COLUMNIST

INES MERGEL, SUKUMAR GANAPATI and ANDREW WHITFORD

Making Government Agile

We sometimes dismiss Agile methods too easily, demeaning them as nothing but colorful post-its and hype. How can we help public managers understand how Agile concepts can—and should—be part of their standard toolbox of teams and managers working at all levels of government? Two points are critical: First, Agile fits well with the core values of modern government. Second, practical applications can help project teams become Agile.

What *Is* Agile?

Agile began as a way of developing software in information technology projects where requirements could change rapidly. The 2001 *Manifesto for Agile Software Development* formalized its values and principles. Broadly, Agile values interactive development, working products and customer collaboration over processes, grand plans and documentation.

Agile Values

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools

- Working software over comprehensive documentation

- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

- Responding to change over following a plan

Consider the alternative—sometimes called the "waterfall" approach—where project phases are never revisited once they conclude. It is linear and process driven, with detailed documentation and predetermined products. In contrast, Agile is a distinctive project management approach, more flexible and iterative in nature. It is results driven, with frequent delivery and rapid adjustments in response to environmental or market changes.

Agile allows a team to rapidly modify planning, account for new input from feedback sessions and achieve better performance in terms of cost, time and quality. It emphasizes frequent delivery of small outputs and collaboration with clients throughout each project phase, not just at delivery time. Agile works through frequent face-to-face communication, self-organizing teams and team self-reflection through retrospectives. Interactions among individual team members and trusting relationships are crucial for Agile teams to succeed. Teams follow time-bound routines to deliver a working product, usually within two to three weeks.

Federal, state and local agencies already are proceeding along the Agile path. At the General Services Administration, 18F has played a crucial role in promoting Agile across federal agencies. Meanwhile, the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) has undertaken initiatives aimed at promoting Agile at the state level. And, Agile Government Leadership (AGL) and private consulting firms have been instrumental in encouraging public sector adoption. The Project Management Institute began to offer an Agile Certified Practitioner credentialing program in 2012.

Government can be agile in the same ways that software development has. It *can respond to changing public needs in an efficient and timely way* if it is citizen centered, emphasizing value creation from a user/customer perspective; and if end users are integral throughout development, not simply at the end of the value creation process. Citizen and internal user input is required throughout the project management process. Agile can do this by capturing end users' priorities through user stories—descriptions in plain language—that then can be reflected in the to-be-built service.

Agile is an organizational culture where both internal and external users help build a shared mindset. It reflects core values of modern government in its orientation toward citizen needs and the common good. To get the job done, it relies on small self-selected teams without strong hierarchies, something not always common in government. These teams need top-down support to be able to prepare decisions *and* make them.

How Can Teams Use Agile Methods?

There are many aspects to Agile, as there are many ways to achieve similar results. That said, government teams can do several things to adopt Agile methods:

1. *Start simple.* As Agile guru Steve Denning says, "Agile is a journey."

2. *Find ways to teach your teams the simplest and most useful tools employed in Agile and design thinking.* These include *kanban* boards, dividing tasks into small and manageable work packages, reviewing progress each day, seeking frequent feedback and talking about what can be done and where help is needed.

3. *Build on small successes.* Deliver smaller parts frequently, rather than work toward a single large end goal.

4. *Empower and protect teams.* Give teams the right not only to prepare decisions, but also to make them, and protect them from above.

5. *Document what you plan to do and why you plan to do it.* Visualize the process using free software—Trello is one example—or boards that highlight what needs to be done, what is underway and what already has been accomplished.

6. *Work with clients, customers and internal users to document the riskiest parts of the plan and the sources of those risks.*

7. *Help teams learn and deploy testing strategies.* It is especially useful to test the riskiest parts of the plan.

8. *Help customers, clients and users reveal how much they care about the problem that you are trying to solve.*

9. *Help teams decide how much they know about the problem and where there are gaps in their knowledge.*

10. *Help teams find ways to determine the hardest-to-reach users, clients and customers.* These include the ones least likely to participate in the process and most at risk of their perspectives and feedback being omitted—or not receiving the service to which they are entitled.

What Resources Are Available?

Agile Government Leadership (AGL, https://www.agilegovleaders.org), an association of civic professionals formed to bring agile practices to the public sector, created the Agile Government Handbook and an online academy to help agencies learn how to introduce an Agile culture. AGL hosts virtual panel discussions where participants can learn about new trends and lessons learned.

The National Academy of Public Administration (www.napawash.org), in partnership with The IBM Center for The Business of Government (www.businessofgovernment.org), has established the Agile Government Center to develop, disseminate and implement Agile government principles around the world. It will be a hub for governments, nonprofits, foundations, academic institutions and private sector partners to develop and disseminate agile government principles and case studies of agile policies and programs.

For individuals seeking to advance their career path in Agile project management, the Project Management Institute (https://www.pmi.org) offers a course on Agile project management and offers the Agile Certified Practitioner.

Ines Mergel is professor of public administration in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz, Germany. She is associate editor of Government Information Quarterly, *member of the editorial boards of* Public Administration Review *and* Information Polity *and director of the Public Management Research Association. In 2016, Mergel was appointed as senior fellow at the German Research Institute for Public Administration. She can be reached at iamergel@maxwell.syr.edu*

Sukumar Ganapati is associate professor and former director of the doctoral program in public affairs at Florida International University. Prior to joining FIU in 2004, he taught at California State University, Northridge; California Polytechnic State University, Pomona; University of Southern California; and Manipal Institute of Technology (India). Ganapati can be reached at ganapati@fiu.edu

Andrew Whitford is Alexander M. Crenshaw professor of public policy at the University of Georgia. His research concentrates on strategy and innovation in public policy and organization studies. He co-editor of the Cambridge Elements Series in Public and Nonprofit Administration *and fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. Whitford received the 2017 Herbert A. Simon Award for "significant contribution to the scientific study of bureaucracy." He can be reached at aw@uga.edu*