



Agile Programme Management

Introduction

Whether they have set out to build or to discover, from the Pyramids to the Particle Accelerator, people have always run programmes to co-ordinate resources to achieve a common goal. However, it was only in the later part of the 20th century that Programme Management emerged as a distinct science.

To some part driven by the establishment of the computer as a major component of business and industrial life, a set of tools has been established over the past 60 years to structure the art of Programme Management. These were largely developed from manufacturing and defence, where success is usually measured as “delivery on time and on budget”. Tools such as PERT, Gantt, and PRINCE were developed to order the chaos of complex projects, to co-ordinate and plan resources, and to help determine how late a project is going to be – if you ask a project manager what the opposite of “slippage” is on a project the answer may take a while in coming.

In many cases, and especially in complex environments where outcomes are uncertain, the application of these tools has led to excessive project overhead and cost, and in several cases total failure to achieve objectives. In addition, these approaches often fail to recognise and manage project risks. It is an old Military adage that “the plan is only valid until the first shot is fired”, but unfortunately devices such as PIDs and PERTs have a tendency to nail things down at the start and fail to recognise the changes that inevitably take place in environments, organisations, people and technology as a project progresses. No point in spending years developing the better mousetrap if all the mice are dying of ‘flu – no point in planning the expansion of your bank into new products and markets if.....

The Lean Revolution

The management tools that emerged during the latter part of the 20th century concentrated on introducing quality conformance and process into our working lives. Providing both solutions to specific problems (e.g. Six Sigma to eliminate manufacturing defects) and holistic philosophies (e.g. the Kaizen continual improvement philosophy), and driven by a mix of Japanese and US academics and successes especially in motor manufacturing, a **Lean Thinking**¹ philosophy has emerged. For this “*The critical starting point ... is value. Value can only be defined by the ultimate customer. And it's only meaningful when expressed in terms of a specific product (a good or a service, and often both at once), which meets the customer's needs at a specific price at a specific time*”.

¹ Womack and Jones, Lean Thinking, 1996

“Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do so is not doing”
Thomas Edison

“Computers are useless. They can only give you answers” Pablo Picasso



Agile Programme Management

As this revolution was going on in manufacturing, software projects using traditional methods were failing spectacularly – Taurus at the London Stock exchange was 11 years late and 132 times over budget, the London Ambulance Service was brought to its knees by a £15m project that had to be abandoned after implementation, the US Inland Revenue wrote off \$4bn after their modernisation program was scrapped... But while big programmes failed, new approaches emerged in software development. US firms such as Microsoft were at the vanguard, introducing their daily build² approach where each day's production of software was compiled, integrated and tested over-night. This helped them to get “good enough” office automation products such as Excel and Word to the market ahead of their competitors. Other developers cottoned on to the benefits of rapid delivery, and Agile software development emerged, with its mantra “develop quickly, deliver often”.

Thus **Lean** and **Agile** became buzzwords that within a couple of years appeared in most invitations to tender for business transformation - and in every tenderer's CV. However, the majority of IT and business transformation programmes were still governed and run along the traditional lines used to deliver battleships to the US navy in the 1940s. The time had come for an approach that fitted the new environment and the capabilities of the people involved in its transformation – Agile Programme Management.

What is Agile Programme Management?

At Cornwell we see Programme Management as a balancing act between the art of managing people and teams with the science of co-ordinating resources and activities to achieve a common end.



Balancing the **art** of managing people with
the **science** of managing process and technology

² See Cusumano and Selby, Microsoft Secrets 1995

*Almost all
quality
improvement
comes via
simplification of
design... layout,
processes and
procedures”
Tom Peters*

*“The worst
enemy of life,
freedom and
the common
decencies is
total anarchy;
their second
worst enemy is
total efficiency”
Aldous Huxley*



Agile Programme Management

How do we achieve Agility?

Although every Agile programme is different, each needs to recognise a broad set of principles and practices³. These are summarised below:

Agile Project Principles

Foster alignment and co-operation – get to know all the people involved in the programme, walk the floors, encourage the project teams to learn about the organisation/industry/business, ensure vital relationships are formed. Create a common vision of what the programme will achieve, encourage a common language and encourage people to speak it.

Encourage self-organisation – help people and teams to organise themselves to deliver value, not to attend meetings and establish hierarchies, and recognise the fact that organisation should emerge through programmes as trust develops and the vision becomes clearer.

Institute learning and adaptation – projects operate best on the cusp of chaos and order, where there is just enough structure and control. People must be encouraged to move outside their comfort zones and to learn from mistakes. To support this, feedback loops and “virtuous circles” are a key part of every Agile programme, enabling regular re-calibration of project priorities and direction as well as giving people a chance to “do things better next time”. The emphasis Agile places on frequent delivery also greatly helps both project teams and their host organisations to learn and adapt.

It should also be noted that Agile programmes should not have a fixed end date. The technicians and consultants will go away, but for Agile to truly succeed, people and solutions must continually adapt and the spirit of Agile needs to live on.

Agile Project Practices

Agile approaches have learnt from the lean principles of adding value and eliminating waste, and respect the following set of principles:

Establish a guiding vision – the team needs to be aligned and directed with a shared mental model. This needs to encompass the whole programme and be “good enough” to give a shared understanding of where the programme is going. The traditional practice of the “business specification” and the project plan is unlikely to be fit for purpose. However, the approach taken in the UK Government’s MSP

*“Listen to many,
speak to a few”
Shakespeare*

*“Action speaks
louder than words
– but not nearly
so often” Mark
Twain*

*“Hope is a good
breakfast, but it is
a bad supper. If a
man will begin
with certainties,
he shall end in
doubts, but if he
will content to
begin with
doubts, he shall
end in certainties”
Francis Bacon*

*“I do better on the
first three takes; I
won’t be better at
30 takes” Kevin
Bacon*

³ Drawn from “managing Agile Projects” by Sanjiv Augustine 2005



Agile Programme Management

“Managing Successful Programmes” approach whereby a vision and a “blueprint” are created at the start of a programme provides a useful framework.

Establish and empower organic teams – Agile teams should be small, co-located, outcome driven (both in what they are asked to do and how they are organised) and should possess overlapping skills. Teams should be fit for purpose and will probably change their composition, grow, merge or disband as the programme develops. They must also be empowered to make decisions (even of the “act now, apologise later” variety), to agree budgets and to define the outputs they are responsible for delivering.

Establish a set of process rules for the team – simple rules that ensure effective communications and cohesion across and between teams should be agreed at the start and then monitored and changed if they are found not to be effective. Rules may include standard protocols for meetings and workshops and team-working rules such as daily scrum meetings for system developers.

Provide free and open access to information – traditional projects tend to restrict information and are wary of releasing information before it is “signed off”. Information must flow through the veins of an agile programme freely if people and teams are to design, promote and manage change. This may lead to problems associated with too much information so it is essential that information is well communicated (e.g. in Plain English), easily disseminated (e.g. through project portals) and well managed through clear structuring and version control.

Apply a light touch – empowered teams, especially those comprising technical experts, do not take well to micro-management, so the manager has to trust and stand back, while still remaining in charge and responsible. In addition, the iterative nature of many of the activities involved in an Agile programme do not lend themselves to the firm fist of “command and control” management, but focus on measuring outcomes rather than inputs.

Provide adaptive leadership – the manager’s hand must always be on the tiller, reacting to the changing winds, normally with a light touch but when necessary capable of being firm and decisive. As a leader, their responsibility is to ensure that everyone has a shared vision or understanding of the programme from the start, that the focus throughout is on delivering outcomes, and that value is created, recognised and delivered throughout.

“There was a time when nails were high tech. There was a time when people had to be told how to use the telephone. Technology is just a tool. People use tools to improve their lives” Tom Clancy

“To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail” Mark Twain

“If you don’t know where you’re going, you may end up someplace else” Yogi Berra



Agile Programme Management

How do we apply Agile at Cornwell?

Before the Programme starts

At Cornwell we hope we don't think as Mark Twain's "man with the hammer" and see Agile as a "one size fits all" solution. When invited to help a client deliver a programme, Cornwell's senior programme managers will work with their client to answer the following questions:

- 1 Is Agile the best solution? As we get to know the organisation and the required outcomes, we may find that Agile isn't right. This could be for many reasons, and is likely to be a mix of:
 - a. **Scale** and **ambition** of the programme - a simple "waterfall" may be sufficient for a short, clearly defined project, especially where proven solutions exist;
 - b. The **capability** of the organisation or its suppliers to be/ become Agile – if they don't get the plot, the plot won't work;
 - c. **The commitment** of the organisation – Agile only works if the client's organisation is committed to it and recognises the need to provide the right resources at the right time. An Agile programme cannot be left in the hands of suppliers, and if the best people can't be included, then the programme probably won't work.
- 2 What **outcomes** are sought? What should they look like; who are the beneficiaries (and who are not), both within and outside the organisation; how should they be measured, both during delivery and into the future; and who will own the outcomes and ensure they are achieved?
- 3 Who will **lead** the programme? An Agile programme's ambition is to do far more than deliver outputs to budget and timescale. This level of delivery is entrusted to the project managers for each element of the programme. An Agile programme must be lead by a respected individual who almost invariably comes from the Client's organisation, understands its business and culture, has gained the respect of staff, and has the capacity to drive and lead the programme.

It is essential that time is spent asking these questions and considering their answers. During this period we also find it useful to help clients gain more understanding of Agile and its delivery through education programmes, client references, and general discussion with people who have either led or been involved in Agile programmes and who can share "war stories" of the good and the things to watch out for. And if at the end of our discussions we do not believe your organisation is capable of succeeding with Agile, we will tell you so.

*"To command is
to serve - nothing
more and
nothing less"*
Andre Malraux

*"The minute that
you're not
learning I believe
you're dead"*
Jack Nicholson

*"Success is
blocked by
concentrating on
it and planning
for it... Success is
shy – it won't
come out while
you're watching"*
Tennessee
Williams



Agile Programme Management

Supplier Selection and Management

It is probable that the Programme will not only require the services of one or more new suppliers, but that it will also impact on existing supplier relationships. Cornwell can use their extensive experience in supplier selection and contract negotiation to ensure the tendering process incorporates Agile, Agile credentials are checked, and the impact of the programme on the organisation's other suppliers and stakeholders is assessed, risks analysed, and actions taken to ensure minimum disruption and maximum opportunity is taken.

Programme Initiation

Once suppliers are chosen, we would work with our clients to scope and start the programme.

Our first step is often to address one of the essential paradoxes of Agile, which is that although Agile is an effective solution to "fuzzy" problems; it actually requires more clarity and discipline in certain areas. Areas that need to be "nailed down" as much as possible include:

- Roles and responsibilities, especially for programme governance;
- The Business case, incorporating quantifiable and non-quantifiable benefits, but most importantly establishing how benefits will be achieved, how and when they will be measured, and who will own them and ensure they are delivered into the business;
- The programme vision and how it will be communicated. This is often a difficult area as organisations have become wary of "visions" and "mission statements" over the past few years. However, it is essential that the aims and ambitions of the programme are defined and a view of what the business will look like in the future is conveyed in a way that fits with the culture of the organisation.

Programme Management and Assurance

Cornwell's main role once a programme is started is in assuring the achievement of outcomes. Each programme is different and our role and actions adapt to fit, so we may:

- Act as the intermediary between the organisation and their suppliers, assuring programme alignment and quality delivery, and most usually ensuring a pragmatic and consistent approach is taken across the programme;

"Experience is not what happens to you. It is what you do with what happens to you."
A Huxley

"Success or failure in business is caused more by the mental attitude even than by the mental capacities"

Walter Scott



Agile Programme Management

- Act as the guardians (though not the owners) of the programme vision, applying a light touch to ensure sponsors, client staff and suppliers maintain the programme vision and focus on outcomes throughout;
- Act as overall programme managers, establishing programme controls, acting as independent arbiters and governors, and managing suppliers and contracts;
- Provide coaching in Agile to staff and suppliers as needed.

Post Programme

And once the programme is officially closed and the technicians have gone home, we continue to support our clients as required to help them ensure benefits continue to be delivered and the whole organisation continues to make effective use of the changes, process and technologies that have been delivered.

What Services do we Supply?

We are an independent management consultancy that supplies three main services to our clients:

- 1 **Agile Advice:** helping organisations to appraise Agile as a potential approach; advising on programme structures and staffing; helping in the selection of Agile suppliers; carrying out either ad hoc or periodic reviews of Agile programmes;
- 2 **Agile Coaching:** helping our clients scope and steer programmes through to completion. This often also involves supporting our clients' suppliers through a programme, an area where our independence can often be to our clients' advantage;
- 3 **Agile Programme Management:** supplying senior programme managers to provide overall management of Agile programmes, especially in complex programmes where multiple suppliers and stakeholders are involved and where business and technology change have to take place in parallel.

For more information contact: dominic.cornwell@cornwellbc.co.uk

Attitude is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than what people do or say. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill"

W C Fields

"Conquerors estimate in their temples before the War begins. They consider everything."

Sun Tzu – The Art of War