

Episode 117: What is an Agile Development method?



In 1970, Dr. Winston Royce criticized sequential development for software. That led to the Agile Methodology, designed for software but generally applicable. This time we look at why this is worth knowing and what makes a SCRUM.

1. Why is Agile important?

Traditional software design methodologies focused on execution over innovations. This is because they are based on the same ideas Henry Ford used to build cars. The assumption was that work was a series of predictable or repeatable work units. Another assumption is that we make big decisions at the start of a project. In today's world, we often know less at the start than after some development. Agile is focused on both learning and working. That means lots of feedback loops and inspection and many steps along the way. That means regular feature delivery and incremental improvement – over big bang.

2. How does it work?

Agile responds to unpredictability through iterative work cadences, called Sprints. After a Sprint the teams must have a potentially shippable product increment. The work in a Sprint is managed by a SCRUM. These use empirical feedback; team self-management and short iterations. Within the SCRUM there are three key roles. The Product Owner who is responsible for the overall ROI of the product. Function comes from vision rather than a roadmap. The Scrum development team is the cross-functional development team. Designed to self-organizing, they are small and usually have no formal leader. The Scrum Master, who has no management authority, is the facilitator. They protect the team from distractions, fix problems and promote good practice.

3. Is Agile right for us?

I think Agile is useful for more than just software – many projects could use this. This is particularly true when you start the project without knowing all the answers. However, it is hard to practice and to keep to the rules. By design it is very disruptive and that can cause contention in many organizations. Done well, Agile will highlight problems in your organization that need to be fixed. That means the whole company may have to commit to Agile to let it be effective. Doing Scrum as it's actually defined usually comes into conflict with existing habits at established non-Agile organizations.

Bottom Line: Agile is as much a mind-set as it is a methodology. Your organization has to both be willing and able to adapt if it is going to adopt this approach.