



# Empowering Managers to Lead through **Agile** **Transformations**

By Mimi Hall

*Managers and teams require support when faced with a fundamental shift in daily activities.*

**A**gile software development is much more than a trend. Agile development emphasizes producing working software quickly with frequent stakeholder interactions, testing, and continuous improvement. Agile principles do not prescribe specific practices. Frameworks such as Scrum, Extreme Programming (XP), and Feature Driven Development overlay Agile principles and help teams with “how” to organize work.

“Being Agile” was once the domain of startups and technology-based companies with organizational structures and cultures that promoted rapid, customer-centric innovation through feedback loops with stable

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teams. As Agile has proven its ability to align development with business needs, large organizations are implementing Agile beyond individual teams and portfolios. Frameworks such as the Scaled Agile Framework, Large-Scale Scrum, Scrum of Scrums, and others are gaining traction as enterprises look for help scaling their Agile team practices.

Established enterprises have teams and managers. Whether their growth is internally fueled, or value was created through mergers and acquisitions, large organizations are unlikely to organize into “pods” with self-organizing and self-managing teams in the near term. Let’s consider, then, what it means for managers when an organization decides to “go Agile.”

At its core, Agile’s success depends on people and strong teams. Approaches to scaling Agile beyond delivery teams may introduce new roles and responsibilities, which in turn introduces new tensions that leaders must address as they transform their organization. Regardless of the framework, efforts to scale Agile should emphasize values and cultures that support stable, relatively autonomous teams.

When companies look to scale Agile, they will likely leverage their management chains to communicate the changes. Yet managers are also undergoing the change and thus should be the focus of separate change



### **Foundational Factors**

Even with sufficient support and execution of change management, successful Agile implementations have prerequisites.

Acclaimed academic, theorist, and consultant William Dettmer describes these factors in terms of technical, economic, and political feasibility.

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#### **TECHNICAL:**

Is the job within our abilities?

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#### **ECONOMIC:**

Do we have the funds to accomplish it?

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#### **POLITICAL:**

Can we persuade the people involved that it’s worthwhile?

A negative answer to just one of these can put an entire endeavor at risk. The knowledge, the skills and tools, the funds, and company culture are foundational to successful Agile implementations—especially those in large organizations.

A QUICK CHECK TO YOUR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT MODEL:



**Set the foundation:**

Have you established the right political, economic, and technical factors to support your change? (see sidebar on previous page)



**Enable learning:**

What training do you have in place for manager leaders to learn about the changes and the available resources for them and their teams?



**Champion and clarify the changes:**

Have you provided proactive communications from the senior leader(s) implementing the Agile transformation?



**Create feedback loops:**

What kinds of open forums are available for employees to engage?



**Ensure you have the right people on the team:**

Where do your people's interests lie? How do their interests and skills map to roles in your scaled Agile implementation?



**Consider their journey:**

Who are the best thought leaders and coaches to support your managers' professional development goals? How does Agile play in?



**Give enough space:**

What is your timeline for implementing this change? Are you providing managers enough time to understand and support the teams through their Agile journeys?



**Ask:**

Are we asking too much? Don't expect managers to build the plan and execute it too.

*Work with organizational design and human capital experts to create a change and communications plan and support it in parallel with your Agile transformation.*

management efforts. Anyone with management responsibilities should feel like a leader of the change.

Successful Agile transformations across an enterprise happen because a needed mindset change is reiterated through daily practice until it becomes the new norm. Start by educating your management team so, with their help, you can take the organization through a series of smaller changes, all with a laser focus on accomplishing specific business aims by supporting strong teams and establishing customer and employee feedback loops. Without

the requisite level of cross-functional leadership, intentional messaging, tooling, and coaching support in place, you'll be challenged to implement Agile at scale.

Be patient with yourself and your leadership team as you work through these and other to-dos to get your scaled Agile implementation off the ground. Be clear about the problem that you are trying to solve, and set your first goal. Establish feedback loops to gauge how you're doing, and if you make it safe to share feedback, you'll get to that first goal. Once you're there, it's on to

the next improvement, challenge, or response to the market. By carving out a distinct place for your management team, and arming them with the tools to lead and encourage positive habit changes, you can drive toward success.

Considering scaling Agile at your organization? Reread Adam Herndon's thoughts on "Agile Success at the Enterprise Level!" in the Spring 2013 issue of The Jabian Journal. [Q](#)

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