



Agile Methodology in the Workplace

Description

“Agile, we’ve got to be agile.” It sounds right, and it sounds good, doesn’t it? Of course we should be agile—flexible, quick on the uptake, responsive. If we weren’t agile, we’d be whatever the opposite of agility would be, so agile it is. But what is agility?

To figure out what is meant by “agile,” it might be useful to offer some definitions here and determine some common themes worth exploring.

Agile Working

Agile working is essentially about being as effective and efficient as possible. It is very common to be effective without being efficient, and equally easy to be efficient without being effective. Think of some of your own practices—you might have got the job right in the end, but did you make the best use of resources? Agile working seeks to fix that problem by bringing people, processes, connectivity, technology, time, and places together to find the best way to achieve a particular goal. Agile working can take many forms, but is always guided by an assessment of what is most effective and what is most efficient, and what we can do to bring these together in practical ways.

Agile Methodology: Steps, Process, Development, Project Management, and More

Back in 2001, a group of software developers created the [Agile Manifesto](#) that set out a series of principles for changing software programming, two of which are of particular relevance here: customer collaboration and responding to change. The key idea here was working with the client to create a product or service, involving them, and solving problems with them, rather than taking a brief, creating the product, and offering it up.

There are good reasons to involve clients. For one thing, they are footing the bill—always a good reason. Moreover, they have greater insight into their needs than you do, so drawing on that makes

sense. Also, of course, things change. How many times have you worked on a project for a client where the goal posts moved? Co-creating means that you have greater insight and earlier warning; you can anticipate change rather than reacting to it.

The benefits here to both client and supplier are obvious: We can cut down on inefficiencies and costs, and save everyone a lot of heartache.

Although taking a formal agile approach is still confined mostly to software, many of the insights and tools have been picked up and used across many sectors and functions. Daily “stand ups” where colleagues quickly share what is hindering their progress, Gemba boards that track progress, and the use of “sprints” that define short bursts of activity to meet specific goals are becoming commonplace in many workplaces.

Agile Leadership

There are probably as many ways of describing leadership styles as there are leaders, and even in different models, there is usually a range of interpretations. Agile leadership, in its broadest sense, describes a framework in which the leader’s role is to create the environment where teams can self-manage. It follows a well-trodden path in the sense of delegating decision rights to the lowest practical level, something that both empowers and gives responsibility and ownership.

A key work here is Alberts and Hayes’ [Power to the Edge](#) (2003), which sets out a series of principles that enable agility. For example, they stress the importance of “situational awareness” for each team, that is to say, a clear and constantly updating picture of what is affecting the team and what they need to do to ensure progress.

This “live” connection to the situation, they claim, engenders the agility and flexibility required to operate in fast-moving, changing environments. In the business world, we see examples of this where customer service teams have the power to respond in the moment to customers’ needs, even to create a unique solution if required.

Agile Mindset

The common threads of the agile mindset are collaboration, empowerment, and responsiveness. These are easy aspirations to hold, but harder to put into practice. To be truly collaborative, we have to set aside our egos and be prepared to engage in what [Chris Argyris called inquiry](#), learning from the other rather than resorting to advocating our position. Empowering others relies on relationships of trust and shared purpose; without these, it’s a non-starter. Being responsive also depends on having a clear and regularly updated picture of what is happening, why, and what you can do about it.

This hasn’t meant to be a comprehensive explanation of what “agile” means, but it may give you some ideas, and provide further space for you to think about what “agile” means to you.

Agility is a key theme in [Kaplan’s new Resilient Leader program](#).

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