



AGILE CHANGE
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Selling 'Agile' to Senior Managers

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Introduction

In this article I expand on some of the themes discussed at the Round Table held at the Agile Business Conference in London in October 2016. This is an annual event run by the [Agile Business Consortium](#) to bring together practitioners with lots of practical experience of implementing Agile approaches in a wide variety of public, private and not for profit organisations.

In each section I explain an idea for helping senior managers to feel comfortable with moving towards an Agile way of working within the business area that they manage.

I assumed that Agile is being used on any initiative where new things are being created, either for internal or external customers I have not called this work development, or projects or programmes because this paper is about how we work, not how we organise it into different streams of work.

Assume no knowledge

If we want to persuade senior managers about the benefits of Agile we first have to explain what Agile is. Just because its second nature to us doesn't mean that senior managers have any real awareness of what it means or what is involved.

In my experience, it is best to talk about some of the broad concepts that we all associate with Agile but sometimes forget to mention because they are so obvious. These include:

1. We deliver early versions of the final deliverable as early as possible so that all those impacted to can really appreciate what we heard when they explained what they wanted
 - So we can correct misunderstandings very early
 - So we can add anything that was forgotten when we were all talking in abstract about what to deliver
2. The work is a collaboration between the experts who design and build and the customers who will be using it to perform their work
3. Although the detail of what is going to be delivered will evolve based on feedback, we will agree the scope of the work and we will agree a deadline against which it will be delivered.

Don't confuse no knowledge with no opinion. Be aware that your senior managers may have a perspective about Agile which does not align with your experiences, but this doesn't mean that their perspective has no validity. My advice is to explore first – ask them what they have heard about Agile and what their concerns are so they you can tailor what you say to specifically address their concerns.

My big learning point is that despite all of the Agile courses I have been on ([Certified Scrum Master](#), [AgilePM Practitioner](#), [SAFe 4.0 Practitioner](#)) their material is not right for senior managers. It is too involved, with too much technical information and not enough business relevant benefits, which is why I wrote this article!

Don't go into detail

Going into depth about what Agile is and how Agile works (Scrum, SAFe and AgilePM) is counter-productive. It creates the impression that an Agile approach is complex and specialist and therefore will not be easy to adopt. You will have to create a high level story that addresses the key issues as they are at the senior management level not at the user level.

A good example of what to avoid is the terminology. Whatever brand of Agile is your favourite, the detailed language is a barrier. The implication that there is a new language creates the impression that this is a narrow specialism and narrow specialisms imply risk and time consuming transition to a whole new way of working.

I have seen Senior Managers visibly recoil when enthusiastic Agilists are trying to explain simple concepts but are using Agile language that for those of us working in Agile is now second nature but is new and not understood by others. For example, debating the number of teams in an Agile release train, and the required cadence (all SAFe® terms) sounds pretty complicated to the uninitiated.

Don't say Agile is the only way

Senior managers are usually middle aged and older. This means they have seen lots of different approaches come and go. In the UK we have been excited by Business Process re-engineering in the mid 1980s, Total Quality Management in the early 1990s and PRINCE2® at the beginning of this century. Stating that Agile is the only approach that will work demonstrates a naivety that affects your credibility.

It's more helpful and more persuasive to explain that Agile is a way of working that can align with other approaches. So do your research, think about how elements of Agile align to other methods. Highlight the consistencies and similarities, creating a feeling of familiarity.

I have found that emphasising the concept of continuous improvement is persuasive, because it is a concept that runs throughout any organisation, and forms the objectives of many managers.

Be empathetic

Any salesperson will tell you that if you want to make a sale, everything you say has to connect to the interests and concerns of those you are selling to. Empathy is a willingness to walk in the shoes of others, appreciating the pressures they are under, what drives them and what interests them.

Senior managers have responsibility for the identification and achievement of strategic objectives, as well as having an interest in the development of their own careers. Here are some of the key points to address if you want to be empathetic to their perspective:

- Align Agile to corporate objectives
- Align Agile to their management concerns
- Explain how an Agile approach increases the capability of the organisation

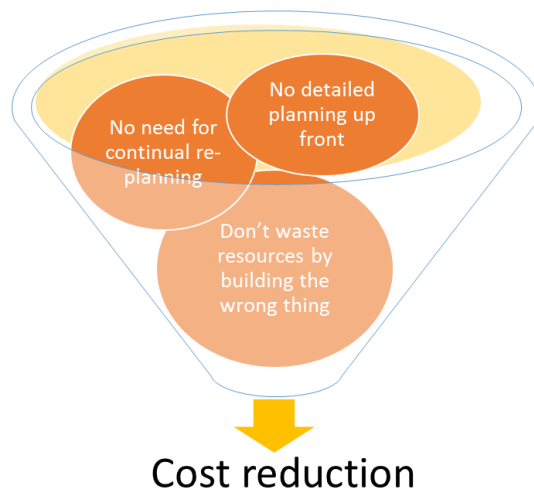
Align Agile to corporate objectives

Objectives at senior management level usually boil down to a couple of key concerns:

- Is what you are proposing going to save costs?
- Is what you are proposing going to increase revenue?
- Is what you are proposing going to deliver added value?

Is what you are proposing going to save costs?

Agile approaches bring an immediacy to getting work done which lowers the cost of initiatives. This is because we are no longer paying for the planning paradox i.e. all the team delivers in its first few weeks is a detailed plan of what it is going to do. So in more traditional approaches, there is a lot of up front, detailed planning that needs to be paid for before anything is produced. In addition, because the detailed planning is completed up front, these plans will need to be reworked as circumstances change, which is an additional overhead.



As Agile approaches involve the incremental development of the final deliverable, the risk of building the 'wrong' thing is reduced, saving costs over all. Emphasise how Agile helps us manage the risk of missing out on new developments which could save us costs or give us additional functionality that we would not have included up front in traditional projects, because we wouldn't have known about them.

In other words, sell Agile as a risk management method which speaks directly to the needs of all those who have risk management as part of their objectives, but who are unlikely to be directly involved with applying Agile in their own work. This widens out the group that can see relevance and benefit in Agile approaches.

Another aspect to selling Agile as a risk management approach is selling it as a cost control mechanism. For those senior managers who are used to projects going over budget, explaining that there is a fixed budget, and new ideas and requirements will pivot around that constraint is very re-assuring. Explaining that the prioritisation techniques enable us to keep to time and budget but bring in valuable new ideas is an important change in approach worth highlighting.

However, one line of argument that can be unhelpful is the concept of 'fail fast'. Yes, if something is not working or it's the not what the customer wants/expects this will be discovered much earlier if the initiative is run using an Agile approach as opposed to a traditional waterfall approach. However, introducing the concept of multiple failures in order to get to the right thing implies high levels of costs.

Is what you are proposing going to increase revenue?

Agile approaches do not necessarily make initiatives earn more revenue, but they do bring the revenue in earlier. Return on investment begins early in the lifecycle, and continues throughout the initiative as more features and functions are made available to customers.



Early delivery can generate higher levels of customer satisfaction because customers are getting what they need earlier. Also, customers are encouraged to give feedback and to help shape later iterations of these deliverables, so they feel involved and they feel listened to, which increases their satisfaction.

An additional benefit to early delivery is protection of the revenue stream because if you get your ideas to your market faster than your competitors then you can build brand loyalty, giving you a solid base of sales and revenue ahead of a competitor launch, which might deter them from entering the market, or will at least mean they have to spend more on marketing to catch up with you.

Is what you are proposing going to deliver added value?

The biggest benefit of moving to an Agile approach is the emphasis on business value. Every member of the team is encouraged to challenge their work, to ensure that it is genuinely solving a problem or adding a feature or function that is needed and will add value to the process. This has huge benefits for an organisation because it deepens and broadens the base of people who are actively contributing value to the organisation.

In a more traditional model, it is the responsibility of the manager to ensure their team is doing valuable work. In an Agile environment it is the responsibility of every team member, so it's a 'pull towards value' rather than a 'push towards value' model. Team members are motivated to do the right thing, driven by intrinsic motivation rather than the organisation having to deploy extrinsic motivators including financial rewards to get the work done.

Align Agile to management concerns

One of the biggest challenges in leadership at the moment is how to effectively lead those who know more about their work than their managers. As our work becomes more technologically sophisticated it is increasingly difficult to manage using traditional delegation skills. To delegate, the manager must understand and plan the work and then allocate to team members. However, if you do not understand all of the steps in configuring a database or building an app to support the sales team for example, then how do you manage their work.

Agile teams are managed on the principle of self-direction and empowerment. The manager defines the scope of their work and clarifies the output from their work but is not expected to define how that work is carried out. The team will self-manage by identifying all of the tasks, organising themselves to complete them in accordance with the agreed deadline and only involve the manager if they hit a problem that needs more management authority than they have to solve it.

Agile helps to develop a network of 'local' leaders which increases the overall capability of the organisation - see next point!



Explain how an Agile approach increases the capability of the organisation

Effective Agile teams rely on members having a breadth of skills and being willing to pitch in and help their colleagues on tasks that are not their areas of expertise, to make sure that deadlines are met and early and regular delivery to customers can take place. For example, an Agile marketing team might include graphic artists, copy writers and media planners. Although each of these team members have their own expertise, they are also willing to support each other. As a deadline approaches, the media planner puts their own work, which involves advanced planning and doesn't need to be delivered at this moment in time to help the copywriter with proof reading. The Media Planner might not be as talented at proof reading as their Copywriter colleague, but they can do it and it frees up the Copywriter to finish some of the text.



Members of these multi-disciplinary teams cross-train each other, increasing the capability of their organisation over time. This is clearly a benefit to the organisation and is a great side-effect of moving to an Agile approach.

Nudge don't race towards Agile

Agile is a cultural change, and deciding to apply these new ways of working doesn't happen overnight. Nudge gently towards their adoption. Always have stories ready to share about other organisations that have adopted Agile and have had a lot of success. Of course, this is even more persuasive if those other organisations are something your own organisation aspires to be.

Tie in the use of Agile to other processes, so that it becomes the norm. For example, adopt Agile techniques such as Stand-Ups and Kanban boards into the existing time slot for more traditional team meetings. Encourage collaborative working by using pooled budgets across different product lines or services so that teams work together to create integrated development plans. The pooled budget pulls them to align their plans with others, otherwise they miss out on funding.

Conclusion

For many senior managers, Agile is an answer to a problem that they do not know that they have. The traditional management approaches are known to them, provide them with regular updates about progress and have an established governance model and set of controls.

The transition to an Agile way of working can appear to be a lot of effort to solve something that doesn't need to be solved. Do not expect overwhelming enthusiasm for this change immediately, and be prepared to regularly explain and demonstrate the advantages of Agile, which remaining open to the advantages of other approaches.

