

## AGILE TRANSFORMATION: WHERE DOES IT END OR IS IT PERPETUAL?

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**Abstract:** *Many organizations start the agile transformation journey with the same anticipation and enthusiasm to enhance the time to market and to deliver continuous value delivery to its customers. They all have the same starting point and with myriad questions in their mind on how to implement agile, what methodology, how to imbibe it into the culture, how to measure, succeed and sustain. A careful observation reveals that the journey is completely dependent on three key roles — The Leader, The Coach and The Team. The IT organizations across the globe have multiple individuals, teams and leaders with different maturity levels of agile knowledge and experience. As a part of the transformation journey they will contradict, contribute, and collaborate and compete with in their teams and their organization to nurture further and evolve in the agile practices and implementation. The leaders and the coaches need to wire the theory in the book to the ground so that one can see how agile the organization is and how far they have transformed from their initial state. The agile transformation journey is indeed perpetual when it comes to learning, implementing, innovating and adapting. At the same time, it cannot be perpetual in the pretention of mind set change. This paper juxtaposes the common pitfalls and about what one can do to take the team to a stage of continuous value delivery as a Leader, Coach and Individual to ensure the transformation be complete and time bound.*

### How it starts?

Change may not happen overnight, but impatience and agitated resistance does challenge it instantaneously! With the intent of achieving agile transformation, organizations ambitiously plan key things such as:

1. Leadership
2. Agile Governance
3. Cultural Shift
4. Organization Structure & Ecosystem
5. DevOps Culture
6. Portfolio & Program Management
7. Metrics & Tracking
8. Training & Coaching

Organizations need to be disciplined for a successful transformation within the constraints of their eco system. They need to steer the transformation and sustain the same. It need not be an ideal system. But discipline should be such that the incumbent employees merge into the culture automatically or unconsciously.

Let's us discuss the above factors in detail that pave the way and support the agile transformation.

### Leadership

In many organizations, the agile transformation journey begins with the executive leadership sowing the seed of agile. Big objectives will be defined with great verbose to start with. Governance team will be formed.

The leadership team is appreciated for taking the initiative but seldom do they talk about it to their subordinates and teams. Basically, the intent will not be propagated downwards. This is where the transformation is nipped in the bud before it even begins.

A famous quote by John C Maxwell

*"Nothing speaks like results. If you want to build the kind of credibility that connects with people, then deliver results before you deliver a message. Get out and do what you advise others to do. Communicate from experience."*

The executive leadership not only have to swear on the agile transformation but also must envisage the cultural changes that the transformation could bring to the organization. They must carefully initiate the pilot projects in each of the portfolios which should implement devops and agile in parallel. Metrics and benefits in terms of value delivered and return on investment (ROI) were captured quantitatively and qualitatively.

As one of the traits of traits of transformational leadership is to lead by example, they must change their own behaviors and act suiting the agile culture and should advocate the very benefits of the agile transformation. The leadership team should not miss a day to transmit positive pulsations within their teams and across the organization and substantiate their recommendations with the help of testimonials and defined metrics along with the case studies from various organizations which are already successful with agile transformation.

A quote by W. Edwards Deming:

*"It's not enough that management commit themselves to quality and productivity,*

*they must know what it is they must do. Such a responsibility cannot be delegated."*

Executive Leadership should have a strong presence in the initial stages of the transformation to show their commitment. These can be the initial agile trainings or the program increment (PI) planning meetings for large programs cross-cutting multiple functional areas. They need to be a part of these cross-collaboration meetings either as a mute listener or as a facilitator. These will result in setting the right expectation to employees. They need to review and assess the progress continuously thereafter.

From Escape Velocity, Geoffrey Moore says

*"Most strategy dialogues end up with executives talking at cross-purposes because ... nobody knows exactly what is meant by vision and strategy, and no two people ever quite agree on which topics belong where."*

*"That is why, when you ask members of an executive team to describe and explain the corporate strategy, you frequently get wildly different answers. We just don't have a good business discipline for converging on issues this abstract."*

In order to support agile and devops culture and ensure that the same is embraced by all the groups in the value stream such as the business, IT, support groups etc., some of the questions that may need answers at this point might be as following

- ❖ Does every leader buy-into to the idea of agile way of working and value it's expected to deliver?
- ❖ Are all leaders in the organization on the same page?

❖ How can they build credibility and trustworthiness when it comes to massive cultural change at an organization level?

❖ Are they able to create a ripple effect on their teams? Making an impact and getting their buy-in for the biggest ever transformation at the organization level?

### Agile Governance

It's a myth that agile process needs no governance. The whole transformation needs a thoughtful governance at every step. Governance is required to define the process suiting the organization's eco system. Agile Governance also has a significant role in engaging the leadership to drive the transformation, driving the communities of practice, tracking the progress and adapting measures to sustain the transformation from time to time.

A common pitfall in many of the agile transformation journeys is that the agile governance team(s) do not visualize the mammoth cultural change the transformation will bring into the organization. Occasionally in a fortnightly or monthly meeting, the leadership may convene a status call to know about current state of agile transformation in the organization. Especially, when the governance team(s) is(are) not strong, and they don't have a vision and plan of what needs to be done and achieved, it may appear that leadership threw the monkey off their back and never got involved and engaged in it.

The above situation may aggravate when likeminded coaches/change agents on board into the organization and absorb and demonstrate the same traits of great agile verbose. It's like adding

fuel to the fire the so-called torchbearers, Leading change agents (who call themselves one such) in the organization will emphasize day in and day out that it's all about 'Mindset Change' and a 'Journey'. This may result in avoiding the people engagement and making the process more of an autocratic administration rather than accounting the feedback from ground levels who are involved in the execution of work. Many a time the agile governance team(s) will comprise of only such people instead of competent participation from various departments of the organization. Year on year, they might be only interested to think of short-term goals and completely ignore the verification and validation of transformation progress in the progress.

Lack of vision will only get us picturesque power point presentations leading to nowhere.

Despite passion and commitment driving the transformation forward, the agile governance team(s) inadequate knowledge will be destructive. Neither the Leadership team nor the agile governance team will take the accountability which is critical to the agile transformation. This would be the time for us to ponder over the question: -

***Did we identify the right people to form the governance team?***

For the agile transformation to be successful, the governance team(s) should have participation from various departments/functional areas of the organization. Stakeholders from IT and business must be included in their process definitions and meetings. The objective was to define a lean process not compromising on anything but also enhancing the efficiency of software deliveries and business value to next level.

Simple agile scrum process suiting the eco system have adapted by individual teams. The tracking mechanism must be outlined clearly augmenting at the same time all the required guidance and support to the teams for agile adoption.

After embracing the agile practices, agile governance team must include agile coaches who can continuously perform program reviews and metrics reviews by capturing quantitative data. As the agile teams mature to various levels of agile adoption, the governance team must pioneer agile at scale for large programs. They need to operate as a bridge connecting various constituents of the organization such as executive leadership, senior management, teams and agile & devops processes and best practices.

### Cultural Shift

A quote by John Kotter:

*"The methods used in successful transformations are all based on one fundamental insight: that major change will not happen easily for a long list of reasons."*

Senior and middle management are a vital constituent of the organization, they are the eyes and ears for the employees and the company. The embarking of agile transformation journey with a weak governance team will eventually lead to a disengaged senior management in the organization. The very sheer course will not appear certain and transparent, even if the senior management is keen to adapt agile into their individual organizations. There will be apprehensions and qualm over the strategy.

Though very few (countable) senior leaders demonstrate by leading as an example, it will not be enough to change the entire organization culture.

Few leaders may advocate their own charters and propel the cultural change in smaller groups which is internal to their teams. Multiple strategies may evolve sometimes to sell the need of transformation to their teams. Sometime this may be percolated as a delegation to the middle management.

When the agile adoption initiative is bestowed to middle management, they would not be ready to adapt the idea immediately as it is a very high-level objective and is not sliced and diced for the middle management layer. Addressing the infinite number of queries and fears from the various functional groups within the organization is an uphill task for the middle management. Some of the questions that may remain unanswered at this stage might be

- ❖ When things are going smooth, why to disturb the harmony?
- ❖ Who will buy-in the new process when the value of it and the roadmap are not clear?

When the why, what, how part are not clear to the managers the middle management will obviously delegate the agile transformation onus to their lower levels such as technical leads or project leads. 'Delegation' is a killer exploit that conflicts the very purpose and need of 'Agile transformation in the organization across various levels. It demonstrates the undesirable ripple effect of leading the disconnected lower level employees in the organization who deem 'Agile' as a burden every day in their work place, and they never consent with the purpose, value and outcome of agile.

A quote by W. Edwards Deming:

*"It's not enough that management commit themselves to quality and productivity,*

*they must know what it is they must do. Such a responsibility cannot be delegated."*

Bringing the accountability at all levels is the bigger fish to fry and how can it be accomplished? Executive leadership should keep senior and middle management informed of the context, need and the expectations. The accountability and responsibility lie with everyone in the management level as part of their objective.

Every manager/leader can follow their own style in going back to their individual teams and inculcate the concept of agile and devops. They can use the various case studies of organizations that have been successful to back up their up their conversations. Agile & DevOps are indeed a 360 degrees mindset shift. But when all the stakeholders are reeling in the same direction, they all will be aligned. A handful of people will oppose the idea, but situationally, they need to discuss, debate and align with the flow in the project execution.

A famous quote by Peter Drucker:

*"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."*

Culture change comes last and culture can be only changes when the working habits of the organization are changed. Kotter described eight steps in implementing successful change:

- ✓ Establish a sense of urgency
- ✓ Create the guiding coalition
- ✓ Develop the vision and strategy for change
- ✓ Communicate the change vision
- ✓ Empower employees for broad-based action

- ✓ Generate short-term wins
- ✓ Consolidate gains and produce more change
- ✓ Anchor new approaches in the culture

### Organization Structure & Eco System

The ecosystem plays a very critical role which is always driven by people managing the systems, anticipating, exploring, adapting and in turn contributing to the improvement of the process and culture. The 'Agile transformation' must be induced into distinct, multiple groups in the system, in many places, business, IT and other support groups and should be orchestrated appropriately to meet the desired objectives. Suiting to the organization's eco system, the degree of changes that are needed could still be prioritized and all the groups should get aligned to that roadmap. This should happen at an early stage during the transformation.

Jurgen Appelo in his Management 3.0 book cited that every organization is a "Complex Adaptive System" and a living organism that needs to continuously inspect and adapt to change.

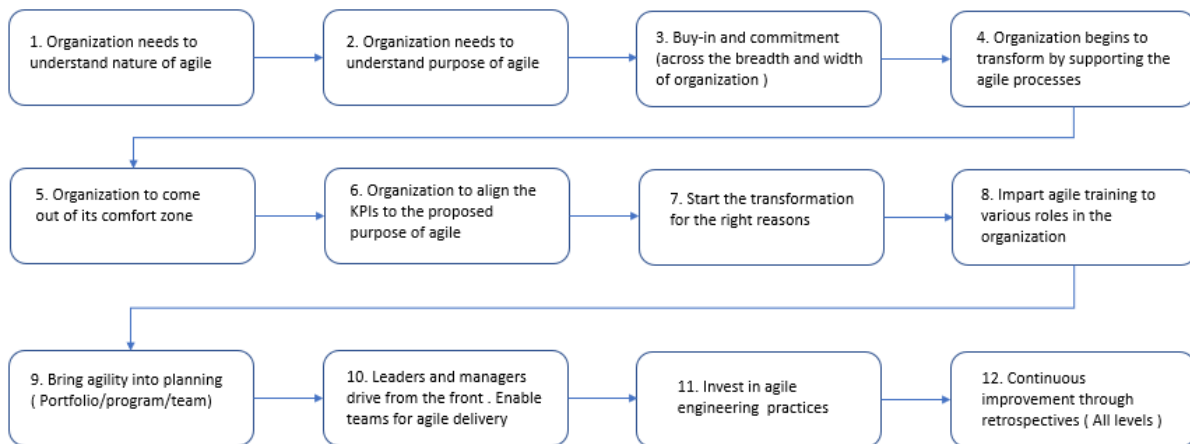
Because of the heavy-weight distributed teams across multitude of geographies and the internal eco system, it is very complex to bring in structural changes in the organization. However, the middle management and the culture should be flexible enough to welcome any change in the job roles and the way the teams operated.

The complexity of the organization in the context should be acknowledged and should be addressed as complexity only!! Some questions that we may need to find answers for at this juncture could be

- ❖ Was the diversity of perspectives from various groups accounted for?

❖ Is the process going to coevolves and get fine-tuned with the feedback and experience from all corners of the organization?

When we aim to transform the organization to be more agile, changes in designation will be forthcoming. The everlasting unrequited uncertainty in the minds of middle management who used to be program managers and project managers would be – “What is the role of Project Manager (PM) in agile world?” As a PM, I will not care about the scrum master role or setting the stage for right culture and environment in order to embrace agile. It's not my problem, its Scrum master's problem!



The managers *aka* servant leaders must own the agile transformation. It's a commitment from the middle and senior management to the Exec leadership. When business and IT servant leaders are wired into agile process, team members automatically start adapting to the same. The first few cycles (sprints and releases) will be of complete chaos. Teams gradually stabilize, some may take more time, some might settle in lesser time.

To scale agile with cross-cutting portfolios and products, the senior program managers and enterprise agile coaches must continuously facilitate the program events such as SoS (Scrum of

Thus, most of the manager group unconsciously get disengaged in the agile world.

To answer the above question, executive leadership should categorically propose a change in the organization structure and ecosystem. Cross-functional teams must be formed product/program wise, and the role of a manager must be transitioned from a command and control mindset to a servant leader. Role-based trainings must be provided and with mutually consented performance agreements. An elucidation in the form of a series of steps that must be executed to further facilitate this transition smoother as following

Scrum) connects to understand and acknowledge the risks, dependencies and impediments. The more transparency and alignment the faster the transformation can be achieved. At the same time the business should also embrace the agile practices as they must direct their IT teams towards the agile stream.

**DevOps Culture**

Are we expecting that we can pursue change and agile adoption, vis-a-vis not attempting new ways of architecting systems?

A quote from Chanakya Niti Darpan

*" Before you start some work, always ask yourself three questions. why am I doing this, what will the results might be, and Will I be successful. Only when you think deeply and find satisfactory answers to these questions, go ahead."*

For an organization to achieve and reap benefits from transformation, the agile methodologies and devops are the two sides of a coin. They are like the head and tail and neither of them have value as a single entity. One complements the other and one sure can't succeed without the other.

In many organizations, it's an unfortunate eccentricity that devops and agile were named under two different umbrellas or groups and always disconnected with each other. Agile inherently includes devops as well.

Many organizations get motivated by reading books on devops and they will try to implement the same theory. They might start a separate devops CoE in the organization, inducing gamification of it, to make an impact on the teams. Many people might welcome the idea of implementing devops into their daily work. Few leaders might push their teams to participate and win the organization annual devops cup. However, once they win the game, subsequently, the enthusiasm will dwindle, and they may not be able to sustain the devops practices in their projects for longer. Very few will be really on top of their devops dashboards such as hygieia, consistently exhibiting metrics and health of the projects.

Does the gamification help the organization to embrace devops practices?

To ensure that the teams embrace the devops culture, the transformation initiative should start

with devops operations in the organization. This might include various devops practices such as automating unit tests, integration tests and slowly move towards building CI/CD pipeline, containerization and micro services. The challenges and success stories must be displayed (IR - Information Radiators) in the work area. Employees need to be careful and to commit any code without adequate testing, lest their team showcase on the information radiator for code commit and integration failures. The state-of-art technologies and frameworks will bring more enthusiasm and encourage more teams to jump into the devops movement, to participate, contribute and be successful. The dashboards should be transparent to everyone in the organization depicting all info about the project(s). This will eventually throw the power point presentation-based status meeting into oblivion. DevOps makes organizations more agile and consistent in terms of value deliveries. Each is an integral part of the other.

### **Portfolio & Program Management**

The portfolio and program management have the onus to nurture the seed sown by executive leadership to the next stage in terms of execution. Two key things that are pivotal in this context are

- ❖ Investing in organizing and reorganizing the creation of value,
- ❖ Continuous verification with the help of metrics in terms of dashboards which are visible to the whole organization.

These two acts should cover any of the learnings from the past, plan the current work and next steps better. Additional responsibilities which include assessing the overall health of transformation in the

organization, reflections, next steps, developing guidance etc. are equally important and should not be overlooked.

Governance team must define the lean agile and scaled agile process at all levels -portfolio, program and team with each level feeding to the other and metrics data reflecting the improvements in the upcoming cycles. Communication channels must be defined across the layers in the organization.

The degree of centralization/decentralization of decision making, risk management etc. should be categorical and unambiguous. The governance team which takes the ownership for the transformation should have definitive objectives that are driven by objective metrics like demos and they should also welcome and incorporate the feedback and best practices (obtained from teams) into the process from time to time.

### **Metrics & Tracking**

The most important of all, metrics and tracking are the crux of 'Agile transformation' + 'Devops culture' and they must be embraced by the organization. Start with this one trait alone, everything else will follow! It's the heart and the core of Transformation!

The classic case of don'ts for an agile transformation is that the governance team defining basic measures and naming them as organizational agile transformation metrics. This pitfall is predominantly because the organization doesn't want to fail fast. These kinds of superficial metrics prove that the operation is success, but the patient is dead. Because there aren't any substantial metrics, there is no way of knowing the health of the transformation. Assessing where we are and reflecting from time to time, acting on the learnings and moving forward will never happen.

.. It automatically leads to a perpetual journey!

However, not every company will fail in its transformation. No. Agile teams must start with minimal metrics and slowly improve (kaizen) to track required metrics and should be intrinsic to their daily work. Teams also must use various devops tools and agile project tracking tools such as Rally and Version One, consolidate metrics into dashboards, capturing portfolio, program and team level metrics. The metrics data is pivotal for any decision making/improvements in the upcoming/future sprints.

### **Training & Coaching**

It has become a trend in today's world that people attend trainings and obtain certifications on the weekend, and they call themselves as change agents, agile coaches and transformational leads on Monday. The illustrious quote "teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime..." will backfire when coaches work at a height of 40000 feet above the ground reality. A coach must be more pragmatic and wire the theories to the ground.

Bestowing the agile transformation responsibility to the newly hired coaches who talk the talk will only result in the completion of trainings, workshops in grandeur. They will train majority of employees in the organization on one or the other role based agile trainings, eLearning courses etc. Change will not happen within four walls of the training room by moving tables and chairs as part of some training activity. When asked about the results of the transformation and where the organization is w.r.t objective measurement of progress, the coaches will fall back saying that agile transformation is a journey entwined with mindset change.



At this stage one will be flummoxed thinking whether agile transformation is perpetual, or it has an end where one can say that we have embraced agility. If there were to be an organization backlog for agile transformation, many of the items will be open with the above coaching style, where coaches do not assume responsibility and accountability even for a single activity or function in the organization.

Of course, if there is any one vital persona or a group who silently work behind the scenes for the agile transformation is a lean team of 3-4 coaches working at the enterprise level.

When executive leadership takes accountability and responsibility and so every other downstream layer, the stage is set right for an agile coach. For any transformation, leadership alignment and support are the foundation... They set the right stage for the game.

Critical part of the coach's job is to ensure that the training they imparted should not evaporate the moment the participants leave the training halls, but the latter go back to their daily work and practice it. Actual coaching starts there on — team level or individual level. A coach needs to train and mentor as well.

Coaches must be more proactive and should be in all the agile ceremonies of teams. If there is any one key contributing process to agile in the organization, it's the retrospectives in the organization. Everything else will follow. Retrospective is an open, honest agreement from team, while scrum master is untouched and not influencing anything in the process. This should be the one meeting teams will look forward to. They can play small team games, accept failures, best practices and successes, celebrate learnings etc. It

improves team's communication internally and they will be on the same page w.r.t. release objectives.

## Conclusion

Adapting to a new process and sustaining the transformation is indeed an uphill task with lot of unknowns, challenges, reluctance and resistance from the employees etc. However, organization will fall back into their old methods if the transformation is not coached, supported, mentored and measured along its way. The leadership team, the agile coaches and the employees everyone must have their fair share of commitment and need to need to deliver their commitments to the transformation journey they embarked. Transformational leadership, professional coaching, objective measurement of progress and relentless improvement are the key for a successful agile transformation of an organization.

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