

Agile Culture: A Panels Report from XP 2017

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ABSTRACT

The culture of agile development practices and an assessment of agile's "success" were the topics of two XP2017 panel sessions. There were three primary conclusions of these two panels. Agile has high brand recognition in the software industry, but it isn't always successfully implemented. In some cases, the labels used to explain and promote agile practices can get in the way of agile success. It was also recognized that despite a negative perception, agile's reputation as being a cult was more a reflection of a small, but growing core of practitioners.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.9 [Software Engineering]: Management; K.4.3 [Computers and Society]: Organizational Impacts; K.6.3 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Software Management

General Terms

Management, Economics.

Keywords

Agile development, complexity

1. PANEL DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Agile practitioners had an opportunity at two XP 2017 panels to discuss the direction of the agile movement. These panels were titled "Agile: Cult or Culture" and "Agile: Succeeding or Regressing." In each of these panel sessions, experts participated in a constructive examination of the impact of agile in the software development world.

The purpose of the first panel was to discuss whether agile ideas, practices, norms and beliefs have achieved sufficient momentum to evolve from cult of limited influence to a widely adopted culture not unlike discussions related to the adoption of patterns [1]. The second panel was motivated by criticisms of agile development practices and was convened to assess whether agile is "succeeding."

Three conclusions from these panels regard the "awareness" of agile, the benefits, and the challenges caused on how agile practitioners rely on "labels" in our agile methods, and whether being a "cult" is necessarily negative.

Each of the following sections presents some of the key discussion points that were raised by panelists and the audience at these two panel sessions.

2. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN TOPICS

2.1 Agile Brand Awareness

Agile has succeeded in building a high level of "brand awareness" – but this doesn't mean that all organizations that claim to be agile are really learning and growing. In some cases, "agile" is used to relabel old ineffective practices.

- If you say "agile", people say, "Oh, I know what that is!" But in many organizations, there are people who say they are doing "agile", even if all they are doing is waterfall with a few standups.
- Branding and names can still have value. It is easier to introduce the practices by teaching a known framework. For example, Scrum is a fairly well-known ecosystem, with a well-defined set of processes, ceremonies, and roles.

- The mindset is key here: good agile teams know when to do certain activities and practices, and they succeed in getting really good software out of them.
- In agile culture, it has become acceptable to fail. This is one of the most liberating things that agile brings to the table. Failure sometimes happens, and the team will iterate to improve.
- Even big companies have occasionally gotten it right and managed to deliver an agile project.
- Luke Hohmann's Agile 2015 keynote talk on "Awesome Superproblems" has many useful ideas. He presented a buffet of different things – things that we know work, assuming the techniques apply to our context.

2.2 Labels for Agile Concepts and Practices

Successful companies focus less on the "shiny labels" of their development technology. They are more interested in building a culture where everyone is learning from failure and teams are constantly adapting their processes to do better.

- If we took away most of the labels of agile concepts and practices, would agile stand on its own legs? Would the following for agile have grown more organically, and would it have more staying power?
- **Andrea Provaglio** (agile organizational coach, Italy) explained about why labels cause problems: "I sometimes think that giving labels to things creates resistance. When we draw a name around something, we create a cult... and there are biases that come with the 'us and them' view of the world. We have to be careful that the labels don't cause permanent damage to our thinking, that we can find ways that people can leap across these boundaries – so it can be a culture and we can get the benefits beyond a small circle of people."
- **Silvana Wasitova** (independent agile coach, Switzerland) reported on a discussion she had with an engineering manager at Facebook. "He described their company as being in post-agile mode. In the sense that it goes beyond the labels. But their focus is on continuous delivery. The principles of agile are being delivered, but none of the popular frameworks describe what they do. Their spirit is: 'We just want to move. We're not after perfection. But we want to move and we want to correct what we're doing – if it is wrong, we'll correct it tomorrow and iterate quickly.'"

2.3 Cult and Culture are Closely Related

Don't be negative about something just because someone calls a practice or process – evidence of a cult. Cult and culture are not so far apart.

- "The words Cult and Culture are closely related." **Ken Power** (principal engineer, Cisco, Ireland) cited Harrison Owen's book *The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform*. "Owen talks about the common root of the words cult and culture and cultivating. Owen's definitions: A culture is what the cult creates so that they can cultivate the spirit of what happens in the organization. If we think of the culture that has been cultivated by the original signatories of the Agile Manifesto, it's hugely impactful. And many of us have been in the position of cultivating something within our organizations, and we may have been perceived as a cult member. We certainly have been viewed

as a cult member for trying to introduce this crazy thing called agile into our organizations. We may have seen it spread and grow into more of a culture.” Ken explained how this fits with agile introduction: “Whether it’s the CEO of the organization or an engineering director or a developer on the team, somebody needs to plant the seeds that will later be cultivated by the cult in the organization.”

- **Avraham Poupko** (senior systems architect, Cisco, Israel) warned about falling into a cult of mimicking the practices of a superstar company. “It is tempting to emulate the successful companies, and latch onto accidental attributes that not inherent. We might discover that successful companies have certain attributes, but we have to be clear about what makes them a successful company. It’s not necessarily playing Frisbee in the hallways or having standups that make them good.”

3. PANEL OBSERVATIONS

3.1 Cult and culture in the agile adoption process

The adoption model for agile is affected by whether teams and management view agile as a cult versus agile as a culture.

David Anderson started the discussion with this question: “Could we think of a cult as top-down and a culture as bottom-up? A cult usually has a figurehead – you are following someone. A culture is usually organic, it comes from the bottom up.”

- In the early phases of agile adoption, it might be easier to treat agile as a “cult” – with a small community of motivated followers using a common set of software development practices.
- Company leadership can make a difference between cult and culture.
- The transition from cult to culture can be difficult – there may be some “cult-like” behaviors that become difficult to stamp out.
- It’s all about community. In the early days, before the Agile Manifesto, there was a small core group of people, who were passionate about lightweight development. So, while the agile movement may have started as a cult – it has certainly spread to become a culture.

3.2 The dark side of some agile practices

The discussions also exposed the dark side of agile practices – rituals that might be a big obstacle for some individuals and teams.

Sallyann Freudenberg (independent agile coach, Britain) observed one problem with agile: “Unfortunately, the name ‘agile’ is also associated with some ugly things, such as exclusively open plan noisy workplaces. People start to think that it’s what agile must look like, so if you’re not doing that, you’re not agile. This is a problem because we start excluding good people – people who need peace and quiet to think or people who want to collaborate quietly.”

Diana Larsen (Futureworks Consulting LLC, USA) explained that the industry has seen big swings between cult and culture. “The original Agile Manifesto intended to create a certain kind of culture. But then people got cultish about various aspects of agile, with so much focus on the practices. Some folks have said that this led us on the path to more of a cargo cult than a culture. But agile mindset is really all about culture.”

3.3 Single methodology is not a universal solution

It is almost impossible to solve all of our problems by clinging to a single magic methodology. Instead of using the identical process for each problem, agile teams might need to broaden their search for agile techniques to apply to new problems.

- **Patrick Kua** (technical principal consultant, ThoughtWorks, Britain) pointed out that one method doesn’t fit every problem. “No Scrum-of-Scrums is going to fix problems with integration and testing. Sometimes the answer isn’t to adopt more practices

– the right approach might be to create a simpler architecture or work on adding some automation.”

- **Nancy Van Schoenderwoert** (agile coach, Lean-Agile Partners, USA) explained how success might depend on small things. “My experience is that the technical practices were useful, but the most important factor for success was what I call a bunch of little micro-practices. And they really just amount to being decent with people. Building team spirit, getting team members to work together to finish tasks – these things may have a bigger impact than the regular agile practices.”
- **Andrea Goulet** (Corgibytes, USA) also mentioned Buffer and Zapier as examples of smaller companies who have successfully created an agile collaborative spirit even with geographically-distributed teams.

3.4 Learning beyond the software community

There are things that the agile community can learn from other fields – especially from other parts of the business world.

- **Claes Wohlin** (Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden) described what the agile community loses by being too parochial. “We are limiting ourselves in two ways. First is that we are not embracing what they are doing well in other disciplines. Second is that we make ourselves special, and this is the wrong thing to do. If we make ourselves special, others won’t listen to us. They can learn from us and we can learn from them.”
- Did the agile community lose track of the things that are happening outside of the IT industry? Ideas like change management and Lean are concepts that are at least 40 or 60 years old. Did we somehow lose the connections to the non-IT industries that are developing these ideas further? Did we put ourselves in a corner by relabeling things as “agile?”
- Do we have community amnesia? If you listen to Jeff Sutherland or Mary Poppendieck, they always make that reference and bridge to the earlier experiences and Toyota. Jeff Sutherland always says that Scrum is a flavor of Lean.
- Software developers have created a boundary between our technical field and these other business-related fields, and we might not be willing to look through that boundary. We should be exploring organization design and picking up things we know from psychology about individuation.

3.5 Barriers to communication and collaboration

We sometimes create artificial barriers to communication in our teams, especially when we begin to label some staff members as outsiders.

- **Andrea Goulet** warned about barriers to communication caused by treating non-technical staff members as outsiders. “Cross-pollination is critical... I think the biggest thing you can take away is to stop using the terms technical and non-technical.” Andrea told a story of a recent experience at her company. Although she is an executive manager in her small company, she is part of the agile team, and she includes many her business-related work tasks in the agile planning process. She admitted, “I don’t look like the traditional software developer – I look like the marketing girl.” When one of the staff members said to her “You don’t code” or “I thought you were non-technical,” her reaction was “How am I ever going to become technical?” Andrea explained that there are degrees of technical ability, but everyone on the team contributes to success: “I’m comfortable saying that I’m less technical, it shouldn’t be a binary zero or one. If it is, it will very difficult for us to collaborate. We need to get away from this binary thing, putting people in a specific box. This is one of the things you can start doing today to improve morale.”

4. SUMMARY

The two XP2017 panel sessions were a useful reflection on agile’s successes and challenges.

Agile brand awareness is both a blessing and a curse. Groups that are new to agile may succeed in achieving an “agile mindset” across the organization, they may adopt effective agile development practices, and they may become more tolerant of “failure” as an important step in delivering quality software in an agile way. On the other hand, there are some agile adoption efforts that revert to mainly waterfall practices.

Some agile coaches have found that the labels for common agile concepts and practices can be an obstacle to adoption. The labels can make the agile practices seem like the rituals of a cult. Many companies have found success by adopting agile methods without calling them “agile.”

Finally, the cult versus culture question is complex. Agile culture is usually very positive: improving the software product development process by building team spirit, getting team members to work together, and learning from failure. It is almost inevitable that the early adopters of agile practices will have the enthusiasm, passion, and commitment of cult members. But the success of agile will depend on some key cultural

issues: how well team members communicate and how much focus the teams have on delivering software.

The agile community has developed a strong culture which has served it well to spread awareness of agile principles and practices. There are many challenges in the agile world as well – how to keep a focus on business objectives, how to avoid a cultish compliance with inflexible rules, how to continue to incorporate good ideas from other fields, and how to foster and grow effective communication networks within in agile organizations.

5. REFERENCES

- [1] Steven Fraser, Grady Booch, Frank Buschmann, James Coplien, Ivar Jacobson, Norman L. Kerth, Mary Beth Rosson: Patterns: Cult to Culture? - Panel Session. In the *Proceedings of OOPSLA 1995*: 231-234.