

Agile Teams Deliver and Succeed while Enterprise Agile Declines into 'a la carte'

Barbara Wilders- Karas
bwilders@ccpace

My experience report encompasses both the topics of Agile Project Leadership and Agile Enterprise Leadership. My experience provides how an agile project provided business value to an internal customer while the enterprise leadership was creating 'agile a la carte' after having many successes with pure agile.

1. Background - Initial Failure with Waterfall

The company had an existing call center system consisting of 4 tools and more than 10 manual processes. For over three years a new system had been under construction using various types of project management to incorporate all of the tools and manual process of the existing system. However, the end users were not involved in development. Management made the decision to move forward with the implementation and the system was ready to go. So the development and management team rolled out the big bang balloon party and invited everyone of importance to the installation of the new system. The rockets were fired and the system failed. This unsuccessful implementation cost over \$750,000 and provided no business value. The tool that was implemented could not be used by call center personnel because response time was slower and the information retrieved was less than the existing system generated. Additional manual processes were needed to compensate for this lost functionality, and as a result the call lengths became longer. The call center went back to the system they already had in place.

This company experimented for several years with many forms of software management from traditional waterfall to inventing their own types of software management methodology; all of which were unsuccessful. Senior Management turned to an agile methodology, specifically scrum, with the hope of delivering projects on time and under budget, which was this company's definition of business value. The company's definition of Business Value did not help or hurt this particular team. This team was driven by the

value that was provided to the end user and the efficiency of the system they were providing. If they delivered under budget and on time it was an extra bonus to them. Other teams within in the company also were driven by customer acceptance of what they delivered. Eventually the definition of business value changed in the company because Senior Management began to realize that when teams delivered value to the customer, they also came in under budget and on time. This became the 'unspoken' change in their business value definition.

2. A Second Attempt with Agile

The agile team was given a mission to create a GUI and middleware that would replace the existing system to support a call center 24/7 365 days a year. In addition, they were tasked with eliminating the four existing tools and manual processes that were in use and assist with decreasing the length of call talk time. A team of three developers, one quality assurance/tester, a scrum master, a product owner and several end users was formed. The team was co-located and empowered to use their talents and creativity to work within the Scrum framework to deliver this new system within six months and for less than \$400,000.

The team followed the Scrum framework. They had the vision and guidelines from senior management which was to deliver what the call center needed in order to operate efficiently at a cost reduction. A sprint vision was created by the product owner; and reviewed and discussed with the team during each sprint planning session. The product owner and end users attended the daily stand ups and there were no surprises during the demo because all parties were involved in testing and user acceptance testing prior to each demo.

The team delivered a system to the call center within 4 months, under budget and with more features and benefits than the product owner originally requested. The system is being used by over 300 call center representatives, and it has the potential of being

leveraged for use by external clients who have their own call centers. Additional sprints were added so that the team could meet a new high priority product backlog items which was to allow end users to access the system in a call center outside of the United States.

Along the way of this successful journey we had many challenging moments, as well as, fun and success with each sprint. The team moved 3 times during the project to different locations. Each of these moves was to nicer accommodations. However, because the team received upgraded equipment, they needed to rebuild their machines. The moves were not planned to coincide with the beginning or ending of a sprint resulting in the team's inability to complete some of their sprint backlog. The product owner was made aware of the situation immediately and worked with the team to remove items from the sprints so they were successful.. They had three scrum masters within one month; needless to say when I showed up and became the fourth scrum master I was not greeted with open arms and warmth. I had to earn their trust that I was going to do everything I could to stay with them and help them succeed. One way - to provide games and candy. End users were very resistant to participate because of past experience with the previous failed project management methods This is another area I was able to help the team because I had previous successful business endeavors with many of the end users and was able to get them to participate in testing and reviewing the work the team was doing. Granted, I did use some bribing to get them to work with the team. Food, as a bribe, will always help build a team. This was a highly political project with pressure to succeed and there were several groups who wanted it to fail.

3. People Over Processes – Human Wins

Working on a team that is fully dedicated and co located is the foundation for an agile project, don't be surprised when the bonding that occurs in the room carries over to outside the project amongst the teammates. Not only did they share the success and road blocks of the project, they shared in joys and tribulations of 3 new homes being purchased, 1 divorce, 1 marriage, 1 baby, 2 new cars, 1 set of braces being removed. As we all know an army travels on its stomach so they had many homemade meals for successful releases of the product to production combined with lots of laughter, honesty, creativity and courage. One of the most thrilling parts of this project was watching the team members grow as a team and as individuals. They were able to share leadership with each other when needed without jealousy or malice. They celebrated wins and losses.

4. Deterioration with Agile a la Carte

The company had success using agile not only with the project mentioned above but also with many other projects. They were so successful with these projects that the company created agile operation teams. The operation teams encompassed data base, IVR and many other operational areas. These teams worked on one week sprints. With this proven track record of successful projects and development of leaders, slowly, small and obvious changes started to occur. The company started co-locating all agile development teams in one large room. It was extremely noisy and loud. It stunk and not only in the intellectual way. Tables were set up in a sewing machine factory style for the teams to work at. With no tables for the team to have discussions around, no phones for conference calls. Scrum Master's had to search for areas to have daily stand up meetings. No more monthly stand up team meetings with the senior management team. This was the beginning of what I call 'agile a la carte'. These changes to the framework were destructive to the success of these teams and the company in the areas of moral, development of leaders, delivering business value and overall success. In hindsight, it appears the reason for these changes were that the Senior Management teams' focus was on preparing the company to be sold rather than to continue growing the company.

5. Personal Validations and Learning

Agile is common sense for leaders. Agile is a formal name and now an accepted framework for what many good, solid leaders have always done whether they are working on a specific project, operations or sales team. Having this framework helped me validate some of my past practices as a leader and helped me grow into a better leader. With Agile at this company I saw many co workers blossom into leaders and many managers remain status quo.

6. Agile Grows Trust

During my tenure with this company it was extremely difficult not to take the corporate approach of put it in writing to CYA. They were extremely short on the trust factor across all areas within the company. Agile did start to restore trust, especially at the project team levels, but when 'agile a la carte' came along, the trust of senior management, quickly decayed

7. Finesse the message, but make sure you deliver it

The culture of this company was to tell Senior Management only what they wanted to hear. Personally, I always had the courage to communicate honest pleasant and unpleasant information to the Senior Team however, at the ripe old age of ??, my mother's words finally hit home "it is not what you say... it is the how you say it." Don't change the message, tell the honest truth but say it in a kinder tone. My belief of delivering information in person is and always will be the best way to deliver any message to anyone. If you're unable to deliver a message in person pick up the telephone.

8. Agile Grows Leaders Not Managers

I saw the growth of team members become leaders on the team at different times and sprints while under the pressure to succeed and under the pressure of others to fail. Company employees, who upper management never believed had the ability to become leaders ...became leaders because of agile. Agile provided the employees the environment to become leaders. Leaders are not always managers and managers are not always leaders.

The agile framework promotes courage, collaboration, communication and above all the growth of people and some amazing leaders.

9. In Conclusion

Lessons Learned -- For Leaders of Agile Teams

1. Keep a safe place for people to have fun and they will deliver and be creative.
2. Demonstrate trust, courage and truth.
3. Communicate information even if it is not what Senior Management wants to hear.
4. People are the key to making it all work and succeed by sharing leadership.
5. Leaders have to trust.

Lessons Learned For Leaders Tasked with implementing Agile for the Enterprise

1. Senior Management will hear some thing's they do not want to hear
2. Courage to give the teams what they need to succeed: A safe place, co-location, keeping it simple and dedicated resources.
3. Leaders have to trust.

4. Provide a safe place for people to have fun and work and they will deliver.
5. Demonstrate trust, courage and truth