: What IS and what IS NOT essential to be agile?

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We are bombarded by buzzwords, technical jargon, and colorful metaphors in the culture of agile processes and agility. What is essential for increased agility and what is heritage, jargon, overly colorful terms, and perhaps even the esoteric of agile? Ideally agile must be widely understood in an organization to change a culture and for employees and teams to become more agile. Agile knowledge cannot be the realm of the few and owned and understood by only a small number of people with specialized knowledge or deep interest. We need an easy to understand set of agile ideas with limited jargon. Agile should be implemented in accord with agile principles within an organization and its culture. There are multiple agile frameworks and methodologies. They all share similar philosophies, characteristics, and practices. Implementation of each agile approach means understanding competing practices, terminology, and tactics. So what is essential and what is not?

1. Essential: Know agile principles and hold agile values. We highly value our colleagues and our interactions with colleagues and stakeholders; we collaborate openly and honestly with stakeholders; we want to deliver results frequently, and in meaningful increments; and finally, we both anticipate change in our plans, and we embrace and respond to change as we implement our plans.

2. Essential: Have a "daily" task-focused project team meeting. The meeting keeps an agile team focused on results. Asking structured questions about progress and plans is crucial, calling the meeting a daily Scrum is not. Standing during the meeting is a good practice and calling the meeting a daily "standup" reminds us to stay focused and high-quality task completion.

3. Essential: Being agile is critical for the success of technically complicated, complex, changing, and even chaotic projects and tasks. The more ambiguity in goals and requirements and the greater the uncertainty, the greater the need for an agile approach.

4. Essential: Have a plan, prioritize tasks, keep track of progress, revise tasks to reflect new needs and changes. Actively manage the "To-Do" list for an increment of work and the project as a whole.

5. Essential: Identify and define tasks for a project. Start with a "To-Do" list, pick high priority tasks to try to accomplish in each work period. Add tasks, revise tasks, even delete them as seems appropriate. Think from your customer's point of view when defining tasks. Tasks should be focused and big enough to track and small enough to complete in a reasonably short time period.

6. Essential: Reflect, think about what was done well and what could have been done better, following a defined, short work period, often 2 weeks. How much was accomplished?

7. Essential: Find ways to create and increase value for customers and stakeholders. Know how they define value. Measure what is finished.

8. Essential: Simplicity. Maximize the amount of work not done.

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1. Not Essential: The esoterica and ritual of agile approaches. We can choose to use or ignore jargon like time-boxed and colorful metaphors like Scrum or eXtreme.

2. Not Essential: To always use an agile approach. Do not use an agile approach for every project and activity. Simple projects that are highly structured can be completed quickly with a traditional structured project approach.

3. Not Essential: Do not obsess on terms like product versus project, or product backlog and sprint backlog. A backlog is a "To-Do" list, there is nothing magical. Use a term only if it helps your understanding or the understanding of others. A team accomplishes work and delivers value.

4. Not Essential: User stories are not appropriate or needed for every project. There are many acceptable ways to define and specify tasks.

5. Not Essential: Do not obsess about creating burndown charts, story points, and preparing calculations for the amount of work completed in a sprint, the so-called velocity of project completion. Measure what is finished.

6. Not Essential: More hype about agile. There is no need for exaggerated statements or claims. It is better to exceed expectations.

What is essential can not be forgotten or ignored. Those "things" that are not essential are applied and adopted at the discretion of the team, the members, and the organizations. Don't become pedantic, too concerned with literal accuracy or formality, about agile approaches and methods.

The key to becoming and being agile is one's mindset. You must know agile principles and believe and hold agile values. Think agile!

References

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