You can’t buy an agile transformation:

#stopbadagile

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Introduction

After concluding another contract in which a company had bought yet another package of bad agile from a big consulting firm, I was beyond frustrated. Swarms of consultants had come into the company, calling each other “agile experts” and cranking out slide decks that had nothing to do with agility. Clients were told to follow the decks and agility would follow. A reorg took place based on what the consultants said but with no thought about how this would affect the people who'd already been through multiple reorgs and, worse, without solid reasoning about what the changes were intended to accomplish.

This company followed the same path to despair as had so many others. I needed a way to vent. I sat at my desk and started writing a new blog post titled “Tales from a Tired Agile Coach”. It ended up being a very long list of all the garbage being sold to unsuspecting execs. I realized it was way too long to be a blog post in today's TL;DR culture, so I broke it into short statements I posted on LinkedIn along with #stopbadagile.

In July of 2023 I began painting birds and let them say all the things I'd been bottling up. This was cathartic for me, but I was also getting messages from people around the world thanking me for bringing bad agile to the surface in a way that helped them to have difficult conversations about the paths their companies were on. Companies used to hire agile coaches and let them guide the company towards meaningful change. Now all coaches are asked to do is force Scrum, urge people to change the word team to squad, and facilitate pointless 2-day long, quarterly-planning sessions. Whenever we mention improvements, they respond, “No, you need to follow the playbook”.

I spent the first 20 years of my career in various roles at Microsoft HQ. I worked in customer service, I analyzed data, I was a tester, a developer, a product owner, a project manager (local and global). I was lucky because at that time we were starting to learn about Scrum and agile from people who were creating it. The people who created Personal Kanban and other forms of kanban for software development were sharing what they were learning. I realized very quickly that work didn’t have to hurt. I learned that transparency, a shared sense of direction, collaboration, and customer knowledge could change systems of work.

We could go from:

- years to release to incremental releases
- years to plan, to planning while we worked
- hierarchical decision making to collaborative decision making
- overwork to sustainable pace
- overwhelm to clarity.

The minute I learned that work could be fulfilling and, dare I say it, enjoyable, I changed my career. Since that time I've spent my spare money and free time on educating myself on all things businesses need to succeed. I've seen what great looks like and now travel the world sharing what I've learned with people who want to be great at what they do.

Learning to coach companies in order to create high-performing teams in a system of work built on trust, transparency, and humane treatment of people takes years to master. It requires years of experience in many industries at all company levels, deep study of all things agile and lean, and involvement with the global community. It's not a role you can gift to someone and expect any result other than chaos. Most “agile transformations” suggest you need hundreds of coaches and Scrum Masters, but, as you'll learn in this book, people can't help you by selling you something they don't understand.

If you are a leader in an organization paying for bad agile, I hope to show you how you can help share why this needs to stop before more time and money are spent on something that will bring you and your people nothing but pain I hope you'll share this book with your colleagues and open some deep discussions about why the solutions your company has been sold in the past haven’t produced the desired results and never will.

At the time of writing I have over one hundred fifty birds like the one on the cover that I use to expose bad agile on LinkedIn with #stopbadagile. I have yet to exhaust the items listed in the original blog post and will continue to add to them. The amount of bad agile being pushed is heartbreaking.

Fortunately, the community that understands agile is working tirelessly worldwide to help people understand they can stop the madness and embrace the true meaning of agility. Agile coaches help people because we have experienced first-hand how much better work can feel when agile and lean principles and practices are central to a company’s treatment of both customers and employees. Many of us speak around the world about the things we've seen help others to understand what great can look like. We share our experiences with others so people don't have to suffer under inhumane working conditions. We do this to satisfy our desire to watch work environments change for the better. We spend our time and money learning from and teaching others because we know the benefits. I hope you read this and make changes based on what you learn. I hope you eventually experience the joy of working in a company with agility at its core. Please reach out if you have any questions about what you’ve read so far. I'm always happy to connect with people who want to improve.

Right now you may be thinking you couldn't care less about agile and be wondering why you'd bother to read this book. You've probably been through multiple so-called agile transformations. The executives who paid for them claim in your town hall they were successful. But you saw nothing more than surface-level change. Your challenges still exist, or may even have gotten worse. I know because I've joined so many companies after one or more failed transformations. I wrote this book to explain why transformations so often fail and what you can do to turn failure into success.

Agile transformation sessions you've been a part of are likely to have dealt with topics like these:

- Squads, tribes, chapters, and guilds
- Iteration managers
- Agile delivery managers
- Velocity
- Agile project managers
- Capability uplift
- RTEs
- Crews
- Performance leads
- Release trains
- Crew leads
- Agile maturity assessments
- Two-week sprints
- Agile playbooks
- Agile OpModel
- Agile change managers
- Mandated work tracking tools
- Epics and features
- Big room planning/quarterly planning.

Were you told that the above would enable you to achieve:

- faster delivery
- better customer satisfaction

- alignment with business goals
- better risk management
- better product quality
- better ROI?

Well I'm here to tell you none of these has anything to do with helping companies to be their best in an ever-evolving world. It’s stuff designed to convince companies they are changing when, even after multiple "transformations", nothing has happened, because agile cannot be forced on teams.

In this book I'll take you through what is being sold as agile and why it fails. In the process you’ll discover ways of dealing with work that aims to help companies thrive.

Agile is a way of being. It's a shift away from processes and tools towards individuals and interactions. A shift from considerable upfront planning to creating a flow of work focused on outcomes rather than outputs. A shift from pet projects to solutions that actually address customer challenges. So-called agile transformations, on the other hand, are an exercise in futility.

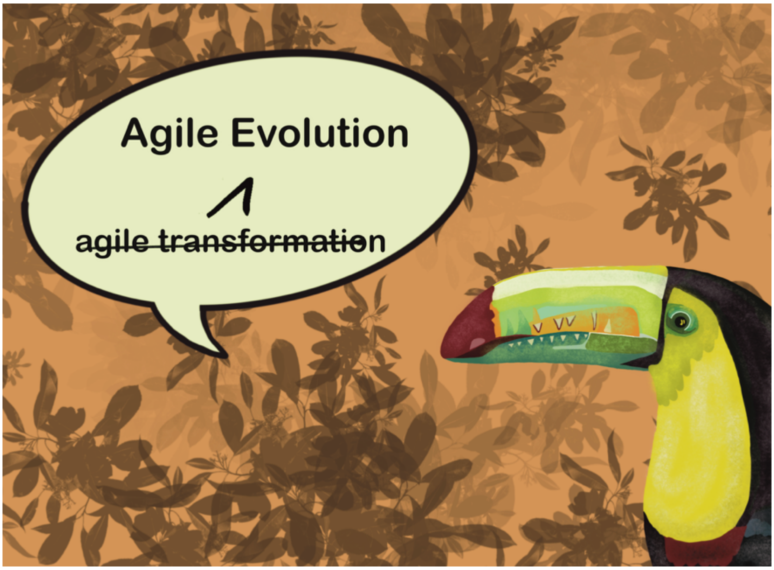
If items on the following list sound familiar post-transformation, it’s likely you achieved little to no agility:

- It still takes months to make decisions.
- Decisions are locked in.
- People are told how they must work.
- People are told which tools they must use.
- People are told which meetings they must attend.
- Work is funded, rather than teams.
- New vocabulary is mandated.
- People continue to be referred to as resources.
- Priorities change constantly.
- Teams are required to focus on too many things at once.
- People are spread across multiple teams.
- Managers are part of scrum teams,
- The business and tech continue to be referred to separately.

Why does this book matter? As a leader, you play a part in deciding whether your company will continue along the same old path or shift course in order to improve and excel. Bad agile will not help you reach your goals. Your best employees will leave and your customers will continue to be unhappy. Why would anyone be okay with that? I wrote this book because I know you want to help your teams to be the best they can be, but how will you know if what you are being sold will help or hurt?

I became an agile coach because while I loved being in tech, I wasn't happy with most of the work asked of me. The contributions of team members weren't appreciated. The value of developers’ insights were not recognized. Products took years to plan and even longer to build, and unreasonable deadlines led to poor-quality work. There was always too much work, and even if there was proof something we were building wouldn't work, nobody was allowed to stray from the carefully planned specs. It wasn't until I discovered personal kanban and began to understand agile and lean principles that I realized work didn't have to be painful. I used visualization to show the work we’d completed, how long we took, and our planned work as well. This transparency allowed us to show what my teams and I were able to accomplish. We set expectations and adjusted our workload as needed.

I communicated with demanding stakeholders, shifting conversations from antagonistic and demanding to sympathetic and mutually respectful. I've spent years learning everything I could about lean, agile, kanban, scrum, training, facilitation, humane workspaces, and conflict resolution and putting it into practice so I could help others create exceptional work environments. Unfortunately, the big (and many small) consultancies have found ways to commoditize agile and we find ourselves surrounded by people with little work experience, no agile experience, no training experience, and no coaching experience who call themselves coaches and spread the all-too-familiar anti-patterns. A move to agility shouldn't be a negative one, and yet here we are.



There is no such thing as an agile transformation. Agile is something you are, not something you do. Worldwide, consultancies are selling prefab solutions to companies and promising that if they follow the playbook, adhere to the OpModel and use the recommended “ways of working”, they will be agile. Nothing could be further from the truth. If the only downside is that nothing changes, I wouldn't have felt the need to write this book, but the fallout from bad agile is far more serious. It can lead to:

- change fatigue
- burnout

- layoffs
- millions of dollars lost
- misinformation spread
- deteriorations in quality of deliverables
- dissatisfied leaders
- unhappy employees
- unhappy customers.

Every day you hear that another large company that claims to have been “doing agile for years” is laying off their agile people because agile didn't work for them. But dig deeper and you'll find that what they were really doing was something else altogether. What they were sold as a solution could never have led to the change to an agile organization. Moving to agility is a move towards changing how a company plans, delivers, communicates, learns, and improves. No amount of force-fed “ways of working” will move a company in the right direction.

An agile company does not look like this:

- There’s only one way of working.
- Everyone uses the same tools.
- Individual capacity is managed.

- Team members are on multiple teams.
- Scrum is the only framework.
- Everyone uses the same work tracking tool.
- A scaling framework is foundational.
- People are moved to roles they don’t have the skills for.
- There are chapters, guilds, squads, crews, and tribes.
- All teams work in a two-week cadence.
- All teams start and stop sprints at the same time.

An agile company looks like this:

- Autonomous self-managing teams make strategic decisions based on data and customer input.
- Management ensures teams understand the vision of the company, and the teams prioritize the most important work in order to achieve the company's goals.
- Inspection and adaptation are the norm.
- All decisions are transparent.
- There is a focus on learning.
- There is no forced change.

- Teams are funded, not projects.
- People are referred to as people, not resources.
- There is a significant investment in tech.
- Teams work on value-driven work until the desired outcomes are achieved or something else becomes more valuable.
- When teams bring up challenges, leadership works with them to solve them.

If a consultant claims to have an OpModel that will make your company agile, they are lying. Even using a respected framework like Scrum does not guarantee agility, and neither is it suitable for every type of team. Again, agile isn't something you do. Following a framework won't help if a company is risk-averse, overly bureaucratic, slow to change, or siloed.

If there were a proven OpModel, everyone would use it, and there would be no need for me to write this book. But the latest bad OpModel has been forced on most organizations I visit. Everyone gets training and a title change; teams are shuffled around in new ways with no consultation; there are more and more meetings, but the second management isn't looking the meetings cease. If people are told change will make things better and it doesn't, they refuse to be involved, even if the company tries to mandate the change. Sadly, this ends in the same way every time: people move back to their original ways of working. Teams must be taught how to surface their challenges. They need to be allowed to be transparent about those challenges and to be empowered to fix their challenges. They need to be allowed to find their own path.

Companies are told scaling frameworks can help them. Unfortunately, a scaling framework only leads to unnecessary new roles, more meetings, more rules, and a lot less money, all the while failing to address actual challenges facing employees.

When companies start with a scaling framework, scaled agile fails everywhere. Look at any of those big companies laying off their agile people. They all talk about RTEs and release trains, bug trackers that support agility, and squads. Sadly, saying any of that can help is equivalent to putting a band-aid on a broken bone. The only people who think you can throw a scaling framework on a broken system and get good results are those profiting from selling it. It's far better to start by setting up just a couple of teams, and once they are working successfully you can move on to more teams.

If you don’t have a solid agile foundation, you aren’t ready for a scaling framework. If you have a solid agile foundation, you don’t need a scaling framework

This isn't to say all scaling frameworks are bad; it's to say, rather, that you have to be agile to scale agile. If you have high-performing teams and need to scale, ensure communication, transparency, and alignment are top of mind, rather than a set of rigid rules, roles, and meetings. Work slowly and ensure every change is needed. Some changes feel as though they’ll work; if they don’t, teams should be allowed to stop doing things that aren't helping them improve.

Consultants will tell you that everyone must follow their one-size-fits-all solution. Some of them even convince leaders to monitor teams for compliance.

Agile is about using the information you have in order to solve customer challenges. Agile is about working on solutions but looking for fast feedback to decide whether you should continue with your program for change. Agile is about looking at the work being done and gauging whether the company is moving in the direction it wants to go.

Every company is different. Every team is different. Every person is different. If change is forced, these results are almost inevitable:

- Employees won't be bought in.
- The mandated changes likely won't be fit for purpose and will cause frustration.
- The teams may go through the motions for a while, but they will soon revert to their old habits.
- By the time someone who knows what good looks like is hired to help, teams will be burned out on change for change's sake and won't listen to yet another person selling potential improvements.

Agility is not something you implement

I've watched teams at so many companies crumble under mandated change. The people under mandated change are told they are empowered and yet are unable to make changes to the way they work. When I see people working the same way today as they did six months ago, I know they are not part of an agile organization. The use of bad-agile buzzwords is a sure sign they've been sold bad agile. It's not up to managers to define the way teams must work. You shouldn’t dictate what frameworks or processes a team uses. You shouldn't dictate what tools they use to track their work or what meetings they schedule. Standardization will not lead to alignment. Alignment is much deeper than surface conformity. The path to greatness requires transparency, collaboration, and trust, not force.

Key Points

Agile can't simply be purchased and installed. You can't force change or benefit from someone else's solutions. So what can you do?

Get an idea of the challenges facing your teams. Brainstorm what can be done to help them. Prioritize the challenges and help the teams grow.

If teams are reluctant to try something new, don't make them follow someone else's solution. Help the teams seek out possible improvements. If some people are unwilling to change, don't make them. As word spreads from successful teams, even the most resistant will often come around.

Given there is no ready-made solution to make a company agile, let's talk about the people who can help you evolve beyond the lies.