

# REAL

*Practical Guidance for Agile Practitioners*



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# AGILITY

# **REAL WORLD AGILITY**

This follows very closely how we as human beings are wired mentally. We are inquisitive, explorative beings who innately look for new ways to do things. When we try something new, we learn from the experience. By nature, there is no concept of failure or success—there is only learning. What worked? What didn't work? No emotion. No judgment. Just pure empirical evidence.

This is the place where we want our organizations to be: focused on learning and not worrying so much about success or performance.

Ultimately, to answer the culture question, it is important to recognize that YOU are the culture of the company. You and all of the other yous like you who are in the company. The biggest question on everyone's mind is, "What's in it for me???" Why should they care about this "Agile" thing? What will it do for THEM? To win people over, it's absolutely crucial to be able to answer that question for each person in the organization.

The next most important thing is to be the change that you want to see in the organization. We don't have control over what anyone else does, but we can ALWAYS have control over our own actions. Sometimes, that means taking a passive resistance approach where you purposely go against something that the company is forcing you to do because you know that it is something that is harmful for the company.

For instance, I have occasionally defied orders from superiors in organizations because I was being ordered to do something contrary to what I could clearly see was the right thing to do. People fear that they will be fired or that other dire consequences will happen if they don't comply. Ninety percent of the time, the things we worry about don't happen, and the other 10 percent is usually not as bad as we think it is.

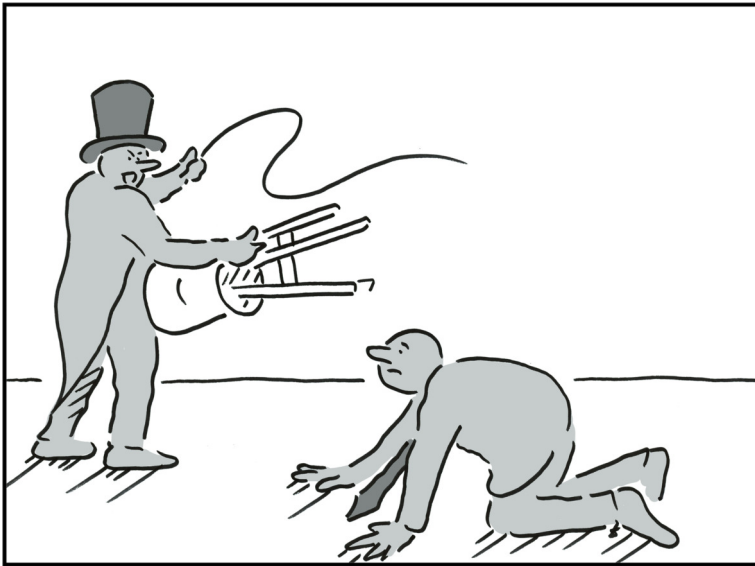
One such instance was when I was told to create a Scrum training program for one of my very large federal government clients. They insisted that the program follow a very specific script, slides, etc. The content was an unrealistic amount to cover in the time allotted—essentially a 2-day course covered in 4 hours. I created the materials and training program that they had requested, but when it came time to delivering the training, I ignored the classroom materials and instead taught the people what I thought they NEEDED to learn. In the end, I received outstanding ratings from the attendees, and they continued to thank me afterward for preparing them well for the changes that were coming.

One of the most important things to keep in mind about not only Agile but life in general is that we are in control of our actions and our destiny, and we make the outcomes happen that we set our minds to accomplishing. It's the concept of internal locus of control versus external locus of control.

Those who have an internal locus of control believe that they are in control of their lives and that if they are not happy, they can make changes to their circumstances; they can take control of the situation and actually change the situation. Those who have an external locus of control view themselves as subjects to the will and whim of others; they view themselves as simply pawns in the game who are hopelessly and helplessly moved around the board.

To overcome the corporate culture, which is resisting Agile adoption and Scrum implementation, it's up to you to stand your ground and be courageous. Speak up. Decide for yourself whether you are content to be just another cog in the machine or if you want to make a difference and work in a fabulous culture.

## How Do We Get Our Leaders Agile Trained?



I have a confession.

I really despise the word “train” and all its variations (trainer, trained, training, etc.). Training conjures images of a lion tamer training animals to do tricks. Or, the best case is an athlete or soldier, etc., going through the same drills over and over again until the actions they seek to optimize are part of their muscle memory and the actions become almost instinctive. They are establishing a routine.

When we “train” people in various Agile topics, the goal is a bit different. We seek to educate, inspire, enlighten, and break free of the routine—to explore new ways and provide building blocks but not complete blueprints. The Agile Manifesto Values and Principles are building blocks. eXtreme Programming engineering practices are building blocks. Scrum practices and Kanban mechanics are building blocks—a means to an end, but not the end. It's like teaching someone the scientific method and then inspiring them to use that approach to discover a world of possibilities in chemistry, physics, anatomy, and so on.

Everyone in an organization should be a leader. I often share with my classes (and give a talk at other events) about entrepreneurial spirit and how THAT is really the key ingredient to success. Everyone is a leader at some level.

However, I understand that the real question here is “How do we help the folks (who are setting strategy and vision for the organization and who are in control of the money) understand the value proposition of Agile and the practices that help to realize that value?” This person is really asking about the C-level, VP-level, director-level, etc., people in their organization.

They are frustrated.

Perhaps their leadership team has charged them with the directive of adopting Agile or, worse, implementing Agile. Then, that leadership team didn’t acknowledge the reality of improvement as a CHANGE in the way things are done. They want all the improvements, efficiency, quicker time to market, delighted customers, competitive edge, etc., without sacrificing any of the things they are doing today, like TPS reports and other metrics, investing in full-time ScrumMasters, co-locating teams, and so on.

It’s also possible that their efforts to become more Agile in their thinking are more of a grassroots effort and that management just doesn’t understand it at all. They see “this Agile” as a methodology of the month or don’t really care what it does as long as scope, cost, and time are all fixed. “As long as I get what I want, I don’t care how it is accomplished.”

I have run into that same immature, noncommittal leadership style on many occasions—leaders who are paid a lot of money to be in the positions they are in who are incapable of making trade-off decisions. Or, they just aren’t willing to take the appropriate risk in order to realize the benefits.

Everyone wants to be a rock star, but no one wants to practice guitar 8 hours a day. Everyone wants to look like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie, but no one wants to work out every day and forego that second helping of pie. It points to a larger sense of entitlement as a product of our decaying society.

Rich Roll, the famous attorney from Los Angeles, regularly evangelizes against this mentality and the cargo cult of “hacking” by advocating for good, old-fashioned hard work and trade-offs. Rich went from being 50 to 60 pounds overweight in his mid-40s to being the only person to run a triathlon on each island of Hawaii within the same week. He also regularly places in these insane Ultraman events, which are two back-to-back Ironman events.

The key here is value: focusing on the things that add value and de-emphasizing the things that do not. That is the mind-set that leaders must have.

When I agree to coach or train an organization, I make it clear that they need to include folks who are at that executive leadership level so that it’s clear what Agile means and what it does NOT mean.

I don’t “implement Scrum.”

I don’t “transform organizations to Agile.”

I help people identify experiments that they can run in order to learn from them. Small experiments yield small, gradual improvements and learning.

Oftentimes, leadership teams and organizations in general fear the change that Agility brings because they hear myths about wholesale abrupt change. I have seen this approach fail time and again. Identifying small experiments helps mitigate this risk.

I have been making a conscientious effort over the last few years to stop using the terms “success” and “failure.” Rather, we try something and have a vision of the outcome. Either we get the outcome we desired or we learned a lesson about the outcome. In the end, there is value in the outcome.

So, how DO we go about educating the leadership teams in organizations?

First, they need to know what everyone else knows.

The elements of Scrum, values and principles of Agile, etc., can be learned and memorized from a book. Anyone can teach Scrum in 15 minutes if it is just about memorization and theory.

The real value in the education process is having an experienced trainer and coach who takes the theory and makes it real with stories, discussion, activities, simulation, etc. It's like the difference between someone who just does tricks in magic and someone who creates illusions or someone who gets up on stage and recites lines versus someone who brings characters to life.

Ideally, EVERYONE would attend the same training: executives, managers, teams, etc. This way, everyone hears the same message and there are no questions about what is expected. I have had many clients who have followed this approach with great success. The training was then followed by coaching over a period of time so that the teams could benefit from my experiences and the learning of other organizations that had gone down this path before them.

Executives and leadership teams often only want a 2- to 4-hour session that teaches them the very basics about Agility. Sometimes, it is worse. They just want an “executive overview” of Scrum. I don't do workshops less than a day in duration, and I don't know anyone else who does either.

Even a full-day workshop seldom provides an adequate understanding of how leadership needs to help support the practices and improvements or the REAL value that these bring. I find that there are usually many more questions than we have time for, and so I usually provide a day-long workshop on the fundamentals (for executives) and a one-day coaching session where they can ask more questions and we can get down to work looking at next steps.

At a minimum, the leadership team needs to be attending these education sessions at the same time that the ENTIRE rest of the organization is attending workshops on the operational aspects of Agile, that is, the practices. “Here's the scientific method. This is a beaker. This is a graduated cylinder. This is what sodium looks like. Never let pure sodium come in contact with water. This is what could happen . . . (demonstration).” And so on.

The education, or “training,” is only the first step. This MUST be accompanied by coaching, mentoring, advising, etc., or the organization will make many mistakes needlessly. They will not have the benefit of someone who has helped to guide other organizations before.

Engaging a coach up front can also help you figure out how to convince the leadership team that there is value in having them attend the training where they are learning about value. Having leadership teams attend a brief workshop is better than having them attend nothing. The brief training can open the door to additional learning, and perhaps they will have a better understanding so that they can support your teams.

## Closing

Changing the culture of an organization should not be the goal, but rather, a realization and litmus test that reflects overall systemic change.

Culture is complex.

Organizations are complex.

Large organizations with inertia will take patience to mature. When leaders and others in the organization set out to improve the way the organization operates, it will certainly take time.

Holistic change that considers value from multiple perspectives is the best approach to making the changes significant and sustainable. When organizations force change prematurely, there is often resistance and, eventually, rebellion and failure. Oftentimes, the organization is left in worse shape had they NOT undertaken improvements.

In the next chapter, we turn our focus to the products we create, which includes anything that we build for our customers that solves their problem and, consequently, delivers value.

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