Agile's Teenage Crisis?

This article is part of the <u>Agile Manifesto 10th Anniversary</u> series that is being published on InfoQ.

The "elephant in the room" is a metaphor for the behaviour of people who deliberately ignore an impending issue. They are fully aware of some major issue that really must be tackled or decided upon, but everyone keeps busy tackling other, often small items, ignoring the big issue, pretending it does not exist, hoping maybe that it will vanish by magic or that someone else will take care of it; that one day the elephant will have left the room.

Snowbird

Alistair Cockburn organized a celebration of the10 years of the agile manifesto in Snowbird, Utah on February 12, 2011, gathering some 30+ people who've been involved with that community at the original meeting and since. It was a very interesting discussion, and I am not purporting to report here the main results or findings of this great event. After covering the walls with a couple of hundred issues cards, David Anderson noted that there was "an elephant in the room", a topic that few are willing to debate in the pen, namely the Agile Alliance (its role, mission, accomplishments, etc.). After the lunch, a small group gathered and identified a few other such elephants in the room, that is, other topics that the agile community is not really willing to tackle for a variety of reasons. We ended up with a long list of about 20 such "undiscussable" topics (or at least not discussable in the open).

A herd of elephants

Here's the raw herd of elephants, with an additional sentence or two to explain what the title is about, based on the best of my recollection (see photograph at bottom):

1. Commercial interests censoring failures

The key players in this community have a direct financial interest and have fear that any negative info would be amplified, distorted, and turned against them

2. Pretending agile is not a business

see 1. above

3. Failure to dampen negative behaviours

We do not face, then analyse the failures and limitations of our assertions, claims, practices (see above)

4. Context and Contextual applicability (of practices)

in which some practice works, or does not work.

5. Context gets in the way of dogma

By evacuating context, we constantly return to dogmas, bigotry, and claims of universal applicability.

6. Hypocrisy

... is a bit at the root of "elephant in the room" (we actually know all this).

7. Politics

A more systematic and thorough acknowledgment that organizational politics plays a big role in the adoption of agile practices.

8. Anarchism

... in the agile and lean community itself, preventing a more systematic organization of the body of knowledge

9. Elitism

... as a defense (against failure) we limit our message to the best... and blame failure on the "unenlightened" others...

10. Agile alliance

Divergence of views as to what it role has been, was supposed to be, will be...

11. Certification (the "zombie elephant")

This massive elephant was reported dead a few times, but seems to reappear... Effective tool to assess maturity for individuals and organization, or commercial ploy from trainers and consultants?

12. Abdicating responsibility for product success to others

In particular, much of responsibility seems to be pushed to product owners, business analysts, users, etc.

13. Business value

The notion of value and in particular business value is mentioned everywhere, all the time, but never clearly defined, or confused with (development) cost, or pushed onto others (such as product owner) to resolve.

14. Managers and management are bad

... as an instance of pushing any failure to others?

15. Culture

subtle interaction with practices, an integral part of context.

16. Role of architecture and design

... depending on context; they are still often equated to BUFD, and rapidly brushed aside with claims of
YAGNI, or "we'll refactor it later"

17. Self-organizing teams

Maybe as a consequence of the axiom that management is bad, and also pushing aside the concept of software
development governance.

18. Scaling naïveté (e.g., scrum of scrum)

With a bit of imagination all agile practices scale up, and if this does not work it is because you have not tried
hard enough

19. Technical debt

While agile practices could help control technical debt, they are also often at the root, the cause of massive
technical debt.

20. Effective ways of discovering information without writing source code

These last few elephants (#16-20) are practices where a large level of variability exists across software
development organizations, and little in-depth analysis has occurred, in particular on how they tie to context.

This is quite a large herd of elephants. So after a few months, here is my view on the elephants we have in the agile community room.

1. The agile alliance elephant

I'll put this one aside; the first that entered the room in Snowbird, since I have nothing to say about it. I noted a small group of former Agile Alliance board members tackled this elephant late in the day. Maybe it is just one instance of the "Community leadership" elephant, which would include other organizations... Is there a scrum alliance elephant?

2. Failures and limitations of agile practices, & context

While the community has been good at amplifying what works, it often has not been good at dampening what did not work, analyzing why it did not work, or under which conditions it did not work (context!). There is in some cases a certain level of hypocrisy (many interested parties know this, some are willing to acknowledge it in private conversations, but then... pretend it does not exist or return to the official dogma in more visible venues).

This elephant has several
causes
, themselves listed above as elephants (i.e., "undiscussables"):

A) Commercial interests

Many of the key players in this community have a direct financial interest in selling something agile (tool, consulting, training, new idea), and there is this latent fear that potential buyers would be detracted by any hint of negativity, that any bad news would get unduly amplified, that it would in the end turn against them or against a whole community.

B) Decontextualization

In most instances, when practices are described too little of the actual context is described, leaving an impression of very wide applicability; even if this wide applicability is not actually claimed. Sometimes this is just pure dogmatism, or bigotry.

C) No obvious way to make progress based on failure

Unlike other disciplines, like medicine for instance, there is very little reporting of failures or limitations in software, and no clear venue or even templates or exemplars of such reporting. And again the fear that this would reflect badly on the person reporting, or the "victim" or "culprit" organization. A good template for such report would include a detailed description of the context.

D) Limited objective evidence