

# Why Agile Projects

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The gang was enjoying a barbecue pig out at Rudy's. It was a magical moment until Rusty and Millie started to argue about Agile software development.

Rusty started it by saying, "Agile is magical."

Millie banged on the table with a half-chewed pork rib. "That's ridiculous. There's nothing magical about it."

"Sure there is." Rusty pulled a Sharpie out of his pocket protector and printed "AGILE" on a paper towel (which passes for a napkin at Rudy's). "There are just a few things management has to provide— like MONEY." He sketched a capital M on the towel, making MAGILE.

"Money's not enough," said Millie.

"Of course not. Management has to eliminate environmental interference." With one smooth stroke, he crossed out the "E."

Millie frowned and shook her head, but Rusty took no notice. "And they need to Cooperate, and not just occasionally, but All the time." He added the C and A, finally producing "MAGICAL."

"Cute," said Millie, her tone sarcastic, but she was clearly struggling not to smile. "But successful projects require more than waving a Sharpie wand and pronouncing 'AgileCadabra.'"

We all knew that Rusty was pulling our legs. Millie, of course, was right. If you want to succeed with an Agile approach, you need more than magic rituals. Not only that, you need to avoid several rather common mistakes that lead to failure.

## Common Mistakes in Building New Things

In my experience, these common mistakes are not unique to Agile projects, but they will kill Agile projects just as easily as they kill projects that use Waterfall or any other approach:

1. Committing to a schedule or cost without having any relevant experience with this type of project.
2. Using experience on a similar but smaller project to commit to an estimate on a larger project.
3. Extending requirements to "optimize" or beat unknown competition.

4. Failing to recognize signs of impending failure and/or act on them by extending schedules and/or reducing costly requirements (like those that diminish velocity by creating more frequent failed tests).
5. Failing to recognize limits of the environment or process, or recognizing the limits but being unwilling to change them.
6. Simply undertaking too many simultaneous tasks and perhaps failing to complete any of them.
7. Not recognizing both changes and opportunities presented by a new technology.
8. Not asking the customer questions, either out of fear or due to a lack of customer surrogate contact.
9. Not asking anyone for help (perhaps because of fear).
10. [I invite my readers to contribute more failure dangers to this list.]

## The Underlying Failure

In the end, though, there's one common failure that, in a way, underlies all of these dangers: the inability to work well in a team. I'm not saying that some team members are "not team players." (That ugly phrase is often used by managers as a synonym for "doesn't follow my orders.")

What I mean is that some people are simply not skilled at working in a team. That's not surprising, though, because most of us grew up in an environment that did not support teamwork. In view of our upbringing, it's actually surprising that we have so many skilled team workers.

First of all, most of us have spent our formative years in schools that discourage teamwork. They actually call it "cheating." When teachers discover that you've shared a task with another person, you're usually punished severely. You're flunked. You're suspended. You may even be kicked out of school.

Perhaps you say, "But our society values teamwork. Just look at the way we love sports teams." Yes, we do value teams, but not teamwork. A team may win a game, but sports journalists

# Sometimes Fail

will write about one player as the hero who “won the game.” The sports league itself goes to great lengths to identify the “most valuable player” for each game and the entire season.

On the job, managers waste endless hours ranking and rewarding individual employees instead of teams. At the same time, they constantly preach about teamwork, but we all give ten times the credence to what people do than to what they say.

## How Teaming Skill Prevents Failure

In order for a problem-solving effort to be successful, the environment must contain three elements:

- M: Motivation.** The trophies or the trouble, the push or the pull that moves the people involved.
- O: Organization.** The existing structure that enables ideas to be worked through into practice.
- I: Ideas or Innovation.** The “seeds;” the image of what will become.

Once we see how teaming skill fosters all three elements of the MOI model, we can turn things around. Leadership can also mean preventing change. If you want to stop some change from occurring, you must do one of three things to the environment:

- M: Kill the Motivation.** Make people feel that change will not be appreciated; do everything for them so they won't feel the need to do things for themselves; discourage anything that people might enjoy doing for its own sake.
- O: Foster Chaos.** Encourage such high competition that cooperation will be unthinkable; keep resources slightly below the necessary minimum in the name of “efficiency”; suppress information of general value, or bury it in an avalanche of meaningless words and paper.
- I: Suppress the Flow of Ideas.** Don't listen when you can criticize instead; give your own ideas first, and loudest; punish those who offer suggestions; keep people from working together; and above all, tolerate no laughter.

## A Balance of Styles

In order for a leadership style to be effective, there has to be some balance among motivation, organization, and innovation. Whether used to foster or prevent change, the MOI model gives us a gross model of leadership style. In French, “moi” means “me.” We can characterize a particular person's approach to leadership in a specific instance by classifying that person's actions as motivational, organizational, or innovational. But, if an Agile team member can lead only one of the three factors, things can fall apart.

For instance, a person whose actions are almost totally motivational might be a sales superstar or a charismatic politician who could sell any idea — if only she had one to sell. I've seen way too many such politicians who persuade a team to accept sub-standard, inadequately tested work in order to meet an arbitrary schedule.

Or, someone whose actions are almost entirely organizational might be an incredibly efficient office manager who keeps things super-organized — for last year's staff and last year's problems. In some cases, such an organizer can transform an Agile effort into one of those rigid “methodologies” that's the very antithesis of agility.

Finally, a team member whose actions are all directed toward innovation might be a genius — full of ideas but unable to work with other people, or to organize work for others. Or, perhaps, the genius can never resist tossing his current great idea in to disrupt a sprint that's just about to finish.

I like the MOI model because it emphasizes that we all possess the elements of leadership — the kind of leadership needed by all members if an Agile team is to be successful. In each of us, some elements are better developed than others, but any one of us can improve as an Agile team leader simply by strengthening our weakest elements. Mr. Universe doesn't have more muscles than I do, just better developed ones.



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