

Building the Agile company - beyond the iteration

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Being Agile isn't easy, it takes more than sprinkling the Agile Fairy Dust on your team, or using the right buzzwords. Like most things worth having, it takes some effort.

Of the perspectives outlines earlier, the one with the most far reaching implications is The State of Agile. Being Agile, as opposed to doing Agile, is about much more than software development. Thus, it is also the most useful of the perspectives.

Being Agile implies we are quick on our feet, we can respond to change quickly, we can deliver quickly and seize opportunities. Using Scrum or DSDM, holding stand-up meetings or writing User Stories are not ends in their own write. They are techniques and practices that have been observed to help organizations achieve Agility.

Its the business, Stupid

“I can't think of anything more important than building an agile company, because the world changes so quickly and unpredictably”
Professor Michael A Cusumano (Cusumano and Hopkins 2011)

But it is not just about speed, although speed makes a lot of things easier; its about delivering what people want, when the want it, where they want it. In other words: Responsiveness.

There are times when we as individuals and as organizations are responsive. If being Agile is somehow different then it implies consistency. One swallow does not a summer make, one act of fast response does not prove Agility. Being Agile has to mean a pattern of being responsive, and fewer, if any, instances of unresponsiveness.

Agile is here

So, given all the hype around Agile where can we find it? To paraphrase the cyber-punk author William Gibson “Agile is already here, its just unevenly distributed.”

Small companies find it easier to be Agile by their nature. Increasingly larger companies contain pockets of Agility but it doesn't exist across the board. Many of these pockets are isolated.

The London Business School Professor Donald Sull has suggested there are three dimensions to Agility: Strategic, Portfolio and Operational (Sull 2009). Most of today's discussion around Agility, particularly in the technology space, relate to just operational Agility.

Today's Agile tools allow opportunities to be spotted sooner and acted on quicker. For many companies that is enough. After all, one doesn't need to be the fastest animal in the jungle, just faster than your competitors, and faster than those who would eat you.

Even these operational tools offer the promise of more. Unfortunately Agile teams can find themselves in difficulty when the wider organization isn't Agile. Teams that could seize opportunities and satisfy customers better find that the annual planning cycle and budgeting rounds are not a good fit for Agile.

Portfolio

This is where Portfolio Agile comes into play. In a world where Lehman's Brothers disappeared overnight, where credit markets froze solid in days and volcanic ash brought an industry to its knees it doesn't make sense to decide your projects in September, provide budget in January, start them in February and spend the rest of the year force them into an artificial timetable.

Agile practitioners don't claim to know how long X will take BEFORE STARTING WORK ON X. Set them a deadline and they have a damn good chance of meeting it. But they've won't, or at least shouldn't, predict until they have data.

Portfolio management - and governance for that matter - need embrace some of the Agile tools themselves. Regular reviews, small amounts of money given out when requested and work redirected when the benefits don't show. Once they have some data from doing actual work forecasts can be very accurate.

Strategy

Obviously this is going to effect, and be effected by: Strategy. Ask yourself: do you want to be an Agile company? Is Agile your strategy? Or just a means to an end? Are you prepared to do things different to be Agile?

Actually, Agile and modern business strategy are a pretty good fit already. Many strategists gave up on long range planning and five year plans a while ago. Strategists have long known strategy is only part planned, it is also part emergent, the result of learning and feedback.

Still an Agile strategy needs to be turned into action - talk without action doesn't get you very far. Broadly speaking strategy is turned into action through two routes: the operational decisions that are made day-to-day, and the structure and form of the business.

Successful strategy execution depends on thousands of small decisions made every day by employees at all levels in the organization. The Agile way is: fail fast, fail cheap; be prepared to try something, take a risk, see how it goes, if it works do some more, if it doesn't then stop doing. Remember: Agile is empirical, try something, see what the result is, adjust.

Which conveniently brings us back to form. If you are going to build something to see if they come you need to structure your teams so the team is responsive and responsible. The team needs to be equipped with all the skills it needs: builders, analysts, and everyone else to do end-to-end work. Fail cheaply also means the teams should be minimally staffed at first and only grow with success.

Agile strategy without Agile delivery might work, but it could be very expensive. If your strategy isn't Agile then there might still be tools in the Agile toolkit to help you do it, and some of the methods may help delivery. Agile methods can be used to cut costs but that won't make you Agile, it will only make you cheap.

Pulling together

In the early days of Agile it was the technical aspects that received most attention and generated most excitement: test driven development, pair programming, refactoring and so on. As Agile matured the process and project management aspects received more attention: iterations, planning meetings and such.

Technical practices, whether for developers, testers or others, are essential to delivering the state of Agile. Many of these practises now go under the name of "Software Craftsmanship."

Project and Processes are the second essential elements for Agility. While technical practices alone will improve most development efforts it is only when processes - and therefore project management - are changed to take advantage can the true benefit of the technical practices be realised.

That is where many companies stop. Technical practices together with process change result in the Iterative and Incremental styles of Agile. In order to maximise the benefits from Incremental development and move onto Evolutionary development it is necessary to bring requirements management into the change. (Requirements are discussed at length later in this book.)

When these three pillars are in place organisations can start to change their approach to portfolio management and after that strategy. Not only can the organisation change portfolio management and strategy they need to. Failure to change will produce tension between teams working Agile and the wider organisation.

As the diagram shows, Agile Portfolio Management and Agile Strategy depend on the three pillars. Without these pillars Agile Portfolio and Strategy are simply dreams.

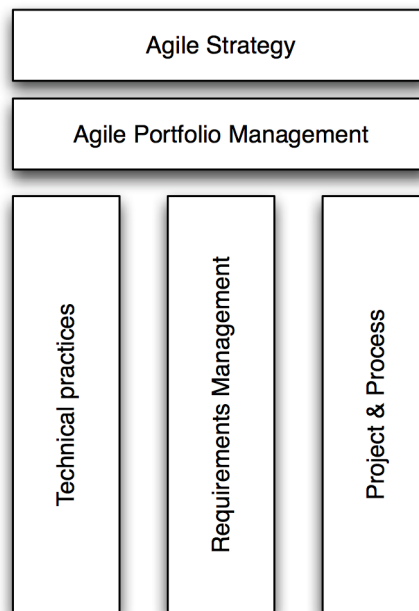


Figure 1: Three pillars of Agile supporting Agility

A team working Iterative has essentially hidden Agile from the organisation. The result may be discontent team members but in general the organisation is blind to the changes.

Teams working in the Incremental style can create tension in the organisation. If the software updates they produce are pushed to end-users there is a change ripple throughout the business. If it is not pushed to end-users tension results because usable, paid for, software is lying unused. Management need to update their thinking on the best way to work with software induced change.

Teams working Evolutionary are discovering new customer needs, business opportunities, questioning established resource allocations and strategies. Such teams are actively disruptive. If the organisation does not respond the tension will damage everyone it touches.

Why?

As more and more companies want to be Agile the question that becomes more and more important is “Why do you want to be Agile?” which is another way of asking “What do you want Agile to do for you?” Only when you understand that do you really know what your objective is.

References

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This essay is a work in progress. The author welcomes comments and feedback at the address above. April 2013

About the author

Allan Kelly has held just about every job in the software world, from system admin to development manager. Today he works as consultant, trainer and writer helping teams adopt and deepen Agile practices, and helping companies benefit from developing software. He specialises in working with software product companies and aligning products and processes with company strategy.

He is the author of two books “Business Patterns for Software Developers” and “Changing Software Development: Learning to be Agile”, the originator of

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