playscrum

You Play or You don't

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To my inspiration, Chanakya

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Chapter 1: Agile – The culture of Purpose and continuous improvement

Mr. Jigar Soni, the CEO of MiddleOvers was very happy today. The Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) had approached him to partner them with a social initiative called as "Let's GoTogether" that they had taken up. This was an initiative to improve the traffic conditions in Bangalore and MiddleOvers was approached to help BDA with technology support. Mr. Jigar Soni, a CEO who had MBA from a prestigious B-School was reluctant to work on this project in a traditional way. He felt there was a need to connect with real end users and make a behavioral impact. He decided to explore Agile as he had heard of projects that run using Agile methodologies were successful in delivering products that meet customer needs. He then decided to hire an Agile Coach, as he was not aware of how to go about it.

Jigar was trying to figure out what is the best way to hire a coach. He decided to go to a Scrum Meetup that was organized in Bangalore, where he happened to meet a coach called Meghana Shetty. Meghana had been a coach helping organizations to become Agile. Meghana was talking about a concept called as Impact Mapping to understand the requirements and stakeholders. Jigar was really impressed and was keen on exploring the possibilities of hiring Meghana.

Jigar was a no nonsense executive who always wished to make decisions based on the outcome. He pulled Meghana for a quick conversation

Jigar: Hi Meghana! I'm Jigar Soni, the CEO of MiddleOvers. How

are you doing?

Meghana: Hello Jigar! I'm doing great! Hope you are enjoying the meetup. Good to see you organization enablers like you turn up for such events.

Jigar: I was really impressed with your discussion on Impact Mapping. I just wanted to have a quick chat with you about something that has come up at MiddleOvers.

Meghana: Sure.

Both of them picked up a cup of tea and moved closed to a corner of the hall with a window that was towards a busy road of Bangalore.

Jigar: Meghana, you see that road. Its full of vehicles. You know that this is a big problem in Bangalore. BDA has started an initiative to solve the traffic problem and they have approached us for a technical solution.
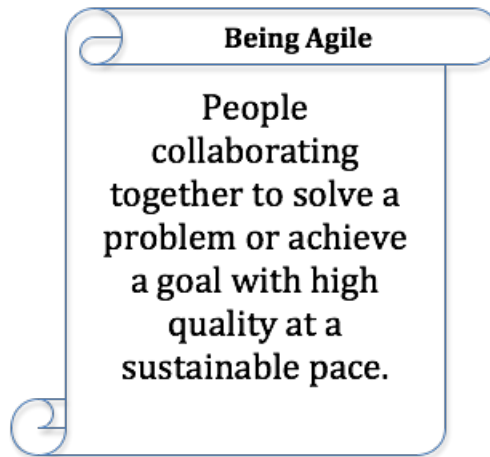
Meghana: That's quite interesting! Finally, the BDA came to their senses.

Jigar: Well, everyone learns continuously. Right?

Meghana: Yes, ofcourse.

Jigar: As this is a social initiative, the success really depends on how people react to this initiative. I have heard about "Agile" being very customer centric approach to solve problems. So I wanted to understand further and explore the possibility of using Agile methodologies for this project. Can you please enlighten me on what is Agile?

Meghana: What is Agile? Its great question. I would rather ask "What is being Agile?"

Being Agile

People collaborating together to solve a problem or achieve a goal with high quality at a sustainable pace.

Now, when you talk about product development, there are three aspects

[Customer Needs]
Are we building the right product?

[Predictability]
Are we there yet?

[High Quality]
Are we building the product right?

Jigar: "Well, that's nice but I'm not able put my heads around and clearly understand what Agile means? In your words, how would one become Agile? Are there set of rules or processes to follow?"

Meghana: "To be honest, the human beings are inherently Agile. I don't think we need sophisticated processes and rules to be Agile"

Jigar: "What do you mean? If its so natural, how come there are so

many conferences and trainings to create awareness"

Meghana: "What I mean is human beings are naturally designed to inspect and adapt but we also need forums to continuously learn. Anyway, let me tell you a story"

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I spent most of my childhood in two villages near Tumkur and Bangalore. About 20-25 years back when the Direct to Home TV was not available, the only source of entertainment for people was some initiative in villages. Even now that's the case in most of the remote villages. One such initiative is to learn a play from Indian epics and stage it with borrowed costumes for certain occasion in the village.

One such event happened in November 1985. The villagers decided to learn Ramayan, one of the Indian epics.

The plan:

The villagers decided that the Ugadi was good occasion for holding such event. So the release date was fixed. Someone had the knowledge of how much a drama set would cost. I clearly don't remember, it could be about Rs. 40K. So the budget was fixed. They decided each member would contribute towards the budget. So this was fixed time and fixed cost project. Also, at a high level the scope was fixed so you can call this as a fixed bid project. This is a complex project not a simple one as they don't know what to learn and how to go about it. They were illiterates so they couldn't read and remember the dialogues.

The Team:

They hired a domain expert. He was called the masterji and he came with a harmonium. Here is how they decided roles. A person who is tall and handsome would become Ram, A person who is lean and fair would become Sita and a person who had big moustache(my father) would play the role of Ravan….. so on so forth. Let's call

these folks artists. There was also one person who would help these people run the show by getting all the support that they need.

Execution:

They decided that they practice every day from 9pm till 12am at the temple. The master would teach them Ramayan chapter by chapter. Many a times, teaching them simple and short dialogues covering the end-to-end story and later introducing the complex dialogues. This was called as rehearsal. Did they continuously rehearse every day until Ugadi(delivery day)?. No, they were doing something wonderful.

Continuous Reviews:

After few chapters or every month, they would hold demonstration of whatever they have learnt for the villagers (real end users). The artists used to be very excited about these ceremonies as they get to gauge their performance in front of real audience. During this ceremony, if some of the artists seem to be struggling to enact the play, the master will make a note to run that part of the play through the rehearsal again. Master will also observe whether the audience is enjoying the play. If they are not enjoying he would make a point to add few fun elements in between which will be learnt in next set of practice sessions. The output of these ceremonies used to be:

1. Chapters that need to rehearsed further by artists.
2. Additional fun elements to be added to make the play more fun for the audience.
3. Sometimes, few action items like – spend few hours extra to learn some complex chapter, hire a professional artisit for some role when villagers can't pull it off

They conducted such ceremonies once every month or after few chapters. They used to gain confidence after each and every such ceremony.

The Release:

Did they stick to the final date to stage the play? Yes, because the day used to be a special day which would never come again until next year[Ugadi – The local new year day]. Each and every time they started an initiative like that they used to stick to the date but play with scope of work and do what serves the purpose. In this case, they used to rent a grand drama set and successfully stage the play. The play used to start at 10pm and go on until 6am in the morning. The neighboring villagers, relatives from the far off villages, towns and cities would visit the village for this event. This was one heck of a carnival for the villagers.

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Meghana: "So what did you learn from the story Mr. Jigar"

Jigar: "I see that they are continuously planning and improving to deliver the goal they set out to achieve".

Meghana: "You are absolutely right! To summarise here are key points of their process:

- **Incremental and Iterative Delivery**: They learnt chapter by chapter in iterations of a month or so. They learnt the crux of a chapter well before moving onto next one.
- **Frequent Customer Feedback**: After few chapters they got the feedback from real end users to make sure that they are going in the right direction. This is not like a document or design but the real thing was demonstrated to real end users.
- **Continuous Planning**: There was no gannt chart or big upfront plan but continuous planning of what needs to be rehearsed and what not, what needs to be included and what not in the final play.
- **Continuous Improvement**: They didn't stick to one way of learning, they changed how they learn, who plays what role dynamically as they learnt about their progress. They

continuously evolved the way they work to suit the goal to achieve. Sometimes, they used to hire an external expert artist when they felt they lacked something.

- **Flow & Emergent Design**: The flow of the whole play was not decided upfront but based on artist's capability and people's reaction. Each chapter was designed, learnt, staged in front of villagers before they moved on to next one.
- **Autonomous Team**: They had the freedom to make the decisions on their own.
- **Cross-functional team**: They had either all the capabilities required to accomplish the goal or they became one towards the end of the project.

Jigar: "Wow! I never realized our villagers did all this. They are really smart people!"

Meghana:"So what do you think?"

Jigar: "We can easily apply their principles in our work to understand the customer needs often and reduce the cost of delay"

Meghana: "You got it right! That's what Agile is all about"

Jigar: "What???"

Meghana: "Yes, the agile principles talk about these points.

> **So Agile is not one fancy framework that will do magic to solve people's problems. It's a philosophy that believes that people need to believe in purpose and collaborate to achieve it. When they collaborate they build a process that is transparent enough to help them inspect the progress they have made with respect to the goal and adapt themselves(process & plan) accordingly.**

Basically an empirical process like Mumbai Dabbawalas have figured out"

Jigar: "Wow! Unbelievable! Thank you so much for helping me out understand this. I get it. However, I have a question. People talk about so many processes like Scrum, Kanban etc. What are those?"

Meghana: "Well, human beings are naturally empirical when they are born. As we grow older, we need some guidelines."

Jigar: "You are right"

Meghana: "So, when the knowledge work started taking prominence in earlier part of 20th century, we wanted a process to control the work. We borrowed it from Electrical and Mechanical industry".

Jigar: "The project management stuff"

Meghana: "Well, kind of. There is nothing wrong in looking at practices that worked for someone(so called best practices), but we need to understand if they work for us or not"

Jigar: "Right!"

Meghana: "Knowledge work like software development is complex. By complex, I mean we don't know the requirements upfront and we don't know how we are going to accomplish them upfront. Both the requirements and solution emerge over a period of time"

Meghana: "So people were trying to breakaway from traditional way of managing projects and still be successful. So there were quite a few people like our villagers who figured out a way to collaborate. As people can collaborate in more than one ways, these people created their own processes."
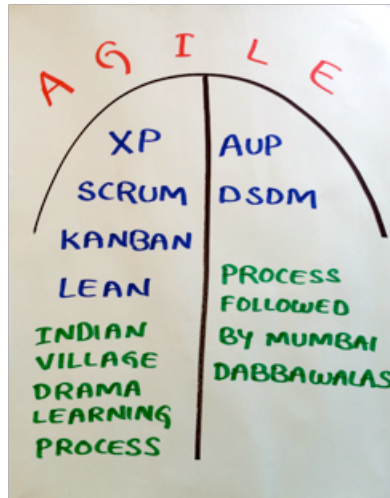
Meghana: "Look at any of these processes/frameworks, what our villagers do or what Mumbai Dabbawalahs do, there are a few common factors that make them succeed in what they do. I call them characteristics of an Agile process. Its basically the gist of what Agile Manifesto and principles say"

1. Incremental and Iterative Delivery
2. Frequent Customer Feedback to improve the quality of the product.
3. Flow and Emergent Design to improve the quality of product and ability to respond to change.
4. Evolving Process to improve quality of product and people.
5. Continuous Planning to improve predictability
6. Autonomous team to improve self-organization
7. Cross-functional team to improve collaboration

Jigar: "So what are you saying? Any process that demonstrates these characteristics is agile"

Meghana: "Yes, any empirical process that demonstrates these characteristics will help the teams deliver high quality products that meet customer needs at a sustainable pace"

Jigar: "Oh Yes! That's what you said what Agile means".

Meghana: "My suggestion for any one is to understand the Agile values and principles first. Then understand the business dynamics and organizational constraints. Finally work with the people in the organization to build a process that demonstrates agile values and principles considering the organizational constraints and business dynamics. You have process to start with and the continuously inspect and adapt"

Jigar: "Great. I would like to take your help in getting started with our new project. We as MiddleOvers certainly want to focus on the outcome rather than output. Would you help us?"

Meghana: "Sure Mr. Jigar. How about I come and meet you next week at your office?"

Jigar: "That would be great! I'll call and fix a time for us to meet. See you next week"

Meghana: "Thank You Mr. Jigar. See you next week".

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