



AGILE CHANGE
management limited

Adopting Agile is a cultural change.

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Executive Summary

As Agile approaches spread from IT development projects to include development of new products and services, redesigning new processes and restructuring teams and departments, we need to build the culture that supports Agile working.

Culture is always a difficult thing to describe. A common definition of culture is 'how we do things around here' but we need to recognise that how we do things is a mixture of peoples beliefs and values about what they think is important, how they think people should be treated, what the purpose of the organisation is and what is the best way to achieve this purpose.

Agile Overview

If we are going to build a culture that supports an Agile approach to working, we first need to clarify what we mean by Agile. Agile is a broad term interpreted differently depending on experience and objectives. This is my view of the key concepts of Agile.

Early delivery of value is core to what makes agile Agile. Any piece of work can be broken into component parts, where each component part creates value, either saving costs, increasing revenue or impressing customers, staff, suppliers or regulators.

The core skill to making Agile an effective approach is this ability to break complex pieces of work into a series of outputs, each of which is useful and valuable to the business. Then order the delivery of these outputs so that as early as possible, the business can realise an improvement, or create a benefit that didn't exist before. The value of this initial output continues to deliver benefits as the next output comes on stream and then the next one.

This contrasts with other delivery approaches, where nothing goes live until the whole thing has been created in full, and every aspect of the work includes all of the requirements originally specified. The advantage that Agile has is that it delivers value from very early on and keeps on delivering value as more outputs come on stream.

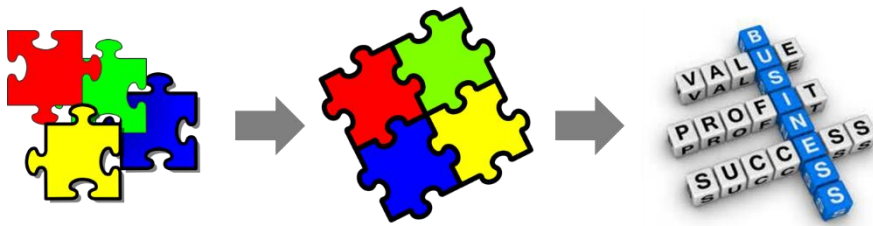
The implication and therefore the requirement for an Agile culture is that these questions can be answered:

- What are the key elements of value that this project will deliver?
- What aspect of the project delivers the most value?
- How early can we deliver this?

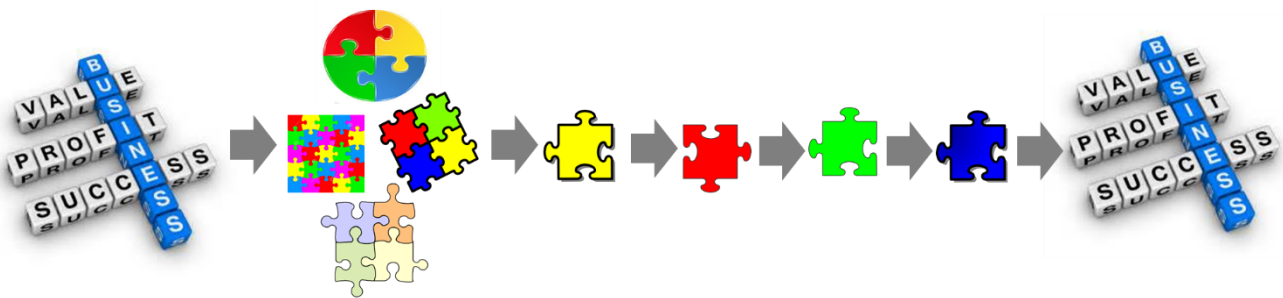
We shouldn't under estimate how big a shift this thinking is. It is easier to work upwards from a set of requirements to the promise of a final deliverable than trying to define a hypothesis of a possible solution that will deliver the expected business benefits.



Start with a set of requirements and action them to create a single deliverable that leads to business value:



Start with the required business value, identify potential ideas, action an early idea and build upon it until the business value has been achieved:



The next important aspect of Agile, is that it is fuelled by the 'voice of the customer'. Everything that is included in an Agile project is deemed to be valuable, because the business impact has been assessed from the outset. Those who are going to use what has been created have been consulted about how it will work, and their opinions about what it must include, versus what constitutes 'nice but not essential' have been referenced throughout the work.

This minimises the risk that an Agile approach delivers things that the business think are unworkable or irrelevant and that the business do not adopt.

One of the techniques that Agile uses for incorporating the 'voice of the customer' is User Stories. An idea is captured as a series of User Stories which explain what needs to happen and why it is useful for this to happen. The big advantage of User Stories is that they are clearly attributable to different stakeholders, so it is possible to see the gaps in whose opinion has been sought.

If you look at all the User Stories that comprise the work of an Agile initiative, you can quickly see if a 'voice' is missing. For example, you might notice that no-one from Finance or Sales have been involved, so steps can be taken to include them from now on.

The implication and therefore the requirement for an Agile culture is that those impacted are included in all discussions about the business and that the project is not just driven from those who are creating the outputs. However, this requires a change in priorities as staff must be made available from their day to day work and this will only happen if the value of the innovations delivered via the Agile approach are viewed as integral to the success of the organisation.

Finally, Agile is a production line. To get the work done, User Stories are prioritised so that the team undertake the most important work first. This work is allocated into short amounts of time, known as Sprints or Timeboxes, often lasting about two weeks. In this time, the whole team works together to get something usable delivered at the end of the Sprint.



These deliverables are then either ready for use or they are used as an input to the next thing that has to be created. Either way, something tangible has been created that generates feedback, hopefully from the end customer as that is the audience we are trying to satisfy. The feedback generates ideas for changes to the deliverables and identifies more deliverables, so more User Stories are written. This continual adding of new ideas is why everyone talks about Agile as being flexible and responsive to change. So the cycle keeps going, with the next Sprint creating the next deliverables, ready for use.

Although Agile began with software development, it is a way of turning any work into a production line, so there is emphasis on achievement, delivery and efficiency of work. At the end of every Sprint there is a Retrospective, where the team review how they did and work out how they can do better next time by tweaking some aspect of their production line to make it go faster and to ensure it delivers less errors. Although a lot of the work to which Agile is applied is cognitive, the principles of lean manufacturing and continuous improvement are key to its success.

The implication and therefore the requirement for an Agile culture is that achievement is valued over activity. In other words, it is important to get things done, not spend time planning in detail what you are going to do, or writing detailed reports about what you have done.

This requires trust in the 'doers' to deliver, rather than using plans and progress reports as a way of checking up on them. It is this trust barrier that is often the biggest cultural leap, because it requires 'those in charge' to step back and allow those with the skills to do the work to get on with it. As a senior leader myself I know how difficult this can be, the temptation to step in and check where we are is huge, but it is more productive to set the goal, and provide encouragement not assessment of whether we are getting there.

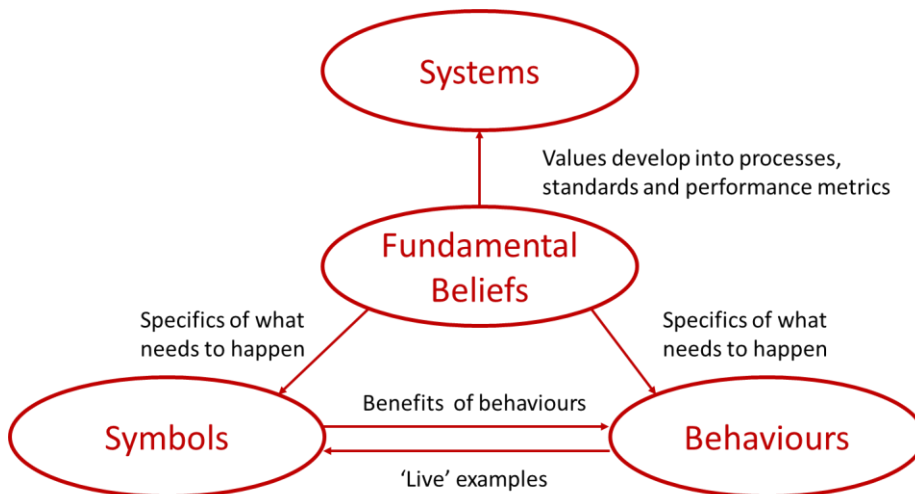
Creating an Agile culture

Culture is a set of beliefs about what is important so if we want to build an Agile culture we need to define what the core beliefs and values are for the organisation, and ensure that these align to the core concepts of Agile that we have already discussed.

Here are some examples of fundamental beliefs that underpin Agile organisations:

- Agile is a way of working, not just an IT project method.
- The voice of the customer is worth listening to.
- Delivering something on time is better than delivering everything late.
- Feedback is a source of useful ideas.

- Everyone is responsible for having an opinion about improvements and innovations.
- Incorporating new ideas and amendments to evolve what is being created is a success not a failure of the original design.
- Teams are formed of experts who can be trusted to organise their own work.



All culture is based on these fundamental beliefs. We create procedures, processes and standard ways of doing things to deliver the core beliefs. These 'systems' become the business norms that we embody in procedural documentation including our Staff Handbook, our Quality Management System, our Key Performance Indicators and our Competency Models. Norms are the shared and accepted sense in an organization of what is 'right' or 'wrong'.

They are also passed on by staff to new joiners informally via conversations and demonstrations. The fundamental beliefs articulate why we do what we do, and it is from them that individuals define their priorities, deciding what work they are going to do first and what is less valuable and therefore, will get done later, when the most important things are finished.

Examples of systems that exist in Agile organisations are:

- Customer forums are the norm
- Attending demonstrations and providing feedback is included in role descriptions
- Senior management devolve decision making to teams
- Senior management check progress through 'walking around' and not through reports

Our culture is further embedded as our natural way of doing things through symbols and behaviours. Symbols are stories, rituals and indicators of what are important. Behaviours are the demonstrable actions that 'role model' the culture for others.

Creating stories takes practice. This is an example of a structure I use to help me plan what I want to say. Once I have the basic structure, I can add more description and emotive words to give it drama and make my story memorable:



Problem/challenge – connect this to your audience by talking about something you know they care about and that is currently frustrating them.

Change – give a simple description of what will be different e.g. new location, new product, new system etc.

Happy ending – provide a description of how things will be when the solution has been achieved or the good stuff starts to happen. Make sure it is relevant to the audience by connecting it to the things they care about, using 'solving' the original problem you used to start your story.

Call to action – tell people what you want them to do. Keep it simple and ensure you are only asking for one thing, as more requests will confuse them and get forgotten.

Stories come in 3 waves:

First wave – what things will be like

- It is only by working out what you want to happen that you can tell stories about how great things are going to be. Use lots of detail to sound compelling. Use emotive words and include some drama by setting up the challenge to come.

Second wave – early examples of success and failure

- For the successes, talk about what has been achieved and how this great foundation can be built upon to achieve even more.
- For the failures, talk about the lessons learned, the skills developed whilst trying things out for the first time and turn the participants into heroes, because they had the courage to try, they took the risk of doing something different even if it didn't work out as planned. Use positive language to congratulate them for having tried.

Third wave – how far we have come?

- These stories are celebratory. Tell the story of the journey, where we were and the challenges and triumphs that got us to where we are now.

Role modelling, like stories is not as easy as it looks. It is important to find an example of an action or task that exemplifies the desired culture. I have two types of examples that I encourage those I coach to look for:

- Asking new questions to demonstrate you have different priorities.
- Demonstrating new behaviours so others follow your lead.

Asking new questions

These are best illustrated with an example. A manager is leading a team that are moving from inputting data to analysing data and taking actions based on their analysis. To encourage new ways of thinking the manager should:

- Stop asking questions about how much data they have processed.
- Ask questions about what trends they have identified.
- Ask questions about how many actions they have taken.

Demonstrating new behaviours:



A manager wants her team to engage more with customers but they spend so much time replying to internal emails that customers come last. The manager should carry out the following steps to role model a new way of working:

- Explain that she is only going to send emails in exceptional circumstances in order to hold more conversations with clients.
- Stop sending emails to her team.
- Use the time she is saving to call clients.
- Discuss in team meetings the impact of conversations held with clients.

As these examples demonstrate, role modelling takes planning and practice but it is a very effective way of illustrating elements of the new culture.

Conclusion

Cultural change doesn't happen by accident. It takes real commitment to keep talking about how things should be, because none of us change our beliefs and values overnight. Stories and role modelling are the real stars of cultural change as they provide continuous examples of how things should be.

However, I think they are easier than the first step, which is a willingness to even consider that current beliefs are not fit for purpose, and that what the organisation prioritises and where it spends its effort needs to be reconceived. This is the classic change dilemma: are those at the top willing to risk their organisation stopping what it does now (which has served them well) to do something different that is unproven and may not work?

If Agile is to move from being a set of techniques and management practices to becoming just 'the way we do things around here' then senior leaders are going to have to take these risks.

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Co-Chair of the Change Management Institute UK and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

To access more resources about change management connect with Melanie on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniefranklin1/>

