The Top 10 Tips for Agile Project Management

Most decision making in a business (See: The Top 10 Tips for Agile Decision-Making) occurs as part of a project or a process (and a process can be thought of as a recurring project). Project management is the engine of an enterprise, so making sure it is Agile is essential to enterprise agility.

Changing Risk & Reward

Front ending risk reduction is essential to success these days.

Tip #1: Take Real Actions Sooner (Realer/Sooner)

Traditional project management is way too “Waterfall” (Waterfall vs Agile). Often called a “Stage/Gate” process (or some variant of that), it typically involves a “waterfall” cascade of phases, requirements definitions, detailed specifications, design reviews and paperwork, power-point and paperwork. Typically, only very late in the project do we finally put a real product (or service or some other kind of offering) in front of real users who really apply it and give us real feedback about what they really like and what they really don’t like. Of course, typically, despite how much paperwork, power-point and paperwork we have been sharing with them along the way, it typically falls short of what the need, want and were hoping for. That’s why projects running late, over budget and failing to hit the bull’s eye of demand generation we were hoping for is the norm. Even though, while we were tracking progress against the stages and gates of the project plan we may well have been succeeding by being largely on track in a % complete kind of way. That’s called “succeeding to failure”. This kind if “Waterfall” project management is a feel-good pretense that we can achieve something complex without experiencing failure. The reward is the comfort of feeling good for longer. The risk is that we are back end loading failure. The trick with Agile project management is to take real-actions sooner. Put real stuff in front of real people who really use it and give you real feedback about what they really like and they really don’t like. The “launch early and iterate often” flow of sprints and scrums, MVPs (Minimum Viable Products) and successive versions 1.0/2.0/3.0 provides a fast series of experiments in which we are testing and verifying our assumptions, known and unknown/hidden. No matter what kinds of products, services of offerings you provide, the question for all to be more agile is, “how can we take realer actions sooner?” See: Agile Planes, Trains, Automobiles, Buildings and so much more.

Tip #2: How Can We Take a More Agile Approach? (Resequencing, Reassembling & Reconfiguring)

Over and above that question, “how can we take realer actions sooner?”, the bigger question is “how can we take a more agile approach with our project management?” Some businesses are fundamentally more waterfall in nature (indeed, building planes, trains, automobiles, buildings etc) but nevertheless, more and more of those kinds of companies and corporations are pivoting to more agile approaches, by holding in mind the questions, “how can we take a more agile approach with our project management?” and “how can we take realer actions sooner?”. If you get creative, you will be surprised what ideas you can come up with. Indeed, most people mistakenly assume Agile started with software. Wrong, it started with hardware (photocopier manufacturers, car manufacturers, camera manufacturers – see: Agile Started with Hardware not Software) it’s just that the software industry went big with Agile while everyone else was going big with Lean. Now it’s coming full circle to

hardware companies and all industries realizing they now need to big with Agile. Often, many of the tasks are the same in Waterfall as they are in Agile, its about resequencing, reassembling and reconfiguring them to be taking realer actions sooner. Never stop holding those questions in mind, “how can we take a more agile approach with our project management?” and “how can we take realer actions sooner?”.

**Tip #3: Simpler Sooner & Sophisticate Later (3 Days/3 Weeks/3 Months)**

Indeed, one of my mantra’s is, “how can we do something simpler sooner and then sophisticate it later” from which I also spun off the idea of 3 Days/3 Weeks/3 Months. Where can we be with a V1.0 in 3 days? In parallel with which let’s figure out a plan for where we can be with a V2.0 in 3 weeks. In parallel, let’s figure out where we can be with a V3.0 in 3 months.

**Figuring Out Where the Marshmallows Are**

Where are the hidden assumptions and risks in your plan. Pick those up first not last.

**Tip #4: Engage Your Team in Identifying “Marshmallows”**

If you have every done the Marshmallow Challenge or seen the video ([Marshmallows Reveal Secrets of Agile Teamwork vs Waterfall Teamwork](https://www.agilitycode.com/)) one way of crystallizing the essence of Agile vs Waterfall is to ask, “where are the Marshmallows” and to pick these up first (Agile) not last (Waterfall). The Marshmallows represent the hidden assumptions on which your waterfall plan pivots. Every day that we aren’t front ending those we are back ending risk. The Marshmallow Challenge exhibits this so well. Even if we don’t truly see people verbalizing “Waterfall” project management they exhibit it by spending way too long building tall spaghetti structures without testing and verifying they can support the weight of the Marshmallow progressively as they go along, until the last moment, when it’s too late. Ta-da becomes Uh-oh! Use the language of “Marshmallows” to signify hidden assumptions with which we should take realer actions sooner to test and verify. Ask, “where are our Marshmallows?”

**Tip #5: RATs (Rapid Assumptions Testing)**

It’s all about Rapid Assumptions Testing (RAT) through rapid prototyping progressively. Surfacing our hidden assumptions and taking realer actions sooner to test and verify these, some of which, perhaps many of which, will fail. But from that failure, we learn and adjust, more quickly emerging into success. That’s called “failing to success”. Any pivotal assumptions which remain hidden until late in the process back end the risk of failure. We are better to fail early, often, fast and cheaply by front ending failure.

**Tip #6: Firing Bullets Not Cannonballs**

Jim Collins put it slightly differently, saying “Never fire uncalibrated Cannonballs. Fire bullets first”. Fire a bullet. Miss, 45 degrees off. Adjust. Fire a bullet. Miss. 25 degrees off. Adjust. Fire a bullet. Miss. 5 degrees off. What does a typical Waterfall executive do around about now? Cancel the program and fire you. We’ve have 3 failures in a row, we’re done. A “Waterfall” mindset doesn’t tolerate failure. What does an Agile executive do around about now? Keep going, because they are able to keep everyone calm by showing a measurable trajectory of success.
learning, which is the bottom line of Agile. We are 5 degrees off. Adjust. Fire a bullet. Ping, direct hit! Now pick up the biggest cannonball that you can and fire it, because now it’s a calibrated cannonball, not an uncalibrated one. Calibrated in the best way possible. Taking realer actions sooner, putting real stuff in front of real people who really have been really using it and giving you real feedback about what they really like and they really don’t like. It doesn’t get any better than that! But your average Waterfall executive spends way too long in their Waterfall plan polishing their cannonball and very late in the project they finally get around to firing it. As an uncalibrated cannonball (calibrated only in theory with paperwork, power-point and paperwork but not in reality by putting real stuff in front of real people who really use it) they take an awful risk of missing! With so much cost, time and resources sunk into it, this can be big trouble. Always be asking, ”what bullets can we fire?”

Facilitating the Agile Middle

Leading your team into the flow-zone.

**Tip #7: Helping Your Team Understand the AND Proposition of Creative Approaches down the Middle**

It’s about finding creative approaches to facilitate the agile middle as an and-proposition of being somewhat structured and somewhat not, not over planned and not under planned, not moving to slow and bureaucratically and not too fast and recklessly. Creative approaches right down the middle like sprints and scrums, MVPs, 3 Days/3 Weeks/3 Months and many more which can give you the best of both worlds. Get creative to find the agile middle as an and-proposition. We are surrounded by the agile-middle in everyday life – we drive our cars in the middle, we play sports in the middle, we chair meetings in the middle, we have conversations in the middle. But most executives are not even conscious there is a middle. They are so stuck in a mindset of OR-Propositions. Structured or unstructured, planed or unplanned, slow/bureaucratically or fast/recklessly. Your argument against one of those extremes they interpret as arguing for the other. Because they are not even conscious there is a 3rd way, as an AND-Proposition, finding the agile middle. On a bad day, even you will lapse into that mental trap. Maybe put a poster on the wall to remind you, there is always a 3rd way, a middle zone, an AND-Proposition.

**Tip #8: Breaking Through the Brickwall of Waterfall Mindsets.**

In particular, you are surrounded by Waterfall people stuck in Waterfall mindsets who will demand Waterfall stuff. Adopt the first rule of sales, “Yes is the answer, now what was the question”. Waterfall people will demand a date, a budget and a payback, or some variant of those. When they ask if you will provide those, answer, “Yes, and ... let me tell you how we go about that”. Then proceed to describe the sprints/hopper/route-map kind of approach we take in Agile Project Management, reinforcing that at any moment in time we will have a route-map with a timeline and a cost profile and a payback estimate, which we will continue to revisit and adjust according to how the VUCA world is shaping up. They wouldn’t want us to take a rigid approach in a VUCA world would they? Maybe pointing back at the rusting relics of previous cannonballs! But at any moment in time, we will have a route-map with a timeline and a cost profile and a payback estimate. Keep reinforcing that. You will have a good chance of facilitating them to meet you in the agile middle. If your response starts with, “No, that’s not how we work and let me tell you why” you are fighting a losing battle and they will dig in. Every time you argue against Waterfall planning they will interpret that as arguing for the opposite extreme of no planning. That’s an argument
you can’t win. Be like a martial artist – don’t meet an oncoming force head on, deflect it and redirect it to the agile middle.

**Tip #9: Facilitating Organized Chaos in the Agile Middle**

We live in the agile middle in everyday life and we know it is chaotic – the trick is for it to be organized-chaos, not disorganized-chaos. Most people who claim to live in organized-chaos (or some variant of that – “controlled chaos” etc) don’t! They live in disorganized-chaos. My test is I ask them to show me the organization, which they typically can’t. It’s like the concept of, “Don’t worry boss, it’s a calculated risk”. To which my answer is “Really? Can someone show me the calculations”? If it is organized-chaos, they will be able to show you the organization – war-rooms, pin-board/white-boards/flipcharts, sprints and scrums, hoppers, route-maps etc etc etc. Be ready to show the organization.

**Changing Your Relationship with Failure**

**Tip #10: Celebrating Smart Failure**

At a deeper level, the essence of Agile is about changing our relationship with failure. Embracing failure as a necessary part of success. Failing to success. Failing early/often/fast/cheap. Smart failure from which we learn, not dumb failure, stupid failure, repeated failure from which we learn nothing. So find ways to celebrate smart failure because it means you are getting closer to success.