure to do this is a common pitfall for CMOs. Often vision work falls flat and gathers dust on conference room walls.

Vision work should never be done in a vacuum. Work collaboratively with peers, executives and partners to identify the opportunity or threat. Create a sense of urgency that will ignite a willingness for change. Paint a picture of where your organization sits today and where it needs to go through data analysis, benchmarking and case studies. If your company has a set vision, then ensure you revisit it and evolve it. A vision should be a living and breathing organ in the body of the business.

3 Hone soft skills. CMOs must lead with empathy, creativity and compassion. At the baseline, listening is foundational. Communication skills will trump some hard skills in this scenario and require leaders to practice newer ways of engaging with teams. Like most skills, these can be learned.

For example, empathy is a required soft skill for being an effective CMO. Understanding points of view is always a good first step to achieving empathy. Put yourself in the shoes of the person or group of people you're persuading or communicating with. The ability to explain that person's point of view and motivation is key to eliminating biases, making better decisions and motivating staff. Achieving empathy requires sincerity and authenticity, or your actions could be interpreted as manipulative (see "[Critical Soft Skills for Effective PMO Leadership](#)").

4 Be a student leader and share authority. Great leaders are also students. CMOs must adopt a beginner's mindset. This means having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even if you think you're an expert. Remember, no one knows everything in today's business world.

CMOs must also share leadership authority. If you "walk the talk" of these modern leadership practices, then your team will follow suit. In the old school age where CMOs had all the authority, agile requires shared leadership practices with modern oversight.

5 Constantly calibrate. Running an agile organization requires you to be engaged and aware. CMOs must "zoom in" and "zoom out" to evaluate the big picture and details. Ask questions like "are we doing the right things?" and "are we doing things right?" Agile marketing requires disciplined and defined work styles with tangible goal orientation and capability-based contribution. This is a vast departure from "setting and forgetting" marketing initiatives and programs. Marketing is not a crockpot.

Leaders going agile, must constantly optimize and calibrate projects and resources with available data and analytics. They should also invest in a digital infrastructure that supports agile and collaborative teams, such as work management, asset and performance management technology solutions (see "[Market Guide for Digital Asset Management](#)").

6 Build a culture of collaboration. This type of culture shift requires that CMOs stimulate and coach each person individually, and the team collectively. It means you must proactively encourage members of your team to collaborate with each other as well as those beyond their immediate teams. Communication is the glue to collaboration. Ensure other voices are heard. Even the most junior member of a team has something to share.

Trust, purpose, engagement and commitment must all be in place to make collaboration work. More than “working together” on a prescribed task, collaboration means sourcing ideas, evaluating approaches and discussing among team members how they will share the work. It is necessary for going agile, when people don’t know beforehand what exactly they will have to do and how they will do it.

7 Reward individual and team outcomes: You must reward team members, individually, and the team, collectively for the work done toward the achievement of expected business outcomes. That will happen in different ways. People want to be recognized and appreciated, but it plays out differently for everyone. The range of what people want is wide — from professional recognition to financial results. Some may just want you to be genuinely thankful and appreciative for the work that was done.

This is one of the most delicate endeavors for leaders: how to balance the different reward categories for each person and among the team members. Good leaders get a feel for this and make sure they customize the type of recognition they provide to each member of their team. Doing this well is a critical, and often overlooked, soft skill. While challenging, you should feel the rewarding personal satisfaction that results from it.

What You Need to Do

To lead an effective agile marketing organization:

- Audit and assess your skills based on agile principals and these seven practices. Identify the gaps, and recognize what is trainable and what is best learned in-practice.
- Embrace coaching and mentoring, and ensure you are humble in the process.
- Invest in relationships to develop trust, which is essential for effective collaborative work and agile marketing success.
- Lead by example by setting the tone of how things are done. Ignoring old practices and habits equals endorsing them so practice agile leadership and don't just try to run an agile marketing organization.

Evidence

The evidence for this research comes from primary and secondary data, including Gartner's 2017 Marketing Organization Capabilities Survey. It is also based on daily interactions with CMOs helping them to build fluid, functional organizations and evolve leadership traits.



Recommended Reading

[The CMO's First 100 Days](#)

[4 Habits Successful CMOs Need to Thrive in Transition](#)

[CMO Perspective: Use the Hierarchy of Metrics to Drive Accountability Within Your Team](#)

[Building an Effective IT-Marketing Partnership](#)

[CMO Perspective: Use the Hierarchy of Metrics to Drive Accountability Within Your Team](#)

[CMO Perspective: Translate Marketing Strategy to Marketing Execution](#)

[CMO Perspective: Leverage Value Segmentation to Focus on Your Most Valuable Customers](#)

[CMO Insight: How to Design and Execute a Winning Customer Experience Strategy](#)

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