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UNDERSTANDING AGILE’S RISE AS A MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

~ *Yutika Rachh*

In the 1970s, American computer scientist Winston Royce published a paper entitled *Managing the Development of Large Software Systems*. He describes the process of developing a large software system and its delivery using a downward sloping graph which came to be known the “Waterfall” model.¹

This model divides the life cycle of product development into phases, where a phase cannot begin without the completion of the previous one, the phases do not overlap, and the sequential flow is considered to be the waterfall. This model, however, suffers from various shortcomings for instance: It is a one-way street, once a phase has commenced there is no way of going backwards in the process. There is little to no interaction among phases with each being carried out individually and no feedback is incorporated during the process. The breaking point is the lack of flexibility, the model assumes that customer requirements are clearly defined at the start of a project, but actual requirements may often change, and such alterations are extremely difficult to integrate.²

As projects became larger and complicated, the need for a more adaptive approach arose.

¹ Jon Kern, *A Brief History of Agile, Part 1: The Rise of Waterfall*, VMware Tanzu Blog (May 3, 2021), <https://blogs.vmware.com/tanzu/a-brief-history-of-agile-part-1-the-rise-of-waterfall/>.

² GeeksforGeeks, *Failure of Waterfall Model—Software Engineering*, GeeksforGeeks (July 11, 2025), <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/software-engineering/software-engineering-failure-of-waterfall-model/>.

Enter: The Agile Methodology. It refers to a collection of frameworks and guidelines that break projects into smaller phases with space for teams to adapt to changes, review and refine their work.³

The formal introduction of the Agile occurred in 2001 with the Agile Manifesto. Seventeen software practitioners convened in Snowbird, Utah to publish this manifesto which articulates four core values:

1. Individuals and Interactions over processes and tools
2. Working Software over comprehensive documentation
3. Customer Collaboration over contract negotiation
4. Responding to Change over following a plan

They state, “That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items of the left more”.⁴ These values indicate a shift towards a collaborative and integrative approach that prioritizes customer satisfaction. Teams innovate, build and test continuously with customers being involved and they can change direction seamlessly as real-time feedback is received.

Agile is used as an umbrella term for several methodologies, the most popular ones being:

1. Scrum: Ideal when project requirements change often, work is done in short sprints not longer than a few weeks with daily or bi-weekly reviews.
2. Kanban: A task tracking system using boards with columns such as “To Do”, “Doing” and “Done”, categorizes all work in progress and helps foresee bottlenecks.
3. Lean: Trims anything that does not add value and uncovers better ways of developing value, as its name suggests.
4. Adaptive Project Framework (APF): Goes with the flow; it embraces uncertainty and adds information as the project moves forward.
5. Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe): For enterprise diversification and scaling, it applies the principals of Agile across portfolios, programmes and teams.

³ Bakri Alkhateeb, *Navigating the Agile Odyssey: Tracing the Methodology's Transformation*, Medium (Feb. 4, 2024), <https://medium.com/@bakrialkhateeb.dev/navigating-the-agile-odyssey-tracing-the-methodologys-transformation-3b556309bca0>.

⁴ Kent Beck et al., *Manifesto for Agile Software Development*, Agile Manifesto, <https://agilemanifesto.org>.

Even though the term Agile originated in the context of software development, it soon took the world of project and organizational management by storm. It marks a significant shift from traditional, unidirectional approaches to more flexible and iterative workflows. Use of the Agile methodology results in faster time-to-market as short but focused cycles of work facilitate an earlier release of updates and products which maintains a competitive edge. Regular customer involvement makes sure that the work is not done based on assumptions and there is reduced risk of delivering flawed products or services. Teams can also spot obstacles early and adjust faster which produces better outcomes and reduces wastage of effort.

A *McKinsey* article from 2023 outlines the hallmarks of an Agile organization. A North-Star i.e. a shared purpose and vision for the organization which makes people feel personally invested in its progress. A Network of Empowered Teams, with scalable structures and high standards for accountability, transparency and collaborative effort. Quick-Cycle Model which uses dynamic management such as objectives and key results (OKRs) along with a Dynamic People Model that ignites passion. And finally, Next-generation Enabling Tech, which improves and evolves operating process.⁵

The successful implementation of an Agile model first requires selecting the right framework depending upon the size of the team, project complexity and general experience in the domain.⁶ Then roles should be defined clearly within the team for example a Product Owner to manage priorities and Scrum Master for removing obstacles while maintaining a general culture of coordination and autonomy. The scope of the project and the actual work to be done should be broken down into manageable sprints and throughout the process stakeholders must be involved through reviews and demos so that feedback can be captured continuously. Finally, performance should be measured deliberately using retrospectives and quantitative metrics so that the process improves with every iteration.

⁵ McKinsey & Co., *What Is Agile?*, McKinsey & Co., <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-agile>.

⁶ Wrike, *What Is Agile Methodology in Project Management?*, Wrike, <https://www.wrike.com/project-management-guide/faq/what-is-agile-methodology-in-project-management/#how-to-implement-Agile-methodology-into-projects>.

Over the last decade, General Electric (GE) has famously undertaken a performance management overhaul. After years of annual performance reviews and a mechanical ranking system, GE has introduced a new system which guides employees towards the achievement of personal and organizational goals within a more flexible framework. They also introduced an app which allows employees to set priorities, actively seek and provide feedback and request in-person meetings. Similarly, the Adobe team bid adieu to annual performance appraisal and embraced “Check-ins” that is regular discussions between managers and employees. Accenture too refocused in favor of individual employees, making personal development a motivator and means to improve morale.⁷

These are only a few examples in the list of many organizations that have benefitted significantly from adopting the Agile methodology for employee welfare, expansion, event planning, marketing campaigns, product development and much more.

Agile is likely to continue evolving in response to other trends like the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning, focus on sustainability goals and concentration on customer experience and user interface.

⁷ OneAdvanced, *5 Great Examples of Agile Organisations*, OneAdvanced, <https://www.oneadvanced.com/resources/5-great-examples-of-agile-organisations/>.

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