

***AGLPM2 - Unit 3 - Activity 2: OBSERVE***  
***6th Agile Leadership Skills:***  
***Encourage Face-to-Face Conversations***

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# *Agile Leadership Behavior Six: Work Face-to-Face*

*The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation*

Agile Manifesto Principle Six

We are faced with a complex and beguiling array of communications technologies that we use at work. Email, text messages, video conferencing, wikis, and many other collaboration tools can save us time and effort in getting our own work done. A great deal of information can be efficiently sent to other people involved in a project for them to consider. However, it is often tempting to fire off a few quick emails to shift responsibility elsewhere. Games of email and voicemail *ping-pong* drag down the productivity of all those copied in on correspondence. However, the case studies we have seen show that this is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the Agile Manifesto to implement successfully. There are subtle but important benefits of personal body language, but in many circumstances, face-to-face is an expensive communication method. For example, where multinational teams are involved or where expert stakeholders are working in the field, while the development team is at headquarters.

## ***Body Language Increases Engagement***

Most readers of this book will probably be familiar with the books of Desmond Morris and Allan Pease that popularized the concept of “body language”.<sup>i</sup> The often-repeated statement is that at least 50% of the communication in face-to-face meetings is non-verbal. Additionally, most of this non-verbal communication is involuntary and often treated by the recipient unconsciously as such as more ‘truthful’ than any words being uttered. Body posture and facial expressions give away the meeting participants’ real

feelings about a subject. Interest, boredom, support, antagonism, and many other emotions are conveyed by non-verbal cues.

Recent research has shown that the decoding of body language, which had previously been thought of as a central cortex activity, can often be an involuntary neural activity – using ECG and MRI scans researchers have found that these messages are relayed in less than 120 milliseconds. The nervous system automatically looks for congruence or incongruence between facial expressions and body postures. More sophisticated decoding then takes place to interpret further, what the eyes have seen. This information is compared and contrasted with verbal tone, and then, and only then is the text of the language itself taken into account in assessing the totality of the message.<sup>ii</sup>

A leadership style that prefers real-world contact taps into the rich communications that body language confers – especially those of emotional intensity and building trust. Neurological research to date has concentrated on how the nervous system (not just the central brain) decodes facial expressions. Only 5% of this research has studied total body language, but enough is known to draw some general conclusions.<sup>iii</sup>

Bodily expressions are recognized as reliably as facial expressions, and both bypass higher cognitive functions to inform the listener of emotion before high cognitive functions can decode and interpret the technical information being relayed verbally. Although we talk of *face-to-face* meetings, more information is supplied from body posture than from facial expression. Non-verbal information is ambiguous, and people take into account several different cues to gain a holistic decoding of the messages sent.<sup>iv</sup>

Face-to-face meetings are a powerful communication channel. This is because:<sup>v</sup>

- ◆ Information is communicated faster
- ◆ Feedback is instantaneous
- ◆ Non-verbal cues help the person talking to fine-tune what they are saying to make sure that it is relevant to the listener's interests.

Moreover, when there are several participants at a meeting, these interactions are simultaneous and multi-directional. By way of comparison, in a telephone conference where only one person can talk at the same time, there is only one message being communicated at any one moment. For example, consider four people having a face-to-face discussion. Each combination of two people will be continually transmitting and receiving body language to each other. Therefore, with just three people there are six non-verbal 'conversations' going on. With five people present, there are 10 such conversations. Each additional person present in a face-to-face meeting increases the possible complexity and richness of communication through non-verbal means.<sup>vi</sup>

So then, this chapter will explain how agile proponents advocate the use of face-

to-face meetings. It will also explore some of the practical difficulties of implementing these practices. Government projects often involve geographically dispersed participants, and co-location can be expensive to set up, and travel to meetings can be time wasting.

## ***Use Agile to Get the Team Communicating***

The enthusiasm of agilists for face-to-face meetings is embedded in all agile methods. Each method tends to focus on one concept – from formal workshops, co-locating people from a range of technical disciplines into one room, through to the micro level, such as encouraging working in pairs rather than solo development. In the next three sections, I will describe these approaches and then explore how you can implement the ideas within government projects.

## ***Face-to-Face Activities in Scrum***

Scrum defines five key activities that involve face-to-face work:

- ◆ Sprint Planning Meeting
- ◆ Daily Scrums
- ◆ Development work
- ◆ Sprint Review
- ◆ Sprint Retrospective.<sup>vii</sup>

At the start of every sprint, a one-day meeting is held broken into two halves: the first half-day to agree on what will be delivered in the coming sprint, and second half-day on how it will be delivered (in what sequence, by whom, and by when).

The Product Owner makes top-level decisions in the meeting, and gives direction on the business priorities via comments on the product backlog – the list of desired features for the solution, each with some relative priority. However, it is the development team and product owner together, who forecast the functions that are feasible for development during the coming sprint. Planning is a collaborative team effort, not the implementation of a ‘plan from above’:

“The number of items selected from the product backlog for the sprint is solely up to the Development Team. Only the Development Team can assess what it can accomplish over the upcoming sprint.”<sup>viii</sup>

The key concept here is that the Development Team works closely together to self-

organize itself in planning the execution of the work.

It should be noted here that there is a divergence in thought between Scrum and DSDM on who agrees the items to be built in an upcoming sprint. Is it solely the development team members (the Scrum approach), or is it a joint decision between the Product Owner and the Development Team (the DSDM approach):

(The) Product Owner, the Development Team, and the *ScrumMaster* use their knowledge, experience, and understanding of the product and the requirements to agree a number of the most important items from the *product backlog* to be addressed in a sprint ... The output of the sprint planning meeting is the *Sprint Backlog*<sup>ix</sup>

Another face-to-face concept in Scrum is the *daily scrum*. This is to provide quick feedback on problems encountered in the last 24 hours, assess the speed of progress, and to synchronize the plan for the next 24 hours. The meeting should, Schwaber advises, be *timeboxed* to 15 minutes length, so each participant needs to keep to a very short statement.<sup>x</sup> To encourage brevity, it has become common practice for participants to meet in an area without chairs — these *stand-up* meetings help stop overruns which eat into the day's activities.

Scrum encourages development work to be co-located whenever possible. When large developments are required, multiple Scrum teams should be organized in a hierarchy, all working to one master product backlog.<sup>xi</sup> In this situation a *scrum of scrums* meeting is then held immediately after all the individual teams have held their *daily scrums*. Ken Schwaber recommends these as a:

“Mechanism for dealing with the complexity of the dependencies in multi-team Scrum projects... It's just like the Daily Scrum, but at the next level up. The Scrum of Scrums is meant to provide transparency for teams that aren't co-located and don't have on-going communications.”<sup>xi</sup>

Once the sprint is complete, and delivery has taken place, a half-day *Sprint Review* is held with the Product Owner and key Stakeholders, which checks off the items that have been *done*. It is important to have a shared understanding of what *done* means – and this, of course, should have been agreed upon before at the start of the sprint in a planning meeting. Perhaps only a *proof of concept* was required – a working model of the system perhaps.

On the other hand, a solution might have been required for immediate live use, and should have been tested thoroughly and perhaps delivered via a formal route to thousands of users. The concept of a hierarchy of deliverability I introduced earlier (see **Error! Reference source not found.** on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) should be applied to help structure the delivery planning process. Progress is not tracked on spreadsheets and memos, but in the daily standup meeting and on kanban wall charts.

Project status is reviewed in a sprint review meeting at the end of the sprint, especially:

- ◆ What went well
- ◆ Which problems were encountered
- ◆ How problems were solved
- ◆ The velocity of progress and a projection for future completion is discussed
- ◆ Consensus is reached on what to do next.<sup>xiii</sup>

Just after the sprint review, the development team holds an internal *sprint retrospective* meeting to self-examine its own performance and plan internal improvements. The focus here is on lessons learned about the relationships between people on and outside the team, and improvements to processes and tools.<sup>xiv</sup>

## ***Debate How the Solution Will Be Implemented***

While Scrum says little about the mechanisms of involving the stakeholders, DSDM is more explicit in its advice. A prescriptive approach to set up of the multi-disciplinary teams is an important attribute of the DSDM framework. As with many features of these methods, there is much to be said for incorporating the best ideas from each into your way of working. DSDM requires that a *Business Ambassador* be allocated to work closely and on a day-to-day basis with the development team.

This role is not necessarily a senior one, but one that can interact in a detailed way on features of what DSDM calls the *emerging solution*.<sup>xv</sup> The Business Ambassador takes part in the equivalent of *daily scrums* – these are termed *daily stand-ups* in DSDM.

## ***Human Interaction and Technical Progress***

A difference between Scrum and DSDM is the explicit emphasis in DSDM on facilitated workshops and the encouragement to use models and non-functional prototypes of the final system during development to get user feedback.<sup>xvi</sup>

DSDM encourages a facilitative environment, ensuring that outputs are not only practical, but also business-focused. Scrum places more importance on the delivery of a working solution at the end of each iteration, than on the business outcomes.<sup>xvii</sup> To this extent, DSDM is externally focused on communication with stakeholders, and

practical use of the solution in operations, whereas Scrum is more concerned with ensuring that outputs work as agreed with users. A good reason for considering using the two approaches together.

Leadership is needed to balance between these aspects – there is no point in keeping stakeholders blissfully unaware of technical difficulties that may scuttle the entire project. On the other hand, regular integration of the entire solution at the end of each Sprint may not be a very efficient way to progress the project if some aspects of the technology are inflexible and expensive to develop. This is particularly true of the need to interface with *legacy* mainframe technology with which new government technology solutions often has to co-exist.

Many teams do not work face-to-face for reasons of organizational inertia simply due to historical desk allocation, and due to pressures to *hot-desk* and work on multiple projects at the same time. Hot-desking can lead to dramatic efficiency gains on utilization of space, especially where large proportions of the workforce are continually in and out of the office and have meetings off-site. On one client site, I saw accommodation costs halve when it was introduced. However, there is a difference between the proactive decision to work in a temporary desk location, and the accidental placement of staff far from their co-workers. One study analyzed how people perceive their co-workers. It found that members of staff treat colleagues as being outside their own team at distances longer than a fifty foot radius, even if they are in the same project.<sup>xviii</sup>

Advanced technologies are available that should help people overcome lack of face-to-face contact. For many years, video-conferencing has been championed, and more recently, computer collaboration tools allowing multiple users to share and edit information simultaneously have been introduced to the workplace. However, researchers have found that these ways of working are not naturally adopted by teams, and that key teleworking concepts need to be accepted by the staff that attempt to work this way:

- ◆ The acceptance that crucial specialist knowledge is dispersed across the virtual team
- ◆ A desire to outreach to other team members
- ◆ A culture that values team performance above individual performance
- ◆ The desire to apply strong analytical capabilities to make technical progress.<sup>xix</sup>

Despite all these factors being in place, research shows that regular face-to-face meetings are a strong leading indicator of success. At team set-up, allow interpersonal relationships to form – and not just inside the team, but also between the team and

management and with members of other teams. The forming of interpersonal relationships allows the appreciation of the difficulties faced by others and the building of *social capital and trust*. One should not assume that these are enduring and static. Studies show that trust is an evolving phenomenon and is “dynamic and context specific”.<sup>xx</sup>

Cooper and Kurland carried out a study comparing the governments of two US cities with two private sector organizations of similar size to assess the impact of lack of face-to-face contact among workers on projects.

Of the two public sector organizations, one was a Southern California city employing nearly 10,000 people – not just administrators, but also technical specialists such as civil engineers and systems developers. The other was a large city in the western US employing 14,000 people. Both organizations had implemented structured teleworking over the previous ten years.<sup>xxi</sup>

The researchers found that a great deal of effort was required to keep communication going between remote and central team members. They recommended that team leaders actively work to find synergies between disparately located workers – matching their different skills to the tasks in hand. The need for formal channels of communication became more important.<sup>xxii</sup> These factors work against some of the principles of agile – that of self-organizing teams and the importance of informal communications.

## **Conclusions**

In recent years, several trends have pushed us into reduced face-to-face contact on our projects. The use of off-shore teams, teleworking by staff from home to reduce commuting, hot-desking within an organization’s main office, or at satellite offices or at buildings of sister organizations are all drivers for reducing the costs of co-location. Technology such as email and video-conferencing has enabled reduction of costs. However, used indiscriminately, these technologies, coupled with the drive for reduced travel time and costs, make for reduced effectiveness of human communication. Face to face communication is also the most effective way of discussing technical information that must be described in documents, for example integrated circuit chip designs, or aeronautical engineering drawings.

*The effective leader will build interpersonal relationships early in a project, engendering trust, and creating a common culture, and understanding of the difficulties of other team members. Agile encourages face-to-face working. A balance is required between the cost savings derived from reduced demands for office space and travel time and the inefficiencies that start to creep in when miscommunication occurs.*



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- <sup>i</sup> {Morris 1977 #435} and {Pease 1984, 1981 #262}  
<sup>ii</sup> {Meeren 2005 #263}  
<sup>iii</sup> {Gelder 2009 #264: 3475}  
<sup>iv</sup> {Gelder 2009 #264: 3480}  
<sup>v</sup> {Gelder 2009 #264: 3478}  
<sup>vi</sup> {Vijayasathy 2008 #250}  
<sup>vii</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 8}  
<sup>viii</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 9}  
<sup>ix</sup> {Craddock 2012 #330: 3}  
<sup>x</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 10–11}  
<sup>xi</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 13}  
<sup>xii</sup> {Schwaber 2010 #267}  
<sup>xiii</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 10–11}  
<sup>xiv</sup> {Schwaber October 2011 #115: 12}  
<sup>xv</sup> {DSDM Consortium 2008 #165: 41}  
<sup>xvi</sup> {DSDM Consortium 2008 #165: 23}  
<sup>xvii</sup> {Schwaber 2010 #267}  
<sup>xviii</sup> {Lee-Kelley 2008 #269: 52}  
<sup>xix</sup> {Lee-Kelley 2008 #269: 53}  
<sup>xx</sup> {Lee-Kelley 2008 #269: 53}  
<sup>xxi</sup> {Cooper 2002 #270: 511}  
<sup>xxii</sup> {Cooper 2002 #270: 528}