Why Agile Principles Matter

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Why the Principles Matter: None of this Agile Stuff Works Without it Anyway

So many times, when we come upon a potential solution to a problem, such as software development challenges, we get so enthusiastic about learning the rule sets of that solution that we overlook the foundation. This is the same for Scrum, or any Agile framework for that matter. From my perspective, this is the cause of a lot of the friction with the "Agile Aristocracy", and part of the root of the complaint that "When I bring up a problem, they say you're doing it wrong" **Principles outlast dogma every time.**

The reason Scrum is a lightweight framework is to make it flexible depending on the situation, however, a lot of people end up turning it into a "Prescriptive Methodology", when that's not the point. The point is to give you a framework for thinking about things in a value-centric manner, and a number of tools to make it difficult to slide into old habits. Underpinning all this are a value system that is an absolute prerequisite.

The Scrum Values are: Focus, Courage, Openness, Commitment, and Respect

Nearly every time I hear about a "failed agile transition", it is because these values were not present and did not act as a foundation for the uncharted territory the company was moving into.

Focus is at the core of being able to deliver value to customers.

This means you allow people the mental bandwidth to do a good job. This means that people are not peanut-buttered across multiple projects paying a context switch tax for every thing they do. This means that fewer things are started and more things are finished. This is what projects look like when people are multitasking. The projects get completed all around the same time, which means that all of the projects have to wait 20 weeks to get any ROI

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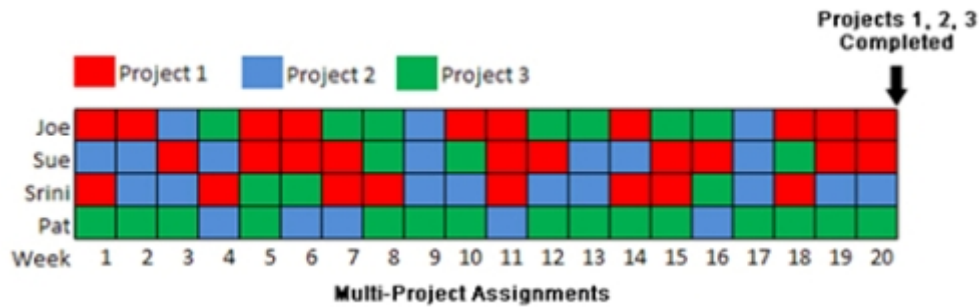
This is what projects look like when people are focused. You get a quicker time to market, this a faster ROI. However, a culture of focus has to be cultivated in order to make this a reality.

Once we remove the switching costs, and get a very modest 10% improvement, this is what the project looks like. Even more ROI faster.

Courage.

With any change, there will be friction, and there will be personality traits of the organization that make it very easy to slide back into old habits. There will be situations where old ways of thinking will need to be confronted and complacency broken. It takes courage to do so, and it takes courage to hold yourself, your peers, and your superiors accountable to those lapses.

Openness.

Since Scrum is an empirical process that relies on data to make decisions in a perpetual "inspect and adapt" cycle, and the typical management style is to rely on intuition, it is necessary that people are open to making data-driven decisions. People also will need to be open to other observations from "inspect and adapt" that may run counter to their intuition.

Commitment.

Companies are looking for a new way of doing things often find themselves looking at Agile methods like Scrum, but any transition requires commitment to introspection and change. Without commitment, as soon as there is a challenge to be faced, the company will abandon the effort.

Respect.

This should go without saying, but I have to say it anyway, you have to respect your people. If you think of your teams as sniveling mouth breathers who will take the first chance they get to slack off, your adoption will not be successful. If you think your team needs to be micromanaged down to the minute level, you will not be successful. If your organization is top down in nature and tightly controlled from a process perspective, your adoption will not be successful.

Trust and Honesty are principles that are implied in the other principles, and without them, none of this agile stuff will work anyway!