What comes first: Doing Agile or Being Agile?

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More and more organisations both in the public and private sector are talking about "Agile transformation" and are investing in the adoption of Agile delivery methods. Alongside this, there also appears to be a significant growth in conversations around "business agility". Which raises the question – "what needs to happen first – business agility or Agile delivery?" "Can businesses be agile without doing Agile?" "Are the two mutually exclusive or interdependent?" "Does doing Agile necessarily lead to an Agile enterprise?"

To answer these questions, it's worthwhile defining the terms "Agile" and "business agility". Business agility refers to the "ability of a business system to rapidly respond to change"[1]. Agile practices like Scrum, Kanban, DSDM or XP on the other hand, are a set of tools, techniques and practices which could help achieve business agility. The operative word here is "could". Success stories around Agile abound and undoubtedly there are many benefits of adopting Agile methods. Sadly, more often than not, these have only been partially successful in bringing about homogenous and sustainable agile transformation in organisations and in achieving greater responsiveness to market and customer needs.

In fact, only 6% of respondents to the world's largest Agile survey[2] reported that Agile practices are enabling greater adaptability to market conditions.

So, if the whole point of adopting Agile methods like Kanban or Scrum is to achieve organisational agility and faster time to market, then why doesn't it work? The reason is simple. Agile methods like Scrum or Kanban, together with frameworks for scaling Agile like SAFe, are merely means to the end. These methods were primarily developed for the software development sector and although some of their principles may be applied to non-IT functions and projects, they cannot be expected to achieve the same results without making fundamental changes to organisational processes and mindset as well as external environmental factors that form a part of the enterprise's ecosystem.

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1 Leybourn, Evan (2013). Directing the Agile Organisation: A Lean Approach to Business Management. IT Governance Publishing.
2 13th Annual State of Agile Report, 2019, Collabnet VersionOne

For instance, Agile software delivery cannot, by itself, ensure faster time to market if supporting processes like procurement, finance, legal and recruitment are slow to respond. Similarly, if an enterprise is dependent on external agencies and regulations, then however agile it may be in delivery, it may face bottlenecks before actually releasing a product or service to the end customer. A classic case of hurry up and wait.

According to the same Agile survey, "organization cultural issues remain the leading impediments to adopting and scaling agile. General resistance to change, inadequate management support and sponsorship, and organizational culture that is at odds with agile values rank as the top three challenges." The reason behind this is that while it is easy to adopt Agile practices and rituals like daily stand ups and retrospectives and even the Agile manifesto, it's much harder to adhere to some of the principles behind these like self-organising teams, trust, face to face interactions and customers and developers working together continuously. According to Denning[3] , there are three components of an agile mindset:

- An obsession with delivering value to customers

- Descaling work into small items that can be handled by self-organizing teams

- Joining those teams together in a network that is interactive and can flow information horizontally as easily as up and down

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3   Denning, Steve (2018), The Age of Agile.

As with any problem or opportunity, before embarking on an agile transformation journey and adopting a specific method, an organisation needs to ask itself three questions:

1.   Why does it need to be agile? What is the key driver? Reducing cost or risk? Improving quality? Driving employee engagement? Or improving responsiveness to customer needs?

2.   How does the organisation need to change the way it functions to become agile? In other words, what's not working? What mind shifts need to be brought about? For eg. co-location, multi-disciplinary teams, flatter structures

3.   What does success look like? What are the real world outcomes?

Once these questions are answered truthfully and an organisation is prepared for the intensity of the effort and battle scars involved in an agile transformation, any Agile method or practice can provide a good kickstart. Without these answers however, Agile ceases to be anything more than a set of rituals shaped like a silver bullet. There is no dearth of examples of innovative, adaptive and responsive organisations before the advent of "Agile" after all.

Would you like to know more about the key ingredients to achieving business agility or how to make change stick in an agile world? Come and talk to us!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kaushiki is a delivery and outcome focused project and portfolio management professional with a wide range of qualifications, including MoP® Foundation, PMP® and is a Certified Scrum Master (CSM®). Kaushiki has over 20 years' experience across diverse domains in both the public and private sector on complex, integrated, cross-government projects.

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