7 Reasons You Should Add Agile to Your Management Toolbox

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Table of Contents

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Eric spent 11 years managing the marketing and product development functions in the educational and enterprise-wide software industries. Over the course of his career Eric has been a part of four hyper-growth situations, helping grow entrepreneurial companies by factors of 2x to 5x in very short periods of time. His specific industry experience lies in Professional Development, Training, Education, Online Retailing, e-Learning, Publishing, Professional Services, Supply Chain Tech and Software Development. Eric has an MBA in Marketing, and is a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM).

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Introduction

Whether you are a Vice President with $500 million in revenue responsibility, a Director in charge of multiple teams and deadlines, or a fledgling manager with a tiny budget and no direct reports, it is no longer possible to ignore the power of Agile. Many of you are probably aware that when it comes to product development, Agile offers benefits like increased collaboration, immediate feedback, shorter project timelines and increased management visibility. But did you know that Agile principles and practices can also improve your effectiveness as a day-to-day manger, and the performance of your departments as a whole?

The fact is, Agile is not an IT methodology. It is a time-tested management tool that—quite surprisingly—replicates the way many managers already think, work, and intuitively manage people and projects. If you are considering adopting Agile practices at your organization, or just looking to incorporate a little Agile into your day-to-day management style, below are seven reasons why adding Agile to your management toolbox could be a very smart idea.

Reason #1: Initiatives and Projects Can Be Started Almost Immediately

It is well-documented within the traditional, five-step process of Initiate-Plan-Execute-Control-Close that up to 40% of any initiative's allotted time is spent PRIOR to execution. To put this in perspective: under the traditional model for getting work done, a Design Firm with a website contract approved on January 1st and scheduled for completion on December 31st wouldn't have anything for the customer to look at until the end of May—150 days AFTER someone determined a website was needed. Alternatively, Agile's focus on delivering smaller pieces of value in shorter periods of time means planning is both iterative and significantly shorter on the front end. And with a continuous delivery of value in a shorter period of time, people quickly see real results from their work—meaning organizations can begin working on initiatives in a matter of weeks, as opposed to months after they are deemed necessary and all momentum and enthusiasm are lost.

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Reason #2: Wasting an Entire Day in Meetings Is a Thing of the Past

Anyone who works in an office five days per week has seen first-hand how the culture of meetings has placed a virtual death grip on corporate America. Among my close-knit group of colleagues, many will admit that meetings fill all but 30 minutes of each work day. And worse, most agree their organizational value is directly tied to the number of meetings they are invited to. Not surprisingly, these same colleagues complain about their organizations being slow to move, slow to react and short on resources for new initiatives. Agile has figured out a solution to the culture of meetings by narrowing both the type and frequency of meetings, and time-boxing daily status meetings to a maximum of just 15 minutes. Agile also encourages short, ad hoc events like hallway meetings and problem-solving sessions involving two or three people and no management presence. After all, why involve 15 semi-invested people in developing a solution when three experienced specialists will suffice?

Reason #3: Personnel Issues Can Sometimes Resolve Themselves

When it comes to Agile, one of the first terminology adjustments you need to make is that people are not referred to as 'resources.' In the Agile world people are simply people, with their own set of strengths, weaknesses, motivations and personal issues; a fact which makes them both unique and non-interchangeable. Under traditional management practices, if a member of a team is not pulling their weight or difficult to work with, we are taught to simply chalk the problem up as a communication issue or process failure, and solve it by writing more documents and implementing more new policies. But in Agile (specifically Scrum) each team member is allowed to make their own assessment of the situation, determine the impact of the non-performing employee, jointly determine a solution, and even vote the employee off the team if the behavior cannot be remedied or productivity cannot be restored. Agile empowers employees and team members to deal with issues without escalation and come up with real solutions to problems—even people-related problems—which will significantly reduce the number of issues that reach your desk.

Reason #4: Everyone on the Team Knows the Vision

Those of us with experience managing people know how much more effective employees are when they know the 'why.' When managers make a conscious effort to tell employees what their work means to the broader organization instead of simply communicating 'what' they are supposed to do, immense increases in productivity almost always result. Agile makes sure everyone on the team, including the stakeholders, SMEs, product owners and marketing people always knows the vision, and ensures that vision is both strong and well-published—and presented and communicated to anyone in the organization who wishes to know it. This includes your boss, your boss' boss, and anyone else who can positively affect your performance review.

Reason #5: Projects and Teams Are Easier to Keep Track Of—for You and for Other Stakeholders

As mentioned earlier, one of the key tenants of Agile is visibility. Within the context of Agile, visibility is accomplished via transparency to the work, the priorities, the deliverables, the progress, and of course the vision of each department and the organization as a whole. Agile practices promote visibility in a number of ways, through the daily standup meeting as well as a plethora of visual "information radiators" sprinkled around the office for everyone to see—whiteboards, burndown charts, task boards, backlog lists, and other things that can tell someone almost immediately who is doing what and what the statuses of various projects are. Agile all but eliminates the need for a manager to ask what an employee is working on, or inquire when a certain project will be completed. A quick trip to the nearest wall or 15 minutes in the next daily standup meeting will tell anyone in the organization everything they need to know.

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Reason #6: The Day-to-Day Management Role Becomes Simplified

Because it empowers team members and individuals to make their own decisions, Agile can be a "set it and forget it" style of management . . . if, of course, you have people in place that can be trusted to act in the best interest of the company when no one is looking. By allowing employees complete control over HOW they do their jobs, management can finally focus on WHAT needs to be done and WHEN—an act commonly referred to as "strategic planning" for those of us who rarely have time to do it. And when employees are in charge of the "how," management's direct interaction with employees becomes focused on three things: removing obstacles to progress, providing information when necessary, and generally staying the heck out of the way.

Reason #7: Agile is Intuitive, Easy to Learn, and Actually Kind of Fun

As mentioned above, Agile matches the way many managers of people, products and projects already think. I, for example, have always intuitively believed things like large extended meetings, lack of visibility, over-planning in the face of numerous unknowns, lengthy status reports and detailed process documenting were the equivalent of organizational wheel-spinning. But now I have a proven methodology that allows me to toss all of these things aside in favor of productivity, accomplishment, visibility, sharing and empowerment. Further, Agile techniques and principles like Time Boxing, Definition of Done, Burndown Charts, Story Points, Relative Estimating, Planning Poker and Affinity Estimation are not only intuitive, but they can be fun at the same time. And how many times in your career have you used the word "fun" when referring to a methodology?

Summary and Next Steps

As you have probably guessed by now, Agile is not for the closed-minded or change-resistant manager. For many of you Agile principles will, at least initially, seem to work against much of what you have learned over the course of your management career. But once you've had some formal training and a chance to try it, I am confident you will realize, much like I did, that Agile is a management tool which can drive productivity, increase buy-in and simplify management within your departments and your organization as a whole.

In terms of next steps, if you are truly interested in learning more about Agile I believe Step 1 should be to take a comprehensive course in Agile fundamentals that provides an overview of all (or most) Agile methods. There are a number of great training organizations out there who offer Agile-focused training in the classroom, as well as live online and through self-directed e-Learning. And once the fundamentals training is out of the way, Step 2 will involve working Agile into your thinking and your daily actions as a manager, a little at a time. And who knows—if Step 2 goes well, Step 3 could involve pursuing an Agile-related certification to demonstrate your knowledge of the practice, including the PMI-ACP (Agile Certified Practitioner) and the Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). In the meantime, good luck in your journey and please feel free to reach out if you have questions, comments, or an interesting story to share!

ABOUT RMC Learning Solutions™

RMC Learning Solutions develops and trains project managers, business analysts and agile practitioners by helping them learn the skills necessary to succeed in their careers. We deliver a wide range of training in multiple learning formats across the globe.

Founded in 1991 by Rita Mulcahy, the company continues to develop and provide innovative, real-world tools and instruction, delivered by professionals with extensive experience and a working knowledge of industry best practices.

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