



# **LUCK, DESIGN, TEARS & PASSION – MY STORY OF BUILDING AN AGILE CONSULTING PRACTICE IN AFRICA**

BIASE DE GREGORIO, IQBUSINESS

---

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

***“Either stop doing Software development in your teams or change how you do things!”***

This was what the CEO told my colleagues and me in 2011. Working in our consulting business in South Africa, our team developed custom-built software for our clients. Still, as with most projects running waterfall, we needed to be on time, on budget, and within scope. At that time, I was a qualified Project Management Professional (PMP) running large software projects and looked after the (Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) for our company. Now I was challenged to change my thinking and our approach. Enter Agile and Scrum. We were lucky to contract with a small Agile consulting company, and they assisted us in piloting Scrum with three teams. We initially adopted Agile internally for our software teams, and within a short time, our clients asked us to help them change how their teams developed software. Combined with my passion for sharing my knowledge and experience, we built an initial training offering that quickly grew traction in the market.

Over time, we started building credibility, and demand increased as the Agile movement grew quickly in South Africa. We managed to recruit some of the initial thought leaders in Agile and, through increased personal and organizational brand awareness, attracted some of the best Agile talent in the country. In 11 years, we grew from 1 person (me) to a team of 37 Agile consultants, trained over 10,000 delegates, led some of the most significant Agile transformations at our clients, and built a highly reputable brand within South Africa as a high-performing Agile consulting team.

Overlay this with the challenges in South Africa including increasing socio-political challenges, COVID, and Load-shedding, this is my story of how we went about building a high-performing Agile consulting team in South Africa with a pinch of design, some luck, and a lot of passion and hard work.

## **2. LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The report is structured to provide the following learning outcomes to the reader:

1. Understand some challenges in building a high-performing Agile practice (within a larger consulting business) in South Africa and Africa.
  - a) The impact of consulting vs. coaching as a service.
  - b) Managing supply and demand in a consulting business.
  - c) Measuring input (billability) vs. value.
  - d) Providing Agile services while your organization isn't that Agile - Drinking your own champagne.
  - e) Building resilience in managing complex transformations.
2. Apply some of the tips in the lessons learned in creating high-performing teams.
  - a) Focus on providing value to your clients by building long-lasting relationships and co-creation.
  - b) Experiment and take risks - Ask for forgiveness and not permission.

- c) Build a personal and organizational brand.
  - d) Don't pick a framework.
  - e) Don't worry about your competitors.
  - f) Don't take things too personally as a leader.
  - g) Motivating a high-performing team? - Dan Pink was right - Autonomy, purpose, and mastery.
3. Provide insight on how the team plans to move from helping organizations adopt operational agility to Business Agility.
- a) Has the bubble burst? - Agile in the South African context of political turmoil, poor economy, COVID, load-shedding, and broader social issues.
  - b) It's all about delivery – our philosophy of Geshido™.

### 3. MY STORY

I consider myself a South African Italian (1<sup>st</sup> generation), and a proud husband and father of 2 amazing girls, born and living in South Africa all my life. A Partner at an independent management consulting business where I have been employed for the last 23 years where I look after the Agile practice which I started 11 years ago. This Experience Report is my personal experience and journey over the last 11 years from being a recovering Project Manager to an Enterprise Agile coach and consultant forming and leading an Agile practice in a challenging South African environment.

#### 3.1. Building an Agile consulting team within an existing consulting business that is primarily profit driven.

*“What is your billability target?”; “How many billable hours do you have?”; “Please make sure you submit your timesheets, or else....”*

These are some of the common questions and comments we get as consultants. I realize this is part of our game, but at times, this is at odds with Agile values and principles that focus on Client Value and Outcomes rather than inputs and the number of hours you spend with the clients. As our organization grew, new processes, bureaucracy, and red tape were introduced that challenged the ability to experiment and try new things and added additional ‘grit’ in the system, challenging our ability to be agile (small a).

As a partner, I was caught between toeing the line and protecting my team from the bureaucracy. I felt I was always the buffer for the team and was often challenged (especially by my leadership team) as I represented the ‘system.’ This was (and is) exhausting at times as I usually take the perspective that these are minor things in the context of the bigger picture, and at the same time realized what seemed insignificant to me were rather significant issues for my team.

My approach to dealing with this was to:

- Increase levels of transparency by sharing financial performance with the entire team. This is often frowned upon in consulting businesses. However, I realized that if the team understands the value of the work that they are doing, they can buy into the reason why some of the processes exist.
- Adjust our performance KPI on billability to include revenue generated by the team members – this highlighted to the senior leadership that we could generate more value in fewer billable hours.
- More recently, to use my internal networks to provide feedback and influence the exco to make better decisions in improving our Employee Value proposition. Even though I steer away from conflict, I had to build the courage to engage directly with those that put some of the processes and policies in place.
- From a personal perspective, worry about the things I could control and not that I could not. Some things are what I refer to as “necessary evils,” and I decided that I would pick my battles for the team's benefit.

#### 3.2. The Power of Advocacy

Advocacy is defined as the *“public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.”*

In the business context, advocacy concerning both clients and ex-employees is invaluable. The opportunity these stakeholders provide to continuously and publicly support our organization becomes excellent references for ongoing sales and attracting critical talent.

As is expected, clients are looking for value at a reasonable price. Our strategy initially was to offer training at a really low price. The intent was to get enough people through the door so that they would see us as experts. We were generally top of mind when they had an Agile need. Over and above, we were fortunate to have vast experience with our clients through other non-Agile engagements. Therefore, when we delivered training or coaching, we could relate to **their** specific problems, challenges, and environment. The clients felt a personal and relatable touch in our approach. It was also vital that we had practitioners and not just theorists.

I spent a lot of effort and energy engaging with our clients through truly connecting, empathizing, and understanding their needs. Many consulting businesses use pre-defined models and approaches to 'copy and paste' at clients. They provide a high-level strategic approach and then typically leave the client to transform the organization themselves. The clients are then lost as they don't know how to do this. My approach has been working with the clients through co-creation, which makes the change sustainable. We intend to ensure that the organization will not revert to its previous culture, processes, and practices when we leave.

These relationships have meant that as these clients move from one company to another, they tend to take us with them.

I recall a particular situation where I was presenting to a prospective new client in East Africa. At the end of the call, I prompted the client to engage with any of our previous clients as references, and he responded by saying I shouldn't be too concerned as he then rattled off 2 or 3 common connections that had already vouched for us. The old saying that it isn't always "*what you know, but who you know*" was accurate.

Advocacy is also essential for ex-employees. Within my experience, there have been many agilists who have joined and exited our organization. When I have my exit discussion with them, I always ask whether we met or exceeded their expectations during their tenure with us and, more importantly, whether we have set the foundation for them to grow and make magic in other organizations. When they leave, and they have had a great experience during their time with us, they tend to help strengthen the reputation and brand of the organization.

If former employees feel that the organization treated them fairly and supported them during their time with the company, they are more likely to speak positively about the organization to others, including potential clients and job candidates. This can help to attract top talent and improve the organization's overall reputation. We make a lot of effort to stay connected to our alums as they can be a valuable source of referrals, partnerships, and business opportunities. There have been many occasions where our alums have become our clients, knowing that even though their reputation may be at risk by promoting us, they know they will get the value they provided to other clients.

### **3.3. Experiment, and don't be afraid to take risks.**

Fortunately, I had a great boss then, and he allowed us to try things that usually wouldn't be allowed. We took some chances, built new offerings, and set deadlines; for example, we would select a date for a public course and ensured we had a Minimal Viable Product (MVP) to get feedback to learn and improve from – which is the original purpose of an MVP.

We partnered with some international thought leaders, bringing them into the country to provide workshops, sometimes even at a loss, but building credibility in the market. Our 'Agile Bootcamp using Scrum' was the best example of an MVP we developed. We developed our first market-facing value proposition and training in just over two weeks. We were fortunate that we were able to test this course with our internal teams and managed to obtain the necessary feedback to improve the course.

We then developed a brochure and worked with several of our sales colleagues to position it with their clients with whom they had an excellent existing relationship. Shortly, one of our clients asked us to facilitate this training for one

of their teams. We decided not to charge them for the first event with the reciprocal opportunity for the client to provide us with feedback. We tested this product quickly and improved our training which became our flagship product within three months.

One of the other risks, and one of the things I am most proud of, is that we hired people who may not always have had the relevant experience but seemed to have a great attitude during the interview process. I recall a specific example where I interviewed a young individual that used to be a professional dancer with less than 12 months of corporate experience. I still remember the interview as if it was today. She left such an impression on me, and even though I had some internal resistance, I made her an offer to join the team. That was August 2016, and she still works for the team and me. Her growth has been phenomenal, to say the least, and she is now one of our team's most senior and top-performing coaches.

We have also hired young graduates through our intern program; many have grown and developed into excellent consultants, which has served us well in developing and maintaining a high-performing team.

### **3.4. Build a personal and organizational brand.**

I recall hating public speaking in high school. The mere thought of standing before people and saying speeches or poems would frighten me. However, I realized that to be successful in what I do and to ensure that the Agile practice would grow in South Africa, I would have to challenge this fear head-on.

Perhaps, as I am genuinely passionate about learning and helping others learn, this started to build my confidence through training internal team members. There was a lot of positive validation, and demand increased for external training. With this, I started offering external training and talking at local meet-ups and conferences. I started writing and publishing blogs and encouraged some of my team to do the same.

We also started promoting and sponsoring these events and built a solid local brand. This allowed us to attract some of the best talent in the country. Recruiting and building a team of experienced Agile coaches and trainers became easier.

By focusing on my personal brand, I brought the organization with me, resulting in the growth of the corporate brand as the leading Agile practice in South Africa.

### **3.5. Don't pick a framework.**

We didn't affiliate with a specific accreditation body, framework, or organization. We built a breadth of experience and skills across frameworks such as Scrum, Kanban, SAFe, Nexus, and EBA Model (AgilityHealth). We partnered with others to ensure we didn't have a narrow view of Agile.

One of the challenges is that we partnered with Scaled Agile Inc. to deliver Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe®) consulting and training services. Within the Agile industry and even in our team, there are many critics of SAFe®, with perhaps some of the criticisms justified. We felt that by genuinely understanding the framework and the essence of applying the values and principles, we could still achieve the results that our clients desired with this framework. I have had many conversations with my team, asking if we were not "selling our soul to the devil" (Perhaps taking it too far. However, I would indicate that if the client has decided to pick this framework, they would do so with us or without us, and wouldn't it be better if we were the ones helping them achieve agility at scale where we can apply our practical experience and approach to solving our client's problems.)

However, SAFe® is not the only organization we partnered with. Our goal is to create Agile consultants with broad knowledge and experience where SAFe® only became one of the frameworks we adopted and became one of the arrows in our ever-growing quiver. This allowed our consultants to understand the context of the environment and provide the right level of guidance and coaching that was fit for purpose and not driven by a specific framework or approach.

With this context, we built our Agile accelerator, a pattern to enter organizations through Discovery and Design. We would develop a roadmap with our clients that included fit-for-purpose patterns and practices for their context. We also needed to form a client-led change cohort where we would partner with this cohort to lead the change. After all, we don't own the transformation; they do. We would then embed these patterns and practices through coaching, training, and consulting over 10-12 weeks.

### **3.6. Don't worry about your competitors – there is enough to go around.**

For many organizational teams, excellent performance hinges on their creativity and adaptability to an environment in constant flux. For most teams, meeting the needs of their clients—whether inside their organizations or out in the marketplace—is more important than beating their competition. Successfully satisfying their clients is the way to beat the competition. And doing that means responding rapidly to challenges and opportunities.

In fact, working together with competitors also brings value. We were brought in for a large financial services organization to lead its Agile transformation. This was a significant challenge in an organization where the culture and mindset were at odds with Agile. I realized that the scale of this challenge would be too large for just our organization to solve. I approached two of our competitors (with whom I had built great personal and professional relationships) to partner with us through co-opetition. Together, we formed an excellent working alliance where the overall principle was that we would do whatever was best for the client and not for our own organizations. We worked together for over two years at this client, using our individual company strengths to develop several training and coaching programs. These relationships exist today, and we often engage with each other if the need arises.

### **3.7. Don't take things personally – the challenge for Talent.**

Over the last eight years, as the leader of the Agile offering at my organization, we have attracted some incredible talent. However, some of this talent will leave, and even though it is difficult, I have realized that I am proud to have been part of people's personal and career journey. For example, some ex-employees have started their own Agile consulting companies that have been highly successful, and although they create additional competition, we are proud of their achievements.

### **3.8. Empower the team - Dan Pink is so Right<sup>1</sup>.**

The biggest lesson (and challenge) was how you keep experienced Agile coaches motivated within a consulting company driven by maximizing profit. While our company is a purpose-driven organization around growing people, growing business, and growing Africa, the equity investors are driving shareholder value. At times, this conflicts with Agile values and principles. Therefore, as a leader, I aimed to create a space for Agilists to get the best exposure and opportunity for personal growth. We created a purpose of "leaving the campsite in a better place than how you found it" by allowing the team to add value to their clients, providing autonomy by allowing the team to work on their projects and initiatives, and providing the opportunity for them to master their craft through continuous learning through conferences, training, and exposure to challenging transformations.

This was achieved by creating and nurturing a strong team culture. Agile, after all, is all about team collaboration and communication, so it's essential to establish a culture that fosters trust, respect, and a sense of shared ownership. I encouraged open and honest communication, continuously celebrated successes, and created opportunities for team building and collaboration.

I also needed to create clear goals and priorities to guide their work. Even though many of us work on separate client engagements, creating an opportunity to learn from each other was essential.

However, the opportunity and ability for the team members to live their own purposes were more important than providing a team purpose. To be clear, it is not my nor the organization's responsibility to determine the team member's individual purpose, but we need to understand their purpose and ensure that they can achieve this through the work that they are doing. The reality is that sometimes, this is not always possible. An example would be when

---

<sup>1</sup> *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink

one of my team's individual purposes was misaligned with our purpose. He needed status and power, and his personal growth was more important than the collective. It was a challenging period for the team and created conflict, especially in the leadership team. It came to a head when he left the organization. He formed his own business, and even though he became our competitor, I am proud of his achievements and realized that this was better for him than staying with us.

But we also know that we could be better and always need to learn, so creating an environment where the team is encouraged to experiment, learn, and improve is essential. Establish regular retrospectives to reflect on the team's performance and identify areas for improvement. This is something that we need to do more of as we are not perfect in this. We are not attached to any decisions we make as a leadership team, and if we need to adjust and pivot as a result of the reflection, we will do so. An example would be when we created a team structure across certain value propositions. Upon reflection, this started silos within the team, and we decided to adjust and return to what we had.

Agile teams (and any teams) work best when they are empowered to make decisions and take ownership of their work. Encourage the team to take risks, experiment with new approaches, and take ownership of the product.

### **3.9. Surviving COVID**

Like most organizations, COVID was a fight for survival, not only in ensuring that you had enough demand for the team that we had but also in ensuring that we provided safety and security to the team while our competitors were closing or furloughing their staff.

Most of our clients paused their Agile transformations and training as that was seen as a luxury. We had a costly workforce that was now on the 'bench,' which added a lot of pressure on me as the board and exco were asking to retrench/furlough some of this team. By applying the following actions, I am proud to say that I did not lose one team member during this period.

- We implemented our "Duty of Care" by prioritizing the health and safety of the team. This was achieved by creating a balance in 3 areas: our team first, the clients, and then the organization. We introduced daily check-ins, provided emotional support through our '**Careways program**', and empathized with the team as much as possible.
- Adapted our business model and embraced digital technology: In 2 weeks, we had to pivot all our training from in-person to online. Over and above, our senior Agile coaches changed their focus from coaching and advisory to delivery, working as Scrum Masters or Delivery Leads applying Agile practices. Most clients still needed to deliver projects and, while they paused their Agile transformations, were required to deliver on them. This also allowed us to engage with clients outside of South Africa and allowed us to engage with clients in the Rest of Africa, including countries such as Botswana, Kenya, and Mauritius.
- Keep your clients informed: Communication was vital during this crisis. We kept our clients informed of any changes to our business operations and the safety measures we were implementing and offered our clients online training and coaching services. We also used social media, email newsletters, and other channels to keep them informed, with a monthly online webinar providing the ability to continue learning and building the community.
- Focus on cash flow: Our team's survival during this crisis was critical. Look for ways to conserve cash, such as negotiating payment terms with suppliers or delaying non-essential expenses.

## **4. THE FUTURE OF AGILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA (AND AFRICA)**

### **4.1. The (increased) complexity of doing this within the South African Context**

South Africa has a complex socio-political environment with a history of racial inequality and a range of ongoing social and political challenges. It is essential to understand this landscape and how it may impact your business operations, including corruption, crime, and social unrest.

Within South Africa, there is a focus on building a diverse and inclusive team. South Africa is a diverse country, and building a diverse and inclusive team can help you tap into various perspectives and experiences. This can be particularly valuable when operating in a complex socio-political environment where different perspectives and experiences can help you navigate challenges and identify opportunities.

South Africa's Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy is a government initiative to promote the economic participation and advancement of historically disadvantaged groups in South Africa, particularly Black people. The policy aims to address the legacy of apartheid-era discrimination and inequality by promoting a more diverse and inclusive economy in which all South Africans can participate and benefit.

BBBEE encourages businesses to implement measures promoting skills development and employment equity. This means that as part of our hiring policy, we will have transformation targets to ensure we apply this policy fairly and consistently.

However, the challenge within the Agile industry is the dearth of experienced African, Coloured, and Indian (AIC) individuals. Over and above, the individuals with the experience are highly sought after and will typically come in with a salary premium. This makes our business model challenging as we have specific margin targets that make it difficult to manage. We have, therefore, taken the approach of growing internal talent through our internship program. This has yet to be entirely successful in that while we invest in the learning and development of these young graduates, retaining them is becoming increasingly more challenging as they will be poached either by our competitors or our clients. As a consulting business, we are unable to compete with the packages that they are offered.

In complete honesty, we have not been able to solve this challenge and have accepted that although they may not stay within our organization, we have contributed to the overall economy by growing this talent for the benefit of all.

#### **4.2. The future of Agility in South Africa (and Africa) is Geshido™.**

Together with my team, we learned so much on this journey about what to do and what not to do in our consulting business in South Africa. Three years ago, because of those learnings, one of my team, friend and colleague, Reneshan Moodley, was having a conversation about the state of the Agile industry, and a little disheartened that it feels at times that it has become too fluffy and vague. Our clients are paying premium rates to receive the right direction and advice. They are often not looking for coaching, but rather consulting and advisory services. They are also looking for better performance and results, especially regarding velocity, throughput, and quality. We also realized that the clients engage with us as we built a reputation of rolling up our sleeves and getting 'stuck in' to solve their delivery challenges. Ultimately, clients want to get sh!t done and often people in business don't really care what method or approach you use to get it done. So, we came up with something called Geshido<sup>2</sup>™. Not a Japanese term related to lean, TPS, or any of the sort, but the "Subtle art of Getting Stuff Done" based on a set of virtues that includes:

- Visualize and Make Transparent
- Prioritise, Sequence, and Execute
- Measure and Monitor
- Improve and Evolve

This also focused on the needs of three parties: The company, the client, and the team applying a framework-less approach to realizing agile benefits.

Initially, even though the CEO loved the idea, we were met with some resistance from our marketing team, and we had to go underground with the philosophy and approach. We made this part of our team culture and DNA and Reneshan developed some content and spoke at various conferences about this approach with excellent feedback. We developed several Geshido accelerators from our experience and IP that we developed to enable our consultants in being better at delivering results that ultimately would benefit our clients.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://geshido.co.za>

It is all about timing...the head of marketing left the organization and the new marketing head was willing to take the risk with us and we trademarked the term and launched this into the market in September 2022<sup>3</sup>.

With the context of the last eleven years and looking at what our clients are asking for, we believe the future of agility in South Africa (and Africa) will be as follows:

- Focus on Agile delivery – clients want results; therefore, it is important that you understand the success and desired performance metrics when you start engagements and continuously measure and monitor these metrics.
- Focus on adding value as Agile consultants – apply context-specific principles frameworks, patterns, and practices to deliver the outcomes.
- Business Agility is an enabler of Digital organizations – don't lead with Agile as the silver bullet. Be practical and pragmatic with your approach but stay true to the virtues.

We are at the time of writing preparing to launch our first Business Agility Conference, called Geshidocon where we have engaged with our clients, partners, and network to share their personal stories about their experience about Getting stuff done and focusing on business results in a corporate world applying Business Agility.

## 5. IN CONCLUSION - WHAT WE LEARNED

If I had to reflect on my personal experience, I have been fortunate to find a career that I am truly passionate about. In writing this report, I realize that I and we have achieved a lot in eleven years, but at the same time need to remain grounded and humbled by all the support I have received from my family, friends, and colleagues. I wanted to conclude with key highlights, but my team insisted that I use the feedback they provided to me whilst reviewing this report. This is what some of my leadership team have to say:

- *"You've created a safe environment where people can challenge and ask questions (with respect) and know they'll get an honest answer from you."*
- *"You've created a space of psychological safety because you're open to being vulnerable yourself."*
- *"You've created transparency by sharing financials with us, so we understand the bigger picture."*
- *"You've created team where people feel protected and valued because you fight their corner, and you say thank you for their hard work."*
- *"You give a sh!t, so people in the team give a sh!t."*
- *"This didn't happen by accident – it happened because you helped drive and create it."*

It may be Confucius that said this (or not), but "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life". I can safely say that although it times it feels tough, over the last 11 years, it has never felt like work.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have way too many people to thank for forming and enabling my career. I have been fortunate to have some amazing bosses that not only I look up to from a leadership perspective, but also as friends. These are Wayne Human and Karl-Heinz Wessinger.

I must sincerely thank my team and specifically my leadership team (Reneshan Moodley, Alexia Sterley, Phil Manning, Riaan Dempers, Bob Grewar and De Waal Hoon). But also, the colleagues and friends that have been part of the journey and that have formed and shaped me as a person and career.

An appreciation and thanks to Angie Doyle, an ex-colleague and friend that motivated me to submit this report.

I want to thank my shepherd, Jenni Jepsen, that without her steer and guidance, I couldn't have done it without her.

And lastly, and most importantly, my parents that laid the foundation and formed my value system, and my wife (Kim) and daughters (Sienna and Milla), who at times don't always understand why I work so hard and have had to be patient with me. I hope that they are proud of me.

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://youtu.be/-wv6hX\\_WYxE](https://youtu.be/-wv6hX_WYxE)