The Agile Mindset Infographic – by Alistair Corrie – The Corrie Partnership Ltd

V2.0

Welcome to our journey into the Agile Mindset. This short(ish) document adds some flesh to the bones of the graphic and the words we use in this Aide Memoir when thinking and talking about an Agile Mindset. We will discover the behaviours, attitudes, and approaches, found in someone who has an Agile Mindset.

Contents

The Agile Mindset Infographic – by Alistair Corrie – The Corrie Partnership Ltd

Brief Introduction
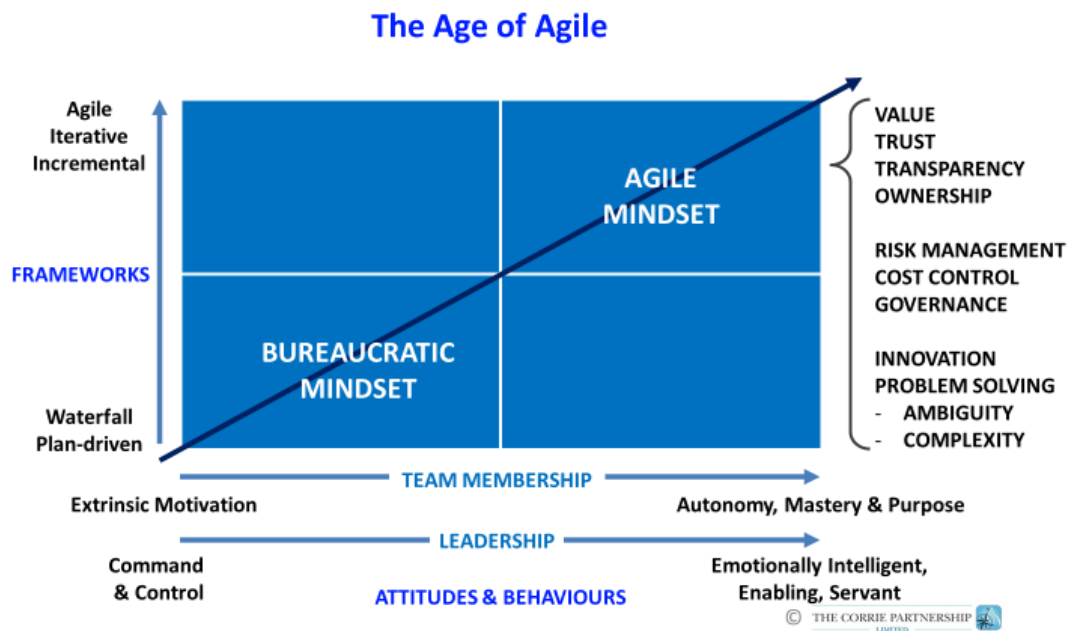
In the 20 years since the Agile Manifesto was introduced to the World we have seen a lot of great outcomes being achieved by applying Agile frameworks and Agile ways of working.

Since around 2016, and in particular following the publication of the HBR article "Embracing Agile" (Sutherland, Rigby & Takeuchi), there has been momentum building on the idea and realisation that Agile is not just for Software Delivery, and that Agile is not just about great frameworks such as Scrum, Kanban, Lean and so on.

We believe in "Agile for Everyone and Agile for Everything". By this we mean for all departments in an organisation, as well as for all aspects of life. Agile is not just for the IT Departments within an organisation.

With this shift, many of us have tried to retrofit and shoehorn the frameworks which have been invented so far into these non-IT environments. We have also been guilty of assuming that because something works for one person, team, department or organisation, we should be able to copy-paste that into another setting. But things never seem to fit properly. What seems like a Silver Bullet when applied in one place can actually make things worse when used somewhere else.

We believe that the Agile Mindset is the closest we will get to a Silver Bullet. After many decades of trying we know that a given framework or methodology, while helpful, only works some of the time for some of the people. The Agile Mindset itself can find the solution to any given challenge, to "solve all our problems", and is therefore is the closest we get to a Silver Bullet. It is a combination of Values, Principles and Frameworks, but also Attitudes, Approaches and Behaviours.

You will soon see that many of these concepts are intertwined. In a later version of this graphic we may well include a series of Infinity Loops to create the visual that supports the feeling and reality of the interconnectedness of the attributes of an Agile Mindset.

Before we jump in, a quick definition: "Agile" is the opposite of "Rigid", "Fixed" or "Bureaucratic".

Customer Centric Outcomes

Customer Centric Outcomes

The 1st of the 12 Principles of the Agile Manifesto states: "Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software." Now we might evolve "software" into "solution" or "outcome" or something else, but for us the focus is on the idea that delighting the customer, or end user, is central to anything and everything we do.

To help achieve this many frameworks have been developed such as the Design Thinking Double Diamond.

The key for us is Continuous Collaboration with the user and getting Fast Feedback, which is achieved through Verbal Interactions and regularly showing the Working Solutions which result from our short working cycles.

There is no point in thinking we know what the customer wants or needs, we need to ask.

We can also experiment and test our assumptions and get fast feedback by releasing early versions of our solutions and seeing what the take-up is and what feedback we may get via the various forums and social media platforms.

Everyone has a customer. Sometimes external, sometimes internal, sometimes both.

Many departments, such as Finance and HR, should view the rest of the organisation as their customers. We also believe the CEO and executives of an organisation ought to look at their teams as their customers. This would take them a step closer to being Enabling Leaders.

Collaboration

We have been bemoaning silos and siloed mentality forever, it seems, and the solution? A team should include members from different disciplines, with different skills and personalities, so that the team can itself deliver the outcomes without too much reliance on others outside the team.

Waterfall projects put like-minded and like-skilled people in the same team who are then waiting for the previous team to finish their work and sling the output over the silo wall.

Ownership

Collective and individual ownership of the outcome(s) we are building towards makes for better quality and faster deliverables with reduced risk and waste.

A sense of ownership ignites feelings of pride in the work being done. A feeling that every member of the team, department, organisation, or even country, can enjoy.

We often talk about pushing the decision-making down to where the information is rather than dragging the information up to the decision-makers.

It feels like we are relinquishing control, but in fact we are gaining power. If everyone on the team is as committed to the successful outcome as the Product Owner is, then imagine what will be accomplished. And imagine where the organisation will be in a few months if this way of working were rolled out across all the teams.

Accountability

We should each be accountable for our own work. It should not be a manager's job to be accountable for our work. The Agile team should be accountable for their work and for the outcomes from their work, including customer satisfaction, profit and growth, sustainability and environmental impact.

The Team works out the "How"

We learn below that the Leader must be able to effectively communicate the "What" and the "Why", the Mission. It is up to the Team to figure out the "How" and then to ensure that the Leader can support the team in completing the mission, the vision, the task at hand.

Ambiguity

One of the main reasons we need good quality leadership in Agile is because we are dealing more and more with Ambiguity. And the leader needs to make everyone feel safe. If we were crossing the Atlantic on a sailboat, we would know where we started from and where we wanted to go, but due to the winds, waves and currents, we would most likely be off-course most of the time. We can't look at where the sailboat is pointing and start panicking and shouting to immediately get back on

course. We need to embrace the uncertainty knowing that we will soon be tacking or jibing to get us closer to our destination.

We could replace the word "Ambiguity" in the graphic with "VUCA", Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity & Ambiguity. Maybe some of you will do this on your versions. Maybe we will replace it in a future iteration. But either ways, the intent is now documented here 😊.

Fund the Team

"Fund the Team not the Product or Project" is a phrase we will hear more and more often, and there are many reasons why we should adopt this policy wherever possible.

1. Any new team (be it two or more people) will go through the Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing curve. It makes sense to keep a team which has gone through this process together so that we don't lose the benefit of the foundations which have been built and waste time building new foundations.
2. Individuals on a team who know that their livelihoods are safe, regardless of the length of the project, will make the best decisions for the project and the organisation, which may include suggesting to leadership that the project has come to a natural end.

Value Focus

If we keep the concept of Value front and centre it is hard to go wrong. We apply this check in everything we do in our professional and personal lives. The following thoughts are often at the forefront of our minds: What would give us the most Value? Which of these things I need to do would be the most valuable? With the next hour of my time what is the thing that will return the most Value?

When replacing a fence row, which panels should we replace first? Do we start at one end or select panels depending on their state, location, accessibility and so on? This thinking runs with the assumption that we may not manage to get to the end in the current allocation of time. What if it starts raining? What if we run out of energy? What if there is a family emergency? Will we have delivered enough Value and leave the fence in a state that we can come back to later without leaving the property vulnerable?

A Waterfall, plan-driven approach might insist that we start at one end and never move on until the adjacent panel is completed. Or it might suggest that we remove all the old panels before we start inserting the new ones.

See 80:20 MVP. We need to deliver first, and early, the thing which have most value.

When it comes to Reporting we should deliver first the most important information, and not wait until the entire slide deck is complete, polished, reviewed eight times, … By then the information may be obsolete.

Think Big

We should always have a bold ambition. David J Schwartz taught us this in 1959 in his book "The Magic of Thinking Big". Today we know this to be true as we explore ORKs (Objectives & Key Results) and the psychology of achievement. We must have a goal which inspires us, which motivates us to action, which binds us as a team. Shoot for the stars. It is OK to land short, but we land further than if we shot only for the next planet.

Start Small

Yes, Think Big, but then Start Small. A phrase from the early days of personal development: "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Probably a more apt phrase is: "How do you complete a journey of 100miles? One step at a time." As insurmountable as a task or problem seems, just start taking small steps.

"Think Big. Start Small. Act Now. Deliver Early. Iterate Often." is our variant on "Think Big. Start Small. Fail Fast."

Whichever phrase works for you the idea is to deliver something, however small, of value quickly.

Act Now

Analysis Paralysis will stop the best initiatives dead in their tracks. Start moving towards the current goal immediately. Do something, anything. Take the first step. This way we start getting feedback and we start learning immediately. No plan survives contact with the enemy anyway, so why wait? Of course, there are genuine reasons to hold back on some steps of the journey. We need to assess risks. But in every single initiative we have been involved in there has always something we could do now.

Deliver Early

The sooner we create a working version or prototype the sooner we can get feedback and adjust accordingly.

Too often solutions (products, software, reports, etc.) are kept under wraps until they are "finished", "ready" or worst "perfect". How often has the big reveal turned out to be a big flop because someone delivered too late something that was no longer relevant?

And how do we know it is "finished" anyway? See 80:20 MVP below. Did we just spend 80% of our time delivering the last 20% of the perceived value, only to find we then wasted the initial 80% of value because the customer, the competitor, the world, moved on?

Iterate Often

The main purpose and benefit of short Sprints is to get Fast Feedback, this way we limit the risk of going off track, we reduce the likelihood of delivering something based on assumptions or interpretations.

80:20 MVP

80% of the Value comes from 20% of the work / features / effort / time / cost / … We need to get into the habit of delivering a Minimum Viable Product, as soon as possible, so that we can work out how much more work we actually have to do.

We can reference and number of cases where we delivered an initial version, as a test or prototype, only to find that it was good enough as the finished product. In one example we saved between 4 and 6 months of development time. In another example we saved the £4million which had been earmarked to solve a problem we had by "just trying something and seeing if it works".

The 10th Agile Principle reads: "Simplicity – the art of maximizing the amount of work not done – is essential." We need to get into the habit of expecting not to do everything we set out in the list of requirements or "Product Backlog". We always encourage people to refer to it as a Product Backlog as we feel it helps to move people away from the need to complete (and check off) everything on the list. The reason Agile ways of working deliver cost savings and enhanced value is because we learn that we won't try to do everything.

Adaptability

Adaptability

It is said a week is a long time in politics, well an hour can be a long time in Agile. Things can really change that quickly. You leave a planning session having agreed what's next, and within the hour there will be a tweak or more drastic change required.

Another great saying around this subject is "no plan survives contact with the enemy". Still, we must plan, but with Agile we plan with differently to the traditional ways.

Inspection & Adaptation

Empiricism, the idea that we make decisions based on empirical evidence, is central to Agile, and is discussed in the Scrum Guide. Empiricism requires constant Inspection so that we can Adapt as necessary.

Pragmatism

Probably the thing I learned on my first official Scrum training was the importance of Pragmatism. Agile is ultimately about applying Common Sense. It is fascinating how human brains tilt towards process and structure ahead of common sense. This must have something to do with our desire for certainty, and that applying common sense often means doing something a little bit new. Maybe?

Simplicity

We mentioned the 10th Agile Principle ("Simplicity – the art of maximizing the amount of work not done – is essential.") earlier in the context of getting into the habit of not expecting to deliver everything that is in the Product Backlog. But Simplicity should be something we keep at the forefront of our minds in other ways too.

We live in Complex times and the World is getting ever more complex. Humans are complicated, as are the systems and organisations we have created. Almost everything we do can have an unintended consequence we could not have predicted.

We should continuously strive to simplify everything, from the language we use to the systems we build, to the solutions we deliver.

Sometimes it feels impossible to do, but everything should be reasonably easily understood by the average person. The saying goes that if we can't explain something so that it is easily understood, maybe we don't fully understand it ourselves.

When thinking on the Agile Mindset, it took a while to move from the "you'll know it when you see it" definition to the graphic we have today. And there are simpler versions, no doubt, which will emerge.

Transparency

Trust is vital for teams to be able to work well together, and there must be high levels of trust between leaders and team members if an Agile Mindset is to flourish in an organisation.

In our video "The Art of Governance in the Age of Agile", we explore how governance is built into Agile. And the primary reason for this is that all things being done in an Agile organisation should be transparent.

Transparency reduces Risk and helps ensure productivity.

Empiricism, basing decisions on information and feedback, requires the ability to inspect so that we can adapt. For inspection to be possible everything ought to be transparent. This is one reason we have a Demo at the end of every Sprint, so we can see what has been done, and not just be told about it via a status report.

Transparency should work in all directions. If we are being honest about what we are saying about why we are doing what we are doing, then there is nothing we cannot solve or get done. But if we are having to second guess each other all the time, or we are not given all the information about why we are doing something, then mistakes and frustrations will happen. (More on this under Clarity & Context)

You may have heard the saying that Agile exposes everything. Well, it should. The good, the bad and the downright ugly. And this is why some people may be afraid of it. If we are not proud of what we say or do, or if we are on a self-serving agenda, then we are probably likely to try and block the adoption of Agile ways by the rest of the organisation.

Clarity & Context

Fire off an email or other form of written message, and the words used will create different images in the mind(s) of the recipient(s) compared to what was in the mind of the author at the time of writing.

Spinal Tap Stonehenge…

Without Clarity and Context the people doing the work will not know what they can and can't do, what they should and should not do when they come up against an obstacle or a decision needs to be made. They need to know your mind and your intention.

Vision

As well as a corporate vision, the various levels of leadership are responsible for the visions for individual departments, teams, initiatives and outcomes.

Everything should start with a Vision. The more clearly that vision is articulated and understood the easier it will be for the teams to deliver against the vision.

We need to ensure we provide clarity and context, and make sure that this clarity and context is understood. If we don't, everyone will have to come back to us as the leader to ask questions and for decisions.

Psychological Safety

If you have read anything on Toxic Leadership, and the Toxic Triangle, well this is pretty much the opposite of that.

The "What" and the "Why"

A leader's role is to help provide certainty in the face of Ambiguity; to provide a clear vision. They explain the "What" and the "Why" and get buy-in from the Team, Users and Stakeholders. Leaders must communicate effectively and listen well to ensure that the "What" and the "Why", the Mission, is properly understood by everyone on the Team.

Emotional Intelligence

When we read the 18 Competencies of Emotional Intelligence (see below), it is striking how much they "resonate" with the attitudes, behaviours and approaches we would expect to find in the mind of an Agilista.

The 18 Competencies are split into 4 Domains.

Self-Awareness
- i. Emotional Self-Awareness
- ii. Accurate Self-Assessment
- iii. Self Confidence

Self-Management
- iv. Emotional Self-Control
- v. Transparency
- vi. Adaptability
- vii. Achievement Orientation
- viii. Initiative
- ix. Optimism

Social Awareness
- x. Empathy
- xi. Organisational Awareness
- xii. Service Orientation

Relationship Management
- xiii. Developing Others
- xiv. Inspirational Leadership
- xv. Change Catalyst
- xvi. Influence
- xvii. Conflict Management
- xviii. Teamwork & Collaboration

Enabling Leadership

Many of us use the term "Servant Leadership" in this context, and some organisations have chosen to replace "enabling" with "servant" on their version of the infographic. Either way the idea is that a leader serves the organisation and their team(s). This concept is not new, and is, for example, embedded in the leadership training British Army Officers receive when they attend Sandhurst.

We are often asked, "What is the role of Leadership in an Agile context?". The answer, once truly understood and experienced, is very liberating. And the answer is the same for non-Agile environments too.

Leaders provide the What and the Why, the teams work out the How, the When and the Who. See also Clarity & Context.

We mentioned earlier that everyone in an organisation is a customer of the leaders. If we think of leadership as a function, like Finance, HR, Facilities and so on, we can then help our leaders focus on only they can do for the organisation:

1. Create and adjust the organisation's Vision
2. Prioritise strategic initiatives
3. Simplify and focus the work
4. Allocate the right people to the right tasks
5. Support cross-functional collaboration
6. Remove impediments

Fast Feedback

The Agile team should be able to get very fast feedback, especially from the customer. It is OK for the leaders to speak to customers, but it is better if the team members speak to them.

The primary purpose of short work cycles (Sprints) is to keep the feedback loop tight.

We start with a hypothesis, we build a prototype, and get fast feedback. There is no point investing time and effort into going too far down the road based on hunches. Just because I like something, or get excited about what I am working on, does not mean the customer will want or need it.

Pilots and Experiments

Complexity, uncertainty, volatility, and ambiguity. We cannot plan our way out of this, we can only try different approaches until we find what works. Now we do this fast. We are not talking about sinking millions of Pounds into an experiment or even investing months. Pilots and experiments need to be "time boxed".

We handle complexity through Agile by breaking things down into manageable chunks. In the Scrum Guide we read: "Scrum (n): A framework within which people can address complex adaptive problems..."

Neuroscience

Humans appear to have an infinite capacity for problem solving. Within the animal kingdom we seem to be poorly equipped compared to our fellow creatures. We have soft skin with little fur, no fangs or claws, we cannot run or swim very fast and we cannot fly. Our eyesight, hearing and sense of smell is outdone by many other animals. We survived this long because of our brains.

We are problem-solving machines, there is no challenge which we have not overcome, or are in the process of overcoming. However we also have the ability to instantly shut other people's brains down by the way we treat them.

Common Goal

We mentioned under Think Big the importance of a goal which unites the team. We know the importance of Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose, and we notice the apparent contradiction which might exist between Autonomy and the principles of Teamwork. However, every team needs a common goal, even though individual members of the team, with their unique skills, contribute to the goal in their own way.

Where at all possible goals should be co-created.

Short Cycles

This is an emphasis on Deliver Early and Iteration Often. Keep cycles short so that we can get Fast Feedback from our Pilots and Experiments.

Small Tasks

In a world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity & Ambiguity, breaking things down into small tasks allows us to solve problems. Scrum suggests that within the 2 weeks of a Sprint we should deliver something of value to a user or customer. This mindset forces us to break things down into their smallest possible components.

Fluidity

When we have an Agile Mindset, we are like a flowing river. We slide past impediments and roll over challenges taking everything in our stride. So often we see folks getting really uptight that things are not going according to plan, or a given person is getting in the way of progress. Our propensity for certainty and conformity, our rigid mindsets, sometimes stop us from seeing all the possibilities.

Maybe we should practice saying, or even post some phrases on the wall. Things like "there is always a solution", "there is always an alternative", "the human brain has an infinite capacity for solving problems".

I also like to refer to the Agile Mindset Infographic itself to open up my brain when faces with a blocker.

- If we can't get sign off for something, because some people hate making a decision, we can refer to it as a Pilot or Experiment.
- If we can't get someone to agree to the full project we can Start Small.
- If we are not sure of the amount of time or budget we will have available we can always Deliver Value Early and remember the 80:20 MVP principle.
- If things are getting complicated as emails or messages fly around we should instinctively resort to Verbal Interactions.
- When we are asked for a report or documentation we should always start by demoing a Working Solution – a picture (or a demo) speaks a thousand words.
- And so on…

The Agile Values

We are sure you have already spotted the references to the 4 Values of the Agile Manifesto in the infographic. There is a lot of debate around whether and what should be changed to "update" the Manifesto so that it is relevant to Everything and Everyone, and not just software delivery.

Our feeling is that, as with anything written at a given moment in time, we know what the meaning or the intent is, and we know how to interpret them. That said, we would also argue that words matter, so changes should be made. And then we get lost in the debate as to which word to use where, and all of a sudden, we are no longer applying an Agile Mindset.

Verbal Interactions

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools

Working Solutions

Working software over comprehensive documentation

Continuous Collaboration

Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

Responsive to Change

Responding to change over following a plan

And don't forget the Agile Principles 😊

Words not used in this iteration of the infographic

Agile – implied throughout

Governance – Governance is built into the Agile Frameworks and is a by-product of a properly applied Agile Mindset

Planning – implied in under Start Small, Deliver Early, Iterate Often, 80:20 MVP, Inspection & Adaptation, Vision, Ownership, Accountability, and Transparency

Budgeting – implied under Start Small, Deliver Early, Iterate Often, 80:20 MVP, Pilots & Experiments, Fast Feedback and Fund the Team

Reporting – implied under Transparency, Inspection & Adaptation

Coaching – implied under Enabling Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Safety and Clarity & Context

Trust – this is a by-product of an Agile Mindset

Empiricism – this is the outcome of Transparency, Inspection & Adaptation, Pragmatism, and Iterate Often

Sprints – denoting short periods of activity with the to deliver Value and obtain Fast Feedback

Product Owner – this is a role in the Scrum Framework

Scrum Master – this is a role in the Scrum Framework

Backlog – this is a living list of all the items or features which could be delivered

Risk Management – implied under Transparency, Fast Feedback, Pilots & Experiments, …

Complexity – implied under Start Small, Ambiguity, …

Autonomy, **Mastery & Purpose** – implied under Self-organising, Ownership, …

Problem Solving – implied under Neuroscience, Inspection & Adaptation, Iterate Often, …

Decision Making – implied under Ownership, Neuroscience, …

Conclusion

We hope this document and the associated infographic help you on your journey. Agile is a way of thinking, a way of approaching things.

There is so much to talk about and to cover, and yet it is so very simple, just good common sense. We hope your journey will give you the courage to simplify and to explore obvious alternatives to the ways we have been doing things and approaching things up till now.

As with anything, we need to frequently remind ourselves. We hope this aide memoir is just one of the artifacts you use for yourself and others.

All the best, and feel free to get in touch with us via https://corriepartnership.com/