



Agile for All (Agile Is Caught, Not Taught)

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For an agile transformation to succeed at scale, non-IT departments play a vital role to bring about a sustainable change. In this report, I share how business teams at AstraZeneca are choosing to adapt the Agile ways of working across the globe, and are creating the pull for other departments to adopt similar ways of working.

1. INTRODUCTION

In late 2013, AstraZeneca was faced with the twin challenges of funding investment in an array of promising new medicines whilst also facing generic competition to some of its most successful products. It was apparent that the company needed to change the way that it worked to ruthlessly prioritize those projects that would make the most impact to the business in the short and longer term.

Senior leadership at AstraZeneca noted that there were differences between the ways that its business functions operated to those of its IT department.

The ambition was to transform AstraZeneca for employee efficiency, creativity, and perhaps most importantly: a culture of collaboration. In my heart, I knew I had to carefully choose a route to sustainable enterprise agility.

Having learned numerous painful lessons leading multiple global transformations over the past decade (in large global corporations and sectors including energy, telecom, utilities, manufacturing, publishing, advertising, civil service etc.), in addition to researching change models by global gurus, I understood that 90% of culture change programs fail due to two reasons: a lack of investment in developing internal change agents, as well as a lack of focus on removing negative language across the departmental silos.

Internal, full-time experts were needed to provide thought leadership on the transformation journey. Instead of hiring external consultants, as was the previous norm at the company, new leadership at AstraZeneca wanted to build from the inside. I (Naveed Khawaja) was brought in by the Agile Center of Excellence (CoE) as a thought leader and master trainer, to train and coach others, many of whom who would later go on to become internal change agents. Kolbe's model of "Learn to Teach, and Teach to Learn" contributed well to our extensive "Agile Learner Journey" program as it recruited potential change agents across the globe.

The results were promising. AstraZeneca's initial transformation reaped significant financial savings and busted perceived roadblocks about regulatory issues outside of suppliers and offshoring. In ten months, one Scaled Agile program enabled three suppliers, seven global scrum teams, replatformed the integration estate, resulting in 11,000 interfaces reduced to 1,775 in 450 applications across six different business areas, thus saving millions in recurring costs over the coming months.

But, there is more to the story than these consolidation programs. As noted in the title, context is crucial. The purpose of embarking and staying on the Agile journey by IT was with a hope business teams would fully engage throughout the product and project lifecycle. Even with the initial promising progress, the Agile buzz with IT fizzled over the coming months due to delivery pressures and mismatched expectations with the business teams.

Despite the business engagement with IT delivery teams at key quarterly ceremonies, the relationship and understanding of Agile ways of working was too shallow. IT teams became somewhat fatigued with pursuing this Agile journey whilst the drive for embracing change (even late in the project) was misconstrued by business on various occasions. Priorities were changed at the last moment without sharing a common vision across the whole delivery lifecycle, which added to IT's frustration and lack of motivation. The newly-found, energizing, and collaborative environment took one step forward...but then three steps back.

Over months, my team's persistence, perseverance, fortitude, and courage were being tested daily. However, in the midst of all this turmoil, some new patterns of success were on the horizon. As some say, "luck favors a prepared mind."

Our resilience paid off. We recognized a surprising opportunity to reinvigorate the drive for Agility, which eventually turned the tables between the IT and business departments.

This paper is all about that journey -- a painfully complex enterprise agile transformation story and how we came full circle, converting an IT push to a business pull.

2. BACKGROUND

Any organization that has an aim to grow and succeed in business must be innovative. AstraZeneca is no different. It is a global, science-led biopharmaceutical business employing 61,500 staff (with 4000 plus IT staff) worldwide. Millions of patients around the globe rely upon the cutting-edge medications produced from inception (Research & Development) to reality (Manufacturing, Marketing & Sales). Both business and IT teams work together and contribute to saving patients' lives.

AstraZeneca's change strategy was based on three objectives: follow the science; return to growth; and become a great place to work.

Within two years (from 2014) of our company's Agile transformation journey, we were making steady progress. Our initial victories planted seeds for change. Some of the barriers that we overcame with limited success were departmental silos; lack of transparency; hidden rules of prioritization; and analysis paralysis.

In this paper, I have highlighted only one of several smooth transformations at AstraZeneca, however my experience has not always been without its speed bumps. Although some teams were quick to pick up on the value of Agile, there were still others that resisted and responded with negativity.

"We can't run Agile. We have globally distributed teams," they would say, or "we can't run Agile; we have to validate our systems." And more, "we can't run Agile because Agile is for application development and we deploy COTS programs."

While I can delve more into the challenges of transforming large complex programmes, I am choosing to focus instead on the (at times) painful reality of pushing business towards agility (in silos) instead of creating a natural pull for agility with emerging business needs. It is the dream of having a well-oiled machine in the form of a continuously improving culture where business and IT work to enable each other's flow that has served as the inspiration for this paper.

3. YOUR STORY

About a decade ago, AstraZeneca found itself in a bit of a golden era. The company was producing some of the world's blockbuster medicines, with life-saving and much-needed cancer drugs generating the majority of the revenue. However, as the new CEO, Pascal Soriot, took charge, a patent cliff was on the horizon.

For those unfamiliar with the term, a "patent cliff" is the term for the loss of revenue when a product which previously benefitted from patent protection is subjected to competition from low cost generics and analogs. Although patent protection typically lasts 20 years, due to the need to file the patent relatively early in the development cycle, products sometimes benefit from less than ten years of remaining patent protection by the time that they come to market.

Although AstraZeneca was aware of the approaching patent cliff, over many years they suffered a series of setbacks with products in their late stage development which had led to question marks about the long-term strategy of the company. The company needed to find an innovative way to increase creative capability and improve productivity whilst remaining supportive of its staff.

Within the company, there was a perception that the business and IT teams at AstraZeneca were not collaborating as smoothly as necessary.

The business side of the company often felt that the IT teams needed to move faster in order to seize business opportunities: at the same time, the IT delivery teams often felt that the business teams had unrealistic expectations and did not appreciate the complexity of creating new IT systems and infrastructure. However, what couldn't be denied was that it was vitally necessary that these teams could see each other's point of view and find ways to work together for the benefit of the company and, more importantly, for patients.

For years, leaders in AstraZeneca's technology department had been hearing positive things about Agile on their business trips, at conferences, and from peers at other organizations. AstraZeneca was intrigued. Finally, the company decided that its IT teams should adopt an Agile mindset. The initial focus was on major programs and an attempt to simplify the IT environment through Agile. While I found pockets of hope in the IT department, there were still many teams that resisted the change.

Despite a consistent push and a concerted effort to make IT Agile, I had a deep-rooted wish to see the day when IT teams would start pulling the Agile CoE for help in challenging situations. This wish was not fulfilled, likely due to anchored traditional mindsets and delivery pressures in various shapes and forms. It was solely my passion for change and hunger to make a difference that kept me going beyond three years of limited success. So, I tried to think outside the box. What if I engaged business teams to create a much-needed pull for an Agile & Lean mindset?

My goal was to make sure that business recognizes the value of Agile to improve its relationship with IT. My hope was to recreate trust, help the two departments progress together (collaborate), and enhance internal capability while saving money for the company -- all while bringing medicine and solutions to the customers and patients, ASAP.

As a member of the Agile Center of Excellence (CoE) at AstraZeneca, I was assigned with designing, developing, and delivering training, coaching, and mentoring programs for business and IT transformation. More than a hundred upcoming internal coaches were on the Agile Learner Journey (ALJ) at varying levels of expertise across the globe. One of the first steps that I took was coaching & mentoring two potential senior change leaders from the UK marketing department and taking them on the accelerated Agile Learner Journey (aALJ). However, these two were experienced lean leaders who were conversant with continuously improving ways of working.

After a few weeks, one of my trainees struck up a conversation with the head of the Legal & Procurement Team (L&PT) at the UK Marketing Company who had some experience of using kaizen sessions to identify process improvements and was willing to give Agile a go.

The L&PT consisted of a small team and they often felt that it was too small a team for the number of projects they were expected to complete in time. The business teams that the L&PT worked with tended to assume that their projects were more important than any other, making it hard to manage stakeholders with competing priorities. In addition, it was vital for the L&PT that they knew what each other member of the team was doing so that each of them could help or step in as required.

Our work with the L&PT team happened mostly in bite-sized, 20-30-minute installments on Agile principles. Initially, my two apprentice coaches and I were focused on figuring out the answers to these two questions:

1. How was the team taking on projects?
2. Why was the team not meeting deadlines?

In hindsight, the way we began to solve the problem seemed simple enough: through empathy, the team understood that we were there to *help* them and not *blame* them for an inability to deliver on time. After a couple of these sessions and some deep discussions, we arrived at the conclusion that this team had too much work in progress, and they would be greatly helped by visualizing their work.

How? With the help of a huge whiteboard, we created a KanBan board. For those new to Agile, a KanBan board is a visualization tool, and theirs looked like this:



Figure 1 The first KanBan in business teams that spread like wild fire

We spent about half a day preparing the KanBan board, and placed it visibly next to the head of L&Pt's desk. To discipline the team into using the board, we met twice a week to review updates and note down what the team intended to complete within the next week.

Again, we kept it simple. Their board consisted of only a few columns: TO DO, DOING, and DONE. Initially, we asked them to only populate the TO DO & DOING columns in order for them see all the projects they were accepting. After watching the list grow to about twenty-five items, we acknowledged that the L&PT was, in fact, taking on too much. It was no wonder they sometimes found it difficult to adjudicate between competing demands.

It was also apparent to all of us that they needed to limit the amount of work they accepted. At any given time, they were only to work on the four highest priority items. Once one project was completed, the team would be allowed to move another one into their list.

After a few weeks, when we saw that they were struggling with competing priority issues, we assisted the team with coming up with a protocol, defining *how* to prioritize on the board.

Within a period of about six weeks, the L&PT was seeing results. They often report that the main advantage is helping the solve the question of “what is the one thing I should be working on right now”. No longer were they bogged down and overwhelmed by all the work they had taken on,

but they were focused and efficiently completing the highest priority projects. The KanBan board was transparent and clear -- *a major result of pure, basic intervention coaching and nudging.*

Someone once told me that luck is truly where preparation meets opportunity. The head of the department was thrilled with his team's results, and I asked him if he would be willing to share a bit of their Agile journey on video. As a senior leader in the company, he possessed an ability to be succinct and engaging, and related effectively how adopting an Agile mindset had helped his team.

AstraZeneca's social media team placed it on the company's internal social media channels, planting the seed for the marketing team's Agile transformation. The response to the video was overwhelming, and it created an immediate and fast-moving ripple effect.

Thanks to that video, the learning and development team (L&D team) within the marketing department asked me to deliver a workshop on Agile at one of their meetings. In a timeslot of three hours, my small team tailored an introductory, experiential lego simulation workshop (an activity used to help teams understand the Scrum Methodology) on Agile principles, practices, and values, with a hint of KanBan.

In return, the L&D team, which I found to be attentive and engaged, helped us to refocus our messages for the business teams, mainly through suggesting that we remove the technology (IT) jargon from the introductory workshop content. The three core concepts that we went into the training with were as follows:

1. Shorter feedback cycle
2. Backlog Management
3. MVP

The three core concepts they felt would resonate more with business teams became the following:

1. Visualization
2. Shorter Feedback Cycle
3. Relative Prioritization

From there, I was asked to create another workshop for the marketing department's annual senior leadership team meeting. Using the messages suggested to us by the L&D team, we created a half-day workshop for forty of the company's top brass.

Within six months of the first intervention with legal and procurement team's famous KanBan endeavor, Agile ended up capturing the attention of the company's President of Marketing, and we received excellent feedback from all involved. After the training, we learned that the participants -- each of whom commanded large teams of their own -- had started pulling Agile (mostly KanBan) into their work.

Soon after our half-day workshop for leaders, one of the heads from the cardiovascular marketing team called us into his office at Cambridge, UK. He was convinced that Agile was for him; furthermore, he wanted his whole team to understand Agile and figure out an Agile way of working that would be relevant and beneficial to them. At a half-day retreat for his team of approximately twenty people, we gave them a quick introduction to Agile principles. Another two-day, deeper dive into Agile ensued, where the team set the agenda and the priorities. By the end of it, this team was prepared and excited, ready to take on Agile and speak to their peers about working in a more Agile way. The first thing that resonated as a practical next step towards agility was to visualize the team's work and have a frequent (at least twice a week) stand-up meeting in front of the KanBan. The visibility of the KanBan coupled with the fact that the marketeers were loud in their praise for Agile created a groundswell, and we were asked to create a similar, info-packed experiential session for the regulatory affairs team.

Formerly, I had been pushing for IT departments to accept Agile. I was knocking on *their* doors and these doors would barely open. Our training rooms were only half full of IT employees who had

reluctantly attended, mostly doing so because they had been pushed by senior management to show up.

Now business teams were creating a pull; they had enthusiastically embraced Agile and were convincing and pulling for their counterpart IT teams to become more Agile. IT teams were in turn asking for trainings and extensive coaching because internally, they could see it working. This move increased IT's productivity by enabling them to establish transparency through physical KanBans on site and virtual KanBans for global teams. This new normal created a neutralized environment that led to increased collaboration and communication between the two departments.

Slowly but surely, we had converted staff. They were becoming adherents to the Agile Manifesto, and all we had to do was focus on these two core values:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Responding to change over following a plan

And the following principles:

- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

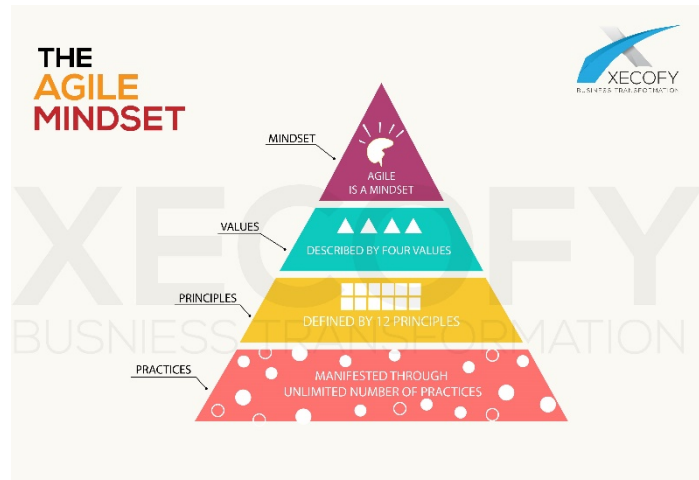


Figure 2: Agile Mindset by www.xecofy.com

With that said, AstraZeneca has still seen significant change and growth. Motivated by clearly articulated organizational values and behaviors [that reflect an Agile mindset], AstraZeneca business teams feel encouraged, and are asking how they can be more Agile. As a result of our work, Agile training have enabled the swift progress of product development, drug discovery, trials, approvals, and launch to various markets. It is no doubt that the company has Agile to thank for this. Moreover, because AstraZeneca is dedicated to cultivating a culture responsive to Agile, the company is meeting its noble goal of saving more lives.

4. WHAT I LEARNED

While my transformation journey has not been without its frustrations, I believe the conversion to Agile is coming swiftly, one team at a time, with the hope that we establish this new normal within the next few *months* -- not *years*. And there is a reason for this belief: visibility.

Visibility is the key reason I believe AstraZeneca will prosper with Agile. Visit any floor of the business office, and one will see the KanBans front and center. You might even witness employees presenting their daily stand-ups. When senior management visit a team in a different part of the company, the KanBan board is often the first place that they go to and it provides a focus for teams to tell other stakeholders what they are working on right now. While not everyone at the company is enthused about Agile, it helped significantly that those who happened to be marketeers and that a large number of them are company leaders, who possess the weight and influence required to nudge people toward agility.



Figure 3 Business Team KanBans in action

For an Agile culture to develop, Agile must be kept at the forefront and must be embedded as part of “business as usual”. Leaders are setting an example so that they may eventually adopt agile, by default. Cross-team learning at a peer level is also increasing as more teams are invited to larger monthly/quarterly meetings to showcase how they are benefitting from Agile ways of working. To further visibility, AstraZeneca is considering setting up internal Agile conferences. The company has already started promoting more of Agile on its internal social media accounts, asking its employees around the world to get involved in a “KanBan Revolution.” Employees have been sharing clips of populating their KanBans or giving their stand-ups in real-time. More of these Agile-focused social media campaigns are in the pipeline, and I believe that with these activities, the excitement will only grow.

Let me be clear: the coaching itself was sometimes a setback. As a coach, I have always focused on guiding others (as opposed to dictating to them), understanding that while I might be an expert on Agile, I could not even pretend to comprehend the specific everyday issues a team faces. If anything, Agile requires flexibility. Yes, there are guidelines, but for Agile to really take hold, a team must be comfortable with the principles and tailor the program for themselves.

The way in which my coaching clinics came about is a lesson in agility itself. As the coaches at AstraZeneca branched out and began conducting trainings themselves, I learned that they were, at times, stumped and struggling. Yes, they could competently demonstrate KanBans and backlogging, but when it came to actually applying Agile concepts to some of the more specific problems a team faced, the coaches tended to be rigid. They wanted to stick to Agile like it was a set of concrete rules.

More often than not, I would be called to undo certain aspects of another coach’s training. After months of going through this, I brainstormed on how to fix the problem. Drawing upon my own experiences at AstraZeneca, it dawned on me: *why not invite the coaches to watch me in live, complex coaching clinics?*

I engaged the coaches and asked them to feel comfortable in the trainings, knowing each brought knowledge and unique insights to the table. After all, Agile requires collaborative thinking and team effort to succeed. Coaching clinics additionally brought consistency, and enabled leaders to address their concerns on the proposed ways of working, as well as risks of changing internal ways of working.

I have also learned that in order to develop an Agile culture, one must engage directly for the transformation to plant its roots deeply within the organization. Through leading by example and

being Agile to supporting leadership in the way of Agile, we help others to adopt Agile, which allows the culture to blossom.

Keeping in mind that Agile was initially developed as a method for IT departments to deliver quality products more efficiently, we could prove through our Agile journey at AstraZeneca that the lessons, once welcomed, can make *everyone* more motivated, collaborative, communicative, and productive. We have gone full circle from trying to push IT to deliver well in an Agile way and we have also built a case for business agility. Instead of IT leading the charge, it is the business side of AstraZeneca that is the driving force for change.

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