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Interview with Mike Palladino
by Yasmina Khelifi
Interview

Agile Lessons Learned in Business, Projects & Life[1]

Interview with Mike Palladino

Director of the Agile Center of Excellence
Bristol Myers Squibb Pharmaceuticals

Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

International Correspondent, PM World Journal

Paris, France

Introduction to the interviewee

Michael Palladino is an Agile and Program Management professional with broad experience across several industries. He is the Director of the Agile Center of Excellence at Bristol Myers Squibb Pharmaceuticals. Mike is an adjunct professor at Villanova University teaching courses on Agile and Project Management and is a PMI ATP trainer. He is a Past President of the PMI Delaware Valley Chapter (PMI-DVC) in the United States and an author for Data Management University Magazine. He has presented in many countries for over 20 years.

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Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. Could you explain the role of an Agile Center of Excellence? What does it bring to an organization, to the teams?

Mike Palladino (Palladino): The Agile Center of Excellence owns the collective knowledge of Agile within the company. We help people, teams, groups, departments, and divisions learn how to incorporate Agile and change the way they work to produce dramatically better, faster, and quicker with higher quality results. I have responsibilities to work Enterprise wide, worldwide. We provide training, coaching, support, assessments, and tune-ups to our teams.

Q2: Could you explain your daily activities as the Director of an Agile Center of Excellence?

Palladino: I've established Agile as a viable and highly desirable approach to solving problems. My current daily activities involve meeting with new areas, and teams to help them determine if Agile is right for their work, and if so, map out how my team can become involved. I tell those who are interested in Agile that I am happy to meet with any level of leadership and speak at any event or Leadership or team meeting as needed. I cannot guarantee success but am willing to have the conversation. I share successes that other teams have delivered in the company and use the results to entice them to try Agile, too.

At these meetings, I typically challenge leaders on allowing their teams to try something new. If the new changes do not work, we can easily go back to the previous way of working. But if the new ways do work, they'll receive amazing results and help the leaders meet their objectives. I ask them to take a chance. They may be pleasantly surprised with the results.

Q3: What's your definition of Agile in project management?

Palladino: Agile and Project Management are similar, but not the same. Agile has meetings and techniques, so Project Managers believe Agile is only a different Project Management framework. But when you dig into the details, and work with both techniques, they have a fundamentally different focus. Project Management is focused on the process of getting the work done. Agile focuses on the team dynamics. If the team dynamics are healthy, and the team can have open and honest conversations about ways to improve, then the team will continually focus on how they can work more efficiently. When the team works efficiently, waste is cut out, and more work is done with less time and less effort. I've personally witnessed dramatic improvement with Agile over

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waterfall. Interestingly, some of the Agile techniques can even help Waterfall projects, therefore Agile cannot be a direct substitute for Project Management.

Q4: What's the topic most requested or the topic where you provide more help/guidance at the Agile Center of Excellence?

Palladino: Most of our requests fall into three areas. 1) People ask us to convince their co-workers to try Agile, 2) Ask us to help them start using Agile, or 3) Observe their teams and suggest ways to improve their Agile implementation.

Q5: What's the most misconception about Agile according to you?

Palladino: There's a misunderstanding of Agile in the industry. Some believe Agile is a different type of Project Management approach. Some believe Agile is a software delivery mechanism. With nearly twenty years of Agile experience, I realize the core of Agile is about people and creating high performing teams. If we can help teams interact better, provide better communication, and make faster decisions, the results can be dramatic. Both here and other companies, I have documents examples of improvements from 25% to 400% faster. The numbers are shocking, and many people disbelieve the impact is that dramatic. Yet we continue to show these types of improvements.

Since Agile started with Software Development teams, there is a false belief that Agile is only for IT organizations. I've been successfully using Agile with business teams in manufacturing, procurement, finance, R&D, Commercial and other non-IT areas and non-software work. As teams began using Agile, the acceleration caused downstream impacts. The result was the need for automated testing and DevOps to handle the increased speed.

Many Project Mangers assume Agile is a different flavour of Waterfall. Although there is a similarity to Waterfall, using Agile requires a shift of focus from building out a large plan to be followed, to that of an experimentation approach. As the pace of work is accelerating, we have fewer examples to reference and therefore must figure out new solutions. Agile is focused on experimentation and building in Change Management. Instead of a Project Manager in front driving the team, Agile relies on a Scrum Master leading from behind, helping the team take on the accountability. The changes may be subtle, but the results are profound. Project Managers who don't understand this change in mindset struggle to have successes with Agile. Then they mistakenly believe Agile doesn't work.

Q6: What will be your top recommendation to project managers to thrive in this new normal?

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Palladino: Project Managers need to understand there is no one leader or driver of the project. The team takes on the accountability. As a PM takes on a Scrum Master role, they must wear two different hats: a PM hat and SM hat. I've seen many PM's who try to run an Agile team the same as a waterfall team, and completely fail. PMs must also realize Agile is here.

Q7:   What is your most learning outcome, being Director of an Agile Center of Excellence?

Palladino: Nearly everyone can learn Agile but may take different lengths of time. I've had people tell me there is no way they will change. They will never use this new approach. But after using it for 6 months, they beg me to convince their colleagues to change, too. They don't want to go back to the previous ways of working. The new way is much better and easier for them.

Q8:   How do you use agile in your personal life?

Palladino: I've been using Agile for many years in my personal life. I have a personal backlog. My family and I have weekly sprints and focus on what we're going to do that week around the house. We identify the most important items and focus on completing them first. We also raised our daughters using Agile. As we taught them new skills, we introduced ideas in an incremental way. For example, before they learned to drive, we taught them how to drive the lawn mower and cut the grass. Therefore, driving a car was an incremental change and an easier transition. I plan to write a book about the experience.

Q9:   Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Palladino: Agile may be a great technique now, but keep looking, learning, and experimenting. There may be a new technique that is even better. If we continue learning, we will continue to be relevant and valuable as the world changes around us.

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About the Interviewer

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Paris, France

Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at Orange S.A. (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in projectmanagement.com as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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