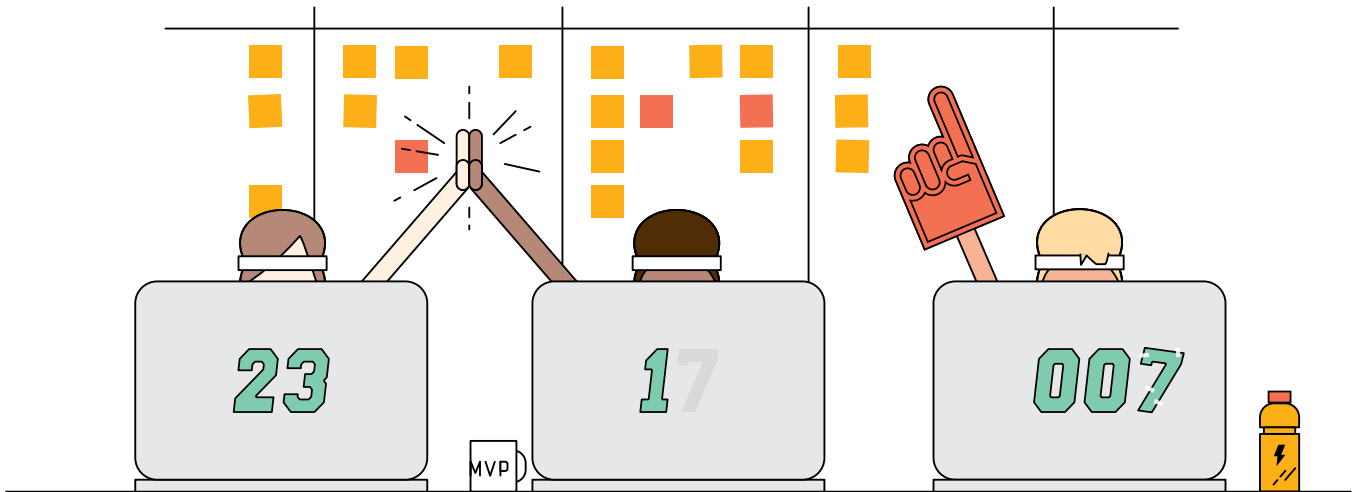


PROGRAMMERS



Tips for Building and Sustaining Durable Agile Teams

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ore and more businesses are adopting Agile methodologies to deliver projects.

While Agile is in vogue today with many large enterprises, Agile adoption is not new. Iterative development and the precursors to what we think of as Agile today go back decades. The Agile Manifesto, encapsulating Agile's organizing principles, was created more than 16

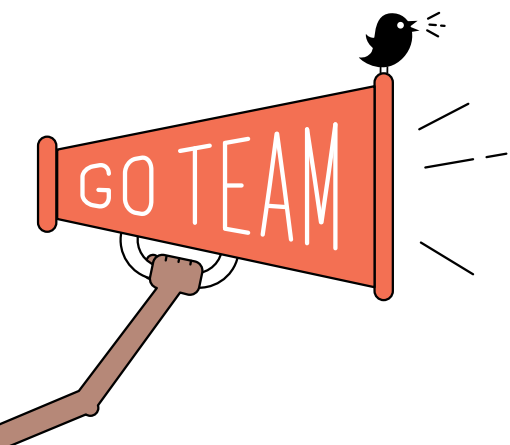
Relatively inexpensive ways to promote principles that undergird successful Agile teams and healthy businesses.

years ago. That means many people in the workforce today may have worked only on Agile teams their entire career.

Yet, far too often, business and technology executives fail to maximize the benefits of Agile by neglecting to adequately nurture their Agile teams. When an Agile team is first formed, there are inevitable growing pains. Members must learn to communicate and



proactively promote themselves to attract the right candidates. They can do so by emphasizing their brand and culture—both within the organization and on externally facing platforms.



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Teams should consider touting their mission, culture, and personality on social media platforms or a team website. To better assess candidate fit, teams should conduct multiple rounds of interviews, mixing one-on-one and group formats, during which candidates are asked non-leading questions.

Teams should pay close attention to outlier impressions. If everyone except one teammate loved a candidate, the team should dig into the concerns of that dissenting voice. Subtle clues should not be dismissed without consideration. A candidate who has excellent technical skills but is a poor cultural fit for the team is a recipe for disaster. Moreover, when members of the team are involved in the recruiting and hiring of new team members, they are more invested in the person, and more likely to work to make them successful on the team.

Next, teams must focus on effectively onboarding new hires. Astute leaders recognize that teams often need to need to “slow down to speed up.” Teams should focus on inculcating new teammates with the organization and the team’s mission. Teams can spend time explaining the team’s history, the company’s customers, and the context within which the team operates. Buddy onboarding can accelerate assimilation. By pairing the new hire with an experienced teammate, the new hire can learn and acclimate faster.

Invite new hires to spend time with the team’s product owner and customers to understand the business context. Doing so can get them excited and invested in the product. It can also

speed the onboarding process and align them to the team’s mission.

Scheduling a team-building session within the first month of hire allows the new hire to build key relationships with team members, which in turn builds trust and enables open communications needed for success. All of this takes an investment of time from incumbent teammates—an investment that can temporarily diminish the team’s velocity. However, by accelerating the onboarding of new teammates, teams can minimize the disruption caused by attrition and support both team durability and long-term value delivery.

#2

Establish a Team Brand

Successful Agile development is a deeply collaborative endeavor, carried out by teams. Through teams, each member is often able to accomplish things beyond their individual capacity. Team sports and history are filled with examples of individuals coming together to accomplish a mission.

The celebration of those accomplishments—coupled with corresponding ceremony, pageantry, and brand identity—instills pride and a commitment in future teammates to uphold the quality and shared mission of the team.

The New England Patriots, the Duke Blue Devils, the 101st Airborne, and the Red Cross are all examples of successfully branded teams whose members feel a deep connection to

their respective organizations and a commitment to supporting the mission and maintaining the qualities embedded in the organization's brand.

Business and technology leaders can engender similar pride and loyalty among team members by encouraging low-cost efforts to brand Agile teams internally. When first formed, teams should pick a team name. Instead of something dry like the "product x buyer experience team," the team should pick something unique that reflects the interests of its teammates, such as a reference from pop culture. Organizations can place guardrails around the range of choices to ensure all Agile team names follow a similar theme.

The team should think of its name less as a name and more as a brand. Team history can be preserved and the team's brand promoted by celebrating wins (e.g., pictures of team outings, key customer quotes, etc.) and documenting successes on team room walls or on a social media platform. Creating T-shirts with team names and logos is another easy and inexpensive way to further form team identities and bind teammates together.

Teammates should be encouraged to cultivate pride within their teams and grow their brand's reputation. As new teammates join, teams should share the values and the history of their brand. Being purposeful in creating team identity can make work more fun and enjoyable. Leaders can use these levers to help drive employee well-being and ultimately increase employee engagement, commitment, and retention.

#3

Create Learning Teams

No one wants their work to feel like work. Over time, without variety, work becomes monotonous. Teams that are amenable to teaching others can break that monotony and restore their sense of purpose and shared mission by becoming learning teams. This can be a unifying experience: As teams come together to educate a new teammate, they're forced to prioritize and focus on what matters most and to organize around a shared approach.

Teams that proactively work to teach others can coalesce around a renewed purpose, improving employee engagement while growing the organization. Teaching others may help teams challenge assumptions and further hone their skills through the process. Interns and inexperienced hires may also bring new ideas and skills to the team, resulting in bidirectional learning.

While the benefits of fostering learning teams are real, this approach is not without risk. To be effective as a unifying and motivating force, the team must voluntarily decide to teach others. Forcing inexperienced resources or interns on a team that isn't willing or equipped to support them can result in disagreements, frustration, and rancor, fracturing teams, reducing team autonomy, and adversely impacting productivity.

However, for teams that are amenable, teaching others can be an excellent, cost-effective way of

challenging old assumptions and reminding existing teammates of organizational and/or team norms, culture, and objectives.

As a company looks to evolve its culture, high-performing teams can become a training ground for others. Organizations might consider rewarding promising employees with a rotational stint on a desirable team. Those employees could then radiate that experience and learned values throughout your organization as rotations end and teammates move to new teams.

This approach allows savvy leaders to seed their organization with better trained, more highly motivated employees with a renewed sense of mission. It may also allow leaders to shift the culture of their organization, as teammates leave the learning teams and spread the values learned thereon to other teams.

#4

Push Decision-Making to Teams When Possible

Astute leaders actively seek ways to push decision-making down to their teams to achieve strategic outcomes. Teams are often closest to the problems organizations need to solve and, if regularly engaging with customers, often better understand the context in which the solution will operate.

Individual teams may be more nimble than the broader organization and, therefore, more responsive to customers' needs. Teams may also

have deeper insight into and appreciation for technical challenges that may be inherent in potential solutions. If they're empowered to do so, teams become more invested in the problems they're trying to solve and will naturally take greater ownership of outcomes.

Leaders should hold teams accountable for the decisions they make, but allow them to feel safe to experiment and adjust as they learn. Successful leaders actively create cultures that embrace these principles and in doing so, they create healthy and fun work environments that promote autonomy, encourage accountability, and empower individuals. As a result, they create value for their organizations, building admired companies that attract and retain talent and ultimately deliver superior value to customers.

#5

Make Continuous Improvement Part of Your Culture

Successful leaders create cultures that encourage frequent, candid feedback, thereby fostering reflection, growth, and continuous improvement. Sprint retrospectives, when facilitated properly, are safe spaces for teammates to recognize successes and identify opportunities for improvement.

If people feel safe to share constructive criticism with their colleagues, the team is able to learn, improve, and evolve. To encourage greater openness, some teams bring in a third party to facilitate retrospectives. A neutral third party, free of preconceived notions or hidden



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agendas, can help teams overcome challenges, draw out latent issues and encourage constructive feedback and growth.

Over time, strong teams become more adept at giving and receiving feedback; they don't limit their feedback to periodic retrospectives, but give, solicit, and expect feedback more frequently or in real time during code reviews or pairing sessions. In such situations, feedback loops are more frequent and actively providing feedback becomes a cultural norm. Effective leaders work to create environments where giving and receiving feedback is encouraged and safe.

Agile, to a much greater extent than traditional software delivery models, allows for and encourages routine measurement and continuous assessment of team performance. Unlike Waterfall, where software delivery is stretched over longer time horizons of several months to more than a year, Agile development and releases to production typically occur in no more than four-week increments. This allows teams, managers, and organizations to routinely assess performance, identify opportunities for improvement, and course correct.

By routinely tracking performance and addressing issues promptly, teams identify challenges earlier and take incremental steps towards improvement. This can produce greater

satisfaction and progress, which in turn may improve employee engagement and retention.

However, measuring performance alone will be of little value if your culture does not promote openness. If fear, blame, criticism, and recrimination are the expected outcomes of missed targets, teams will find ways to manipulate performance data, rendering measurements meaningless.

To realize the benefits of Agile, teams must not only track their performance, they must be given the space to experiment, fail, and adjust. Healthy teams are transparent teams, open about their performance, the sources of their successes and failures, and receptive to constructive feedback. These teams succeed or fail together. They actively search for the root cause of any performance challenges, rather than reflexively pointing fingers at one another. They seek ways to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Agile ceremonies such as Stand Ups, Retrospectives, and Sprint Reviews promote transparency and assessment. Healthy teams and organizations not only leverage these standard ceremonies, taking their learnings to heart, they make continuous improvement a cornerstone of their culture. The best teams and organizations periodically conduct Agile health assessments or health checks to assess their Agile teams and processes, identify opportunities for

improvement, and develop actionable plans for remediating deficiencies.

Some teams may need outside assistance to transform their way of working. In addition to assessments, leaders can support their Agile teams and promote healthy Agile processes by providing experienced Agile coaches. Agile coaches can dip into multiple teams, help teams resolve conflict, encourage healthy Agile processes, provide support to less experienced teammates, and coach product owners and business stakeholders. Successful leaders insist their organization periodically undergo a health assessment, and they provide the support and resources necessary to address any findings therefrom.

#6

Connect Teams With Users

Agile development is, in large part, about removing barriers between teams and end users, shortening the feedback loop and delivering incremental value to users on a regular basis. When Agile teams lose sight of or have limited interaction with users, they become blind to the positive impact of their work and in turn are less invested in outcomes.

Furthermore, direct user/customer interaction with a team can help ground future decisions. Users provide meaningful, real-time feedback, allowing the team to react quickly. Because the user will feel the consequences of the team's decisions directly, it also raises the stakes for the team and can engender empathy for the user and emotional investment in the solution designed on their behalf.

Finally, through direct customer interaction, teams become intimately aware of the context within which their application is used. When coding, context is considered, and decisions are based on many more variables. This, in turn, results in a product that better meets customer needs. Smart managers value and find ways to encourage those interactions whenever possible.

While teams can meet and communicate with actual users remotely, face-to-face interaction is highly beneficial. Seeing the problem firsthand can lead to valuable customer insights and creative solutions. Depending on the issue, the team may be able to do rapid prototyping to address a user challenge on site, discover unknown pain points through conversation with the user, or observe an inefficient process that can be improved by the team.

As customers see both their interests addressed and the quick reaction to the feedback they provide, they start to trust the team, which often results in a virtuous feedback cycle, and ultimately, a better product.

Travel can also be fun for the team, building camaraderie as teammates learn more about one another. The shared experience of travel becomes part of a team's lore. The anecdotes that arise may further reinforce the team's identity, and the intra-team interactions may create lasting memories that bind a team together.

The team can memorialize these shared experiences and learnings from users, especially motivating customer testimonials, on their team wall, further strengthening a team's history and identity. The result is an increased sense of ownership, accomplishment, pride, and potentially deeper

relationships across the team and with clients.

All of the suggestions above should be made in consultation and with the consent of your teams. They shouldn't be top-down directives. As with most teams composed of knowledge workers, Agile teams' motivation and sense of fulfillment is based in part on their relative autonomy. By dictating the adoption of these suggestions, you effectively remove that autonomy and can adversely impact diminish team productivity.

Agile is an effective means for delivering quality software, but at its core, Agile is built upon principles that precede it: respect the dignity of people; empower them to make decisions; encourage reasonable experimentation; recognize successful performance; and hold individuals and teams accountable for outcomes.

There is no single formula for creating and sustaining durable Agile teams. However, the tips above, in our experience, are relatively inexpensive ways to promote principles that undergird successful Agile teams and healthy businesses. When supported by leadership and voluntarily adopted by teams, these suggestions can be powerful drivers of employee engagement, accelerating Agile delivery and creating value for your customers and your organization. ◀

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