9th Agile Leadership Skills:
Give Your Team The Space They Need to Excel

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Agile Leadership Behavior Eight: Give your Team Space

The (team) should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely ... continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility ... the best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams ... at regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

From: Agile Manifesto Principles 8, 9, 11 & 12

US Government Health Data Project

In January 2012, the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Todd Park, asked his agile team to deliver a web data feed before the Third Annual Health Data Initiative "Datapalooza" conference. The new and improved HealthData.gov website had to include:

♦ Datasets from agencies across Federal government to provide open data on national health

♦ Special brainstorming and sharing of new applications

♦ Crowdsourcing to encourage aggregation of new datasets

♦ The ability for other developers to write their own applications to directly access health data

♦ A new content management system to load information faster. [i]

The initial problem was getting the right people together to create a cross-functional team. This took two months, leaving only time for five sprints – two week scrum sprints being the planned approach. The Scrum Master used the idea of a *minimally viable*

product (MVP) to make sure that delivery would be made before the June conference. Low priority requirements on the product backlog were planned for delivery after the conference to ensure that the tight deadline was met.[ii]

Beta.gov: a Self-Organizing Team

The total cost of setting up and running UK Government web services in the decade to 2011 was £479m. The expense of these services rose up to about £30m/year towards the end of this period.[iii]

The public-facing website was run by DirectGov and the business facing-website by Business Link. The organizations running these websites used traditional project thinking, and the costs and inflexibilities reflected this. (Please forgive the varying use of capital letters and periods in organization and website names in this chapter, but I am just using the actual titles of these websites and project names, which varied over the 2000s and into the 2010s as trends in naming fluxed!).

However, the old DirectGov organization had already incubated a small team working in a very different manner. They were delivering a new portal for delivery of digital government services called alpha.gov, and they built it in just 10 weeks with only 10 staff and £327,000. The team did not follow either a waterfall approach to delivering the required breakthrough in technology, nor did they follow a specific prescriptive agile method. They followed the principles of Scrum, but were not dogmatic in its application. One of the many interesting things about the way they worked was that they used the opportunity of the frequent *retrospectives* at the end of each sprint of work to reinterpret how to use Scrum rather than slavishly following the manual.[iv]

An example of this adaptive behavior, happened just before the fifth and final sprint was about to begin. The team decided that agreeing on a fixed list of priorities would not be flexible enough. The alpha.gov team needed to use the kanban planning method rather than using computer spreadsheets or planning software because they found that the necessary work was varying dramatically almost hour by hour. They had to deal with a number of *bugs* that became apparent when the fully sized implementation was being prepared. They also found that a number of other Government departments had 'woken up' to the fact that the alpha.gov site was really going to happen (many had expected it to slip).

Francis Maude, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, had authorized the live release of the alpha.gov website for general access to the public to try out the new facilities and provide feedback. He had been very close to the work that had gone on and was very involved in the technology.

The alpha.gov team was working as part of the "Directgov" organization that was responsible for converging 95% of the public-facing content of central government websites onto a single, reliable platform with a consistent user-friendly interface over

the three-year period from 2008 to 2011. However, in many cases, the government did not close down the old departmental web servers, and duplication continued. Moreover, the web publication software that had been set up for Government officers to use to publish content onto the web was coming to the end of its life. In 2011, the rest of the world was moving onto Internet Explorer version 9 ("IE9"), while most UK Government staff members were still stuck on a ten-year-old version ("IE6"). This was creating extreme inflexibility and expense for web publication and a growing disconnect between the Government, working with old technology, and citizens working with new technology, such as smartphones and tablet computers.[v]

The Government Digital Service (GDS) was established in 2011, headed by Mike Bracken, who had moved from the Guardian newspaper where he was head of Digital. GDS set up a successor project to alpha.gov, predictably called beta.gov, with the aim of implementing a new strategy of *digital by default.* The aim was to implement all information flows to and from users of Government services by Internet. GDS planned to convert old services over time, while implementing new services digitally right from the start. No paper forms required. No letters required by post. Safeguards called *assisted digital* would exist for the *digitally excluded* who could not access the service on the Internet for whatever reason.[vi]

The Delivery of Beta.gov

The GDS beta.gov team grew to twice the size of the alpha.gov team, and it quickly delivered the new website for public access on January 31, 2012. There were two Scrum teams: One concentrated on further conversion of DirectGov public-facing information, and the other created a *wide and thin* conversion of the old content still rattling around on departmental websites.

Prior to the set-up of GDS, DirectGov had preceded its website launches with high profile marketing activity. This had created expectations of large step changes at each project delivery point. The GDS team now decided to release changes incrementally, and without fuss. An example of such a release was the Inside Government beta release. GDS made this available for six weeks in Feb 2012 to collect feedback from other Government users. It had many innovative features, including:

- ♦ A responsive design with variable page layouts taking advantage of the latest web browser capabilities

- ♦ Consistent layout and look and feel for all Government web pages – no matter which Department

- ♦ A consistent approach to policy definitions in the substantive content

♦ Lookup by topic and clear statement of ministerial responsibility

♦ A special "Overseas" section to pool information on the UK Government's international interests and policies

♦ A custom built publishing engine to replace the obsolete *content management* system previously used by Government staff

♦ Special functionality to cater for Cabinet reshuffles, elections and *machinery of government* changes (where departments are merged and split)

♦ State of the art analytics to show where people are looking, what pages they access and in which order, including diagrams to make the understanding of the statistics clearer. [vii]

A second example where the team members self-organized and decided to try a new approach was in the usability testing. The traditional approach would be to agree on theoretical quality criteria for usability in advance of development, and then inspect the web site to see if it had been created according to those standards. The team chose a more practical approach called *summative testing*. This used large panels of trial users to measure how user-friendly the system was. GDS worked with a specialist supplier who organized hundreds of these test users to access the system pages remotely over the Internet. Their use of the system was tested using the 30 key *needs* that the system had to fulfill, from finding a school holiday date, through to finding details on powers of attorney in family cases. The test system tracked each user's actual use of the system to see how many people managed to find the right information, and how long it took them. Error rates were reduced by a quarter with the first release of this new system.

A third example of how the team organized their work was the conversion of the existing content from the old DirectGov website to beta.gov. First, a *Pareto* analysis was carried out that identified which areas of the website were popular, and which areas were the equivalent of a web graveyard of unused pages. The team recognized early on, that the old web site had become bloated, with many aging pages that related to one-off campaigns and special projects that had no benefit. For example, a defunct campaign to recruit firefighters did not need conversion. Neither did obsolete information about a new motorcycle safety standard. Many of these pages were not related to core government business. At the end of the analysis, only 1,000 core pages were selected for conversion to beta.gov. The team insisted that content experts should work alongside the beta.gov team in reworking those pages. Efficiency increased when the co-location started, because the developers could ask questions and demonstrate ideas first-hand to policy and organizational experts.

The team re-organized itself again after delivering beta.gov. It scaled up again into

a three-tier *scrum of scrums* with over 100 people, including some external experts under the direction of the GDS *Scrum Masters*. There were 16 teams organized within six sub-programs, all under the direction of one *Proposition Director*, who was, in effect, the ultimate *product* owner. The major roles were:

♦ *Product Manager*: one per team – controlled the product backlog and kanban charts for that team. Each of the six sub-programs also had a more senior product manager who juggled priorities between the product backlogs for each team in that sub-program.

♦ *Fact check coordinator*: a special role provided a single point of contact where there was a discrepancy between two pieces of content.

♦ *Technical Architect*: an additional role given to the product manager for the *publishing platform* team. The TA was responsible for providing a consistent publishing engine to all the other teams and rolling it out into all Government departments.

The aim was to move to a flexible cloud-computing contract, and away from the existing managed services contract for the hosting of DirectGov. The scope widened to include not just the decommissioning of the public-facing DirectGov content, but also the Business Link website, aimed at the business user. The aim was for all major UK Government websites to run as one service for the first time. Mike Beaven of GDS explains:

> "We have a pretty established and successful agile software delivery engine ... a firmly established way of working beyond the core delivery teams, and lean/agile methods are used across GDS in a variety of teams. However, we need to interact with other projects to be accountable when we spend public money. That gives us a challenge in terms of needing heavier processes and being able to articulate what we do in good old milestone, cost and risk ways." [viii]

GDS maintained a light, but effective program *box* around the agile project teams. A project management office (PMO) created the necessary standard statistics and reports needed for departmental portfolio reporting, while allowing teams to decide how to control the delivery.

Beaven pointed out that the important thing is to allow "different methods for different areas of managing delivery – one size does not fit all." [ix]

Other Agile Projects at GDS

The conversion and upgrading of government services and information under the

alpha.gov and beta.gov initiatives was only part of the GDS remit. Other activities included:

◆ The e-petitions project, which was built using an agile approach. It has demonstrated the importance of using *open source software* which is available without license fees and has allowed the e-petitions program code to be shared with other governments "from as far afield as the governments of Montenegro and Chile"

◆ The assisted digital team, mentioned briefly above, puts in place safeguards to ensure citizen access to Government *digital by default* services. Rather than digital being merely an alternative to paper information exchange it will be the primary channel. The assisted digital team investigates the requirements for different people in an agile manner. Rather than attempt a detailed specification up-front, GDS carried out a wide collaboration exercise with organizations already providing assisted digital such as the Post Office and the public library service. This included 16.1% who had never used the internet and millions of disabled adults.

Francis Maude took a much closer interest in agile project management concepts than previous politicians did. He encouraged team self-organization and planning. He said that:

> "Already we have seen the beta launch of gov.uk which signaled a new approach to providing services based on real user needs rather than internal Government processes and traditions ... This is the new model for digital service provision and ... we will transform many existing Government transactions in this way. For the first time in Government we are using agile, iterative processes." [x]

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen how self-organizing teams can quickly address changing requirements. Agile Leadership Principle 8 encourages you to give your team space to organize itself, and delegate decision-making as much as possible.

Having light controls over the detail of the development team requires a corresponding restraint, consistency and tightness in top management governance. In Part III of the book, I discuss the need for this combination to achieve *light-tight* management of agile projects.

[i] {Park 2012 #336}

[ii] {Forrest 2012 #335}

[iii] {NAO 2011 #253}

[iv] Unless otherwise stated, information in this chapter was provided to me directly by team members in discussions.

[v] {NAO 2011 #253: 8}

[vi] {NAO 2011 #253: 6}

[vii] {Williams 2012 #376}

[viii] {Beaven 2012 #378}

[ix] {Beaven 2012 #378}

[x] {London Evening Standard 3 June 2011 #168}