

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest¹

What is Agile?²

Henny Portman

Introduction

Agile is used all over the place as a working method or as a catch-all term. But what is "agile" really? Literally, it means maneuverable, nimble, and flexible. As far as I am concerned, agile is a mindset.

Agile is therefore between your ears: how do you think, how do you act, how do you behave? Do you think for the customer, or do you ask the customer? Do you make all decisions yourself or do you trust the people in a team so that you allow them to make their own decisions? Do you start from a set plan, or do you accept that not everything is clear at the beginning, and do you proceed step by step, allowing yourself to be influenced by the results of experiments and by feedback from the customer? Is making mistakes not allowed or is it allowed to make mistakes as long as we learn from them? Do you go for the most perfect solution or is good, good enough?

Examples of the classical mindset versus the agile mindset can be found in this table.

Classic mindset	Agile mindset
Starting from a solid plan	Accepting that not everything is clear at the beginning
Thinking for the customer	Asking the customer
Thinking out as much as possible in advance and then making it	Step by step
You cannot make mistakes	You can make mistakes, as long as you learn from them
It is about the perfect solution	Good is good enough
Experiencing changes as difficult	Welcoming changes (feedback) from the customer

¹ This is the first article in a new series by Henny Portman, one of the world's leading authorities on "agile". Based in The Netherlands, Henny coined the term "agile forest" in 2019 to describe the many agile frameworks that have emerged over the last 20 years. This series is intended to help readers better understand the agile concept, navigate through the 'underbrush' and more successfully apply whichever framework is selected for their projects.

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Manifesto for Agile Software Development

In February 2001, 17 software developers in a ski resort in Utah, United States of America, elaborated on this mindset in the Manifesto for Agile Software Development consisting of four values and twelve principles in order to formulate an answer to the much too slow software development.

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value:

1. Individuals and interactions over processes and tools.
2. Working software – nowadays we speak of working products – over comprehensive documentation. Do you first read a manual for your mobile phone, or do you switch on the mobile phone and get to work?
3. Customer collaboration over contract negotiation. If you must fall back on a contract when working together, what does that say about the result and/or the cooperation?
4. And as a final value, responding to change over following a plan. If a customer wants to implement changes, the result will better meet the needs of that customer, which will increase customer satisfaction.

With all the values, the comment is made that while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more. So, it is nonsense to say that no documentation or plans are made in agile.

Principles behind the Agile Manifesto

To further define these values, the 17 developers also described twelve principles. These principles can be summarized as follows:

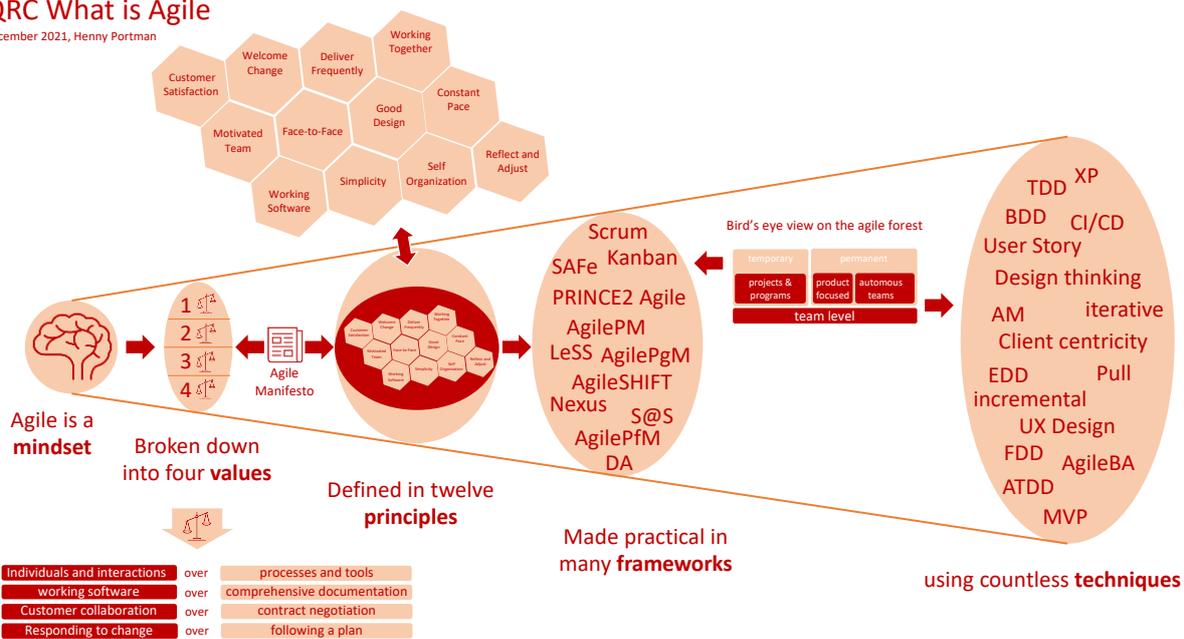
- Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.
- Welcome changing requirements, even late in development.
- Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.
- Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.
- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Build projects 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.

- Working software is the primary measure of progress.
- Agile processes promote sustainable development.
- The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.
- Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.
- Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

These principles are applicable for a single agile team. If you work as a team of agile teams on one specific product, I would suggest to use some common sense with the principle 'The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.' To have an architect in place developing a high-level architecture will help to make integration of the work of individual teams easier.

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As many as 100 Agile frameworks

One of the first frameworks in which these values and principles were made practical is Scrum. Scrum is used by both IT and non-IT teams. However, this is not the only agile framework. There are now more than a hundred. Examples include AgilePM and PRINCE2 Agile for projects and AgilePgM for programs. If you assume working in clusters of permanent agile teams, you can use

SAFe, Disciplined Agile, Scrum at Scale, or Nexus for example. All these frameworks then make use of techniques such as user stories and iterative and incremental development. In my article *A new bird's eye view on the agile forest*³ you can find explanations of all these frameworks.

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series

This article is part of a series of articles called *Sensemaking in the Agile Forest*. This series will consist of the following parts⁴:

- What is Agile?
- What is Scrum?
- Is Agile always better?
- The ideal Product Owner
- The ideal Scrum Master
- Is an agile team always autonomous?
- What do iterative and incremental mean in Agile?
- The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) unraveled
- Prioritizing in an agile team
- Multitasking task switching or monotasking
- Being predictable as an agile team
- Self-managing or self-organizing agile teams
- Slicing user stories
- Agile management products
- Culture makes or breaks your agile transformation
- The evolution of agile frameworks
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Please let me know if you would like to add specific agile topics to this series.

³ Portman, H. (2020). A new bird's eye view on the agile forest; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue X, October. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/pmwj98-Oct2020-Portman-a-new-birds-eye-view-on-agile-forest.pdf>

⁴ This series is based on a number of short blogs I made for Forsa Advies, a project management training organization in the Netherlands (<https://www.forsa-advies.nl>).

About the Author



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Henny Portman, owner of Portman PM[O] Consultancy and was partner of HWP Consulting, has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, program, and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches, and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional (PM(O)) communities.

Henny Portman is accredited in a variety of qualifications, including P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and an SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant (PMO Global Alliance). On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition to this, he is an international speaker, author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field, and an active blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com).

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