

When the Agile team wasn't ...a case history

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Converting your development team to Agile is often looked on as strictly a “technical” challenge – ideally, if you find the right coach and get the best Agile skill training, the adoption process will be smooth and quick. Oftentimes, managers fail to account for the organizational forces that conspire to untrack the best-planned change processes. It is this lack of appreciation for the dynamic nature of change and the resulting impacts outside the immediate target audience that catches the most savvy technicians by surprise.

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We decided to reevaluate our decision to move to an Agile environment after a mounting number of auspicious events made it impossible not to consider that we might have made a big mistake. The need to take a hard look at our adoption decision and process was due to an ongoing series of product release scheduling challenges, a divisive management offsite, and the loss of several key technical and management resources on short notice that brought one of our most important projects to a grinding halt.

Initially, moving to Agile seemed to be a really good idea. Our young, relatively talented, and highly energetic product development group seemed continuously stifled by our waterfall focused development process and rigid chain of command. We were not hitting our schedule and quality goals and had exhausted a significant amount of energy and good will in trying to change that. While we certainly did not consider the organizational atmosphere or environment to be constrictive or toxic, our workforce management group seemed to have an irritatingly narrow focus on how low our employee satisfaction rankings were in the areas of job satisfaction and professional growth. Our managers were well versed in human capital management but admitted frustration with the growing level of discontent they were hearing around how “things” were done. This was also showing up more frequently on exit interviews, as our attrition rate continued steady at a manageable though admittedly uncomfortable level.

It was right after several of our project managers returned from an Agile conference, singing high

praises for the Agile principles and philosophy, that we decided to consider doing something to shake up the system. Their enthusiasm was infectious and frankly a pleasant change and after a short deliberation period, we approached our IT management with a vision for transforming our development enterprise to an Agile focus. We emphasized the promised benefits of quicker to market time, reduced error rates and higher morale, among others. Our executive management team was extremely skeptical that we could effectively transform our development environment as quickly and efficiently as we thought we could, but they grudgingly agreed that what we were currently doing was not providing the desired results. They subsequently allowed us to begin efforts to find the resources to plan and implement an Agile transformation effort.

We focused our attention on several organizations specializing in Agile development training and familiarization, ultimately selecting an Agile coach that indicated we could be operating in an Agile fashion within three to six months if we employed their training path and philosophy. The coach had significant experience as a developer and project manager on small to mid-size projects, and very quickly, we plunged headfirst into our transformation journey by starting Agile training on one of our newest and most promising product development engagements. Our executive management team gave us approval to pilot one team with the understanding that it would be closely monitored from a resource and production perspective. Additionally they made it painfully clear this was purely a trial run since there was not universal support for either Agile



or the expense of transforming the development environment to Agile.

Our focus for training was on the product development team, and we spent a full week familiarizing the team with Agile techniques and practices, including stand-ups, retrospectives, unit testing and other new practices that were quite a deviation from the way we normally ran our development process. Once training was completed and implementation began, a number of issues emerged that began to impact the transformation, including:

- *The need for co-location of the team.* The project manager for the transformation effort, assuming there was clear authority for her to do whatever it took to implement Agile, went head to head with the facilities manager to procure the necessary space to house the team. The facilities manager, in his defense, with little notice and even less understanding of how and why Agile was even being considered, tried to help but just did not have enough time or motivation to provide the scope of necessary changes to meet the needs of the Agile team. While there were other options that could have satisfied the co-location requirement, including software solutions and video conferencing equipment, these options got lost in the escalating discourse that ensued between the two managers.
- *The goals of self-organization and empowerment for the Agile team.* We all understood what this meant conceptually and assumed our project manager would be able to work within that framework. However, once development actually started, it became clear that her style of leadership, emphasizing structure and close adherence to a project plan detailing who did what when, was conflicting significantly with the desires of the team and Agile philosophy to choose what they worked on and how the work might be done with less documentation.
- *The ability of the team to actually produce code effectively due to the lack of skill and experience.* Agile skill development had been the focus for training and the entire team had received that. However, we had staffed the team with volunteers, and paid less attention to skills that would be needed such as expertise in testing. Complicating this issue was the understanding that folks could work on whatever they wanted to and even work in pairs, which was contrary to established norms. While we all understood that we were trying something new, the project manager felt obligated to speed things up by concentrating available skills and knowledge where she could, at the expense of providing growth and learning opportunities for team personnel.
- *The total lack of understanding across the rest of our company regarding why we were piloting Agile and what it meant for everyone else.* As time wore on, interactions between the pilot team and workforce management, operations, and other development activities became more problematic due to conflicting needs and requirements. Predictably, as frustration grew within the pilot team, the project manager became increasingly concerned with the team's focus on itself and how little cooperation they seemed to be getting from the rest of the company.
- *The amount of time resolving non-production related issues seemed to be escalating as shorter production cycles were being implemented, causing obvious stress across the Agile team and consequently the rest of the company.* The team was obviously not capable of correcting internal issues and the external issues were exacerbating the situation. Additionally, the schedule was contributing to their challenges.
- Finally, *the observations of management and staff of the Agile transformation effort and the trials and*



tribulations of the team personnel were not creating a desirable perception for anyone with regards to Agile and its benefits. The Agile coach seemed content with the progress being made, but it appeared to external observers that the team was getting more panicked and frustrated, and producing less as time went on.

In an effort to figure out what was going on with the transformation, we convened a management offsite to discuss progress and challenges. Prior to the offsite, the Agile team missed its production goals for the second consecutive iteration, and whether as a result or as an indication of frustration, the project manager and lead developer resigned from the company. During the offsite, we interviewed the coach as well as several project team members to identify what issues the team was facing. It became clear that there was tremendous resentment from outside the team focused on the Agile adoption process, the team itself was not happy or convinced they could succeed, and that there was a real danger that we had a project team that was going to fail miserably unless something changed.

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What a difference six months makes! The key decision we made during the offsite that forced our reevaluation of our Agile adoption was not to throw in the towel, but to immediately get help with some of the issues that on the surface seemed to be “non-technical” in nature. These included the larger issues within the company regarding the adoption effort, as well as the challenges the team itself seemed to be facing as they struggled with adopting a new philosophy while simultaneously producing software. We found a consulting group that focused on team and organizational transformation, and with their help, got our Agile adoption effort back on track and in a position to catapult us to the level of performance we were aiming for when we first looked at Agile.

Hindsight being 20/20 as it always is, we can group the challenges and opportunities we faced in adopting Agile in several specific areas.

Change Management:

One thing we did not consider in our rush to start the Agile adoption process was the impact on the rest of the company, and impact the rest of the company would have on the Agile adoption process and the team. We did not effectively articulate the rationale, benefits, and requirements necessary to adopt Agile to key stakeholders, had we even taken the time to identify them. This failure to communicate across our organization amplified resistance to change and complicated the adoption effort exponentially. This negatively influenced management support and buy-in, and detrimentally affected the interactions between the Agile pilot team and outside entities that were unaware of the priority for adoption or the requirements they themselves had to support the Agile implementation. We also did not appreciate the organizational interconnections that would be affected by one of our production teams operating in a totally different manner and philosophy from everyone else.

The consulting group we brought in focused first on understanding our unique culture and the areas of change that adopting Agile would entail, particularly with the interactions with the rest of the organization. This was accomplished by a multi-tiered data collection, involving individual interviews, team activities and an electronic survey. Once they identified the critical facets impacting the Agile adoption effort, they worked to identify the specific changes that would be required to effectively support the Agile transition. They also worked on improving the communications flow, articulating the key requirements and benefits of Agile, and worked to identify where areas of disconnect and resistance were through targeted assessment and research. They created a plan for keeping the key stakeholders in the loop, which helped enhance buy-in and support at this critical level. Finally, they created a change management awareness program for use across the organization to increase the understanding and impact of the Agile adoption process and how to manage the changes that would be forthcoming on an individual and team level.



Leadership

As the Agile transformation took place, we realized that our traditional style of project team leadership that was the hallmark of our management team and staff was not going to work with the Agile philosophy, and in fact could derail the entire process rather effectively. Our emphasis on documentation, assignment of personnel according to skill and expertise, and our traditional process for collecting metrics was not congruent with an Agile approach, and had not helped us either in our previous development philosophy.

The consulting team we brought in helped us appreciate that effective leadership now had to focus on increased collaboration, dialogue and understanding among the team members, impacting the very structure of how we make decisions, allocate work assignments and evaluate our resource needs. They worked with us to improve our manager's comfort and expertise with an "empowered" team, including very focused and inclusive decision making techniques, trust building activities and other areas that we could improve empowerment and collaboration based on their understanding of our existing culture.

Team Effectiveness

We had a front row seat to watching our pilot team implode under the stress of adopting a new philosophy while struggling mightily to produce software. While there was some lack of technical knowledge initially, our Agile coach quickly and effectively ensured that the Agile skills necessary were in fact demonstrated and made available to the team. Where the challenges appeared and manifested themselves was in the pilot team's interactions among themselves, and with those personnel outside the team with whom they had to work with or coordinate with. The pilot team also did not appreciate the value of learning from each other, partly because it was a new perspective, but also because they did not have the skills to actually do so. Finally, the level of commitment and trust within the pilot team was questionable at times.

Our consulting team helped us with this by working to increase the self-awareness of each

individual on the pilot team with regards to their intrapersonal actions and preferences. The personnel on the pilot team learned about themselves, which contributed to their understanding each other more effectively. Considerable time was also devoted to learning about each other – strengths, preferences, goals, etc. The pilot team was also taught how teams work together, at the team level and at the organizational level. While time consuming and not comfortable initially, it soon became apparent that this new knowledge and experience was the glue that would hold the team together as it progressed through the Agile adoption process. Through this new perspective and knowledge, the pilot team was able to communicate far more effectively internally and externally. They also gained an enhanced appreciation of the nature of their needs with regards to the external organization and how to better set expectations around those needs with non-team members.

Today

In following the lessons learned from our experience, we were able to successfully adopt Agile on our pilot team and accomplish the production goals necessary to ensure success for the team and organization. Our Agile adoption process is greatly improved and disciplined concerning the areas we need to focus on to create success for the teams involved. As a result, we are planning to expand it to our other product development teams and fully leverage the benefits from the Agile philosophy and approach.