

Why Can't I Become Agile?

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Abstract: With so many articles and blogs focused on the differences between traditional project management and Agile (specifically, Scrum), you probably don't want to read yet another article on the same subject. I have been surprised (especially with the online discussion blogs) just how established Agile practitioners don't want to let project managers into their "club." Why can't project managers become Agile?

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Background

In my learning seminars I've presented around the country I've noticed a consistent theme. Some project managers want to become more Agile, but they aren't sure how to transition to it or what it requires. Especially in the business of leading software/technology projects where the underlying "learn and discover" type of work fits so well with Agile, that I struck out to determine what a project manager need to do to overcome any and all obstacles to become Agile.

If you don't mind, I'll focus the discussion on Scrum (and on being a ScrumMaster) specifically even though there are tons of other useful, impactful Agile approaches out there.

Key Roles of a Project Manager Vs ScrumMaster

In Andy Jordan's Gantthead.com article "From Project Manager to ScrumMaster," he states the most important roles for a ScrumMaster include: removing obstacles, following Scrum "rules of engagement" (self-organizing is key component, by the way), and mentoring and guiding the team to complete work in Sprints. Using *The Agile Manifesto* as a guide, one of the key benefits of the ScrumMaster role is to enable the team with the flexibility to self-organize. This can be a project manager's nightmare.

The enablement of the team to self-organize in order to complete and test the work may be one of the toughest changes a project manager needs to adjust to. One respondent to Andy's article had this perspective:

"The principles of self-organization and self-direction immediately become endangered when a PM is added because, by nature, PMs tend to exert command and control due to inherent responsibilities they are tasked with regarding product delivery."

From the very tenants of Agile, you'll find this overriding theme that completion of the work is more important than tons of documentation and specifications which tend to result in long-winded meetings. Just like you, I've been subjected to endless meetings where teams seem to meet continually to review specifications and project status. Several years back I can remember one engineer candidly yelled to the rest of the team, "ya know, if we weren't in meeting until 1PM every day, I could get the work done that we're here everyday asking the same question, why aren't you done?" In retrospect, he was really directing his frustration at the project manager and not the team. Not surprisingly, every member of the team nodded their heads in unison acknowledging a uniform, yet unspoken frustration with the broken process.

Jordan goes on to say that you need to mentor and guide the team while not "coming across as a micro-manager." Even the infamous 15-minute Daily Scrums can easily become 30-minute to an hour (or so) endless dialogs if you don't plan for these meetings. (I know I spend at least one hour a day planning for the next Daily Scrum with the sole intent of making sure that I don't waste one minute of the team's time.) Failure to prepare for effective team communication usually results in wasted time (which nobody these days can afford).

Can You Be Both Project Manager and ScrumMaster?

Knowing that there are gaps between project management and Scrum leadership, why not combine the roles? Great idea, right? David Bland in his article "And Now You are Just a Project Manager," provides an interesting perspective since he's noticed job ads like this being posted:

Project Manager / ScrumMaster

- Must have experience of traditional project management
- CSM preferred
- PMP nice to have

His perspective is that any attempt to combine the "best of both worlds" will ultimately be doomed with the only survivor being the project manager role while the ScrumMaster role becoming less important. In fact, he boasts that this combining the project manager/ScrumMaster role will fail within the first week due to (1) Daily Scrums will drop from 100% team participation to 25% attendance, (2) open discussions (retrospectives) as to how to improve things will dry up, and (3) command and control will become more of the norm as the team becomes confused about roles, procedures, and become less and less empowered.

In a couple of discussion blogs on LinkedIn over the past couple of years some folks have floated harmless discussion questions to a group's members regarding "project manager vs ScrumMaster." From my reading, you'd think respondents would be generous with constructive feedback. Instead, I've witnessed responses that are closely akin to nuclear attacks. The responses range from project managers who think that transitioning to being Agile is possible" to ScrumMasters who firmly believe that "there's no way that a project manager with their training in *PMBOK® Guide*'s perceived command and control philosophy could EVER become Agile."

Take, for example, Frank Waltzer's "Can and/or should a Scrum Master serve as both the Scrum Master and Project Manager for a Project?" recent discussion blog. One fellow commented that "Don't eliminate the PMs. Invite them to participate." Another respondent's comment was just the opposite: "Let me put that a different way – ABSOLUTELY NO. In fact, HELL NO."

The Price of Entry Checklist

I never liked to use checklists—they were only good for making a list of stuff to not forget at the grocery store. As I’ve gotten more Agile in my old age, I find myself wanting to visualize *everything* with a table (or list). Over the past two years I’ve taken input from a sources (see “Bibliography”) and first-hand experience to come up with a set of four questions that may help determine if you (or someone you love) can truly flourish in an Agile environment. I’ll preset this checklist along with answers from a project manager I have recently worked with. Why not jot down your own answers as you scan this table?

Checklist Item	Your Answer
<p>1. On an average day, what is your ratio of time spent on planning, process, and people activities?</p>	<p>Well, I don’t have much time planning and I don’t really like dealing with people issues much. I spent about minimal time planning, a little more on people, and the remainder doing process activities (like filling out reports for the PMO, running process-status meetings, and so on). So, my answer is:</p> <p>5% planning, 80% process, and 15% people</p>
<p>2. Do you feel comfort in managing your projects by utilizing best practices learned from my peers and the <i>PMBOK® Guide</i>.</p>	<p>I find that as a PMP and as part of a legitimate project management organization, that we’ve all standardized on PMI practices. It may seem a little outdated, but overall it seems to work.</p> <p>Yes.</p>
<p>3. Do you feel that if you weren’t managing every little detail on your projects, the work would rarely get done?</p>	<p>Unfortunately, left to their own intentions, the teams I work with would constantly “gold plate” (adding unnecessary neat features) and remain at the 90% almost-done status. The clear answer is:</p> <p>Yes.</p>
<p>4. Which do you feel best describes your role project leading your team(s)?</p> <p>A. Removing obstacles so that the team members can concentrate on their work.</p> <p>B. Motivating and guiding the team focused on completing those tasks that have the most business-value.</p> <p>C. Following the process we have embraced to a “T” – every time we’ve strayed, the team has missed its goals.</p> <p>D. Tracking key project measures, like AC (Actual Cost), to make sure that the project is on track. Without some hard measurements, objective assessments of a</p>	<p>This is a tough one,—I think all are important. We’ve invested significant effort in defining our methodology and so the most important one of the bunch has to be:</p> <p>C.</p>

Checklist Item	Your Answer
project's cost and status can't be understood.	

I have found the following answers to be a good indication that you, as a practicing project manager, are ready to step into the role of ScrumMaster:

Checklist Item	Your Answer Should Be
1. On an average day, what is your ratio of time spent on planning, process, and people activities?	We mentioned the importance of planning and that effective communication (interacting with the team) is really important. If the process is intuitive, you don't have to spend nearly as much time dealing with it. A more balance approach is best (something like this spread): 30% planning, 25% process, and 45% people
2. Do you feel comfort in managing your projects by utilizing best practices learned from my peers and the <i>PMBOK® Guide</i> .	There are great benefits you can learn from processes defined in the <i>PMBOK® Guide</i> . However, focusing on intuitive Agile techniques is far more useful. No.
3. Do you feel that if you weren't managing every little detail on your projects, the work would rarely get done?	Motivational, guiding, and mentoring will have better results than micro-managing everything. No.
4. Which do you feel best describes your role project leading your team(s)? A. Removing obstacles so that the team members can concentrate on their work. B. Motivating and guiding the team focused on completing those tasks that have the most business-value. C. Following the process we have embraced to a "T" – every time we've strayed, the team has missed its goals. D. Tracking key project measures, like AC (Actual Cost), to make sure that the project is on track. Without some hard measurements, objective assessments of a project's cost and status can't be understood.	Even though A. may be the most important Agile role you can play, in my experience, motivating and guiding the team to complete the most important work rules the day: B.

If you didn't respond similarly to the answers shown in the table above, I question whether you're ready to put on the ScrumMaster hat. I would be very interested to hear feedback on these questions or additional criteria that you've found helpful.

A Final Word

I have found it extremely tough for teams to migrate from traditionally project-managed teams to those that are inherently more Agile. The title of *project manager*, by itself, doesn't help with the perception either. As Jordan indicates where a project manager is assigned a task with an imposed deadline, they'll make every effort to manage the work that it gets done. In this case you "own" the completion.

A ScrumMaster, who I would say is more of a *servant leader*, uses encouragement, inspiration, and motivation to create an environment where the team "owns" the work and they self-organize to complete that work with you providing the direction, mentorship, and guidance for them.

Isn't your role really to "make your team member's job easier?"

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Bio



Ken Whitaker of Leading Software Maniacs® (LSM) has more than twenty-five years of software development executive leadership and training experience in a variety of technology roles and industries. He has led commercial software teams at Software Publishing (remember Harvard Graphics?), Data General, embedded systems software companies, and enterprise software suppliers. Ken is an active PMI® member, Project Management Professional (PMP)® certified, and a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). Sources for LSM’s material come from case studies, personal leadership experience, the PMI *Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, and Ken’s leadership books: *Managing Software Maniacs*, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, and *I’m Not God, I’m Just a Project Manager*. PM University, <http://www.pmuniversity.com>, is a new addition to Leading Software Maniacs’ online, eLearning curriculum focused on pragmatic project management and software leadership courses. Ken is also the creator of PM Chalkboard, <http://www.pmchalkboard.com>—the fastest way to learn basic project management principles with entertaining, no cost tutorial videos.

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