The Three Great Agile Challeges

Steve Wille PMP, CSM

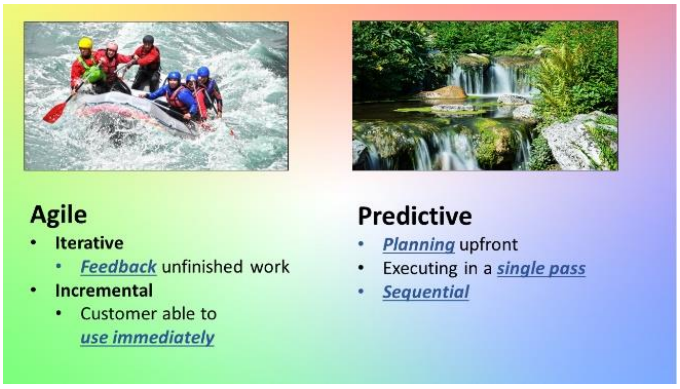
I've recently worked with companies that are transitioning from traditional project management to agile product management. In the process, I discovered there are some challenges that are difficult to overcome during an agile transformation.

Traditional project management is often referred to as the *waterfall* method.

- You get your requirements and move to the next phase of design.
- After design, you enter the next phase of development.
- After development you enter the testing phase.
- Finally, you to the implementation phase.

Each phase is like going down the waterfall. The idea is you never go back up the waterfall. You want to get the requirements right. You want to get the design right. Each phase is done only once.

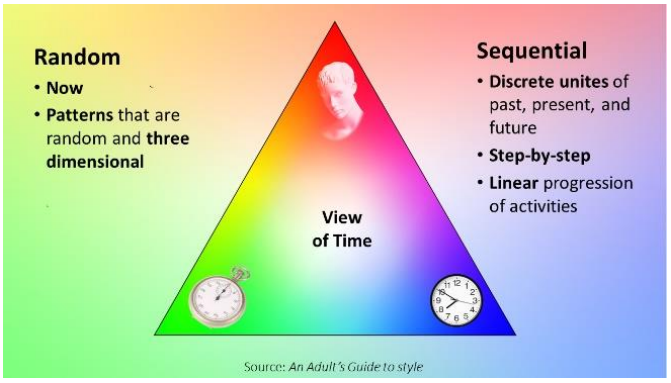
Agile is different. You're going down the rapids. Business people and developers are in it together. They're moving down the rapids fast and making things go. They're taking some chances along the way. If they don't get it right the first time, they keep working until it is right.



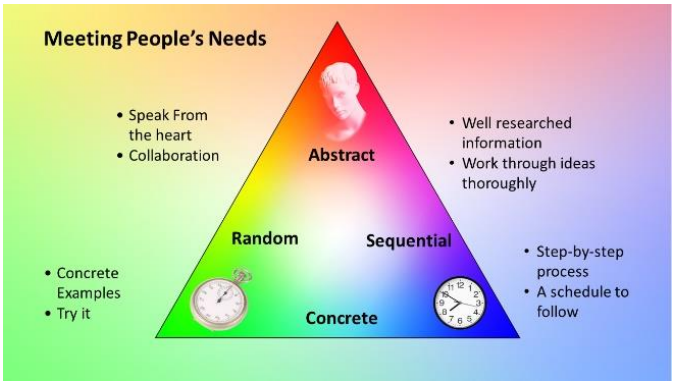
Another way of looking at the difference between waterfall and agile is how the Project Management Institute (PMI) is defining them. They say agile is *iterative* and *incremental*. Iterative means we get feedback on unfinished work and make changes. Incremental means we finish work and get it in place before the whole project is done. By contrast. PMI calls traditional waterfall project management *predictive*. We're trying to predict the future. With waterfall we do a lot of up-front planning and we do the entire project in a single pass. PMI calls this a *sequential* process.

Sequential is an interesting term. Think about baseball. At any one time what are most of the players doing? They're standing and waiting for the ball. One player has the ball and everybody else is waiting. When they execute, they better do it right the first time. They're going to let the team down if they don't catch the ball. The baseball game is over when it is completed, meaning all nine innings are played, regardless of how long the game goes into the night. In project management we call this *full scope*, meaning it is done when every requirement is met.

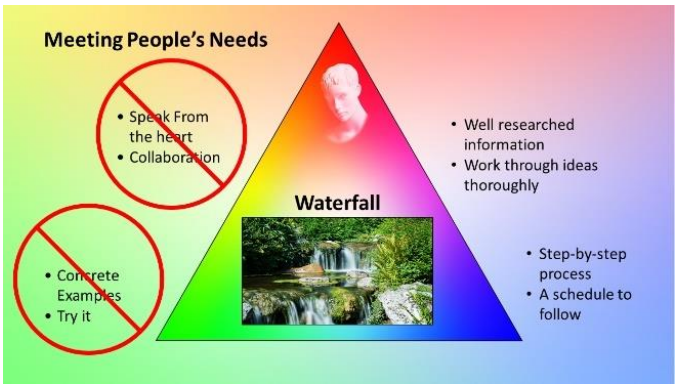
Contrast that with basketball which is *random* rather than *sequential*. If the players were all standing in their positions, waiting for the ball to come, the coach would say, “Start moving and shoot the for the basket.” It doesn't matter if you miss. Somebody will catch the rebound. The game ends when the buzzer rings. Basketball lives inside a time box without the concept of full scope. Agile, like basketball, is time driven. We must get the most value out of the time we have. Time is the driver.



Anthony Gregorc, did some research on how people perceive time (http://gregorc.com/books.html). He found that some people are sequential in nature. This can be symbolized by a clock with minutes and hours always moving forward. Gregorc says sequential people like a step-by-step process. They think in a linear way. He calls the other half of the population *random*. They think about *now*. The past is over. The future is just a seed that that will grow in good time. Random people do things in a multi-dimensional way. They don't do design followed by developing, followed by testing. They might do some development first. Then they might test some other ideas. Then they might do some more developing. To sequential people the random way looks all wrong because it is out of order. To random people, who are multi-dimensional, the linear, step-by-step process simply does not have the flexibility they need for developing new ideas.



Gregorek said some of us do a lot of thinking before we act, and others do a lot of acting before thinking. He calls the thinker's abstract and the doers concrete. He says that the ***concrete-sequential*** people like a step-by-step linear progression of activities. The ***abstract-sequential*** people like to do their research up-front. They want to know what's going on before they start anything. He found that ***abstract-random*** people speak from the heart. They use intuition which is whole brain thinking, going beyond logic. The ***concrete-random*** people like to try things. They like to get their hands in it and experiment with different ideas.



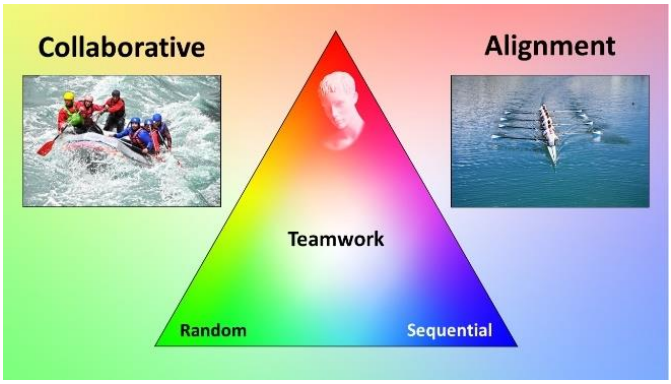
Can you see the conflict and the challenges of these people working together? When we had waterfall as the only way to do a project, we told the random people, “you're doing it the wrong way. You must do things in the right order. Furthermore, we don’t care how you feel. Just follow the plan.”

With agile we get to be random, but we're leaving behind the abstract-sequential people who want well researched information before starting down any path.

People’s perception of time is the ***first great challenge***. People want projects on time, on budget, and full

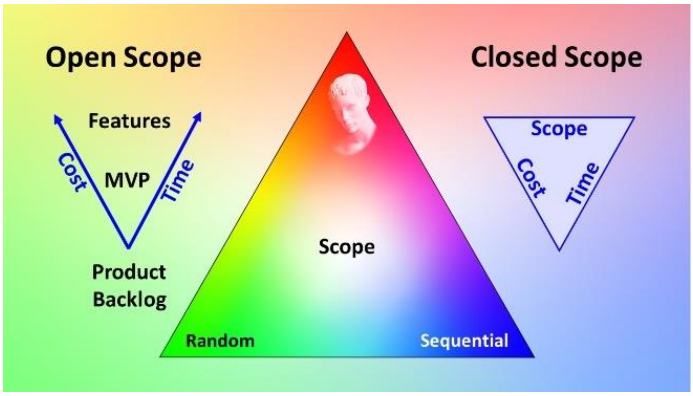
scope. The randomness of agile can be confusing. The fact is, the world is not linear, and it is rare that a project goes according to plan. Things happen. Randomness gives the organization an opportunity to react and innovate as things happen.

The ***second big challenge*** is how we define ***teamwork***. I'm sure you've seen a picture of a rowing team. Everyone is working together, perfectly aligned. Did you notice they're all faced backwards? The person in the back is steering the boat and setting the pace. One person is making the decisions. This is a 20th century view of teamwork. 21st century teamwork is different. We're in the raft together going down the rapids. We've got the business partners with the developers. It's highly collaborative. If you look at the two teamwork models you have the *random-collaborative* side contrasting with the *sequential-alignment* side.



Random collaboration is a challenge for people who are used to seeing everybody aligned. Now suddenly there's a lot of random stuff going on.

The ***third great challenge is the triple constraint triangle.*** You're paid as a project manager to be on time, on budget, and full scope. Agile has an open scope. An unknown scope is a challenge for people who are highly sequential. They want to know what they going to have at the end of the project. Agile people say "I don't know. Give me some money. Give me some time. We'll have good stuff and it'll meet business needs."



To understand open scope, consider the Monopoly® game. You build a house and collect rent. Later, you build another house. That's the incremental open scope. You get value a bit at a time and over time you may eventually you build a hotel. You don't know exactly when or how. The first house could be called a minimum viable product (MVP). It is not much, but it has immediate value.

To summarize, the first great agile challenge is how people view time differently. Some are *sequential* and some are *random*. The second challenge is teamwork. Some people emphasize *collaboration,* and some emphasize *alignment*. The third challenge involves the triple constraints of time, cost, and scope. Everyone wants to be on time and on budget, but scope can be a sore point. Some people want an *open scope,* and some want a *closed scope*

After considering these challenges within organizations, my thinking is that there is value in both approaches. It is unrealistic to think you can convert the thinking of people and culture overnight. Our goal should be to move to the center. If you're a highly sequential organization moving to agile you don't need to go all the way. You just need to become more agile. Moving towards the center is like mixing many colors of light to make white light. White light symbolizes the cooperation from all sides. This maximizes personal engagement, regardless of personal preferences.