Agile isn't just about process. It's about people.

Successful implementation of agile isn't just a methodology - it's a mindset

"The Agile methodology is a project management approach that involves breaking the project into phases and emphasizes continuous collaboration and improvement. Teams follow a cycle of planning, executing, and evaluating."

- Atlassian

This definition of agile from the experts at Atlassian is rather standard, and also rather dry, which itself proves the point that there is more to this approach to project management than meets the eye. Why is there such excitement for a process that sounds so unexciting on the surface? Because when done right, agile can lead to increased productivity, improved innovation, and engaged teams. Additionally, executives are correct in thinking that investors will view a commitment to agile a a promising sign of progress.

Once the executive team has committed to agile transformation, a rollout usually consists of training teams in agile processes, ultimately requiring that employees change how they work. And this is where most teams have already been set up to fail. For agile to succeed, leaders need to relinquish far more control than they realize. True agile gives employees the autonomy to actually make evaluative, collaborative decisions without executives overriding them. Agile simply isn't agile if executive teams ultimately remain the ones who decide exactly what needs to be built, regardless of feedback from team members or even insights from actual user research. Agile isn't agile if there still remains a hard date for launch, regardless of the insights that may inform the project. And it certainly isn't agile if leaders still demand that teams execute exactly according to plan, scope, and timeline regardless of any new information that may become available. Yet this is exactly what happens across America and is being touted as agile, because team members attend certain agile-type meetings and attempt to follow agile-type processes.

A [2022 Harvard Business Review article](#) revealed that *"approximately half of organizations that undertake agile transformations fail in their attempts"* at being an agile organization because they neglect to provide their teams with psychological safety.

In the article, author Timothy R. Clark provides a poignant example of a team that is unable to succeed with agile because they still operate within a culture of fear:

"I sat in a scrum meeting with a product development team that was in the middle of a two-week sprint. Unfortunately, the team was missing the core technology of psychological safety. Guarded and focused on self-preservation, the team ultimately failed because the dialogic process fell apart. As it became more emotionally and politically expensive to speak up, they gradually stopped doing it. They sabotaged their agility by punishing each other's vulnerability. After the team was disbanded, I conducted a formal postmortem and interviewed each of the nine members. Ironically, every member of the team had been extensively trained in agile processes and tools, but those processes and tools couldn't save them. Only psychological safety could have done that."

Clark rightly points out that agile needs to be framed not as a technological or process improvement but instead as a *cultural implementation* [emphasis ours]. And this is where the rubber meets the road, or doesn't. Agile cannot coexist with waterfall, top-down management. They are fundamentally different, foundationally opposed, and yet employees on "agile" teams often find themselves right in the middle of two conflicting ideologies.

With top-down management, leaders or managers at the top of an organization make the decisions and goals and then oversee everyone below them delivering on those goals, according to a specific process and within a specific timeframe that is decided upon by those in charge.

In contrast with bottom-up management approaches, such as agile, employees are encouraged to be problem-solvers and innovators and given the support and resources to succeed. This can look like holding workshops and meetings where goals and projects are decided upon together. Additionally, there is often more flexibility and room for passion projects that employees decide upon and ultimately contribute to more innovative ideas that can come from anywhere in the organization.

But beware believing that simply supporting workshops and passion projects is the same as being truly agile. Successful agile implementations require much more than that.

Agile is often rolled out in phases, usually beginning with Technology teams. This is unfortunately the opposite of what is required for agile to succeed. If you must begin with one team, it needs to be the Business and Strategy orgs. Placing the responsibility of "going agile" squarely upon the shoulders of developers, instead of changing the way the strategy and business teams work as well, places accountability and responsibility on a team who ultimately isn't supported by partners who can override the key principles of agile whenever it serves them.

When only Tech is trained in agile and evaluated on adherence to agile, they are put in a losing position of having to plead with senior leadership to adopt the sometimes difficult changes required in order to reap the benefits of agile. The burden of living within two different, incompatible systems tends to fall disproportionately to lower-level

employees who are expected to take time out for trainings, change their workflow, "evangelize" the new approach, and then manage up to the senior leaders who instituted the changes but somehow aren't accountable themselves.

This is agile in name only, also called "Fake Agile," which Pete Behrens, founder of the Agile Leadership Journey defines as "...when agile terminology has been adopted by the organization, however, the way it operates continues to be governed by preexisting structures, policies and metrics." If executives only adopt agile halfheartedly, instead of believing that it is actually a superior methodology and mindset worth embracing at all levels, it will fail.

Behrens elaborates, "In most cases, Fake Agile emerges in organizations because the pathway to a more holistic Agile approach is blocked by existing systems and leadership thinking. While Agile is often viewed as a project process for IT, in reality, it is rooted in a value system. This new value system shifts from a traditional define and control-based operation to an empirical and collaborative-based operation. When leadership limits consideration to an Agile process, where Agile values are left at the door, they will most certainly open the door to Fake Agile."

Behrens has this advice for leaders wondering why their agile initiatives are failing, "Look in the mirror and take personal action." He also suggests that if leaders truly wish to move to agile, "...it would be wise to bring together senior members of the teams involved…" and he adds that "shifting from Fake Agile to a more holistic Business

Agility requires a broader involvement of leaders across business functions including finance, legal, procurement, HR, and operations."

The bad news: failure of agile/fake agile is a common symptom of misaligned, top-down leadership. The good news: this is completely avoidable. And even better - agile is so frequently rolled out incorrectly that when your team does true agile implementation, with faithful adoption of agile principles, you will be leaving behind your competitors while your organization reaps the true benefits of agile methodology and mindset: increased innovation, superior products, streamlined processes, and happier, higher-performing teams.

This white paper is just the beginning. For a deeper exploration of strategies to improve workplace cultures during digital transformations, check out Not Safe For Work by Chief People Officer Tosca Fasso. Her book offers actionable strategies and real-world examples to guide leaders through the complexities of transformation!

Click here to purchase the book Not Safe For Work.