

Why Agile Teams Fail

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I have often argued that the center piece of organizational success or failure is people.

People interact and drive the day to day strategy, operations and tactic which provide the life line for every institution. Nonetheless, people especially regular employees are not accorded the respect, nor given proper treatment in most environments they work.

Now, people are found at all levels of an organization and play different roles with varying responsibilities that either places them as leaders or as followers. Apparently not all leaders are leaders, and most may wonder why am being emphatic about this, but the reality remains, most organizations fail at Agility adoption because of leadership ideologies. Here are some main reasons why Agile teams fail in my views;

1. Wrong people in the right position.
2. Entrenchment factor.
3. Understanding of concept.
4. POT
5. Ecosystem readiness.

Let's start by discussing the five reasons above as I have a lot to say from my personal experiences deploying or working for organizations practicing Agile.

1. Wrong people in the right place: Organizations make the mistake of creating the right positions but place the wrong people to drive the objectives of such position. Sometimes the POT (Politics of Things) mind set and the whole idea of perceived competence, tends to erode the placement of right people in the right place within organizations. Organizational mis-alignments are typically caused by people not understanding the vision and how it syncs with their roles. The issue with the wrong people in right place is;

- a. No knowledge of employee skill set; Lots of managers or middle management have absolutely no clue of what training their direct reports have, looking to have and how it can be leveraged.
- b. Single point of failure; Creative leaders or managers re-create knowledge and diversify source. Having a single go to person with a lot of knowledge and no evident sharing knowledge transfer mechanism creates potential process stalling or delayed access to project requirements.
- c. Ability to listen; Though simple but very hard to do. Most leaders listen but do not hear. The ability of listen and hear someone must be inclusive of taking innovative opinions and implementing them.
- d. Authority drunkenness; Not something people will worry about too much since the leader or manager has the authority to give directions. But the truth remains, I quote; “Why lead if you don’t have loyal followers that believe in your goal”? Obviously, Mark c Crowley said it all in his book “Leading from the heart” – Leaders who worry about controlling others often end up with health issue most of the time. Wrong people in the right place always worry about the authority of the position versus its output requirement.

2. Entrenchment Factor: I hear this a lot – No, we cannot do it that way because it’s not how we do it or It’s going to cost a lot of money. Sounds like a statement you hear very often - yes, it does sound like what I hear. The idea of if it works don’t fix it continuously truncates basic adoption of Agile best practices by most teams. Below are some of the reasons why entrenchment factor fails Agile teams;

- a. Out dated knowledge: Entrenchment encourages people to remain in a purse in so far as acquiring new skill or knowledge. Usually there is no visible challenge on the job that creates a need for an individual to think more creatively.
- b. Culture positioning: Entrenchment factor walls off ideas and creates a myopic view of problem context as well as late adoption of standard practices. As a result, innovative cultures and ideas is conditioned and boxed into a corner making creativity almost invisible.

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3. Understanding the concept: A lot of teams do agile as against be agile. The idea of agility is focused around mindset, proactivity, creativity and above all collaboration. Agile is not scrum and neither is scrum agile if you follow my drift. Scrum which is the most practiced flavor of agile application is often understood as

the center piece of agile thinking but that is far from true. Better put, agile is the practice and principle around aligning people, culture and process to deliver value to the end client while scrum is the model of applying agile thinking. Incrementally developing a solution and having ceremonies like daily stand up doesn't make teams agile. This misunderstanding of the agile concept greatly limits teams and results in eventually failure of the team.

4. POT (Politics of things): The POT factor continues to plague organizations and decision makers alike in many ways. First, human beings are political animals guided by the idea of interest, perceived shaped by perception and grounded in rational or irrational actions or responses. Decision makers often are clouded in bias when decisions are made around appointments or specific assignments. Take for example, I finished my MBA with a grade point average of 3.67/4.0 and was an excited 20+ year old who wanted to change the world. At the time, I had an opening in my schools which I applied for which I was told the job was not for everybody. Not providing too much detail, the organization lost out on an individual that was dedicated, willing to learn and had the vision or goal to teach in that same school. Over the years, I have tried to understand why I was not evaluated like everyone else and haven't been in the corporate world for so long, it never changes. Bias is real and brings out the worst in human beings even when it's at the cost of the organization. I have seen qualified and innovative minds get relegated and not so innovative minds get placed to make decisions all because of POT. You may not agree with me, but these sentiments are shared even at the team level. Certain individuals viewing others as intellectually inferior and never allow their views to come to light. And even when such ideas are allowed they are treated like not so smart but applauded when presented in a different way by the so-called innovative minds. The POT effect continues to slow down adoption of agile as well as innovation in and around any organization. You will be amazed how deeply rooted the POT effect is in most organizations.

5. Ecosystem Readiness: Ecosystem readiness is like holiday preparation in my mind. If you have family and friends coming over there is usually a preparation or arrangement that must happen. Now, a lot of leaders and organizations want to introduce agile but do not have the infrastructure to support the practice. The agile approach or mind set is a known disruptor of the existing. In most cases it changes the entire mindset and approach and requires a receptive ecosystem that is ready. As an Agile coach, I have come to learn that the practice of agile by a team or in an organization is premised on three key factors that I refer to as the triple As;

- Adopt a mindset
- Adapt to a mindset.
- Accept a mindset.

This in my experience is the roadmap to business agility and is the definition of being agile.

In summary, agile teams fail because of people and the decisions they make. Deciding to be agile is always a clear difference from deciding to do agile.