

AMS Insights

Thought Leader Article



Agile Methods and Cultural Impacts

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Developing People, Enhancing Process, Enabling Technology

AMS Insights

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Introduction

Do geographically dispersed teams impact the way we collaborate while working with Agile methods?

The essence of global projects is such that we have to accept indirect contact points and various cultural norms within the project environment, thus the cornerstone items that support the Agile method (stand up meetings and frequent collaboration) are inhibited by time zone challenges, communication styles and decision making protocols. Additionally, we have less time to develop working relationships within the project teams, ultimately adding another challenge to quality communication.

In order to accomplish our goals of higher productivity, less defects and sustainable quality within the Agile environment we must first normalize the environment that will frame the project behavior and contact points.

Consider the following when you set down the path of Agile Project Management:

- Establish the best technology platforms to collaborate in the Agile environment.
- Identify the cultural impact points that could inhibit dynamic communications.
- Design a robust protocol within the project construct to support the Agile requirements of Participation, Inclusion and Purpose.
- Proactively create an expectation of behaviors through the dispersed teams to align with the Agile environment.



Using Technology to Collaborate

What technology resources can we use to collaborate in an Agile environment?

Keeping in mind that Agile projects require access, and to that point, access requires we reach across many boundaries with a sense of instantaneous contact. The following are some tools global organizations are using to bridge the gaps on agile projects:



1. Cisco TelePresence™ is a wonderful tool to bring real-life imagery to meetings. The platform can be accessed internally at organizations, through outside vendor locations such as FedEx Office™, select Marriott™ properties and Regus office locations. The downside is availability and scheduling open rooms due to high usage. We recommend that when able, the TelePresence option is a good one, yet the reality is that we should use it during initial team building sessions as the “best in class” method of digital video communication platforms. This limited approach helps control cost and overcomes the need to overbook rooms only to be met with scheduling challenges.
2. Video and web based platforms such as WebEx™, Live Meeting™ and Go to Meeting™ are other open platforms means to make desktop interaction a reality with both video and VoIP options. There is less of an investment than TelePresence™, and the only scheduling necessary is based on personal calendars.

3. Text based communicators such as MS Instant Messenger™ or Office Communicator™ allow us to stay connected with teammates, and provide for immediate access to decision makers and colleagues.
4. Other less immediate contact tools such as collaboration sites, file sharing portals and open calendars (as found in SharePoint™) are a sub set of these tools and are good support mechanisms to build a multi dimensional set of tools and best practices that guide their use on an Agile project.



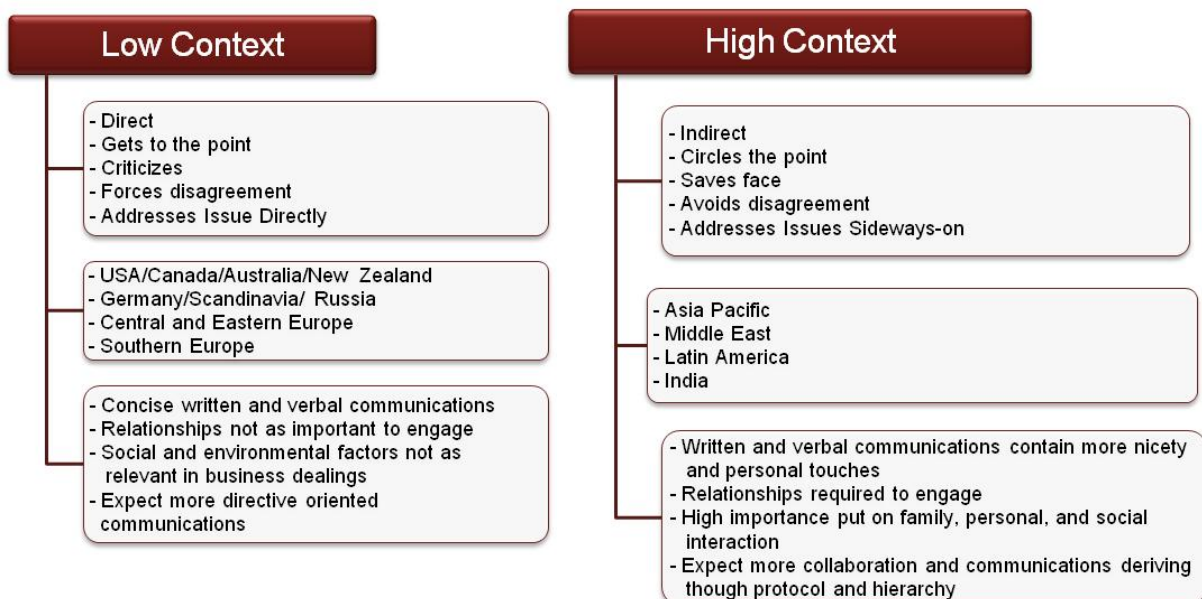
Use your Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Do Agile Project Management methods heighten the impact of having (or not having) cultural awareness?

In standard projects, configured with traditional methods, cross cultural issues are always a challenge. Utilizing the Agile method which calls for shortened decision making cycles, and little to no adherence to hierarchy, protocol or time zone concerns will undoubtedly increase the challenges we already face. It is critical as a global leader of Agile projects that you inherently understand the needs of your various project constituents. Think about enhancing your CQ by embracing the following:



1. Read books such as Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands prior to engaging geographically dispersed teams. Also, consider web sites such as GlobeSmart™, travel sites and regional information portals to build your knowledge of behavioral norms associated with your regional teams.
2. Plan open communication sessions to share expectations between your teams and overcome some of the communication challenges in a proactive way. These sessions will also provide a platform to build relationships and establish better ground rules between teams.
3. Become aware of how different cultures interact, communicate, make decisions and respect hierarchy. This understanding will help you to avoid breakdowns in these areas when the Agile environment is demanding high energy and performance within shortened project cycles.
4. Understand the basic norms of various cultures through the lens of high and low context attributes.



Purpose, Participation and Inclusion

What are the core ingredients for an Agile team to be successful?



Probably the most difficult aspect of managing global teams in the Agile environment is maintaining continuity through purpose, participation and inclusion. It is a critical success factor to be mindful of how we help our teams to stay connected and empowered, and even more so in an Agile project setting. Remembering that our goal in an Agile environment is to be flexible and adaptive, the importance of a well connected team is obvious and possibly paramount to the effort.

The following graphic depicts the high impact points to accomplish this, with the highlighted elements being the greatest focus in the global environment.

- Purpose
 - Meaningful Work
 - Visible Outcome
 - **Contribute to a Bigger Cause**
- Participation
 - Seat at the Table
 - **Empowerment/Distributed Work**
 - Global Cross Functionality
- Inclusion
 - **Decision Making**
 - Change Management
 - Collaboration



Behavior for the Agile Environment

To this point we have been discussing the tangible elements of constructing a productive Agile environment. However, in order to generate sustainable and measurable actions we need to model such behavior and promote it throughout the organization.

Organizational culture has proven to be just as important to supporting the Agile Method as the process itself. In fact, I would suggest that without the consideration of organizational culture, the probability of global acceptance of the concept is greatly minimized.

Consider the following when leading your global resources:

1. Promote cross functional activities and assign work across cultures.
2. Allow time for learning and mistakes as a way to foster real empowerment.
3. Create an environment that promotes interactivity outside of the email world to promote relationships.



Conclusion

What can you do to impact your global agile environment?

Monitoring and developing the people the process and the technology associated with the Agile environment is the paramount action which will lead to the success of your efforts. Any project including one that is associated with the Agile Methodology needs clear expectations and ground rules. The agile environment exaggerates the need to be flexible, accept change openly and recognize that real-time interactions are the cornerstone of success.



If we, as managers, overlook the cultural aspects of interactions we could very possibly be putting ourselves and our teams in jeopardy of missing our Agile project objectives.

About the Author/Research

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Phil is the Principal Founder and CEO of Advanced Management Services, Inc., (AMS). As a contribution to his firm's success, Phil has personally consulted to clients such as Boston Edison (NSTAR), ADP, State Street Bank, Cabot Corporation, Merisel, Data General, Simplex, AT&T, BIC, Bank of Montreal, Kronos, Copyright Clearance Center, J.P. Morgan, The Hartford, Bank of America/Merrill Lynch and others. He has facilitated strategic, operational and tactical level business development activities with clients that led to significant organizational breakthroughs ranging from new business unit development, strategic planning, human resource performance improvement initiatives, succession planning, talent management plans, globalization initiatives, business development planning and integrated process, and business systems design.

Phil has personally overseen and collaborated with his team on many of the firm's global initiatives such as:

- Off-shore teaming intervention for Staples in India.
- Development and delivery of an enterprise level Global Leader Program delivered in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, Dublin, London, India, and various locations in the U.S. for clients such as JP Morgan, Bank of America and Merrill Lynch
- Capability and Maturity Modeling for IT systems at the World Bank in Bosnia.
- Phil is currently leading an internal AMS team to further expand their global reach via strategic partnerships as well as deploying more global resources to service the firms expanding client base with resources in Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong.
- Design and delivery of keynote presentation for the knowledge globalization conference in the U.S. and Bangladesh, sponsored by Suffolk University, Sawyer School of Business.

Phil studied psychology and management development at Northeastern University, LaSalle University and the University of New Hampshire School for Continuing Education. Phil holds a BS/BA, an MBA with a concentration in organizational development, advanced certificates in management development and a master's certificate in project management from Boston University as well as multiple certificates in the area of quality systems.

Phil is a commercially rated pilot and is registered with Virgin Galactic to participate as a passenger on an upcoming space flight. Among other interests he is an accomplished yachtsman, motorcycle enthusiast, skier and not so accomplished golfer and guitarist.

Research

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