

My Agile Enablement Philosophy

By Gil Broza

My company is called 3P Vantage, and this turns out to be a conversation piece. People ask me, well, what does that stand for? It stands for People, Product, Process – because that’s the order that Agile has them in. People first, Product second, and Process third, which might not agree with the reality you’re in, but that’s how they intended it.

Now, as you might know, my coaching and training career started in the early days of Agile, when few organizations in the world were applying it. Few books existed, and there had been only a couple dozen coaches worldwide. Since then I’ve helped more than 50 companies, and close to 2,000 software professionals move toward effective, humane, and responsible software development using my system, which I call ADAPTIVE®. And I want to share with you today some of how I do that in a people-first manner.

Generally I will help a client company do one of three things: Transition from Waterfall to Agile, which is happening less and less because a lot of them are picking it up on their own. What’s more popular nowadays is to fix a sputtering Agile implementation, or conquer the next peak: they’re doing well, they want more.

The typical cycle of any of these three services involves assessment, training, coaching, and integration. Now, I can’t describe them all in complete detail right now, but I want to give you the highlights of how to do them people-first.

First, here are a few of my guiding principles, regardless of the step in the engagement. I think I have eight of those principles.

1. I care that the teams and organizations implement the Agile principles. If they want Lean, the Lean principles, typically both would also be a good idea. I don’t actually care whether they use Scrum or XP or anything else, as long as it respects the principles. In my quest to be pragmatic, I actually rip out a good part of established methodologies, and add in newfound practices and structures. I like to keep current, and make whatever the teams do be profoundly pragmatic.
2. I only work with the willing. Sometimes that actually draws a laugh out of people when I say, “I only coach the willing.” But if somebody doesn’t want to change, or doesn’t want my assistance, I won’t push myself where I’m not welcome because there’s just no point. Now, if that’s a single person in an otherwise willing team with support of management, I will also work with them separately from the team in order to crack the concrete. I’m not always able to; generally I am, but some people just do not care for the change. And it doesn’t matter that they bring somebody in from the outside, such as myself, or they have internal support. That’s just not going to happen.
3. Respect the current state, never knock what they are doing so far, and only introduce change that they can tolerate. It doesn’t matter how far I think a certain team or organization should go, the closest milestone needs to be achievable. I never pronounce

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any current practice crazy or silly, or judge it in any sort of way. I don't get on soapboxes. If there is a sacred cow – and every organization has a few of them – or just a longstanding habit, I might start a discussion about its pros and cons so people can reflect on it and inspect it, and maybe consider it different ways.

I never want to let anybody feel stupid or backwards. I hope I've never done this myself, but I've seen it done, and it's not pretty. I really subscribe to the basic premise that people operate according to what they see as best in a situation, and if I can help them with that, maybe they change their minds about what's best.

4. I want people to have hope. Often, the overall organization is actually not going to change much. But I will still show my teams what's possible, and especially if they change what's in their immediate environment. It's really important that people have hope. And I've been invited to places where Agile has been pushed down on people, and really, all I can do (and it's sad to say), is make the best of a bad situation. It doesn't feel good, so I definitely prefer to work with the willing, but if there's a chance of actually doing something useful, I will certainly go there.
5. This is actually another quote. I'm sure many of you will recognize it. "Attribute to ignorance what would otherwise be attributed to malice." Sometimes I come into an organization – again, there's been more than 50 of them so far – and I'm told "Watch out for so-and-so," because so-and-so is rigid, or pedantic, or non-cooperative, or old school, or confrontational. The funny thing is, I actually spend extra time with those people, and I really amp the empathy and the kindness, so they feel valued and respected, because their teams will not always actually treat them this way. And you know the funny thing? These people (like most) eventually move on to other places. Then they hire me again, to do Agile in their companies! It's happened a few times. It's even shocking to a few people to see just what sort of personal transformation is possible, when people feel respected.
6. Most of my end users (my customers, so to speak), they tend to be developers, testers, managers, designers, product managers and so on. They tend to be highly pragmatic, so that's how I discuss things with them. I rarely quote theoretical models or give the theoretical / mathematical / probabilistic / process-theoretic / empirical explanations or research, unless there's a chance they would actually resonate with people. And I'd say that for 99% of people, even those who actually have the background from university or from previous jobs, they don't actually care! So why pound them with that if we can talk pragmatics?
7. Much of the process is optional and customizable. So I like to start with the suggested minimum, gain acceptance, and then modify. Instead of starting with a precast opinion, such as, "Oh, demos are a must," and, "Standups are a must," and "Thou shalt estimate with points and hours."
8. I always show options and support people in choosing. For instance, do you want to estimate or not? Do you want to limit work in progress or not? I keep sending the message that it's up to them to choose the path, and I'll support them.

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So these have been the guiding principles. I want to talk more specifically about how, for instance, I assess a situation. I know that a lot of companies invite consultants (such as myself) to come in and assess the situation, but others will actually do the assessment on their own. So, I want to point out some of the things that I look for when I conduct assessments, and maybe you can do the same things.

It's really important to observe meetings. So when I observe meetings, I just sit there. I tell everybody, "You know, I'm a fly on the wall. I'm not here to intervene." (Unless they ask me to.) I pay attention to body language, to who talks and who doesn't. Do they allow what's known as the "groan zone," which is really where a lot of options are being explored, and sometimes it gets even a little bit heated, or something like that? Or, do they jump straight into decision-making? I look for engagement and motivation. I look for the participants making progress as a team.

I want to tell you a story about this. I was assessing a company in Toronto a year ago, and they were doing Waterfall at the time. I sat in on a meeting with a bunch of testers and their lead. So, they were just planning the next couple of weeks. And the test lead, he was a friendly, smart, outgoing type, and he really tried to get people to participate, but it wasn't happening. So he was standing near his whiteboard, and trying to solicit contributions from people, and it just wasn't happening.

Fifteen minutes into the meeting his phone rang. He actually checked who it was from. It was his manager, so he said, "Sorry, I have to step out," which I found surprising, but okay. And then I just sat there looking; and people are looking at each other. This is the scene in the movies where you hear crickets. And eventually, one of the testers said, "Uh, well, maybe we'll just continue." And there were a few nods all around. He stepped up to the whiteboard and they got into a conversation. And it was actually a normal, participative type of meeting where most people spoke, and they got good stuff going. I was shocked, and I actually even violated one of my rules for assessments - which is again, don't intervene unless asked for in advance - I actually went outside and I asked the team lead not to come back *yet*, because we were experiencing team dynamics that were very promising, and we want to see where they go. So this is the sort of thing I pay attention to. Not so much the mechanics, not so much the process; it's like how they behave as teams.

I always ask: what keeps people here? And you'll be surprised. When you do assessments, you'll be surprised at what actually keeps people around. I really like the theory presented by Dan Pink in the book, "Drive." It's backed up by a lot of research, but it really says that intrinsic motivation is the big deal. Motivation comes from within. He speaks about autonomy, mastery, and purpose. I sometimes speak about fun, meaning, and challenge. I might've picked it up from somebody else, I can't remember whom. But the thing is, you want to know what keeps people around, because if they're not motivated, a process change, a methodology change, a structural change won't probably matter much.

Other things I look at are workspace properties. For instance, people spend a good deal of their waking time in an office - is it welcoming? Do they actually want to be there? Which is why cubicle farms leave something to be desired for the most part. I look at foot traffic patterns, how

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people use and customize their space. Because the more they own it, the more they feel they belong.

I look for evidence of leadership. I look for evidence of self-preserving behavior. Unfortunately, that happens in too many organizations, where people really look out for number one more often than we'd like. And that means that putting people in a team is probably not a winning proposition. It might work in the short term, but if otherwise people are worried what will happen, they'll say, "Yeah, we rise as a team but we fall individually." Then a whole methodology predicated around teamwork will probably not take off so well.

I look for evidence of pride and satisfaction, evidence of empowerment. And also, here's another interesting thing: I always include some form of education or teaching in my assessment. So anytime I interview people, I make sure to also explain where I'm coming from, and why am I asking these questions, and why certain things seem to give better results than others. And I find that when it comes to assessments, this is really powerful. Because what will happen is that people don't just feel that I'm taking, taking, taking by just asking stuff and subsequently rendering judgment - but I can also give back a little bit. And if we are in fact to end up working together, I want the relationship to be symbiotic. People will not take well to a coach or a trainer who they feel is above them.

So in other words, really the main things I look for are all the things that are not covered by that famous Nokia test - that test that Nokia developed to assess their own implementation of Scrum. It might have worked for them, but it became incredibly popular. And it's really primarily about process and structure, and there's so much more about the people who actually live in the structure and apply the process.

Now, in training. Typically a training I do is a two-day "Pragmatic Scrum" course, or a two-day "Agile Engineering" course. So this is where I have developers and quite often tech leads and architects, and we look at all the things that devs have to do to in an Agile environment to sustain Agility.

The important thing for me in training is to meet people where they are. There will be people with different skill levels and different expectations, and different preconceived opinions about the process. I typically send out prework to gauge their emotional reaction to the subject matter. So if I can tell that there's going to be a whole lot of skepticism or anxiety or frustration with people coming into the training, then I actually customize it differently to help them get past it. Because it's more important for them to get over or to accept these emotions and move on, rather than just soak up knowledge that they're not going to use.

Empathy is a big deal in training. So for instance, when I teach Test-Driven Development (TDD), I say, "You know, I can explain Test-Driven Development in five minutes, what's the big deal. But to actually get good at it, it's going to take you months. And during those months you're probably not going to feel all that great about yourself." This is where we bring in the Satir Change Curve, the change model that explains how people react, how they respond universally in situations of change. "And you might feel some days that it is scary; or that it's even irresponsible to write code this way. And it might just look backwards, right?" So, I try to key in to how people are feeling, and how they might be feeling about it, so they can have the

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hope, so they can understand that the first couple of months, where some days are better and some days are worse, that if they have less than stellar results, that's not a case of failure, it's a case of learning.

And another thing that is incredibly important, and this is a topic that comes from NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). It turns out that everybody runs this sort of metaprogram, some sort of mental processing pattern, that has to do with approaching work. Some people like having options before they choose the way to go. And other people like to have what's known as procedures, which is basically to say, here is a good (or the right way) to proceed. People respond differently to how stuff is presented to them.

So if I say, "Look, in Scrum you need to estimate stories with points, and you should use the cards for Planning Poker, and Fibonacci estimation is a really good idea," (which I never say, by the way) and so on and so forth, "this is the procedure." I tell people what the right way to do is. There are always people in the audience who really take to that and say, "Okay, now I know what to do." But there are other people who will instinctively rebel and say, "What are my other options?"

So any time I train people in whatever aspect of teamwork, process, whatnot, I will make sure to present both procedures and options. So I might say, "Here is one procedure. It's well accepted, people have been using it, it seems to get good results. But if you don't like that, here is another option. You could do this as well. Up to you; I'll help you choose." This tends to go across well with both subsets of the audience.

And lastly - we only have a few more minutes to go - when it comes to coaching, I never, ever dump process on people. I want to suggest valid options based on my experience, and let people choose. And if I'm working with a team who is inherently very curious, or somewhat experienced with process thinking, I let them make the suggestions. I had a team just a few weeks ago stumble on WIP limits. So, it's an Agile team, and they somehow ended up saying, "We want to limit how much work we put in every state of a story." So, maybe somebody had read up on WIP limits from Kanban; I don't know how that got to be, it wasn't my suggestion. They were engaged and motivated and they wanted to make stuff happen, and they just ran with it.

When I coach a team, and that's usually anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, what's important to me is to increase engagement, involvement, and empowerment. I'm not too worried about the process itself. So I achieve a lot of that through that age-old mechanism called Coaching By Walking Around, which is modeled after Management By Walking Around - which means a whole lot of connecting people. So not just getting people into a meeting room where they sit diligently and wait for me to speak. Rather, I just go around and I talk with people, one on one, one on two; I pull up a chair; I use informal hallway meetings. There's a whole lot more talking, but the results are actually very powerful.

I work on building teamwork, and really give any sort of teaming support to encourage leadership behaviors and really strong teamwork.

I like to monitor team interactions for unhealthy signs. Sometimes there are rumblings; sometimes there is domination; sometimes there is cowboy behavior, and I monitor those very

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closely. Mostly through observation and conversations. So those things can be addressed early on. If you let them fester, much of the Agile benefit is not going to happen.

In the coaching world there are all sorts of stances, which is really how the coach approaches a client in a given situation. A very common stance is “you know the answer – let me help you find it within you.” And I find that in a lot of Agile coaching, that stance is not productive because I’m there to show people a different way, that other people have developed, and they will customize – but they don’t have the answers yet. They actually do need a little bit of subject matter expertise. They do want to rely on me as the trusted advisor, and all that. So I actually prefer to give options, and suggest, and tell stories, encourage people to experiment; and work first through their fears, either with logic or with emotion – typically with emotion.

I keep reminding people of two things. One is, the principles matter. Whatever practice you’re using, that’s just one possible manifestation. Because whenever people get too hung up on the process (that’s again the ‘procedures’ thinking), what I’ll do is just dissect it with them so they understand the value of each step. And if they insist on a detailed or rigid procedure, I give them one. And later we debrief the experience from using it.

But the other thing – and that’s something I started doing recently – I constantly have to remind people that they are not victims of the process. It causes me endless frustration to see people respond to Agile, especially when it’s sort of dumped on them, as “this could be good, but there’s so much about it I don’t like, but there’s nothing I can do.” You can see this when people show up to the standup, and they just can’t wait to get out of it. You see this when people have any artifacts brought in. For some it’s a task board, and they say, “No, we hate this!” One team I assessed a couple of months ago wanted to throw it out the window. You see this when people go to retrospectives and they will not admit stuff. You see this when people go to the demo and say, “Why are we wasting this time?”

This happens when people feel victims of the process, and I work with them on pulling back, working back to the basics, understanding, well, what are the principles underlying all of this? And why are we doing this? Who cares? If you do the meetings right; if you do the ceremonies right, all of that, and it still doesn’t get you the value that it’s supposed to get you, we’re going to do something else. And if it’s supposed to get you value that you don’t actually care for – for instance, the daily standup for a team that regularly sees each other and converses well, and everybody knows what everybody else is doing and what you’re stuck on – you don’t need a standup, okay? Pragmatic.

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