Agile impact on Change Management

Author

Melanie Franklin

Director

Agile Change Management Limited

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Introduction

In this article I want to review the impact that adoption of Agile practices is having on how change is managed. This article was the basis of this webinar: http://apmg-international.com/en/news-events/webinars/743857.aspx

Agile can mean different things:

- Organisational Agile – the strategic adoption of an environment which responds quickly to new ideas, developing them and getting things in front of the customer quickly to protect competitive advantage
- Development Agile – the tactical adoption of Agile methodologies that speed up the creation of new ways of working, often through IT enabled change.

In some organisations, 'Development Agile' has been further enhanced into what is called DevOps, which is a way for IT to organise itself so that it creates a 'production line' of changes to infrastructure, applications, information and security, which move seamlessly and speedily from Development to Operations.

'Development Agile' is rapidly becoming the norm for many organisations. For example:

- Research from Version One in their State of Agile Survey 2016 reported that a third of their respondents adopted Agile more than three years ago and a quarter more than 5 years ago. Only 4% of respondents said none of their teams had adopted Agile. Agile is well embedded in many IT functions and teams are becoming experienced in its use and realising benefits from their application of it.
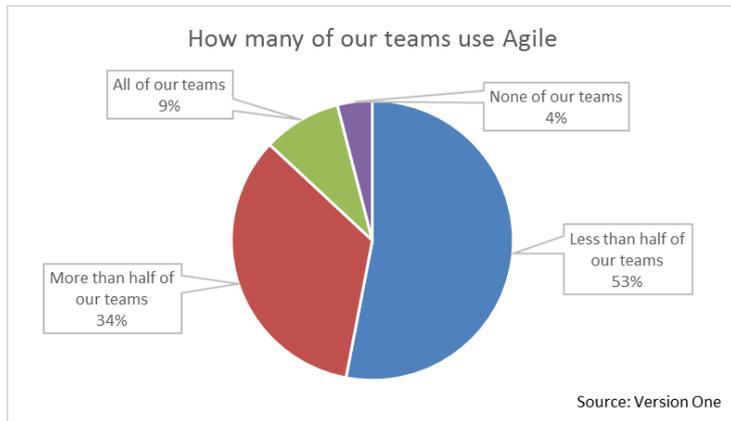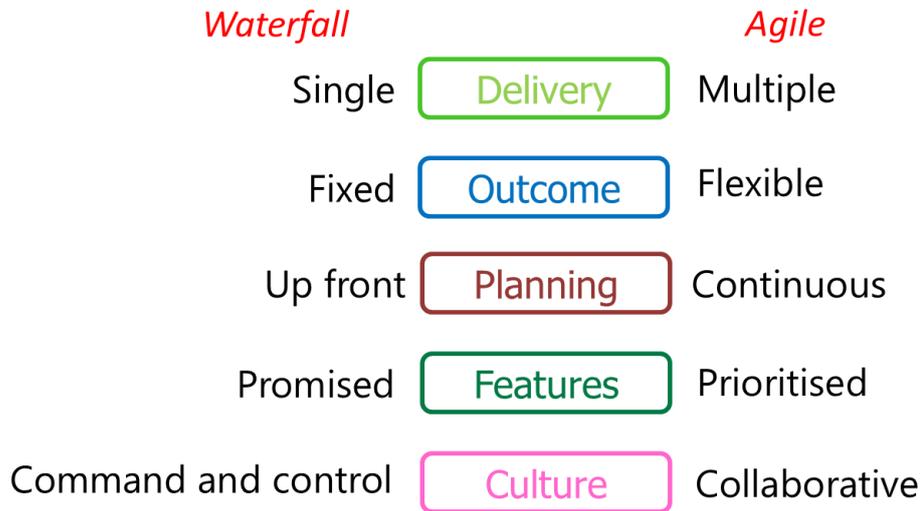

- Research from Wrike, another software company, looks at the adoption of Agile in marketing functions. Marketeers have been slower to adopt Agile than IT, but a third of respondents in the Write survey in 2016 said they had adopted in the last 6-12 months and just over 20% said they had adopted it in the last year. Over 50% of respondents say they are using some form of Agile.
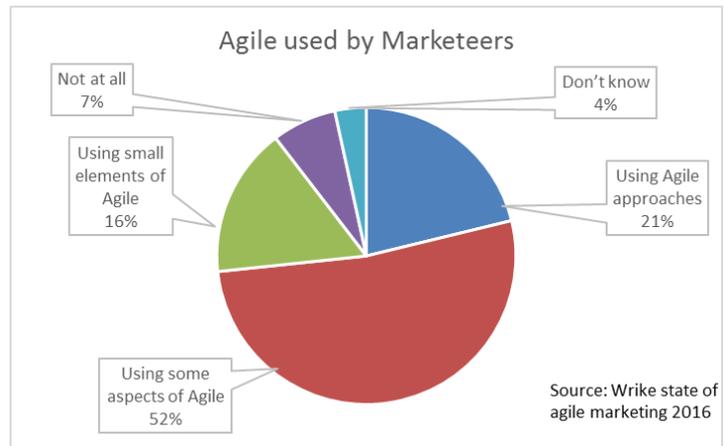
Agile speeds up the delivery cycle because it provides a continuous stream of outputs. It is the impact of this 'production line' that has the capability to most strongly impact how we manage change. I think it is very interesting that many in IT and project management now using Agile, who have felt unfairly maligned by the business for late delivery in the past are now complaining to those same colleagues in the business that they are not implementing what is being created fast enough.

The scale of the challenge

This production line contrasts sharply with what are often referred to as 'waterfall' approaches, one of the most famous of which is the PRINCE2® project management method. 'Waterfall' gets its name from the idea that in a waterfall, water falls down, but it does not go back up. In other words, in a 'waterfall' approach, the work is always moving towards a single delivery of the change without the feedback loops that generate an evolving solution.

Waterfall		*Agile*
Single	Delivery	Multiple
Fixed	Outcome	Flexible
Up front	Planning	Continuous
Promised	Features	Prioritised
Command and control	Culture	Collaborative

In Agile approaches, the change is delivered incrementally, building up as the work progresses, but being released to the customers as often as possible so that they do not have to wait for the next 'must have' features. It also gives them the opportunity to give their feedback and help shape what is delivered to them next.

This has a big impact on the way that the work is organised. Planning is an on-going task, as only a high-level outline of what is to be delivered is known at the start, and this will be expanded upon in response to feedback from customers who can re-set the direction of the work as they experience it and learn from using it.

This on-going planning is underpinned by the prioritisation of the feedback, where those involved are always seeking to do what is most 'business useful' and which will realise the most benefits as quickly as possible. This means applying the concept of 'good enough' - willingness to openly share work in progress with customers, and not waiting until everything is perfect before releasing to them.
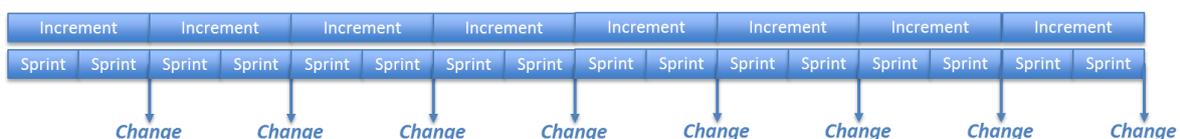
The regular release of deliverables, and the constant search for feedback means that anyone working in delivery has to work in partnership with their customers. This collaborative environment demands new skills including:

- Facilitation of discussions to generate feedback
- Replacing the 'command and control' structure with a willingness to allow anyone on the team to talk to anyone in the business to get the information to help develop the deliverables

The impact of Agile on change management

The most obvious impact is the increase in the amount of change that customers have to adapt to. Changes are delivered incrementally which means they may be smaller and less dramatic than a single deliverable of all

Agile production line

Increment	Increment	Increment	Increment	Increment	Increment	Increment	Increment
Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint	Sprint Sprint
Change	*Change*	*Change*	*Change*	*Change*	*Change*	*Change*	*Change*

requirements at the end of the development effort, but there are more of them. The business are now the recipients of the deliverables created as the result of an 'Agile production line'.

I think this produces a problem, because there is no equivalent production line for embedding the changes once the tangible elements of change have been created. This type of production line would require the business/our customers to have a well-defined, well-rehearsed approach to implementing change which enables them to seamlessly incorporate new ways of working into their business as usual.

However, for many organisations this is not the case. The challenges that Agile create are:

- The need to create this established approach to change management
- The ability to assimilate the changes as quickly as they arrive

Established approach to managing change

A capability for managing change comprises structural and behavioural elements. The structure comes from:

Change management framework, which is an agreed method, lifecycle, tools and techniques for identifying, planning, implementing and embedding change. To be effective it must align with other structures including the project management methodology and portfolio management.

Recognition of the value of change management skills and the investment in trained, experienced change management professionals

The behavioural elements include:

- A culture that recognises change is the responsibility of everyone
- An acceptance that change is the norm and not an exceptional situation

My concern about the rise of Agile is that too few organisations have this capability for change. Many of them are currently developing it but it is not yet established at a local level that enables the seamless adoption of high volumes of change. Professor John Kotter, when writing his 2014 book Accelerate identified only 0.01% of organisations have this capability, so there is a long way to go.

Assimilating change

We all experience change every day, and we know instinctively that change takes time to adjust to. Some individuals are fine with the change, they absorb it really quickly and it becomes a new habit for them very quickly. In the diagram below, they are the first curve, taking little time to get back to 'unconscious competence' which is the automatic, habit like ability to do something.

In the second curve, which is the more normal response, the dotted line shows some dip in performance or ability as the person practices the new ways of working, but over time, they too adjust and it becomes the new norm for them.

Finally the third curve shows those who for whatever reason are finding this particular change hard to adjust to. They have got stuck in lower productivity and ability, they have not been able to build up their competence in the new ways of working and they will need a lot more time and some specific encouragement and support to adjust.
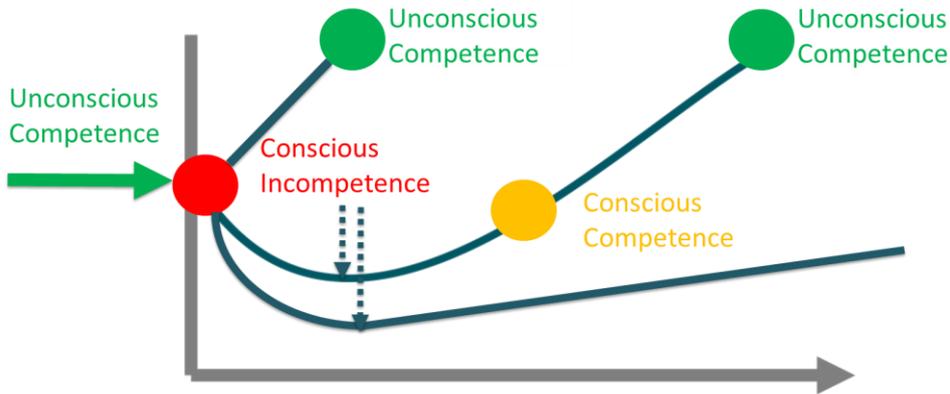
The key problem that Agile adoption generates is a disparity in speed. The speed of delivery of tangible aspects of change using an Agile approach is very fast. Sprints, paired working, daily stand ups and Kanban boards are all techniques which lead to delivery in days not weeks. However, change can only be absorbed into business as usual when those impacted have made a conscious decision to change their ways of working. This psychological and emotional adjustment does not happen overnight. In this diagram, the business is struggling to adapt to 3 changes in the same amount of time that the Agile production line has delivered 5 changes:

Agile production line
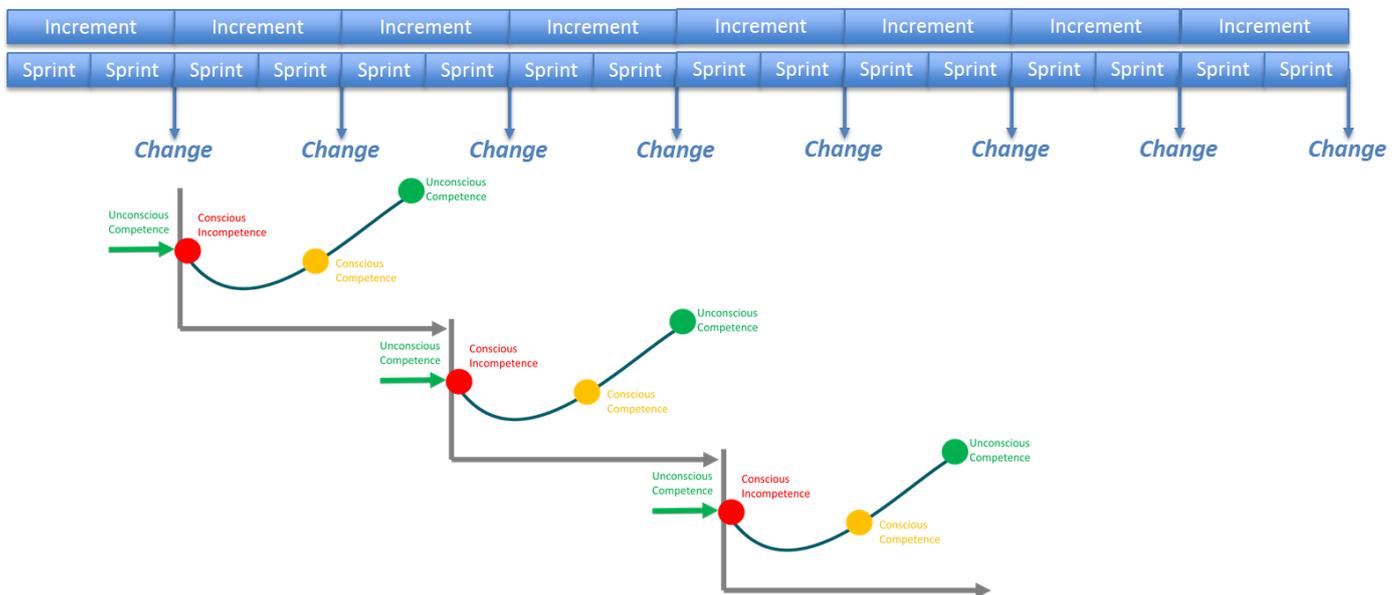
We know that some people find this easy, often labelled Innovators and Early Adopters. Their willingness to engage with new situations contrasts with those who are more comfortable with stability and consistency, maintaining the status quo rather than seeking out new ways of working.

However, there are many that struggle to unlearn how they currently work and replace this with a period of lower productivity as they adjust to the new approach. They take longer to adopt the new competence, and again take more time to develop the change as their new, automatic approach.

As with the convoys of supply ships across the North Atlantic during World War 2, change can only be successfully adopted at the speed of the slowest participants.
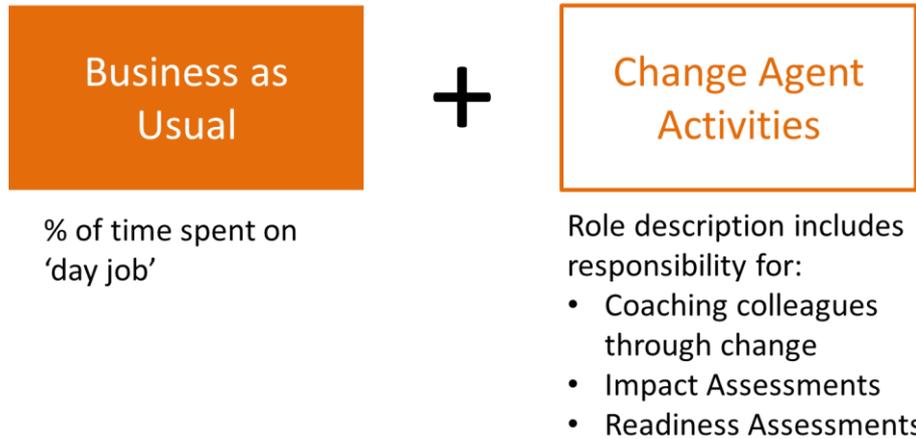
How to manage change in an Agile world

As the changes are smaller and more frequent, it is harder for organisations to deploy a top down approach to managing change. Top down approaches will require more time to filter through the layers of hierarchy of an organisation, which is not practical when the stream of new deliverables is at the pace of a production line.

Also, these new deliverables are often part completed ideas, requiring adoption into the working practices of the organisation before the requirements for the next change become apparent. These are smaller changes which are not suited to top down, 'professional' change management which involves full-scale impact assessments and readiness assessments and lots of communication events.
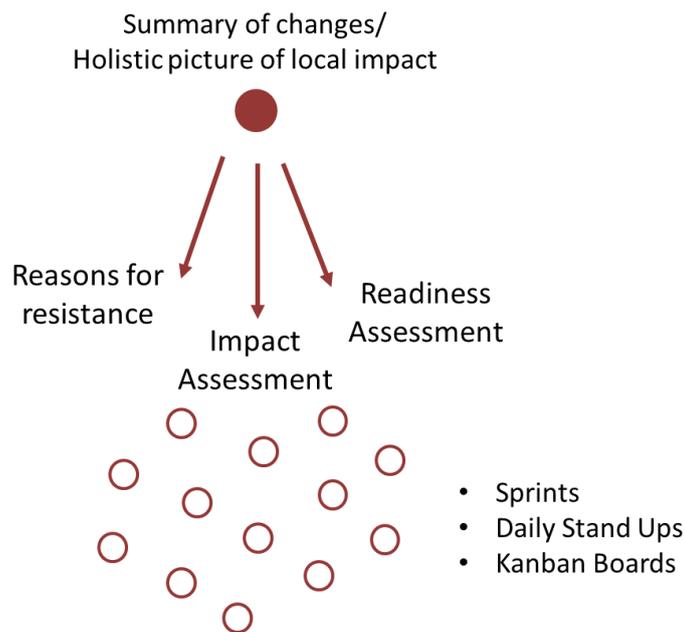
We need to create a two tier approach, where experienced change practitioners provide guidance to sponsors and line managers, and line managers are encouraged to identify team members who can lead change within their local sphere of influence.
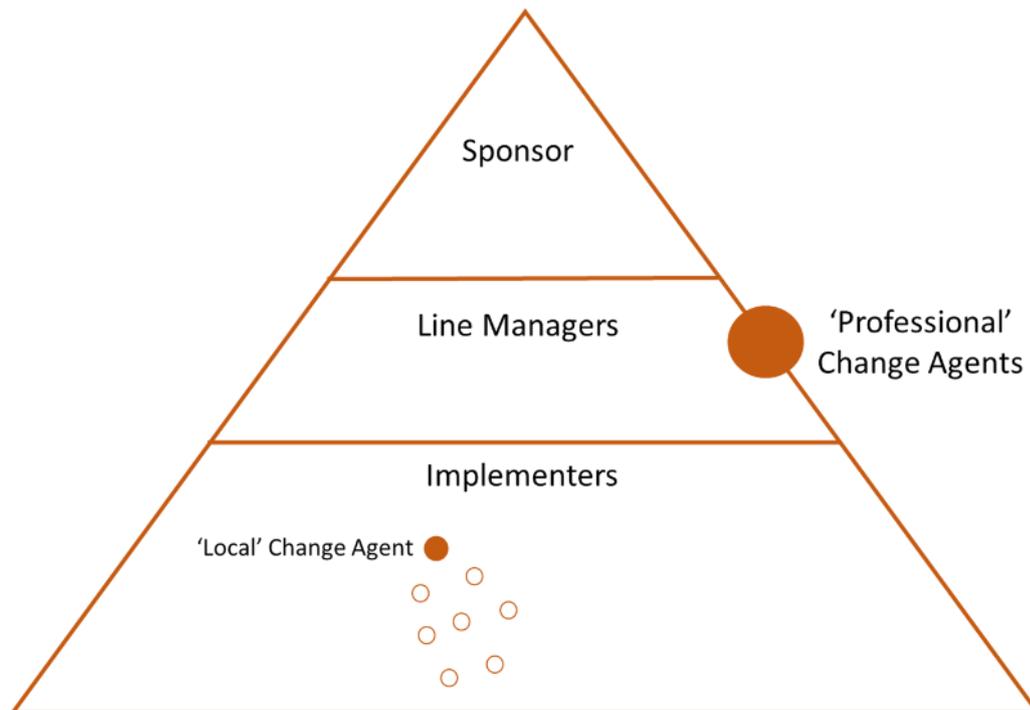
This means that instead of building the capability for change in a relatively small group of 'change professionals', organisations need to build this capability at the grass roots level, involving many more staff. If change becomes localised, then the role descriptions for everyone in the organisation will need to change to reflect that there is now more of a balance between getting the job done and participating in the changes that lead to improving how the job is done.

Business as Usual
% of time spent on 'day job'

+

Change Agent Activities

Role description includes responsibility for:
- Coaching colleagues through change
- Impact Assessments
- Readiness Assessments

By developing the skills for change management in a much wider group of staff enables change to be led locally, at the point of impact.

Summary of changes/
Holistic picture of local impact

Reasons for resistance

Impact Assessment

Readiness Assessment

- Sprints
- Daily Stand Ups
- Kanban Boards

It also includes helping those leading the change locally to look at change holistically. In an Agile environment we don't have time to treat each change separately, there are too many changes for that to be practical. We have to look across all changes taking place in a set time period and examine the impact as a whole. Those trying to get their work done don't care which projects are generating which changes, they just want to know how it is going to affect them. They don't have the time to be distracted by lots of individual changes so they need to be able to review their ways of working to incorporate a raft of changes simultaneously.

Finally, I think those of us in the change management profession can learn a lot from the adoption of some of the most common Agile practices. There is no reason why the behavioural changes we lead cannot benefit from the application of Sprints, Daily Stand Ups and Kanban Boards to identify, plan and control the work.

Conclusion

The pace of change is not going to slow down. Those of us responsible for the successful adoption of new ways of working need to review our practices at a tactical level and devise ways that enable staff to be able to cope with an unrelenting schedule of change.

At a more strategic level, we need to look for those with emotional intelligence because it is those staff who are already psychologically equipped to handle change effectively. The ability to learn from mistakes, to build trusting relationships and the ability to remain resilient in the face of failure that are essential in change.

For change we need emotional intelligence, for everything else we have robots!