



Hopping on the Agile Project Management Bandwagon

Agile and lean are all the rage for enterprise project management, but be careful about putting the horse before the cart.

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Expert

BRIEFING

In this interview, Agile and lean project management expert **JOSEPH FLAHIFF** explains the buzz and misperceptions surrounding these methodologies. Flahiff is president and CEO at White-water Projects Inc., a firm that provides Agile project training and consulting services to enterprise organizations. Learn why building the right culture and asking the right questions are key to project management practice success in the enterprise.

How is Agile project management evolving in enterprises?

People are applying it to areas other than software development. I have people in my class working on an ERP implementation, which is software, but it's not software development so much as implementation. Another client is in marketing and sales and he wants to figure out how to use Agile to solve problems with the way projects are being run in his organization. Another client works in a logistics environment, shipping goods, and is trying to figure out how to use Agile to do that. Well, you don't.

Why not? What should they be trying to do in terms of better project management, Agile- or lean-related or not?

You have a set of problems that are unique to your organization and you need to look at solving those problems, but people don't want to do that. It's very hard work to create a culture—the first thing people should do is create a culture where people can say, 'this is broken,' and not get slammed for saying that. The culture needs to change to look at solving the problems and not blaming the people.

But that's not where people are going. People are looking at Agile and saying, 'Hey, there's a lot of success around it and a lot of buzz around it, so how can we apply it?' They're asking the wrong questions. They need to ask where are the problems that we're experiencing and how can we resolve them. Mike Rother, who wrote [management book] *Toyota Kata*, talks about how this same problem is happening in the lean environment, where we've taken things like Kanban [a project storyboard] or just-in-time [training], and various tools from lean in manufacturing, and we're trying to apply them and they don't always work. The hot thing in Agile right now is Kanban, and Kanban comes from lean. It is a tool that helps with the continuous flow of products, from request to customer. The problem is we've grabbed the tool, in this case Kanban, and we're implementing the tool when

people should be looking at your problems and how to resolve them.

How can people start to look at the problem itself, rather than at a project management approach or tool to resolve a problem?

Culture is slow to change, but the first thing to do to move in the direction of cultural change is define what it is that your company does. What is value in your organization to your customers? Who are your customers, both internal and external? As a CIO, [you] need to figure out what is the value that my department, that my company, delivers, and how is that measured? Then look at the things that are slowing the delivery of that value. Next, create a culture that is constantly picking away, in little bits and pieces, at those problems, keeping you from getting there.

To explain the cultural difference: In *Toyota Kata*, Rother describes how Toyota has a chord that is pulled to stop production if there is a problem. I asked my class how many times they think that chord is pulled in a day—they said two, four, maybe six times. The answer is a thousand times in one day. If that number dropped to 700 in the United States, we would celebrate the improvement. What happened at Toyota is the manager called an all-hands meeting and said, “We are down to 700. That means either people don’t feel comfort-

able pulling the chord when we should, or we are not pushing ourselves to improve. Let’s get back up to a thousand.”

Here in the States, if you raise the red flag in your PMO [project management office] and say, “This practice is a time waster,” you get slapped for it. In the Toyota culture, you are praised and told, “Great, let’s go fix it.”

Is there also a fundamental disconnect between what people think Agile project management is and what it really is?

Most people who take my Agile and lean fundamentals class just want to learn what is this Agile thing and how do I apply it? When we get into what it really takes to do Scrum correctly, and these are things that break it for most companies—like the need for 100% dedicated people and teams and fully cross-functional teams—they say they can’t do that. With Agile, you need a specializing generalist who can jump on many tasks in a project backlog. In many organizations, that doesn’t work when you have very deep tools and technologies where people really know that and only that. People in the class say, “Well, having a dedicated team of people and generalists doesn’t work for me.”

So the question is not, “How can I apply agile?” but, “What is my fundamental problem here and how can I resolve it?” Most project managers like

solving problems, so this plays well into what they like to do, but instead we [as a corporate society] tend to look for the answer and what to apply to the answer.

What are some of the problems enterprises are running into when they try to implement a combination of Agile and lean?

Agile is heavily influenced by lean. A lot of things that come out of Scrum, such as empirical process control and error-proofing, are lean. The *read, doing* and *done* columns of Scrum point back to a Kanban board.

It's not hard to integrate lean and an Agile approach. The tricky part is understanding that most of what we think of as lean is developed for manufacturing, so [in manufacturing] you're talking about creating a lot of the same things, while projects by nature are created to be one-off. Another challenge when trying to implement Agile in an enterprise organization is that it was designed for product management and not project

management. Limited scope is fine for a project, but in product management you want to expand the scope and come up with new ideas, for example. On the other hand, if a project manager is constantly coming up with new ideas for the project, then they're guilty of "scope creep." This is a fundamental tension we see in Agile applied in an enterprise where they're doing projects and not recognizing the product nature of Agile.

Are we going to see a new discipline emerge that takes the best of Agile and lean? The best of both worlds?

I hope so. It would be culture management or culture growth. If you don't have that culture where it's safe to say, 'this is broken,' then you can't have constant improvement. I would hope there's a future that says the place where we're going is this discipline of culture management. ■

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