

Five Common Mistakes that Undermine Agile Project Management ¹

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For many years, agile project management has delivered significant benefits to companies that have taken advantage of it. Even so, other established organizations make mistakes that impede growth and profitability when leaders fail to enforce core agile principles. To prevent such outcomes, it's important for businesses to be aware of five of the most common errors that undermine agile project management and implement steps to overcome them.

Mistake #1: *Not establishing an agile project management office*

Many organizations overlook creating an agile project management office (PMO) when transitioning to agile methodologies. The absence of a governing authority guiding adoption leads to fragmented implementations across teams, resulting in the limited alignment of processes and tools and minimal organization-wide coordination.

An agile PMO is critical to organizational well-being. It serves as the hub for orchestrating appropriate agile deployment and ensures readiness for changes. It also enables group collaboration, standardizes reporting, and provides training and consistent communication.

Without an agile PMO, uncertainty takes over. Teams struggle without guidance or reference content for new ceremonies, values, or responsibilities. Further misalignments arise from groups adopting tools and techniques inconsistently, causing inefficiencies from duplicative and incompatible systems. Ultimately, the lack of cross-functional coordination forces departments into isolated silos. They are unable to collaborate on customer initiatives.

In contrast, a proficient agile PMO institutes consistent language, processes, and metrics across units through centralized policies. Benchmarking progress based on standard

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criteria identifies areas needing help and enables targeted improvements.

An adept PMO also equips teams with practical tools to assist in planning, tracking, and information-sharing. Regular advising, best practice education, and project debriefs disseminate education for continuous betterment. Mature agile PMOs shepherd the cultural transition, which emphasizes individuals over processes and responses to change over rigidly following standards. This stewardship makes PMOs invaluable for elevating organizational agility.

Establishing an impactful agile PMO starts with the following:

- *Identification of obstacles.* Assess the status quo to pinpoint group-specific challenges hampering agility.
- *Goal setting.* Define overarching principles for adoption and create a detailed transformation plan that includes phased-in new roles, ceremonies, and training programs.
- *Development of collateral.* Create and provide assets like instructional guides and collaboration tools tailored to group needs.
- *Regular meetings.* Schedule regular check-ins to ensure changes take hold through deepened comprehension.
- *Reporting.* Institute centralized reporting identifying areas struggling to gain traction.
- *Measurement of progress.* Continuously reevaluate goals against real progress and solicit input on improvements.

Mistake #2: Ineffective tool selection

IT groups or executives frequently make unilateral decisions regarding tools instead of involving cross-functional teams to balance needs. The deployed tools then miss key requirements, causing limited adoption, inter-departmental friction, redundant platforms, and squandered investments.

Choosing tools enabling enterprise-wide transparency requires coordination across divisions reliant on the systems. It is important that IT, sales, marketing, product, and end-user representatives detail feature needs from their unique vantage points. Decision-makers can align tools to concrete criteria required for business objectives, allowing them to develop ideal solutions that meet collective specifications across departments.

The rollout of new tools demands rigorous testing and training. Early limited launches with engaged users permit adjustments to resolve issues before expanding across the enterprise. Ongoing support through forums and designated experts builds institutional knowledge-spreading proficiency.

Teams commit to incremental adoption by smoothly integrating basic features rather than expedited overhauls. More advanced functionality can be unlocked as comfort levels improve, further elevating efficiency. Eventually, use becomes second nature. The payoff is an empowered culture that intuitively collaborates across historically disconnected teams through shared systems—the ultimate promise of agility.

Mistake #3: *Not training leadership and PMs on agile principles*

As firms transition to agile delivery, educating executives and project managers at all levels on fundamental ideas becomes essential. Unfortunately, many businesses do not prioritize training or teaching leaders to acquire critical mindsets for directing rollout. Those in charge of change cannot adequately transmit abstract ideas to teams without understanding agile values and motives. Further, leaders who cannot communicate the rationale behind unfamiliar changes face skepticism about credibility. They also struggle to gain buy-in across resistant cultures.

Other risks of inadequate or non-existent training include lack of engagement and leadership support, inability to guide teams properly, reduced outcomes, and customer satisfaction. Conversely, agile training creates vision and motivation for transition and enables successful change management, leading to greater efficiency and innovation.

These six principles apply to educating and training leaders:

- *Immersive training on the Agile Manifesto.* This enables leaders to become capable agile ambassadors.
- *Workshops grounded in real transition accounts, ongoing mentorship, and experiential application.* Specialized training cements the patterns for more soulful leadership.
- *Practical agile skill-building.* It is essential to educate executives on higher-level principles and develop the mindsets necessary for steering implementation.
- *Change management.* Addressing motivational “why” questions behind

practices provides the impetus for leading change.

- *Transitional workshops that prepare managers to guide teams by introducing new processes, roles, and rituals for on-the-ground execution.* This type of training equips middle management with tactical tools and trains key lieutenants supporting the mission.
- *Collaboration and celebration.* Consistent reinforcement through peer sharing around common hurdles and wins bolsters organizational proficiency.

Mistake #4: Not building self-organizing teams

For agile practices to work, it is essential for leaders to prioritize the Agile Manifesto's four values. These values are individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working software over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and responding to change over following a plan. Yet, hierarchy-oriented organizations initiating agile transformations often default to traditional command-driven management when structuring teams. Dispatching orders that do not grant autonomy severely limits potential innovation that empowered teams can unlock.

When denied self-direction, teams focus excessively on following fixed plans. They don't swiftly adapt to shifting conditions and concentrate energy on mandated processes instead of creative solutions. As a result, customers' needs are overshadowed. Micromanagers effectively communicate distrust, draining engagement essential for success. And when detached senior leaders override front-line observations, responsiveness suffers greatly. Those closest to the challenges best understand appropriate solutions, while insufficient authority paralyzes their ability to address issues emerging in real time.

In contrast, organizing autonomous, cross-functional teams unlocks immense advantages aligned with agile values. Executives can champion a customer-first mindset and avoid empty rituals to promote innovation and self-direction. Instead of relying on documentation or strict standards, they encourage a flexible, collaborative approach focused on face-to-face engagement. Only by modeling these attitudes can leaders inspire change and enable agility to thrive.

Self-governing teams constantly inspect priorities and plans. They adjust based on regular customer input rather than blindly relying on obsolete assumptions. Real-time course corrections enhance relevance. Independence also nurtures relentless innovation as intrinsic motivation soars. Given clear goals yet freedom over methods, teams

perpetually find better solutions. Liberated teams rapidly respond to ever-changing needs and don't await permission from distant executives. Eliminating bottlenecks dramatically accelerates delivery.

Transforming command-driven cultures requires enlightened leadership, balancing guidance with independence. To foster team autonomy, leaders can:

- *Hire and nurture agile-minded talent.* Recruit intrinsically motivated staff who value collaboration over egotism.
- *Provide transparent purpose and constraints.* This allows groups to drive daily decisions.
- *Coach teams through intelligent inquiry rather than knee-jerk instructions.* This helps them self-assess scenarios for appropriate responses.
- *Encourage autonomy.* Grant teams the control they need to optimize roles, processes, and norms tailored for functionality.
- *Help navigate roadblocks.* Offer support when removing external impediments rather than enforcing internal standards.
- *Reward success.* Give more freedom to high-performing groups and use them to model healthy independence for others.

The key is balancing guidance with independence. Self-direction opens immense advantages aligned with agile values. Though transforming command-driven cultures requires enlightened leadership, the rewards of empowered, accountable teams are immense.

Mistake #5: Avoiding failure

Most companies discourage experimentation and risk-taking to avoid potential failures, a mindset in direct opposition to agile principles. Organizations that hold to that mindset will struggle to meet evolving customer needs. Rather than entrench themselves in traditional project management principles, organizations can regularly test new ideas and pivot as needed. Today's vision may alter in a few months because people drive many new changes. Unlike traditional project management, an agile mindset of driving fast delivery, including the freedom to fail, will result in quicker time to market.

Agile cultures don't try to prevent all missteps. Instead, they embrace frequent small failures. They use them as fuel for accelerated learning and innovation. Quick feedback

loops build knowledge to rapidly iterate breakthroughs, fulfilling emerging needs. Failing fast saves significant time and money over delayed, more extensive launches. Gathering ongoing insights exposes flawed assumptions early before significant investments are locked in. Normalized failure powers a creative culture hungry for wisdom over optics. Agile organizations out-innovate rivals. They incentivize experimentation and shift focus from outcomes to knowledge.

Additionally, it's vital that leaders do not build multi-year masterplans but take an iterative approach instead. Launch minimum viable products to validate concepts quickly. Small bite-sized projects limit risks while accelerating insights from real-world engagement. Further, compress cycle times by empowering teams to drive rapid experiments. Seek external perspectives frequently, but trust those on the inside to interpret results and pivot as needed. Soon, productive failure becomes a cultural norm, enabling continuous innovation and growth.

Putting it all together

Agile methodologies offer immense advantages when done right. These include faster delivery, improved productivity, and greater customer focus. Missteps abound for the unwary. Companies can avoid common pitfalls by learning from others and securing experienced guidance. They can also realize full benefits by focusing on small wins, continuous learning, and committing to the long haul.

Agile transformation is not for the faint of heart. It demands that leaders courageously embrace challenges as they emerge at each stage of the journey. Building an agile culture requires flexibility, failure tolerance, and perpetual transformation. The result of maximum customer value, organizational well-being, and greater profitability is worth the effort.

References

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