



How to Use Agile Project Management In Your Business

Editor's Note

In this issue, we interviewed Dr. Leong Mun Chak to share his top tips about Agile Project Management Strategies.

Dr. Leong has a lot of knowledge on the topic due to his many years of experience in training on Project Management as well as running his own consultancy.

He explains what Agile Project Management is, provides some tips, illustrates the biggest mistakes he's seen, and describes the benefits people and organizations receive if they follow these tips.

Why Agile Project Management?

Project management (and Agile Project Management) is one of the core management skills that is applicable to any industry or discipline you are from.

Top 5 Tips for Agile Project Management?

Tip number 1

Don't force agile.

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Some projects have been traditionally planned in such a way that we work sequentially.

For example, in construction-related projects, where you have to do the foundation work before any substructures or superstructures can be conducted.

While some other projects such as software development don't necessarily follow a prescribed standard operating procedure. You can program modules individually or modularly.

Such projects are very viable for the agile approach. Now, agile actually means an adaptive project management style. This means to say that if a project is faced with multiple changes. You can adapt the plans to suit those changes and react accordingly.

It advocates we should not plan too well ahead of time. It's just like imagining ourselves standing on the shore and watching things in the sea drifting towards us.

So, things that are being carried by the waves, you can't clearly see far what's ahead, but you can see those that are near to your feet.

Likewise, don't plan too far ahead when the project is exposed to many uncertainties and changes. Given that, there are some projects that we have to traditionally follow what we call the "waterfall approach".

Whereby, we have to do all our planning way ahead of time before we actually execute it. That's the traditional approach, we call a "waterfall approach".

In agile, you do not necessarily have to plan everything ahead of time. You work in small pockets or parcels of work that can be individually worked on, creating deliverables, and finally we integrate all these various deliverables as one unit. In this agile approach, it reacts to changes as well as uncertainties very well.

Tip #2:

Your senior management, the sponsor, the customer, and team members have to be very comfortable with Agile. Because agile does not necessarily permit you to have pre-plans.

So you plan when you feel you need to plan.

What it means is that it is actually a very different paradigm of thinking about how plans are being conducted on a project.

It really requires a mindset change because the project is not being pre-planned, but is planned as we go along. We play it by ear.

Tip #3

Agile actually permits visibility to the customer. What this means is that every deliverable that has been produced can be immediately known to the customer or the customer actually sees the deliverables that are produced in a very speedy manner.

In a traditional waterfall approach however, is that the deliverables will occur towards the tail end of the project whereas in Agile for every parcel of work that's being conducted, deliverables can be immediately produced and customers will be able to assess whether to accept the deliverable and as well as they feel comfortable, they feel assured that the work or the project is actually moving, is progressing well ahead.

Tip #4

Agile empowers a team because it requires the team to work as team players. Now subject matter experts in the team will have to pool their resources or come in with constraints.

They can also work in teams among the smaller teams.

They can produce their results independently of each other.

This actually permits some form of ownership among the team members as well as the concerned stakeholders.

Tip #5

The way that the agile plans are conducted, senior management and customer as well as the sponsor must support this paradigm shift.

If they are uncomfortable maybe because they have been so used to the traditional "waterfall approach".

Unfortunately, Agile would not work. So there will be a lot of barriers that will prevent the project management team from actually practicing agile project management as a result of this.

I'm going to say that senior management must really support this paradigm if they really want to make agile work in the organization.

What are some of the biggest mistakes that you see people make when it comes to Agile Project Management?

I see two major mistakes:

Mistake #1:

The first mistake is when people force through an established culture of waterfall paradigm and this will not work. If you're forcing through and not practicing change management, a gradual change towards agile will never work.

You will get a lot of resistance, a lot of opposition from the team as well as from all the stakeholders and decision-makers. So basically, the agile approach will fall flat even from day one. So never force ... Agile itself has to be conducted in a way that we have a mindset change.

Tell the stakeholders what agile is, keep a product awareness of what agile is and its benefits and over time, cultivate the spirit of practicing and working agile. Then you will see people slowly adopting agile approaches.

Mistake #2:

Mistake number two is that people assume agile is the only answer or is one of the many answers to their project schedule problems.

That is not so.

Agile requires teamwork. If teamwork is not there, agile, no matter what it is, in whatever form it is, it will not answer to any of the project key roles.

Never assume that agile is the answer, although it's hype today. Firstly, examine whether your project can be agile or not, or if it's traditional, it has to follow a waterfall paradigm.

If it has to follow a waterfall paradigm, in construction, for example, you cannot use agile. But you can use agile from a macro-view or from the helicopter view, while work on the various parcels is conducted in the waterfall manner.

So this is something you can also suggest to people that in some construction projects ... The bigger work is done agile, but the physical work which is where compliance or standard procedures have to be met because of the quality, compliance, whenever, it can be performed using the traditional approach which is the waterfall approach.

What are some of the benefits that people receive when following these tips?

There are 5 key benefits I foresee:

Benefit #1:

It's a passport to market. Being agile, the advantage of being agile is that it's able to produce deliverables quicker than the traditional approach.

So one of the key points in software development's life-cycle is that, the quicker it goes through the market, the sooner the advantage over the competitors have.

Benefit #2:

Every deliverable has visibility. Customers will be excited to see the deliverables being produced and they can make an assessment of the deliverables in the soonest time possible without waiting for the tail-end of the project using the waterfall approach.

Benefit #3:

The third benefit is that agile responds very quickly to changes and uncertainty. It is pretty obvious that projects have changes and we cannot avoid them, provided there are reasons for such a change to happen.

Being able to respond quickly to changes means we are able to produce deliverables and the final deliverable, which is the project itself, can be handed over quickly to the customer.

Benefit #4:

The key benefit number 4 is that it empowers people in teams where every team member takes responsibility for the work they're involved in and they plan in a very autonomous manner and are able to integrate or converge all their modules and all their work together towards the end of the project.

This helps ownership, which is actually my key benefit number 5, that it promotes ownership of the project by the stakeholders. This is something we want to cultivate, we want to nurture.

Very early in the beginning of the project is that once there's ownership, one doesn't buy-in from everyone, from the stakeholders, the team members especially, we will see that the project will have a higher degree of success.