

## The Softer Side of Agile: Leading Collaborative Teams to Success

*By Nancy Y. Nee, PMP, CBAP, CSM  
Vice President, Global Product Strategy  
ESI International*

The Agile Manifesto places customer collaboration over contract negotiation with a keen focus on a highly skilled, motivated team in constant interaction with the product and the customer at every phase of the project. As a result of this collaborative, customer-centric view, Agile requires more than the technical expertise needed to gather requirements, and develop and test new product lines. It requires soft skills, leadership competencies and an understanding of how to apply those skills in a more malleable, people-focused setting. As practitioners know, collaboration brings a set of challenges. With the Agile approach, project managers are called upon to team up with customers in a constant stakeholder dialogue.

Constant customer collaboration provides great opportunities to measure project success by gauging the level of customer satisfaction throughout each life cycle of the project. It creates the framework for faster time-to-market and a more nimble process to deliver successful project outcomes. When it comes to successful agile project delivery, collaboration also is key for the integrated project team.

### **What Makes Good, Effective Collaboration?**

To begin to understand, we should first take a look at the 12 principles behind the Agile Manifesto. These principles, which are the building blocks of Agile, identify three areas that lend themselves to successful collaboration. These principles are as follows:

- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Projects need to be built around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.

Based on the above three principles, successful collaboration among the team relies heavily on three key factors:

- Feedback
- Communication
- Motivation

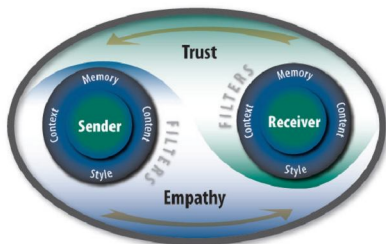
## Feedback

How does feedback work in a team environment? What is the most successful way to deliver it on an Agile project? Remember that feedback during the iterative development work of an Agile project must increase awareness and insight as well as foster innovation, yielding positive alternatives. Having the business as part of the core Agile project team creates the environment for continuous feedback and an opportunity to take positive risks in doing things differently, which is the very nature of why the project is being done in an Agile setting. Within the iteration work, it is essential to provide feedback that:

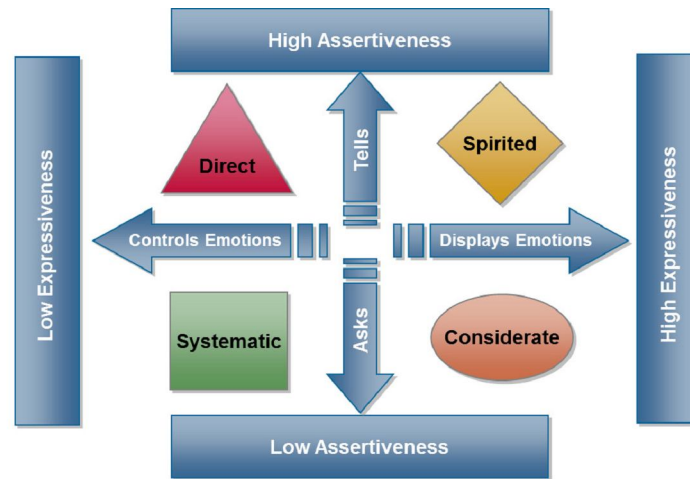
- Contains a clear purpose
- Is specific and descriptive
- Offers positive alternatives

For all members of the Agile project team, it is important to identify what to start, stop and continue doing when it comes to iteration work. This is where effective feedback is most often used. You can easily integrate these practices into your daily stand up meetings to prepare for the day's work.

## Communication



What makes effective communication? When it comes to communication, it is important to deliver information in a manner that is understood by the receiver, which means that we need to get past the receiver's filters and ensure that the individual understood the intended message. To get past those filters, we, as the sender of this message, have a responsibility to understand how our receiver takes in information. Does he communicate in a direct manner? Is she considerate in her messaging? Understanding your receiver's communication style will help you provide feedback that enables effective dialogue.



## Motivation

When you combine productive feedback with effective communication, the foundation for motivation has been established. Motivation is built on encouragement, partnership and compromise without making concessions that damage trust. Working together to ensure that barriers, impediments and unrealistic expectations do not derail the creative impulses of the team brings about team unity. When the Agile PM delegates to team members the authority and responsibility to complete features to which they've committed, the Agile PM has created an environment of trust, partnership and self-directedness. By creating this environment, the team can discover their patterns of working,

The soft side of Agile is just as important as the technical side of Agile. Both sets of skills are required and dependent upon each other for success in the Agile environment. Given what you just read, ask yourself, how soft is your Agile team?

---

© 2012 Originally published at *Business Analyst Times*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



***Nancy Nee***

*Author*



**Nancy Nee**, PMP, CBAP, CSM, Vice President, Global Product Strategy, ESI International, guides clients in the development and implementation of learning programs customized to their specific needs. Her solutions reflect the insight of almost two decades of PM and BA experience in healthcare, information technology, financial services and energy. [www.esi-intl.com](http://www.esi-intl.com)