Make Learn Change

Digital transformation
is a marathon
not a sprint

ustwo

A couple of years ago I was talking with a colleague about the mindset and behavioural changes required to truly transform an organisation.

I was reflecting on the challenges our clients experience every day. Often I hear, "We're supposed to be using Agile and yet I don't see any improvements in our ability to delivery quickly", or "We've tried to adopt Agile, but it doesn't seem to stick – perhaps it's not appropriate for our organisation".

The trouble is too many of our clients have systemic structures that hinder innovation and change: five-year projections (over rapid response to market changes); quarterly financial targets (instead of focusing on rapid learning cycles); organisational silos (instead of collaboration around results); plan-driven projects (instead of outcome-driven plans); Board expectations (instead of Boards cutting through the bureaucracy), and ultimately a culture of "we know what customers want" (instead of true customer engagement). This book was born out of wanting to help you have a firmer understanding of what Agile is really about and to equip you with the essentials to support the adoption of it in your organisation.

I'm Collin, the Delivery and Transformation Director at ustwo London. I've been helping organisations improve their digital capability for over 20 years. In my earlier days as a consultant to global financial services organisations, I saw them throw millions of dollars of good money after bad. One experience that shaped my understanding of the perils of these organisational barriers was a five-year, $120 million programme that one year after it's launch, was completely and entirely scrapped. It wasn't because of a change of management direction. It wasn't because the purpose had changed. It was simply because they didn't adopt two very important principles from Agile: build your product iteratively and incrementally, and frequently solicit customer feedback along the way. Had they followed those basic principles, they would have had a better, faster and much less expensive result. This is a dramatic example, but it's by no means unique. I suspect if you look around your organisation, you wouldn't have to look far for similar examples.

Before we discuss what Agile is, let me explain where it came from. The traditional approach to creating digital products was based on a linear way of thinking: work out what needs to be built (gather requirements); build the thing; then, validate that what you built was the right thing. It sounds logical. And yet, it often leads to unsuccessful outcomes. This traditional approach presumes you can always know exactly what's required at the start of any project. But you can't. You have a hunch, an idea, or a set of hypotheses. Agile was created to navigate the uncertainty of digital innovation.

Agile adoption can feel like a radical cultural shift – it is. But it's also a shift you can make gradually and incrementally.

Agile is fundamentally a customer-driven, collaborative-based approach that firmly embraces rapid response to change. When you boil it down, it's a risk management strategy.

More specifically, it's a mindset manifest in principles that enable companies to create value for their customers better, and faster. It's a way of thinking about being digital and doing business. And, it can help you transform your organisation. Agile adoption can feel like a radical cultural shift – it is. But it's also a shift you can make gradually and incrementally.

I will guide you through what Agile is really about. I will make the principles of Agile clear so you can assess for yourself if your organisation is being Agile. I will explain how it will help you change your business as well as how your teams make digital products or services.

Our clients (Co-op, Sky, Three, Fresenius Medical Care and Harvey Nichols) all started from different places, in different industries, and yet one thing united them all: a relentless commitment to designing for customers' needs and changing their way of working. It's easy to say, but hard to do.

Our belief is that transformation is a marathon and not a sprint. It takes time, and it can be messy, but the results are dramatic – just ask our clients.

At ustwo, I focus particularly on helping organisations become more digitally capable by coaching them (executive teams as well as delivery teams) to create new digital products, services and businesses.

This little book is for you. It is written for leaders at all levels. It is a guide to creating Agile teams that excel at innovation and solving today's business challenges. Making, learning and changing together are the principles ustwo has seen work again, and again, in organisations and within our own doors. They reflect our belief that transformation is a marathon and not a sprint. It takes time, and it can be messy, but the results are dramatic – just ask our clients. Through these pages we will explain the philosophy of Agile and the benefits it could bring to your teams and culture.

In the long-term, it is the cultural shift that matters far more than the new proposition or digital product you deliver.

Make together

Start small, continuously
improve, and repeat

What does it take to make change happen? We start with making – it's in our DNA. Our founders, Mills and Sinx, started making mobile interfaces in their bedrooms 15 years ago.

Fast forward 15 years and ustwo includes a famous Games studio and a start-up and ventures business. We've changed ourselves and Agile has been at the core of it all.

What do we mean when we say Agile?

Agile is a short, yet daunting word. Countless books have been written on it, spawning many opinions, definitions and processes. Fundamentally, you should see it as a cultural shift. It is an umbrella term referring to a collection of principles and methods adapted to suit the context. At its core it encourages rapid and flexible response to change.

Agile organisations succeed through sensing, and adapting. To become an Agile organisation it's not only about embracing change at a human level but about reappraising all aspects of delivery. If budgets are all agreed at the start of the year, how can an organisation meaningfully adapt to market changes? If contracts are rigid how can teams and partners have the freedom to pivot where necessary? By asking different questions and challenging old ways of doing things you'll be able to improve your delivery function and shift the philosophy for your entire organisation.
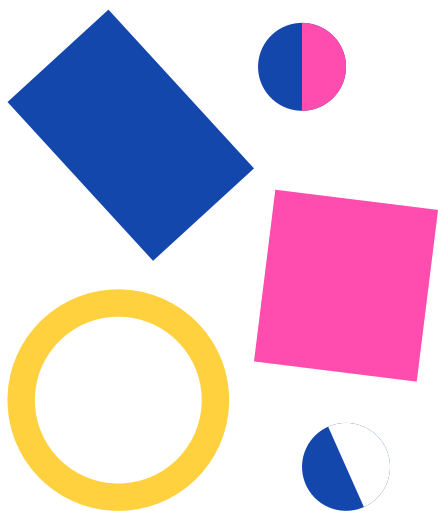
Agile is made up of these 11 characteristics:

1.

Iterative and incremental
This is at the heart of Agile. Instead of working towards a big bang release, you work on a new product or service bit by bit (product increments), refining along the way and incrementally improving it. Continuous feedback from customers helps you learn as you go.

2.

Evolution of requirements and solutions
Agile takes the position that you can't get it right upfront, but you can understand the problem space and solutions through the process of building the product. In other words, creating a new business proposition or building software is a process of discovery.

3.

Collaboration
Agile employs cross-functional collaborative teams. It banishes the idea of specialists working in silos, passing signed-off documents to one another.

7.

Adaptive planning
You should be prepared to adapt your plans regularly and frequently in light of new information. You should also create plans that are easy to adapt and expect that your plans will always need to be updated to reflect the latest understanding.

8.

Evolutionary development
Solutions emerge through making. You begin with a nascent idea – and it may feel right at the outset. Whether your solution requires writing code or defining a new business proposition, your solution will evolve through a better understanding of the problem.

9.

Early delivery
Release value as soon as you can. You should be willing to be slightly uncomfortable when you initially put a proposition idea or product in the hands of customers. Learning from customer feedback is priceless no matter what stage of the process you're in – whether it's early discovery, alpha, beta or live.

4.

Empowered self-organising, cross functional teams
Agile acknowledges that teams – the actual experts doing the work – know more about organising the work than anyone else. This is fundamental.

5.

Delivers value continuously
Delivering value early and often, is a core principle of Agile. Value as perceived by the customer. Your customers place little or no value on the documents you write, the governance processes you use or the tracking tools you leverage – but they do care what value you provide to them.

6.

Customer feedback is everything
Everything you make, you should be making for your customer. It's no good getting customer feedback only after you've launched a new product or service. Customers are the core of your business; and it is their feedback that will enable you to create the right product and business. Agile ensures their voice is continually part of your process.

10.

Responds to change
Change will happen on the journey to creating, launching and optimising digital products. The environment for building digital products is volatile, and so instead of pretending change isn't coming, embrace it.

11.

Conceptual framework
Agile is above all a conceptual framework – the specifics need to be adapted to your context.

A different kind of contract

In 2015, we started working with Sky as their design and delivery partner on their inaugural kids product. Our brief was to bring the best of Sky and the best of ustwo together to form one cross-disciplinary team, working side by side. The commitment from Sky to adopting ustwo's ways of working made this possible. In practice, that meant removing the silos that often exist between design, product, business and technology teams and creating one cross-discipline team. The team was the essential unit of delivery, so we invested heavily to create a great one. There is a crucial distinction between a group of individuals working together and a team. Shifting the dynamic takes investment and time. We focused on a variety of techniques: one-on-one coaching, team socials, close attention to team dynamics and investing in getting to know

each other as people rather than the roles we played on the project. A Sky team v ustwo team cricket match was one highlight! All of this investment in the team is recognition that, as the essential unit of delivery, you are working to ensure they are operating in such a way that they are more than the sum of their parts. Or as we say at ustwo, you can unleash the collective genius.

We did, however, almost fail to get to that point. In order to work in a way that would enable Sky to deliver the best product possible, we needed to entirely re-write their contract. We needed an Agile contract. Sky's procurement and legal teams were set up to focus on deliverables and timelines. We couldn't commit to a set of deliverables upfront – we needed to understand what their customers wanted. Our stakeholders chose ustwo because they wanted to work in a different way –

customer-centric, iteratively and incrementally. Their procurement team weren't set up to purchase services in this way. We pushed our lawyers and their lawyers to create an Agile contract that would work for both parties. We invested time in agreeing high-level feature ideas and then building governance into the contract that allowed both organisations to steer the project on a day-to-day basis. It was a challenging element of the project – but enabled us to work together with shared understanding and trust.

Managing risks

Investing in a new proposition idea or building a new product always feels risky. Agile is designed to mitigate that risk. Counter to our instincts, old ways of working specifically increase risk: the risk of making a product or service that isn't valued by your customers, and the risk of creating a product that is expensive to enhance and adjust. With Agile you can create the right product and create the product right.

Different ways of budgeting

The budgeting process is one of the biggest hindrances to Agile adoption. In most organisations, budgets can only be allocated once there is an approved business case. The assumption is that the business case is correct, even when it lacks validation, or justification, for the cost and projected revenue. And, if the project turns out to be a flop, you only find out after all the budget has been spent.

Jeff Bezos stated it best when he said in his 2015 annual letter to shareholders: "To invent you have to experiment, and if you know in advance that it's going to work, it's not an experiment. Most large organizations embrace the idea of invention, but are not willing to suffer the string of failed experiments necessary to get there."

Influencing and changing the way your organisation budgets will take time. On the next page, here's four simple steps to help you reframe the conversation internally.

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Jeff Bezos

How to budget

1.

Come up with a rough estimate of costs and benefits. You'll always need to submit something as part of your budget cycle. The benefits should significantly outweigh the costs to ensure that some of your assumptions can still be wrong and the product or service would still be worth building. Then allocate all the budget, but only release a small amount of money to get started.

2.

Start with an initial customer-centred discovery and research phase to determine if it's worth pursuing. You can do this very quickly. In eight to ten weeks, you can validate whether there is value for the business and potential customers. Your team can test the riskiest assumptions of the proposition immediately and cheaply, while looking at an initial business model. Ask your team to report on what they are learning about the market, their customers, the ability to build the product, the operational and financial set-up and capability required to scale and maintain it. You can use all this new insight to update your initial budgeting plan.

3.

As you learn more, continue to reassess your budgeting assumptions. Does something needs to change? Review your plans and business case in light of what you're learning to determine if you should continue as planned, pivot or cancel the project. Attend your team Show & Tells (more on these later) so you can ask the right questions about progress and continue to assess the confidence of your investment.

4.

If all seems good, release more money. In this way, budget is only released as you continue to gain confidence that you're on the right track. If you feel you should no longer continue with this project, it's not a failure. You've experimented and saved yourself future expenditure.

A different approach to contracts

Trust is the bedrock upon which Agile thrives. This includes the relationship between you and your different partners. The nature of your contracts with your partners will have a great impact on their ability to work in an Agile way.

An Agile contract should be clear about:

- **The project vision** and how success will be measured.

- **A scope** that is sufficiently high-level to give the team the ability to make the right decisions as they learn.

- **Roles and responsibilities** between you and your partner supplier(s).

- **A fixed** delivery date.

- **An initial upper limit** on spend.

- **Terminating the contract** if the proposition, product or service has been proven to not be feasible, desirable or viable, or if your partner supplier is under-performing.

Always be mindful of your finance processes or contracts dictating what, or how, you deliver a new product or service. It can be hard to change procurement and legal process, but it is possible. It helps to be clear about what you are trying to achieve with the contract.

Exposing problems early
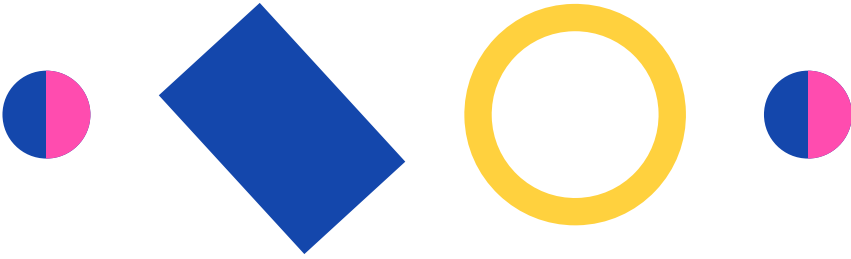
Inevitably, the best laid plans can go awry. With traditional ways of working, you often don't find out until very late in the process that things have gone severely over budget or time. You will all be familiar with finding out the bad news once it's too late.

Cast your mind back to a recent large delivery project where traffic lights were used to report on project health. The pattern probably looked something like: Green from the start for the first several months. Everyone loved the design work, there was lots of excitement and energy around the new project. Risks were being actively managed, and the project was more or less in good health. As the deadline approached, you encountered some snags that the project manager was fully confident would not affect delivery. At this point the project was probably technically Amber, but so as not to alarm anyone, was reported as Green. As the launch date approached, more issues surfaced and the launch date started to look like it was in jeopardy. Technical complexities hadn't been surfaced; features had been promised to senior stakeholders that hadn't been validated; a couple of team members were off on long-term leave which impacted how much the team could realistically deliver. The entire project was now months behind schedule. The project manager realised that there was no way to withhold the issues surfacing and reported the project as Red.

From a stakeholder's point of view, the project was merrily going along until it very suddenly became Red. At this point, the story is even more familiar: a seasoned senior person was assigned to get it done. Emergency budget was found and some radical prioritisation decisions were made. Luckily, in this instance, the project delivered close enough to the delivery date that nobody was fired. But, confidence in the
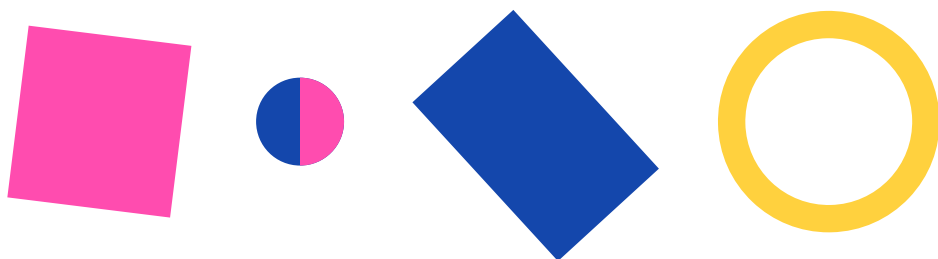
delivery team was eroded, and someone senior spent all their political capital managing expectations.

Now consider an alternative version of this story – an Agile version. The delivery project kicks off and in the first couple of weeks the team try to get something small, really small, working in a production environment, but they can't. They don't have all the people on the team yet (even though they've officially started). They haven't been granted access to the systems they need, they aren't able to get the support and information from a department they are dependent upon. The project is reported as Red.

Your stakeholders might say: "Red? How can this project be reporting as Red? This Agile stuff is a joke! You've only just started and the project is already in trouble?" Well, that's one way to look at it. Another way to look at it is that there are barriers preventing the team from doing the thing that is the ultimate measure of progress: creating something of clear value to the

customer. If that's the measure, then the team are indeed in Red.

Let's imagine you, or one of your colleagues, is able to remove these barriers and the team proceed. They quickly get into the rhythm of delivering value and move from Red to Green. They stay in that state of Green as they progress to delivery. No surprises at the end; no one has to come in and rescue the project and there is no stress at launch. This is what Agile can bring to your delivery projects and ways of working.

It's up to you to ask different questions

Let's be honest, being a stakeholder around an Agile team is hard, especially when the way of thinking is new to your organisation. Typically the questions you might ask to give yourself confidence that something good is going to be delivered would be something like these:

**What am I going to get?
When am I going to get it?
How much is it going to cost?
What percentage of the product is complete?
How are we doing against schedule?
How are we doing against budget?**

These are entirely reasonable questions. In some circumstances they are good ways of managing a project. It's just that digital products and services are different (which is why Agile exists in the first place) and if you make an Agile team answer these questions you'll stop them being Agile. You'll undermine the very thing you're trying to develop. Your questions pull in the wrong direction. It's not just the delivery team that has to change, it's the team around the team. It's you.

You need to shift your mindset and ask different questions.

Try these four questions

1 **"What does the product or service have to do?"**

Instead of asking "What will I get?" and looking for every detail to be decided upfront, come up with a small set of things a successful product will have to be able to do. Ideally it'll be a set of genuine customer needs. Leave all the detail for later. Leave that to be solved by your team, working with customers, making the real thing.

2 **"When will we have something in people's hands?"**

Instead of asking "When am I going to get it?" concentrate on encouraging the team to get something in front of customers really, really quickly. You need to steer them (and yourself) away from the binary idea that "it" will be delivered on a magical day. What you want is for them to get something into the world and hands of customers as quickly as possible and then iterate towards a successful product.

3 **"Does this make financial sense?"**

Asking "How much is it going to cost?" is not an unreasonable question. You have budgets. You have accountabilities. The thing is, making products and services is different, so you have to build more tolerance into your process and you have to make sure your business case works to those tolerances. If your business case makes sense if the product costs one million pounds, but doesn't if it costs a fraction over one million pounds then don't build it.

4 **"What can you show me that we've done?"**

Delivering a product or service is not like running a bath. If you've half filled it in two minutes you can't expect it to be full in four. Knowing that you're '50% complete' does not tell you whether you've been making the right stuff or that the last 2% of the project is going to take twice as long as the first 98%. The best question you can ask is "What can you show me?".
Ask to see a working thing. If there's no working thing yet, ask to see the insights that will inform the working thing. Don't be satisfied with insights for very long. Live, working things will give you so much more confidence than a presentation or percentage on a dashboard.

And then you can apply some judgement and common sense. You can do this regularly at Show & Tells – we'll talk more about Show & Tells in the next section, they're essential.

If you ask those questions of your team, if you show them that's the stuff you care about and if you can get your fellow senior stakeholders caring about those things then you'll give Agile a real chance to work for you. And, frankly, if you're leading a team that way, you'll find that they probably have pretty good answers to most of the question you wanted to ask at the start. They'll know, roughly, what it'll be, how much it'll cost, when you'll get it and how it's going. Just don't make those the questions that rule their lives.

Key takeaways

1.

Agile is a customer-centric approach to creating new things.

2.

Agile is all about using customer feedback to learn as you go.

3.

Agile demands a learning mindset.

4.

Agile delivers value to the customer early.

5.

Agile will help you mitigate risks.

6.

Agile is about innovation and experimentation.

7.

For Agile to work, leaders need to ask different questions.

Learn together

Build empowered, collaborative, cross-discipline teams

Collaboration and openness are key to helping your organisation change. It's also fundamental to an Agile way of working

It banishes the old fashioned, traditional ideas of specialists working in silos, passing signed-off documents to one another and instead leverages cross-functional collaborative teams, boosting creativity and innovation while decreasing risk.

When you first start talking about collaboration – especially when people come across the model of whole teams sitting together, exploring solutions together, planning together – it can feel like there's a lot more talking than doing. There are good reasons for teams to work in this way.

Requiring people to continuously share their perspectives and their work-in-progress can be messy and emotional. For some people this will feel exposing. The vulnerability it requires can cause some people to obstruct or retreat. To change to a culture that champions open collaboration, a shift is required across every aspect of an organisation - from hiring, to where people sit, to how work is shared and recognised.

## Let's look at how to set up the essential open culture.

Creating an open culture

Agile is so much more than things people do, it's about a set of principles, a change of mindset and, for there to be any hope of Agile growing roots, it has to be approached as a cultural change. Anything less and you're wasting time, money and effort as changes will be superficial and short-lived. Implementing changes without the right mindset won't achieve the intended results.

You have to role-model these changes. You shape the culture of your organisation. You don't do it alone (and sometimes not consciously) but everything you say and do contributes to your organisation's values. People look to you to understand what's important.

You'll need people who are open to adopting a different way of thinking and who are willing to try different ways of working (even if they feel a bit uncomfortable at first). And of course, that includes you.

As you start to talk more about the product and services you're creating, people in your organisation will become curious. Hopefully they'll want to find out more. It's important to host Show & Tells that anyone in your organisation can attend. Your role as a leader is to be there, express curiosity, ask questions, provide feedback and in doing so, role model to your colleagues. All this input gathered by the team at Show & Tells ultimately makes the proposition idea, product or service stronger.
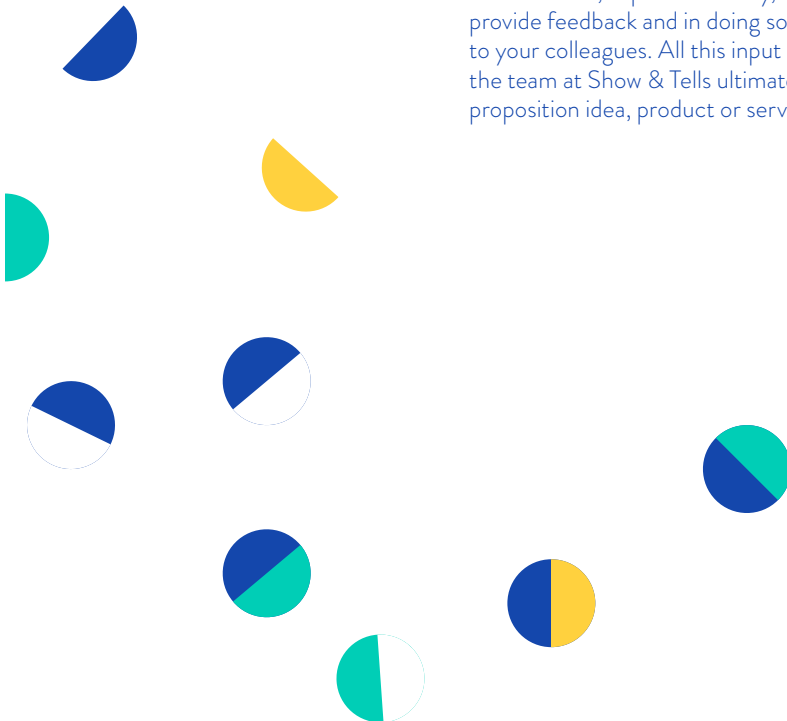
What's a Show & Tell?

It's a chance to hear what teams have been working on that week, or that fortnight, how they're progressing and what's coming next. This is the forum where the team will share with you what they've learnt. It's also a chance for you to learn from the team. If they're at a stage where they've built working software, they'll demo that.

A good Show & Tell has attendees from all levels of your organisation. From board members and senior management to team members and customer service experts. You want as many people as possible to attend and ask questions. The more feedback you get from your colleagues, as well as your customers, the better your product or service will be. Your attendance as a leader will role model the importance of showing up to these sessions. It's powerful – we've seen it work with many of our clients. In fact, the Co-op Food's commitment to openness is one of the best we've seen. It made a real difference to every project we did with them.

In this forum, you don't only learn about what the team have accomplished, you learn about the tangible progress the team has made. This is the power of the Show & Tell — you're looking at real working product. And as you know, transparency about real project progress is one of the most challenging things to obtain in a traditional approach to product development.

This openness and transparency can surface issues that might otherwise remain in hiding for a long time. For instance, someone from another department may realise that they're working on much the same thing and that wasn't understood by the organisation. Or that there's a dependency that the product team didn't realise that they'll have to deal with. Or there are potential impacts to another parts of the business that hadn't been considered.

These are all things you want to surface as early as possible so corrective action can be taken. Transparency makes possible this opportunity. And as a leader you should ask the difficult questions so that you role model learning together as a team and organisation.

It might feel uncomfortable at first, but over time you'll see more and more people attend the Show & Tells and they'll feel their curiosity is rewarded.

Working in the open

Co-op Digital was founded in 2015. Their mission is to use digital techniques and capabilities to transform a large, vigorous business with a strong ethical base. We were taken on as a partner to explore how service design and digital could enable efficiency savings and deliver a better customer and colleague experience.

At the start of our engagement with Co-op Digital, we began with a quick two-week discovery phase looking for the best problem to solve. Something tractable with a business case behind it. We looked across the retail business from logistics to stock management, looking for places where we could save time or money. We quickly identified a problem that had been causing considerable pain in the business – scheduling and shift management. We validated that with Co-op colleagues via some quick paper prototypes and decided to move into the next phase by building an Alpha of a digital scheduling and shifts organisation tool called 'Shifts'. We worked on Shifts in the leanest way we could. We only wrote code to test the things we needed to learn. We assumed we'd throw all the code away at the end of that Alpha process. It's important not to get too attached to it otherwise you're baking in unvalidated assumptions.

Everything we did was about learning and being open. We used Intercom to gather real-time feedback from customers and that, coupled with the 1.1m distinct interactions we observed, meant we were able to learn not just what customers said they wanted but what they actually did. This approach allowed us to prioritise and design content, listening to their needs while referring to data to decide where to place it in the application.

When we first started working with Co-op Digital and Co-op Food, we were surprised by our team space location. Near the lifts; on the way to the lockers and the loos. And yet, it was the spot with the most organic footfall. Alongside the regular Show & Tells (in the open, filmed and recorded for others to watch later) the team worked in a space where anyone could see what we were doing and how we were progressing. We were literally working in the open!

Throughout the project, we also supported Co-op's overall mission to become a digital first business by expanding their internal capabilities, setting up teams and enabling individuals across their business who were savvy in Agile ways of working. The Co-op's commitment to an open process matched (and possibly exceeded) our own. The Show & Tells and the co-design sessions helped ease the acceptance of the project internally and the quality of the feedback we got. We learnt together.

Hiring for an open culture

You're trying to change a culture. You'll need people who are open to adopting a different way of thinking and who are willing to try different ways. Think carefully about new hires and what capabilities you're looking for.

Look for people who:

Won't be precious about their work. You need people who are happy examining what's not working and willing to make changes, whether that's proposition development, process or product. Maybe they'll need to deliver small pieces of work instead of big chunks.

Prioritise the team over their individual contributions. You want individuals who know the team is the unit of delivery, and therefore the team comes before the individual.

Are customer obsessed, and see the value in getting things into customers hands as quickly as possible.

Focus on achieving outcomes, not just completing tasks.

Are comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. That's the mind shift — changing how you look at things.

Value transparency and working in the open. Collaborating can put some people in a vulnerable position.

Comfortable navigating conflicts which are inevitable in deeply collaborative teams.

Are brave enough to raise bad news early so there's time to address it.

Respect other disciplines equally. Designers, strategists, technologists, researchers, product managers and QAs all hold an equal voice in a team.

The importance of cross-functional teams

Traditionally you may have grouped people together in their discipline silo. Marketing, product, technology and design were often separated into distinct departments and teams. As you know, Agile takes an entirely different approach. A cross-discipline team is essential for it to work. And more than that, your team should be self-organising and empowered.

Self-organising and cross-functional teams are the key to successful collaboration and embracing this acknowledges that teams – the experts doing the work – know more about how to organise the work than anyone else. You have to trust your team.

What does good collaboration look like?

Some organisations mistake collaboration for just working 'together'. Simply working on the same outcome doesn't mean people are collaborating. Forming a cross-discipline team, even if they sit together, is not enough.

The traditional siloed approach leads to designing without considering technical feasibility from the outset.

Real collaboration is a strategist, designer, and developer solving a problem together. Sketching ideas together. Finding feasible, suitable solutions, together. Bringing to bear each of their expertise on determining what is the appropriate solution given the context. This includes time, the committed release date, what the technology can support, the expectations of the sponsors, the needs of the business and the customer.

Your tester is thinking about what might go wrong, your researcher is feeding in customer insights and your growth marketer is creating the growth and acquisition strategy. This is not a design-by-committee approach (which always yields mediocre results) or an approach that balloons the cost. This model of collaboration creates solutions taking into account all perspectives.

With collaborative teams that are working within an Agile framework, they have a lot of freedom about how they go about their work. This is as it should be. And they should exercise that freedom by frequently pausing to reflect on their effectiveness and identifying ways to improve it. A standard – and essential – ritual is the retrospective.

The most important ritual

I was once being interviewed for a role where I was asked "If you could choose only one Agile ritual, which one would you choose?" It was a great question.

Although I was accustomed to adapting Agile to the client's context, and I firmly believe in meeting our clients where they are in their journey, I'd never considered what is the most essential aspect of Agile. The various processes and practices, more or less, formed an interdependent whole. The question gave me pause. I concluded that retrospectives are the most essential part. They are the activity that causes you to reflect on your performance and consider what you might do to improve. Most Agile teams will do this once a fortnight.

Whether teams do it weekly, fortnightly or monthly, taking time frequently to review how they are performing, where their ways of working could be improved, and identifying specific action to make improvements, is a very powerful practice for teams. With some foundational principles to aim for, like focusing on creating value for your customers and continuously getting feedback from them, retrospectives are the tool that can get you there incrementally. They are the epitome of continuous improvement and learning together. You don't need to be making digital products to introduce them to your organisation.
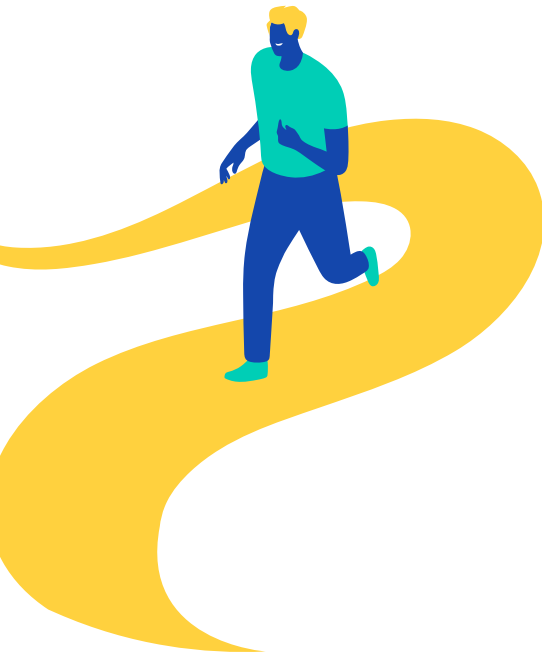
Key takeaways

1.

An open culture is key to collaboration – Show & Tells are a great place to start.

2.

The rituals of retrospectives are crucial to developing a learning mindset.

3.

Good governance means turning up and seeing the thing for yourself, as a leader, regularly.

4.

Look for people who are open to adopting a different way of thinking.

5.

Self-organising and cross-functional teams are the key to effective collaboration.

6.

Transparency allows you to bring stakeholders on the journey with you – and they can provide meaningful feedback throughout the process.

7.

Working together is (part of the work) but you don't need to do everything together.

Change together

Be open, transparent and enjoy the journey

You need to be the change you want to see and that means adjusting your mindset. You are responsible for leading a profound cultural shift. As the leader, you shape the culture of your organisation.

Be the cultural change

Everything you say and everything you do contributes to your organisation's values and sets of behaviours. People look to you to understand what's important.

It will be crucial that what you and your peers say and do works in harmony with the changes you're trying to implement, and not inadvertently against it.

You have to start by understanding that bringing in new ways of working is more about bringing in new ways of thinking and shaping the culture to make these ways of thinking thrive. For there to be any hope of Agile growing roots, it must be approached as a cultural change to your organisation. Anything less and you're wasting your time, money and effort.

Instead of relying on status reports, visit the team workspace. Go to the Show & Tells. Give the team feedback on what they've shown you. Ask questions that strengthen a culture of experimentation and learning. Watch customer insight sessions. These are all behaviours that will demonstrate your personal commitment to changing the way things are done.

Where should you start?

All too often leaders in organisations believe that it is only the people doing the hands on delivery work who need to change. Cultural change needs to be both bottom-up and top-down. Your people will get cues from how you behave and where you put your attention. You have to role model the change you expect them to deliver.

We work regularly with leaders to help them better understand the role they play in making this type of organisational change. A huge part of the cultural change is understanding what Agile is and what it is not. (This little book should be helping you with that.) It is also about ensuring you are actively supporting the change you want to see and not unintentionally hindering it. All the way from the questions you ask in meetings or Show & Tells to the way you interact with the team on a day-to-day basis.

Transformation and how we do it

Transformation has been written about by so many people and consultancies. It may be in vogue, but it's started to lose all meaning.

Let's keep it very simple: it's about successfully becoming a digital business and the cultural shifts you need to achieve that.

Our approach is about getting into it together: making together, learning together, and changing together.

We believe the transformation works best when we partner with our clients to bring something into existence and by doing so, we help transfer not only the skills, tools and techniques, but also the mindset that makes it all work. We do it with you side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

Before we wrap up, there are a couple of important topics you need to know about: trust and guidance.

The importance of trust

Trust is central for Agile to be successful in your organisation – trust among team members, stakeholders, and partners. The absence of trust consumes tremendous non-value-added resources. If the trust isn't 100% then the focus needs to be on building it. Fundamentally everyone depends on everyone else, and a lack of trust slows the pace of getting things done. Here are some illustrations to consider:

The authenticity of deadlines: are deadlines real, or are they artificially imposed to try to squeeze more productivity out of your employees?

The ability to honour delivery commitments: is there trust that the team are trying to honour their delivery commitments as best they can with the skills and experience they have, and the context they are operating in?

Trade-off implications: when navigating the need for trade-offs, do all parties present options in good faith with full transparency?

The truth of time estimates: are estimates given and received in the spirit of what they are, estimates, not guarantees?

When things don't go as planned: is there a hunt to find out who messed up, or do you accept that everyone did the best they could under the circumstances, while seeing if there are opportunities for improvement?

Clear and transparent communication, good and bad news: does the culture welcome transparency of both good and bad news, and focus on improvement instead of blame?

Personal responsibility: do team members do what they say they're going to do?

Supplier relationships: do you authentically work with "partners" or is that just nice sounding language for suppliers? Does the relationship require buttoned down details in the contract or do you expect to go on this journey together through the ups and downs?

Trust is complex, but crucial in making Agile work within an organisation, and these are only a few of the questions you might want to ask. The salient point is, you need to be asking these questions (and more) to understand the level of trust that does, or doesn't, exist in your organisation. Even though you intuitively know that trust is the foundation for a healthy working relationship, it can be hard to get there. Try answering some of the questions above and see how it feels.

Change is infectious

We started working with Three in January 2018. Three have an audacious goal: to become the UK's most-loved brand by 2021 and to make it a place employees love. Their new Chief Marketing Officer was keen to ensure that the customer returned to the core of all their decision-making and ustwo were appointed to help them make that happen. It was taking Three six months (and hundreds of thousands of pounds) to identify, ideate and then approve new propositions to take to market. Their Director of Propositions had worked with us before and was convinced that the ways of working she'd experienced with ustwo was exactly what Three needed. Her ambition was to create and validate new proposition ideas in four to six weeks instead of six months. We worked concurrently across two streams: delivering a series of new customer-centric marketing propositions while bringing an Agile way of working to the Three marketing team to improve their capabilities and transform the way they worked.

After 12 months of working together, the marketing team at Three now works in a completely different way. Propositions are not just marketing-led but involve stakeholders throughout the business. Business cases are being established through customer research rather than guesswork, and customer value is at the centre of every marketing proposition. The time it takes to develop a proposition has shrunk from six months to just six weeks. Together, we've reduced their timelines, their costs, and improved each proposition outcome. Three are bringing more customer-value and customer-focused propositions to market faster than ever in their history.

As the marketing team role modelled this new way of working, more and more parts of the business became interested in better understanding this profound shift. Alongside working day-to-day with the marketing team, we've been teaching Agile ways of working across departments like technology, legal, compliance, regulatory, execution, and trading. They're starting to see the results.

All these teams have had to start build trusting relationships alongside their new ways of working. Fostering an environment of openness, transparency and trust has been a cornerstone of their rapid progress.

The value of Agile coaches

You should consider hiring skilled and experienced Agile coaches to be part of your team and organisation. Their job is to help people at all levels adjust their mindset. They can help you navigate the change overall, including how finance, people teams, IT, procurement, marketing, legal and compliance can all work with or against the change.

The biggest risk of going along the road without an experienced guide is bending Agile to be closer to what you already do and accidentally sabotaging your transformation. Agile is not particularly prescriptive. It is guided more by mindset and principles, making it easy (and common) for organisations to leave out the bits that are hard or they don't like. The net result is you'll keep yourself stuck in old ways of working.

An effective Agile coach will ensure you don't fall into that trap, or if you do, it will be with your eyes wide open to the implications. This risk exists irrespective of the size of your transformation programme or how much money you spend on it. Let's face it, people don't like change. At every opportunity to maintain the status quo, they will, even if it's innocent. Good Agile coaches will keep you and your organisation honest.

What is an Agile coach?

The term coach conjures up any number of mental images from sports coaches to lifestyle coaches. These images can confuse the role of an Agile coach. There are similarities and there are differences. The role of the Agile coach is to teach, mentor, guide, inspire, support, and indeed coach, people in making the best use of their hard and soft skills in an Agile framework.

A lifestyle coach is focused on drawing out the answers about your life that you already have inside you. A sports team coach is helping players work well together, capitalising on their skills. An Agile coach is doing both of those things and more. The goal of every good Agile coach is to support the team to become self-sufficient. Their objective is to help a team to work well together, while continuously delivering customer-value. They do this at the same time as creating an environment in an organisation that is supportive to their way of working.

What does an Agile coach do?

An Agile coach tends to work with a senior team to ensure they understand what Agile is and isn't, and to coach them to ensure their behaviours are working to support the change. (These two goals have also been the intention of this little book.)

The Agile coach will identify areas of friction in the organisation and strategies to improve them. They will conduct team sessions to increase bonding and cohesion, from the senior team to the teams doing the hands-on work. They will ensure practices are being used in the spirit with which they are intended. They will support individuals on how best to contribute given their personality and the culture of the team. They will help with interpersonal conflict. They will hold a mirror up so people can see where they can improve. They will say uncomfortable truths the team are unable to recognise, or unwilling to say. They play a very important role in helping you change your organisation.
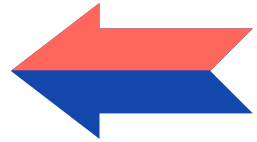
Finding good Agile coaches

The challenge is finding good coaches. It's a relatively difficult role to assess if you're not skilled at knowing what good looks like. Here are some tips: you want someone who has a deep appreciation for this being a people problem not a process problem. "Doing Agile" isn't the same as "being Agile".

You want someone who doesn't litter the discussion with Agile buzzwords. They should speak the language of the business. Everything in Agile can be explained without resorting to buzzwords. You want someone who can be persuasive with senior leadership.

Someone with enough experience to empathise with the barriers to change in large organisations. Someone who gets that what is written in most books on Agile is describing utopia. Someone who genuinely understands the need to adapt to the specific context that is your organisation.

While finding good coaches is hard, it's one of the best investments you can make for the success of your transformation. Much of what has been described in this book is simple, but not easy. Coaches will help you and your organisation do the hard work.

Key takeaways

1.

Agile means trusting your teams to organise themselves around a common goal.

3.

Agile demands a sincere cultural change.

2.

Agile needs you to champion its core message and communicate its ethos to your organisation.

4.

And for Agile to work, cultivate an environment of trust.

If this book has done its job, you'll feel a little clearer about what Agile really is, beyond the buzzwords and hype.

You also have a better sense of why you'd want to adopt it. You appreciate the vital role that you as a leader in your organisation, and your peers, have in enabling this type of transformation. You feel inspired to focus your organisation on relentlessly delivering customer value in small increments. You are motivated to turn your organisation into a digital business.

For some of you, this little book will simply be a good reminder. For others, it'll feel like a big job to start putting all these cultural shifts in place.

Here's the thing: you don't need to adopt all of this in one go — in fact we've seen the best and lasting results in organisations where leaders took an incremental approach. Choose what works best for you, your team and your organisation.

Start small, pick a good first project and focus on getting it right. Be incremental in changing how you deliver. Empower your teams to own their process; trust them, and don't let the process own them. Then take the learning from your first project and move on to the next. Rinse and repeat.

Remember, Agile is mostly about how you think and the mindset with which you approach getting work done. It will help you with the organisational change. Try it, and let me know how things go.

Working with ustwo has changed Three. From proposition development to ways of working to team dynamics to de-risking innovation – ustwo has helped us transform the way we do marketing. And it's been fun to boot.

Shadi Halliwell,
Chief Marketing Officer,
Three

ustwo is unique, in the sense that they have a great balance between technology, user experience, design and Agile methods. They understand digital, business and Agile – my team has been privileged to work with them as I was. Without ustwo we would not where we are now.

Ricardo Carvalho,
VP of Digital Transformation,
Fresenius Medical Care

Say hello
It's easy to get in touch with us

For follow-up questions, send Collin
an email: **collin@ustwo.com**

If you'd like to talk about a possible project
say hello to Cameron: **cameron@ustwo.com**

If you'd like to see how we work drop into
our studio and have a coffee:
62 Shoreditch High St, London E1 6JJ

For regular news from our studio you can
subscribe to our newsletter:
ww.ustwo.com/subscribe-london

If you want to know more about our work
with Flipside to help improve diversity in the
digital industry, follow: **@flipside_london**

If you're an under-represented group, email
us at **hello-london@ustwo.com** to get access
to our events space. We prioritise hosting
events for under-represented groups.

And you can find us **@ustwo** on all the
socials, so say hello.