

Sometimes the conversation about tools is a way of avoiding having the real conversation

Interview with Mike Burrows¹

Agile Pioneer, Author, Corporate Advisor
Founder of Agendashift, Director at Positive Incline Ltd
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Interviewed by Aina Aliieva

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Introduction to the interviewee

Agendashift founder Mike Burrows is the author of [*Agendashift: Outcome-oriented change and continuous transformation*](#) (2nd edition March 2021), [*Right to Left: The digital leader's guide to Lean and Agile*](#) (2019, audiobook 2020), and the Lean-Agile classic [*Kanban from the Inside*](#) (2014). Mike is recognized for his pioneering work in Lean, Agile, and Kanban and for his advocacy for participatory and outcome-oriented approaches to change, transformation, and strategy. Prior to his consulting career, he was a global development manager and Executive Director at a top tier investment bank, CTO for an energy risk management startup, and interim delivery manager for two of the UK government's digital 'exemplar' projects. To contact Mike, go to [Mike Burrows](#).

¹ How to cite this interview: Aliieva, A. (2021). Sometimes the conversation about tools is a way of avoiding having the real conversation, Interview with Mike Burrows; *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue V, May.

Interview

Q1. Mike, could you describe the initial reasons behind creating Agendashift and its evolution?

Mike Burrows (Burrows): It actually started with the assessment tool. My first book *Kanban from the Inside* came out in 2014, and soon after publication I and a few other people around the world realized that the checklist at the end of the book was a pretty good basis for an assessment tool. And I went through a number of iterations on that and collaborated with my friend Dragan Jojic on improving it.

We found that most of the improvements actually came from taking as much of the jargon out as possible and making it less specific to Kanban. We did our best to give it a good overall Lean-Agile coverage without getting into specific practices or techniques. So, eventually, my attention turned to working out how to do workshops around it. I discovered that rather than using the tool to diagnose what was wrong with the organization, I was using it to start some conversations. And I've been on a journey now for the last four or five years to formalize that process, with or without the specific starting point of the assessment tool.

Q2. There was a sentence in your book, "meaningful self-organization at every scale." That really touched me because you're talking about frameworks that they can be good or can be bad. What's your opinion on these and is the Agendashift often confused with the framework?

Burrows: I'll start with self-organization first. I think self-organization has been taught so much as a team thing, and in a way, that's so easy to confuse with self-management. I'm actually really pleased that books like *Team Topologies* and *Dynamic Reteaming* have come out in the months before the second edition of Agendashift, so I was able to reference them. Because now we're talking about self-organization not just about what work people do and how they collaborate, but also about what structures emerge from the collaborations. Taking it up a level, what happens when teams collaborate with each other? What happens when people move between teams? Are there different kinds of relationships between teams? Can we encourage people to be more mobile? Is there an optimum level of mobility even? Where are the decision-making forums in which it becomes very apparent that we need to change something?

All of this depends on people being suitably authorized to make those changes happen, whether that's through sort of an organic process or by someone directing it. Many organizations need to make it easier, and they need to design for it.

I want to pick out another phrase from the book, "for too many teams, strategy is something that happens to them." There's just not enough participation across delivery, strategy, and organization development. So it's hardly surprising that self-organization is a very hard-to-detect feature in most organizations.

I think Agile hasn't helped by teaching us self-organization in a way that's so team-centric.

I can kind of understand how it happens. But if you're interested in whole organizations, it can be a little frustrating at times. I think the same about servant leadership as well – I did a whole series of blog posts a few years ago on that topic because I was just so frustrated – it being taught that servant leadership is just serving your team as though that it was all about.

For years I've tried to encourage people to think more organizationally, and if we're going to really make a significant impact, then that has to happen.

Q3. The organization is the most powerful invention of humanity, right?

Burrows: Yes, It's about being able to do more than you could possibly do on your own. And in fact, it's even more than that. It's the possibility of doing things that you couldn't even have thought of on your own. I used to explain collaboration not just as working nicely with people. It's actually good to have a collaboration model, for example, Lennon and McCartney, Watson and Crick, you know, those kinds of collaborations that spark creativity, producing things that just wouldn't have happened if the collaboration wasn't there. I think it's a wonderful thing that Agile has put the spotlight on collaboration, and we should enjoy that, and see it as so much more than just rubbing along well together in our teams.

Q4. For example, one and one are 11?

Burrows: Exactly! That's organization level.

Q5. One thing you said there, Mike, is an organization is a forum where we can do more than we could on our own. And then you sort of corrected that and said you could even think of something bigger than you can think of yourself. Could we be in the middle of the way from an organization of workers who actually perform work that someone else thought of to knowledge workers who collaboratively think about what we're doing and develop the ideas?

Burrows: Yes. I've been very fortunate in terms of the teams that I've been worked with and that I've seen a lot of that happen. Teams that've been very close to their customers and teams that are very good at coming up with ideas on behalf of their customers.

Going back to self-organization at scale... I can point to examples of that going back to the nineties before Agile was even a thing. Teams worked things out between each other, even across countries. Without even a project manager or a business analyst we would work these things out, and we would decide which team was going to take the lead with which customers. We'd work out the interfaces between teams both in terms of communication and technically. It was amazing how much work we could get done working that way, where teams and individuals within teams take responsibility for stuff.

It's just a little bit of effort working things out in conversation. Working out how these

collaborations are going to work really pays dividends. I feel privileged to have worked in organizations that encourage that.

It was an eye-opener for me to work in a banking environment in the nineties, where such cool things were happening, organizationally and technology-wise as well. And, I still draw on some of those examples even today.

Q6. Yes. That's when you're a sort of like in the flow?

Burrows: Yes. And the boundaries start to matter less. We worry a lot about organizational boundaries, and it's right that we should. But why are we letting organization boundaries get in the way when we don't have to? We can decide to talk to each other, so let's do it.

Q7. As an Agile Coach, sometimes I get put in situations where pre-agreed outcome-based solutions are in place. What do you do when confronted with a situation like this, and how do we make it better?

Burrows: I don't deny that it's going to be a hard sell for many executives who just want a solution and don't even care what the solution is. But I hope if we keep repeating our message for long enough that we'll get through to enough people and eventually start to change things.

As the specific situation, if you're going to do any kind of project, and I think change projects included, much as I disliked the project word, let's try and do it in an Agile way. And what if we do it truly iteratively? Let's pursue our objectives goal by goal.

So we choose a goal and think about how it might be achieved within the kind of solution space that has been offered to us. Then the next goal, and so, on. Rinse and repeat! I hate the idea of an Agile rollout, but if you're going to do one, then at least do it in a way that is Agile. If you're telling people – smart people – how to work, they won't like that.

Q8. I'm not sure I couldn't agree with you more on that. You mentioned you would dedicate the rest of your life to outcomes. Could you tell me more about that?

Burrows: As I said before, there is a very strong tendency to quickly jump to solutions before we've adequately worked out what it is we want to achieve. It's very easy to solve problems without actually meeting a need. If we're really clear about what outcomes we want to achieve, we've got a much more, much better basis for measuring success by focusing on the outcome rather than the problems we think should be solving.

There's the whole thing about imposing change on people by trying to upgrade your organization like you're upgrading your email servers. However, we are missing the fact that we need to recognize that organizations aren't just processes.

They're not just structures. They are social constructs. They exist and are maintained through the discourse – through conversation. And if we want to change organizations

fundamentally, then we need to tap into that. We need to be part of those conversations. Though can't control the conversation in an organization you can inject things into it, and you can model different kinds of conversations and so on.

Q9. One of the most famous tools for collecting data from stakeholders is surveys. My experience shows that this tool might be useful if the majority of stakeholders are full-time employees. However, suppose we have team members who are a third party and working offshore and have their managers and corporate culture. In that case, they don't care much about surveys and improving the organization where they work temporarily. Do you think surveys might still be helpful in this case, or are there other practices on data collection?

Burrows: So our survey isn't the first thing that we do. It's a tool for helping us identify perhaps a lower level of obstacles we would come up with when we do our initial discovery conversations. So I think in the end it is just as a way of getting people involved. Although, some people quite like surveys as a way of getting your foot in the door.

I used to send the survey out the assessments ahead of any workshops and it sort of does help to set the tone. And it does help people think about the kind of issues might we be talking about. But there was always the worry that not enough people would respond to it and that might be a real problem in the kind of context you describe.

Since we've been going online, I started doing the assessment actually in the workshop, spending twenty minutes of the workshop time doing the assessment. Previously, I used to hate the feeling that the energy was being sucked from the room while people were doing it, but online it's seems to work well.

So, in the end, it comes down to what motivation do these people have to come to the meeting in the first place? What's the purpose? And if you can't articulate that, then you're probably not going to get them.

If you can involve them in drafting what the invitation is, then there maybe you have a chance.

Q10. Mike, what tools/technology would you recommend for companies to capture the "Shift"; while operationalizing the shift, a lot of companies have tools like Jira, Planview, Blueprint or others; they wonder how we connect the OKRs (the other end of Left side) to existing tools they have? or they need new tools? Which ones?

Burrows. Sometimes the conversation about tools is a way of avoiding having the real conversation.

I do most of my work with Zoom and Google docs. Agendashift is about conversations. It's about giving people just enough structure. With Google Docs I can send people out to breakout rooms and with a shared document that provides that "just enough" structure.

I don't have any recommendations about tools for tracking OKRs and so on. And in fact, I think the worst thing to do is to believe that your whole transformation hangs on the rollout of another tool, right?

I'm trying to get away from the rollout, and instead, we need some conversations on what we want to achieve. And those conversations need to happen at every level. And those levels need to have those conversations with each other. And the more that we can get people in the same room to have those conversations, the healthier and better that's going to be.

So, I don't know; Google Docs, Zoom, and (only when really necessary) Miro are the tools I use, and maybe sometime in future I'll use Clubhouse (laughing).

About the Interviewer



Aina Aliieva

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Aina Alive (Aliieva) has 10+ years working in Project Management and an Agile environment.

She has managed and consulted on Technical, Construction, Telecom, Retail and Engineering projects. Aina is a Transformation Leader, Coach & Mentor. She helps individuals, teams and organizations in their transformation journey. Aina is passionate about productivity, creating a positive work environment and building Dream teams.

Aina has a Masters's degree in electrical engineering and an MBA in technology. She holds PMP and PMI-ACP certificates. Aina is a proud member of PMI CWCC (Canadian West Coast Chapter), PMIT (Toronto Chapter), PMI Ukraine Chapter and UAE PMI. She is also a Program Manager, Disciplined Agile in PMI CWCC and DA Ambassador in PMIT.

Aina is an experienced public speaker and coach. In her free time, Aina participates in different mentorship programs, speaks at webinars and interviews people for her blog.

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