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The Agile Journey: Four Stages of Agile Adoption and Maturity

The Agile Challenge

At some point, every company must address the the obstacles that impede its ability to thrive. It may be the inability to pivot when markets change suddenly. It may be missing delivery deadlines due to overly ambitious development plans or unforeseen dependencies and roadblocks. It may be spending too much time on trivial fixes and too little on customer value initiatives. Or it may just be ineffective prioritizing.

Fortunately, these are issues agile software and methodologies were designed to solve. The challenge is that transforming into an agile business isn't effortless. It's a multi-stage process, and more likely, it's a cycle that includes multiple stages that change, revert, overlap and intersect one another, each with its own set of obstacles that must be overcome on the path toward higher levels of agility.

This document serves as a guide for recognizing the (approximate, and likely not linear) four stages of an agile transformation and defining the transition points between them.

The Agile Journey

Agile is more than a methodology. It's a mind-set that changes how you deliver value to customers. It transforms your market strategy into marketable innovation. When you're agile, the right people get access to the right information faster than ever before. You remove the barriers that separate teams and transform delivery from an end result into a continuous, evolving part of your business.

But agile is also a journey of learning that will require you and your organization to change the way you think in several fundamental ways. This white paper is your guide to understanding that journey, its stages and how your organization can advance between them.

Stage 1: Discover agile

Agile discovery typically starts with specific challenges. Something inside the organization isn't working right. Time to market is poor. You're churning out new features, but they never quite seem to fit customer needs. Your competitors are always getting the drop on you. And that's leading to low employee morale, anemic product development and increasing customer ambivalence—all in the face of ever-increasing expectations.

In search of a solution, organizations learn that agile has earned a reputation for addressing these very problems. The agile discovery process officially begins, and the organization moves through a series of discovery phases. These phases may be linear, but most likely they will occur as a continuous cycle of learning and understanding.

1. Agile investigation

In this phase, organizations learn about agile. They find that while it was once relevant only to software development, it has evolved into a set of practices, principles and methodologies that can be applied across a broad range of industries and functions. Here, many organizations start to explore how agile methodologies and software can help them to:

- Deliver projects more quickly and with fewer complications
- Free up resources and allow for faster response to customer demands
- Ensure alignment with overarching business objectives by illustrating the projects being funded, what resources are committed to those projects and the real-time status of delivery
- Set the stage for future success by implementing the tools necessary to respond to change quickly and build the high-quality products customers want

To achieve these benefits, improve customer satisfaction, and enhance work visibility and predictability, organizations learn they must facilitate an enterprise-wide transition that requires focus, dedication, perseverance and the adoption of new ways of working.

2. Agile consideration

In this phase, the agile champion within the organization takes on the task of convincing others of the need for agile. They often begin by working out a strategy for implementing a mental shift: their own mind-set first, followed by that of their teams and, finally, the mentality of the whole organization. A few key things can help facilitate this shift:

- **Identify the problems with the current approach.** Surface challenges within the organization—getting work done, connecting strategy to work execution, acting strategically to match the pace of the market, and explain how these issues are creating unnecessary stress on teams and significant opportunities for competitors.
- **Communicate a clearer vision of the future.** Everyone wants a less challenging, less stressful and less contentious work environment. And everyone wants the company to succeed. Paint a clear picture of a future made possible by agile.
- **Acknowledge that a true culture shift is needed.** Agile adoption requires a whole-org commitment to change. Without all parties on board, agile adoption will likely only succeed at the team level.

3. Agile selection and adoption

In this phase, organizations learn more about operations at large. They research best practices on how to organize, collaborate, communicate and streamline work. They explore methodologies—Scrum and Kanban, agile and Lean—and identify when to choose one over the other. They may also start investigating different agile software solutions or tools and when to use them, focusing specifically on those that meet key criteria:

- Does it give us visibility into the project work currently underway?
- Does it provide a mechanism for improvement and rapid response to problems?
- Will it improve collaboration and coordination?
- Will it give us increased clarity and focus?
- Will it increase our productivity and the predictability of deliverables?
- Will it increase our software quality and time to market?
- Will it better inspire the creativity of our teams?

Once the due diligence is complete, a set of criteria is established, and the best agile software and methodologies are selected, pilot projects (if not already underway) can begin across a limited number of teams to test and vet choices against one another.

Stage 2: Learn agile: Getting over the agile plateau

By Stage 2, agile has probably already been piloted across a handful of teams, and while it's become clear how agile methods could and should work, you may not be reaping all the benefits—yet.

New agile teams often fall short in one of three common areas: 1) They aren't performing the necessary agile ceremonies and practices, 2) They aren't fully utilizing their agile software or 3) They haven't entirely embraced the mind-set shift agile requires. As a result, work hierarchies, flows and plans are not aligning properly, making the identification and analysis of risks and their impact on delivery unnecessarily tricky.

1. Take a step back

Agile methodologies and technologies are often introduced into organizations at a grassroots level. Perhaps a development team was looking to speed delivery, or an IT department was interested in streamlining operations.

Agile software that enters an organization this way is often low-cost, quick to implement and provides just the basic functionality required at the time. And minimal functionality makes activities like reviewing work, measuring progress, pulling metrics and tying work to a specific initiative or funding a manual, time-consuming process.

If you've graduated from pilot programs to a handful of teams and you're struggling, ask: "How are we struggling? Are our teams communicating effectively? Is everyone on board with this change? Are we using the right software?" If you think you'll ultimately need a full-featured agile solution to meet your goals, or you need more robust transformation help, it's better to come to that conclusion now.

If you decide you have the right agile solution, begin to monitor ceremonies. While individual ceremonies provide value, they're most powerful when aggregated into a cohesive system. If you're performing ceremonies as planned, review teams to ensure they've been established with the proper roles and responsibilities.

If those items are in order, you may need to evaluate the mind-set of the teams involved. As mentioned, agile requires a cultural change, and many teams fail to grasp the implications of agile ways of working. Other times, leaders may fail to see how agile will improve the delivery of work. Regardless of the reason, organizations may determine they need outside help to ensure a smoother agile transition.

2. Invest in education

Transitioning the way we work can be challenging, and doing so while learning new software can be overwhelming. Success in Stage 2 can be aided with agile services, professional coaching and experienced agile transformation experts, particularly if you can't get everyone to agree on how agile should be rolled out.

If your software has the ability to facilitate collaboration, see parallel projects, understand work hierarchies and priorities, and analyze how deliveries will be impacted by dependencies, but your teams aren't benefitting, agile features and methods aren't being effectively leveraged. You may need help.

- **Agile coaches:** Trained agile professionals help facilitate the organization of agile teams and team-of-teams' programs. These coaches teach people their new roles and explain how to best approach them. They can help re-engineer pre-agile processes, act as mentors to team members, help teams leverage tried-and-true templates, and educate entire organizations on effective practices for rolling agile out across multiple teams. If efforts to evolve leadership behavior fail, a coach can be instrumental in explaining why loosening the reins is necessary.
- **Agile transformation consultants:** Your next line of defense is transformation consultants—experts with significantly more experience in leading large organizational transformations encompassing multiple teams and departments. They can be called upon at any stage of your agile journey but are often critical in ensuring early organizational alignment by assisting teams and executives in working faster and smarter. Their goal is to prepare teams and programs for transformational agility.
- **Agile education classes:** Training should include an introduction to agile concepts, principles and practices, covering a range of agile methodologies with guidance on how to incorporate them. Training should be delivered by practitioners with extensive real-world experience with common pitfalls and blockages. Agile educators facilitate cultural change by evolving user mind-sets and teaching people to leverage agile methodologies and software in ways that create and measure business value.

3. Ensure leadership is on board

For an agile implementation to succeed, the mind-set of the organization must change. And the mind-set starts at the top. If your company's leaders are stuck in a state of command-and-control leadership, you may not have adequate executive buy-in, and you're going to need it. Eventually, the senior management team will need to understand that everyone has responsibility to make decisions that best serve the customer, so decision-making power must be delegated to those closest to the customers.

To build executive support, take leaders on their own learning journey, illustrating the key benefits of agile. Don't be afraid to rely on expert help to get your leadership team where they need to be. They will model the changed behaviors and make sound decisions in the direction of change.

4. Plan. Build. Measure. Improve. Repeat.

If you've addressed the issues above, the last thing is...practice. Learning agile is like learning a musical instrument: No one sits down at a piano for the first time and plays Mozart.

Every time your agile teams plan, they get better at it. Every time they build, they build better. Every time they measure, evaluate and adjust the process, the process improves. The important thing is to stay true to agile principles and execute all ceremonies: big-room planning, daily stand-ups, iteration reviews and retrospectives. Over time and with repetition, these agile ceremonies will help to work out the kinks in Stage 2 and enable your organization to truly scale.

Stage 3: Scale agile: Expanding across the department

You've implemented agile across a handful of teams. As you're practicing and feeding learning back into your system, it's humming along smoothly. Teams are getting the hang of agile ceremonies and practices, and the purpose behind the methodologies, mind-sets and values is setting in. But you've encountered new challenges—key among them is the inability to visualize and roll up the work your teams are doing.

1. Understand, prioritize and utilize data

Every team, department and organization needs data to make important decisions that steer the business. But many organizations lack a way to clearly understand, prioritize and utilize the data they have. For agile to be successful, organizations need to establish data visibility and transparency at every level—from portfolio, to project, to initiative, to individual work hierarchies. This starts with the right instrumentation solutions and a clear data reporting structure.

In the process of scaling agile in Stage 3, business leaders begin to understand that teams of teams work as a holistic system, with complex interactions that can only be understood when viewing the system as a whole. The use of independent, disparate team-level tools will not provide the business insight needed to make important decisions, but will often lead to tampering in one area for local benefit that negatively impacts the wider system.

Agile teams in large organizations must utilize a consistent enterprise-wide software solution that provides real-time transparency on the work they're doing, and uses solid data and reporting to ensure proper governance standards are applied throughout the enterprise without hand-wiring together custom ETL systems, or worse, a forest of Microsoft Excel® workbooks.

The right set of data will also drive mind-set change. It's inevitable that what gets measured matters to all managers and executives in an organization.

2. Set data reporting standards

Setting data reporting standards helps teams understand how they're going to refer to, read out and analyze the data within the company. Data discipline promotes the standardization of data across teams, projects and work.

Without a centralized database (or a good agile software solution), data management becomes a largely manual task. And the manual manipulation of data, reporting and metrics is what causes the most pain in Stage 3. If you establish a data schema for your team-level, day-to-day work within a centralized system of record, all teams can start down a path of better data accessibility, rollups, comprehension and insight.

3. Apply agile portfolio management

By the end of Stage 3, you should be able to evaluate the entire delivery cycle: Ideation, authorization, funding, team allocation, development process, customer deployment and implementation. A value-based analysis will help you decide which projects to start, which to continue and which to drop. Rather than demanding exact requirements, a precise budget and a perfect solution, a more fluid approach will help you stay focused on a strategy that enables tactical execution, resulting in better, faster decisions.

Enhanced insight combined with fully leveraged data prepares your organization for the transition to Stage 4.

Stage 4. The transformation to business agility

The first thing to do after you've reached Stage 4 is to step back and celebrate your accomplishments. You've successfully navigated some rough waters, and that shouldn't be taken for granted.

In Stage 4, you're extending agile across the final areas of your organization. Perhaps you're looking to expand to another line of business or another division. Or perhaps you'd like to directly align HR hiring processes, marketing programs and financial costs with the agile work underway, so you're extending to those areas.

Whatever the specific goal, introduce agile only in areas that need to be optimized to increase effectiveness of the entire organization. And make sure your customers are at the heart of everything you're doing—that you're using agile practices to build something with real-world value that responds to customer expectations and needs.

While extending agile across the enterprise can be challenging, Stage 4 is where you'll begin to see exponential benefits of your agile transformation: comprehensive visibility of centralized data, tracking, cadence, predictability, better business alignment across multiple corporate functions, enhanced time to market, better workflow efficiencies, improved departmental operations and greater cross-functional operations. Here are some tips to make your organizational transformation successful:

1. Continuously optimize your investments

Now that your processes and practices are honed, be sure to continue to monitor funding. Losing sight of how priorities tie to investments can be detrimental to continued agile success. Dynamically evaluate investments through quarterly (or more frequent) steering and release planning, and reduce or increase funding accordingly. On the back side, ensure you're delivering what your customers want—when, where and how they want it.

2. Give your organization permission to operate with business agility

With teams sharing data and insight, this is not the time to be shy. Broadly share goals and articulate ideal shared outcomes. Establish a trust-based operational rapport through regular and open communication, and through collaboration across your now flattened management structure. This means:

- Creating extreme (and sometimes uncomfortable) levels of transparency
- Delegating decision making across the team
- Establishing structural flexibility with adaptable funding models
- Shaping your business on demand

Create the foundation for a pragmatic, problem-solving mind-set throughout the business. By giving every single employee a charter for disciplined exploration, you're illustrating that you both welcome and expect innovation and the identification of new opportunities from everyone.

3. Use agile consultants to streamline, facilitate and ensure value for the C-suite

Agile transformation consultants are agile experts with significant experience in leading large organizational transformations encompassing multiple teams and departments. They can be called on at any stage of your agile journey but are invaluable through this stage as you streamline processes, facilitate team alignment, and ensure that company executives are able to access and visualize company data and the progress occurring across your organization. They can assist teams and executives in working faster and smarter as they guide you toward ultimate business agility.

Final Thoughts: Your Agile Journey

Fully scaling agile across the enterprise through this four-stage process is important to recognizing the total value of agile, but also the total value of your organization. By embracing agile thinking and accomplishing the distinct, high-impact activities outlined above, you will increase your organization's ability to succeed in a hyper-competitive, fast-paced, ever-changing environment.

Why CA Agile Central?

CA Agile Central is an enterprise-class platform built from the inside out to help organizations scale their agile development practices. It is the only agile software solution built to help teams develop true data discipline, which is the foundation for cross-team visibility, coordination, rollups and a clear top-to-bottom connection of strategy with execution across multiple teams. CA Agile Central was also architected with easy-to-follow internal structure for establishing organizational, project, initiative, program and work hierarchies that support agile planning, tracking and delivery. With this construct in mind, and your organization's agile data all in one place, the goal of truly predictive plans can become a reality.

For more information, please visit ca.com/agile-planning

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