

The Baby & The Bathwater: Build on What You Know

Five ways Lean processes prepare teams for Agile ways of working.

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Agile is the hot new work process and it's difficult to ignore. With a work methodology that boasts productivity improvements, enhanced effectiveness, and fulfilling work for its team members, it seems like a panacea. The danger, of course, with any new work approach is to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' and assume that the best new work systems are better than anything that came before. In addition, Agile brings a requirement for us to learn an innovative system of working and figure out how best to support it. This is no small challenge given our already full-to-overflowing workloads.

The good news is that history is a guide, and working in an agile environment isn't so vastly different than the effectiveness of Lean methodologies from the 90's. Lean started in the factory and many companies sought to apply its work flows to white collar work from healthcare to service, many with mixed success. It's a new day however, with agile work environments taking hold in IT and expanding to all kinds of work beyond software development.

Far from methodologies that apply only in manufacturing or in IT, these work approaches can enlighten us in some of the most effective ways of working — for all kinds of work. Here are some of the lessons learned:

FOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER

Definition: In Lean, focus is on the customer and value is defined by the customer. Takt time is the rate at which new work needs to be produced and faster isn't better. The ideal is to produce work at the pace the customer demands it. Similarly, Agile starts with story cards which are written from the customer's point of view and based on the customer's criteria for success. A key expectation of the Product Owner (the customer representative in Agile) is to embed with the team and stay deeply connected to the work of the team. In addition, the Product Owner's role is to be a liaison with the Business Owner and other stakeholders. Show and tell sessions at the conclusion of each sprint provide the opportunity for the team to report to the customer on their progress and the value they've created in that portion of the work.

Lesson: This enduring theme of customer first, customer embeddedness, and customer centrality is surely a lesson for our work. I used to work with a leader who said regularly, "if you're not serving the end-customer, you better be serving someone who is."

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ONE THING AT A TIME

Definition: A hallmark of Agile is to work on one project at a time with team members who are present and focused together on the tasks that must be completed in order to accomplish the sprint. With Lean, a method called one-piece flow ensured that there was no batching (doing things in groups) and that each piece flowed through the system one-at-a-time so that value was added for each piece on its path to the customer. Both Agile and Lean work to reduce the work in process, to enable the flow of the work.

Lesson: In our multi-tasking world where it's hard to process issues or get to decisions because everyone is focused on so many different projects, doing one thing at a time is not only a welcome relief, but increasingly it is the only way work will get done effectively.

VISUAL DISPLAY

Definition: In the days of Lean, workplaces became seas of Kanban boards, visual displays and dashboards, with the intention of managing work visually and providing a place where teams could see at-a-glance the status of their work. Agile is similar with daily standups held around work authorization and Kanban boards. Teams within Steelcase's IT group hold quick meetings around their analog boards and following the meeting, the Scrum Master or project manager has 10 minutes within which to also update the digital version of the board, so that it is accessible both physically and virtually for all team members.

Lesson: Make work visual and visible so that everyone can be aware of the work, its status, and the shared processes that must be accomplished.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Definition: In Lean, we were taught to look for non-value added work and root it out (we identified the work that didn't add value for the customer, as the "seven wastes"). In every process, we started with the assumption that there was 50 percent waste in things like movement, inventory, over-processing, and the like. In a similar vein, the Agile retrospective focuses on feedback, learning, and improvement at the conclusion of every sprint.

Lesson: We are all moving fast and this speed frequently gets in the way of our taking the time to reflect, regroup, and systematically identify areas for improvement. Without this learning however, we undermine progress and growth. It is counter intuitive, but Agile teaches us that to pause and reflect actually helps us speed up because of the improvement that occurs.

EMPOWERED AND EMPOWERING LEADERS AND TEAMS

Finally, both Lean and Agile feature the best of leadership and team theory. Across multiple disciplines, industries, and situations, leadership is most effective when it is shared and emergent. Those with knowledge on key topics are empowered to influence and decision making is distributed. Cross trained team members and a focus on avoiding specialization and breaking down ‘towers of knowledge’ allow for development of skills and more fluidity in moving from one job to the next – and more flexibility in getting the work done. Teams are empowered to direct their own work and provide each other with feedback. The leader is guide and coach to a team that is both enabled with skills and empowered to implement them in creating value for the customer.

In the early days of Lean, there was a story that circulated about Toyota and its world renown production systems. They were said to regularly allow their competitors to tour their plants, see their processes, and take pictures and plenty of notes. When one of their competitors asked why they allowed this kind of openness, they said confidently there was no risk in competitors seeing their processes today because they would all be different by tomorrow. This was the nature of empowered teams who were constantly improving based on a focus on the customer and a rigorous approach to constant improvement. This was the power of their process, which shares the same fundamentals of Agile.

While Agile may be the newest thing that we’re scrambling to learn, implement, and employ, it is significantly informed by all that came before. Rather than a nod to the future that calls the past into question, it is a build on all the learning we’ve done over the years – the baby and the bathwater.

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