Business change in an agile world

'Agile' has become an increasingly popular way to deliver projects – including projects that have nothing to do with IT. While many organisations are taking the leap into an agile delivery world, the discipline of change management is often left behind or forgotten. However, while the way you manage change effectively may look different in this environment, it remains a crucial ingredient for the success of any project.

An agile approach comprises iterative cycles that deliver early and often, keeping the end customer engaged and involved along the way. It's flexible and doesn't necessarily need a firm end point, allowing a project to change course as business requirements evolve. This means progress can be made without the finished product being fully understood. Plus, insights gained along the way enable flaws to be corrected quickly and can help shape subsequent phases in the project.

There are several natural synergies between this agile approach and managing change effectively. Ingrained in the agile delivery method, for example, is early and regular engagement with impacted business stakeholders, which presents multiple opportunities to interact with end customers to get them on side. This in turn reduces the gap in engagement between design and roll-out that is sometimes experienced in the more traditional 'waterfall' form of delivery.

Unfortunately, despite such natural synergies, all too often change management can still be overlooked in an agile project, mainly due to its singular focus on delivering 'products' in multiple releases across short timescales. However, regardless of the approach being adopted, it's crucial that change is managed well throughout any project to ensure the impacted business areas are set up to realise the full benefits of the investment being made.

Our belief is that the fundamental principles of change management remain the same regardless of the project delivery method. What we have learnt, though, is that there are ways and techniques that you can use to optimise change management in an agile environment and indeed apply agile techniques to change the organisation more widely.

Below are three areas particularly worth focusing on.

Getting everyone on the same page

When agile projects deliver little and often, people's expectations of what will happen on day one need to be reset. They need to know upfront it won't be a big bang with the final product and all the bells and whistles. Instead, they need to understand the benefits of agile delivery and how it will impact them over time, including what's happened so far and how they can contribute going forwards. It will also help to provide them with the right tools to talk knowledgeably about the incremental changes when they speak to others who will be impacted.

More widely, to embed agile delivery as the norm, the organisation needs to adopt an 'agile culture' that embraces flexibility and adaptability and that can absorb frequent change. This requires a significant shift in mindset, and people will require help to do that – so this must be seen as a core component of the 'change journey' alongside the more traditional aspects of change management.

Focus on transparency

Agile delivery teams use visualisation tools to show explicitly how things are progressing – and they do so more rapidly than traditional reporting cycles to a much wider audience, particularly if this information is made available across digital channels. When things are going well, this can quickly build confidence in both the team and the outcomes.

However, challenges or problems are always likely to crop up on a project, so being aware that these are likely to be visible to a range of people at different levels is important. In the agile world being transparent and showing that issues are being recognised and actively managed can make a real difference to project morale. It also opens opportunities for end customers to provide their input to finding the right solution. In contrast, lack of transparency is the way that rumours usually start!

Leverage the agile environment

As noted earlier, when end customers are intrinsically embedded into agile teams, this provides a real opportunity to engage them earlier and more effectively for change management purposes. For example, using their knowledge of the business to understand the change impacts and planning interventions accordingly, or equipping them to be change advocates when they return to their normal business roles.

Another way to leverage the agile environment is to adopt agile principles to change management activities themselves. For example, iterating the change approach through test-and-learn cycles, measuring progress by monitoring the value delivered by change products or welcoming rather than resisting emerging new requirements. Adopting some of these principles will enable change managers to 'walk the talk' and help the project and the organisation to bed in agile ways of working.

In summary, an agile environment provides ready-made opportunities for change management interventions. However, all too often, these are not spotted and taken advantage of. Yet crucially, effective change management is a key success factor for almost any business project, whether it's being run on an agile basis or not. Agile provides the opportunity to do some change management activities differently, but it is not a reason to abandon the fundamental principles of good change management.

The good news is that if executed well, a more agile approach to change will not only enable agile projects to succeed by embedding the changes that they bring about but also provide the broader opportunity to drive a more 'agile culture' across the organisation. And in a business world that seems to be evolving at an ever-increasing pace, becoming a more flexible and adaptable organisation can, surely, only be a good thing.

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