# Embracing the Agile Mindset in Any Project Environment [1]

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In our 2021 UMD Virtual Project Management Symposium, Jeff Beverage, Educator and CEO, spoke on "*Embracing the Agile Mindset in Any Project Environment*" for his presentation. And we would like to share this valuable information with you.

Jeff Beverage is a project management trainer who spends much of his time teaching the Federal Acquisitions certification in Program Project Management. Jeff acknowledges that we have a lot more knowledge than we did 10-15 years ago, but there still is a wide misconception held that Agile is a separate discipline that not everyone needs to worry about. On the contrary, the Agile mindset can be embraced and benefited from in any project environment.

The mindset shift between a waterfall, or predictive, setting to an Agile, or adaptive, incorporates scope as a variable, not just cost and schedule. If you say, "Here's how much time and money I've got," the question that then needs to be asked is "How much work can we get done?" Jeff points out that in any project environment or class, when discussing this triple constraint, you only get to pick two of these variables. However, he emphasizes that it will not always be the same two variables, and that predictive projects also have some level of variability. Jeff highlights that some of the first questions that might need to be asked are, "What's fixed?" and "What's variable?"

There are several primary sources that describe and build the foundation for an Agile mindset that include values and principles seen across *all* projects and programs. The Agile Manifesto includes the four Values and twelve Principles. A very important point Jeff makes is that within these values and principles, the word "software" can be substituted with "product", "training", or whatever fits your need. He finds himself lucky that his boss introduced this to him on his first official assignment working with Agile on a Scrum team. In other words, these values and principles work with whatever you're developing and aren't exclusive to software. Jeff notes that Principle #10 *"Simplicity – the art of maximizing the amount of work not done is Essential"* is his favorite!

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The next source to look to are the five Scrum Values of the Scrum Alliance. The importance here is the focus on people. People define what's valuable on the project. People make plans, commitments to those plans, they do the work, learn, and reflect. In addition, the SAFe House of Lean and the Ten SAFe Principles are also included. Jeff mentions that if you are not already familiar with these primary sources, he strongly recommends them as a starting point for the learning journey that asks, "What is the Agile mindset?"

There are values and principles consistent across these sources, but they are also universal across projects and programs. These Universal Values and Principles are as follows: People, Prioritization, Participation, Persistence, and Patience. There are plenty of examples to tie each of these back to the sources. For example, "People" relates to all five of the Scrum values, the first value of the Agile Manifesto Values, the 1st pillar in the SAFe House of Lean, and the eighth principle of the Ten SAFe Principles.

These Universal Values and Principles are universal across the project environment. In predictive environments, we are prioritizing work based on value and prioritizing based on value is important in any project or program. We can look to #11 of the Agile Manifesto Principles and #9 of the Ten SAFe Principles for "Participation". "Persistence" is just as applicable, as overcoming obstacles is a widespread theme throughout these sources and obstacles are always being overcome. "Patience" is being honest and realistic with our expectations because Agile is not necessarily going to get faster.

Jeff especially emphasizes transparency as a universal value and principle. He also notes that transparency might be what is the most lacking. Transparency with information combats the common need-to-know mindset we have. It is beneficial to have more information alongside more resilience, responsiveness to change, and relentless improvement. Jeff asks, "If you're not trying to improve everyday across projects - what are we doing here?" The values and principles in Agile frameworks exist and are important in a predictive/waterfall environment even though we don't shine the spotlight on them.

Jeff ends with the positive outcomes that are produced through the use and practice of an Agile mindset, noting that he speaks to his experience as a team member when stating there is great benefit to doing so! Honest communication on progress lifts the weight stress from feeling like he was always behind. The nature of these short cycles and transparency, rather than trying to hide obstacles and hope nobody finds out, changes not only work life but personal life as well.

The ability for team members to learn and grow is another beneficial outcome of the Agile Mindset. Agile frameworks offer an emphasis on reflection, retrospection, learning, and growth. When we embrace the desire to help team members get better and help them learn and grow, everybody benefits.

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Relationships built on trust are cultivated through honesty with information and reality (good, bad, or ugly). The collaborative nature of the Agile mindset forces people to work together. The more we interact with others the more we get away from the detrimental "us vs. them" mindset. Having this relationship *before* you need it is important. Additionally, decisions should be made based on data rather than intuition. The creativity and innovation that comes from spending time and space within this mindset will surprise you.

As we get back in touch with more collaborative work, we'll be facing challenges around trust due to the struggles people have had with long periods of isolation and an increased fear of the world around us. This re-entry will be challenging in various ways. Starting with trust and communication will serve as a strong catalyst for our re-entry as organizations, and societies, to be successful.

This mindset is valuable beyond work life and is important now more than ever. When we start with trust as the opening move, our counterparts respond with trust. If we start with distrust, then our counterparts will respond with distrust as well. We must take this leap of faith Jeff notes that yes, trust is earned, but we need to give opportunities for this to happen. We do this by opening with trust.

The positive outcomes of an Agile mindset are mental, lead to a decrease in stress, increase job satisfaction, and provide innovative solutions and data driven results. The values and principles associated with Agile are applicable wherever you go. The outcomes are positive and worth achieving. So now you might ask, "What are we going to do about it? What should I do to cultivate the Agile mindset in myself, my teams and team members?" This leads to the final point on cultivating the Agile mindset at both an individual and team level.

Cultivating the Agile mindset on an individual level consists of a couple things. We must try new things and do so often so that the act of trying becomes less and less daunting with the more newness we experience. We need to ask questions and cultivate this skill to ask *good* questions. Time must be taken to learn and seek opportunities to learn. If we cannot learn we cannot survive.

We must reflect as the retrospective is the most important part of the Agile framework. Take a pause to ask what you've learned recently, what you've done, how it went, and what can be done better next time. Ask what you've learned at the end of a Symposium Day! Share what you know with others and be willing to share this in both formal and informal settings.

There are also important factors to cultivating the Agile mindset in the team environment. To start, we need to invest in time and space for creative thinking, deep work, and reflection. Encourage team members to learn and pursue curiosity on any topic so that they can be well-rounded individuals. Focus metrics on value delivery because the

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outcomes are the project. Empower team members by delegating responsibility and authority. Truly delegate and not just assign, which includes stepping back and being comfortable that they might get it wrong. Give time and space for failure and learning. Finally, communicate with regular, rapid, and honest feedback to team members.

The next University of Maryland *VIRTUAL* Project Management Symposium will be May 5-6, 2022. The event will feature 4 keynote speakers and 55 individual sessions in 5 concurrent tracks.  Event information will be available September 1, 2021.  If you want access to all 57 of the session recordings from the 2021 event at very low cost, visit the 2021 Project Management Symposium website to register.

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## About the Author

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**John Cable** is Director of the Project Management Center for Excellence in the A.James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, where he has been a professor and teacher of several graduate courses in project management. His program at the University of Maryland offers masters and PhD level programs focused on project management. With more than 1,300 seats filled annually with students from many countries, including more than 40 PhD students, the program is the largest graduate program in project management at a major university in the United States.

John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation.  As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer two undergraduate minors, 3 master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at www.pm.umd.edu.

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC).  Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as vice chair.  In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012.  As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC.  He can be contacted at jcable@umd.edu.

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