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How
can the
Government
be more Agile?

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How can the Government be Agile?

Abstract

We sometimes dismiss Agile methods too easily - that they are nothing but colorful post-its and hype. Our goal here is to help public managers see how Agile concepts can be part of the standard toolbox of teams and managers working at all levels of government. We have two main messages: 1) Agile fits well with the core values of modern government, and 2) through practical ways project teams can become Agile. We also highlight a few useful resources for public managers.

What is Agile?

Agile came about as a way of developing software in IT projects where requirements could change rapidly. The 2001 Manifesto for Agile Software Development formalized Agile's values and principles. In a nutshell, Agile values interactive development, working products over grand plans, collaboration with customers, and rapid response to changes (Box 1).

Box 1. 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

Box. 1: Agile Values

Consider the alternative, sometimes called the "waterfall" approach, where project phases are never revisited after they end. In contrast, Agile as a distinctive project management approach, is more flexible and iterative. Waterfall is linear and process driven, with detailed documenta-tion, and predetermined products. Agile is results-driven, with frequent delivery and rapid ad-justments in response to environmental or market changes.

As such, Agile can rapidly modify its planning and take into account new input from feedback sessions to achieve better performance (in terms of cost, time, and quality). Agile emphasizes frequent delivery of small outputs and collaboration with clients throughout each project phase - not just at the 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 2-3 weeks.

Federal, state, and local agencies are already on the Agile path. At the federal level, 18F has played a crucial role in promoting Agile across federal agencies. The National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) has undertaken several initiatives for promoting Agile in state governments. Agile Government Leadership (AGL) and private consulting firms (e.g., Accenture, Deloitte) have also been instrumental in encouraging government agencies to adopt Agile. The Project Management Institute began to offer an Agile Certified Practitioner (PMI-ACP) credentialing program in 2012.

Government can be agile just like software development can be agile. Government 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 the development process (not just at the very end of the value creation process). The input of both citizens and internal users are required throughout the project management process. For instance, Agile does this by capturing end user's priorities through user stories (descriptions in plain language) that are then reflected in the to-be-built service.

Agile is an organizational culture where both internal and external users help build an Agile mindset. It reflects core values of modern government in its orientation toward citizen needs and the common good. To get the job done, Agile relies on small self-selected teams without strong hierarchies - something not always seen in government. As such, they need top-down support so they can prepare decisions *and* make them; Agile teams need supportive public managers.

How can government teams use Agile methods?

While there are many aspects of Agile and many different ways of getting to similar results, here are a few things a government team can do 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 that are employed in agile and design thinking - this includes *kanban* boards, divide tasks into small and manageable work packages, review progress each day, include frequent feedback, talk about what can be done and where you need help.
3. Build on small successes: deliver smaller parts frequently, instead of working toward one 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 your process using free software (e.g., Trello), or boards where you highlight what still needs to be done, what is underway, and what is already accomplished.
6. Work with clients, customers, and internal users to document the most risky parts of the plan and where that risk comes from.
7. Help teams learn and deploy testing strategies. It is especially useful to test the most risky 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 which users, clients, or customers are the hardest to reach, the least likely to participate in the process, and thus the most at risk of their perspectives and feedback being omitted - or not receiving the service they are entitled to.

Where can you find more Agile resources?

Agile Government Leadership (AGL, https://www.agilegovleaders.org/) is an association of civic professionals formed in 2014 to bring agile practices to the public sector. AGL created the Agile Government Handbook and an online AGL Academy to help public agencies learn how to bring agile culture. The AGL hosts virtual panel discussions where participants can learn about new trends and lessons learned.

The National Academy of Public Administration, in partnership with the IBM Center for The Business of Government, is forming the Agile Government Center (AGC) to develop, disseminate, and implement agile government principles around the world. AGC will be a hub for governments, non-profits, foundations, academic institutions and private sector partners to assist in developing and disseminating 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 (PMI, https://www.pmi.org) offers a course on Agile project management. It also offers the PMI Agile Certified Practitioner.

Useful practical readings:

- Denning, S. (2016): *The Age of Agile*. New York: Amacom.
- Whitford, A. B. (Forthcoming). *Transforming how Government Operates: Four Methods for Changing Government*. IBM Center for the Business of Government.
- Mergel, I. (2016). Agile innovation management in government: A research agenda. *Government Information Quarterly*, *33*(3), 516-523.
- Project Management Institute. (2017). *Agile Practice Guide*.
- Beck, K., et al. (2001) *The Agile Manifesto*. Agile Alliance. http://agilemanifesto.org/