

AGILE METHODOLOGY VS AGILE CULTURE, WHAT COMES FIRST

by Ian Menard

Over the past several years I have experienced multiple companies embarking on the Agile journey. In two cases, I was approached by a leader charged with implementing Agile teams to discuss the transformation challenges and obstacles they were facing in making agile stick. In both cases, problems related to Agile implementation seemed to be on the rise and consuming more and more of their time. Symptoms of this included increasing turnover, disengaged teams and disgruntled business partners. As a result, both were considering whether to abandon Agile all together and return to traditional method(s).



Based on the many conversations with colleagues and the myriad of articles and forums on Agile these days, I have identified 3 common themes at the core of unsuccessful agile implementations:

1. They implemented Agile methodology BEFORE addressing the cultural elements that would clash with Agile (e.g., how decisions get made);
2. They provided Agile communication and training to the core project team only vs all functional areas that needed to be involved in successful implementation;
3. They did not factor in the other elements of the ecosystem (e.g., structure, performance, reward, recognition, governance, leadership role) to reinforce the desired changes

ADDRESS THE CULTURE ALIGNMENT FIRST

All too often the broader set of leadership stakeholders are not engaged upfront to understand the both the benefits and requirements to successfully implement Agile methodology. While there are obvious benefits, having dialogue and building collective alignment on the changes to existing cultural norms that may conflict with Agile will be required. It starts with a clear understanding of why Agile and how it can support the broader strategic goals. From here, there has to be a consensus on the elements of the culture that conflict with agile methodology and a commitment to change them. You want to start the dialogue on culture (e.g., the set of beliefs, norms and decision making guidelines) early on to identify the elements that conflict with Agile so they can be addressed in time for implementation

Finally, the communication and engagement activities can be mapped out for all the groups that will need to understand and embrace Agile before it gets thrown at them midstream in the project.

MAP YOUR EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER TO ALL FUNCTIONS IMPACTED

The project and product development team(s) cannot work in isolation and be successful. There has to be proper engagement and collaboration with various cross functional partners (e.g., marketing, operations, HR, finance, etc.) throughout the project sprints in order to be successful.

As such, proper education/training on what to expect, new terminology and project methodology will need to be delivered to all parties impacted and endorsed by their respective senior leaders. In this way, extended team member involvement to create stories, validate requirements, test solutions, etc. in an iterative and fast-paced environment will not be met with resistance on the perceived “unreasonable” demands asked of them.

MANAGE THE ECOSYSTEM TO SUSTAIN & EMBED AGILE INTO THE ORGANIZATION’S DNA

To make Agile sustainable over the long haul will require calibration of the management systems in the organization. Organizations are living ecosystems that continuously strive to achieve harmony. Just as in nature, if you introduce a new species into the system, the other elements will resist and fight to maintain status quo unless you neutralize them.

So in an organization implementing Agile, how you would do this is to look at all the management systems (e.g., structure, performance, reward, recognition, governance, leadership) and determine how they need to be adjusted to achieve harmony with Agile vs continue resisting and fighting it.

CONCLUSION

By building awareness and understanding on Agile goals upfront along with starting the culture alignment conversations will set the stage for implementation. Then providing the education and training to all impacted groups will get you well on your way to implementing Agile. Finally, aligning the management systems to reinforce Agile principles.

By making these changes and monitoring the results, you will ensure the Agile methodology becomes second nature and the focus can be shifted to improving speed to market and delivering value to your customers.

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