



AGILE TRANSFORMATION – IDENTIFYING BARRIERS AND THE WAYS TO OVERCOME

Agile is commonly understood as the mindset, or ways of doing things at work, enabling a workforce to deliver continuous flow of business value via constant collaboration with the customer. Agile ways of working are increasingly sought after by organizations owing to the promising results shown across industries, primarily in terms of better IT-Business alignments, accelerated solution delivery and enhanced ability to manage changing priorities, which together account for over 60% of the motivation factors responsible for driving organizations towards adoption of Agile

While Agile has a multitude of benefits to offer, adoption of the methodology itself needs to be a gradual, flexible, and meticulously planned process rather than a rigid framework to impose on the subject team or organization over a short, predetermined timeframe. Switching from 'Waterfall' to 'Agile' can have a range of issues involving but not limited to the concerned delivery team. Because every organization is unique owing to its industry domain, skillsets of the workforce, organization structure and work culture; it needs an Agile framework that's aptly tuned to fit in. However, Agile transformation journey of organizations is often met with hurdles of similar nature. This article puts forth such commonly encountered barriers and proven ways for organizations to navigate through.

Inexperience and lack of wider buy-in: A vicious cycle

For an organization embarking on its Agile transformation journey, inexperience might lead to misinterpretation of Agile principles and wrong decisions at the onset which, combined with human tendency to resist any change, are bound to derail the whole process. Even for a most disciplined and well-trained team, absence of Agile-experienced members is likely to cause slow, inadvertent fallback to the old ways of working. So how does one seamlessly introduce Agile to an inexperienced organization? Unless the transition is dealt with proven approaches, organizations are bound to find themselves in a vicious cycle of reluctance-inexperience -bad decisions, and consequently cause a setback to the motivation to continue with the Agile Transformation journey.

The key advice here would be to start by doing what's small and necessary, then cherry pick what's feasible; and slowly transition to a state where you'll realize you have already started doing what was once commonly perceived as impossible. Launching a pilot program with a small sized team that's independent from others should further increase the chances of getting a glimpse of success sooner. Positive results from such a pilot can create ambassadors of change for others to look up to, help obtain wider buy-in for the new ways of working; and eventually overcome inertia at the enterprise level.

Secondly, where it's possible, onboarding an Agile coach with experience in a similar industry can not only give a much-needed shot in the arm for the organization but his awareness of the likely roadblocks can also help navigate efficiently and successfully.

Bureaucratic organization structure

Even a seasoned Agile Coach in charge of the mission would long for an organizational structure that's conducive for the transformation. For example, the

process of building cross-functional teams, which serves as the basis to create and nurture self-sufficient and self-evolving Agile teams in the longer run, is most likely to meet hindrance in an organization that runs like a bureaucracy where an established chain of command directs workforce that's split between multiple departments owing to their specialized roles. The operational silos within such an organization tend to obstruct the free flow of ideas and resources required for existence of an independent team to be empowered with increasing ownership of the product or service it is responsible to build.

In such a scenario, it's imperative for the enterprise to have a leadership that knows the benefits of and is willing to undertake the route of organization change management to revamp the organization structure such that it's best suited to let an Agile Coach evaluate, create and implement Agile framework tailored to the organization's needs.

Pursuit of certainty

It is of utmost importance for the all the stakeholders to know and accept that delivering value in iterations, putting it forth for end users' evaluation, learning about the shortcomings and undertaking improvisations to deliver better in the next iteration together form the core principles of Agile. Many organizations, on the other hand, are used to running new projects at the mercy of funding decisions driven by perceived certainty of success, and often end up framing their business strategy around the persistent wish to enhance and expedite returns on investments.

The funding models need to recognize the new world that prefers to rally ahead on 'make-test-learn-discard/adopt' approach instead of spending months on laying out a seemingly perfect roadmap. Further, there needs to be cognizance of the benefits of incurring controlled expenses on exploratory work, and killing-off bad ideas at early stage as it would, in the long run, actually help bring in richer dividends for the investments made today.

Non-conductive Organization Culture

Organizations at times find themselves pegged with legacy values, beliefs that obstruct dynamic and action-oriented working environment suitable for Agile. An organization culture that encourages getting the job done rather than following formal procedures (i.e. Adhocracy Culture) goes hand in hand with Agile principles. On the other hand, firms driven by Hierarchy Culture might inadvertently obstruct its adoption owing to their top-down, report-based way of working. The leadership at

such firms, having become accustomed to making decisions and directing work; could prevent development of an environment conducive for fostering of Agile principles at work.

Among large size enterprises, the shift from culture of 'control' to one based on 'trust' has been observed to be the biggest challenge that outpaces others mentioned above by a significant margin¹. The key indeed is to relinquish centralized, old-

school management style in favor of letting the 'doers' of the job choose how best to achieve desired results. The leadership needs to adopt a steady, albeit slow, shift in management style towards leaving 'how' part of the problem with people closest at work, and at times even assuming role of a participant to establish a democratic way of working that a matured Agile workplace needs. After all, games are won by players who focus on the field, and not at the scoreboard alone.

Conclusion

Agile Transformation in many organizations is often seen to be having more emphasis on 'Agile' part than on 'Transformation' while it should be the other way round. Only a prudent and cautiously planned approach can lead to making 'Agility' the fabric of the organization, and avoid limiting it as just part of the fabric.

There's no perfectly laid out 'To Do' list promising sure shot success, nor do the benefits of Agile ways of working manifest themselves with the swiftness of turning on a switch. While aiming for a carefully engineered Agile implementation plan, self-introspection as against commonly encountered barriers as above would instill the much-needed initial confidence; and help organizations reap the time tested and proven benefits of Agile.



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