

Walk Before You Run

Mastering agile techniques takes time, so avoid perfectionism.

By Jesse Fewell, CST, PMI-ACP, PMP, Contributing Editor

A project manager recently told me she was frustrated with her team. “Every month they do a week of requirements, followed by two weeks of work, followed by a week of verification. They’re delivering every month, but it’s a mini waterfall, and it’s driving me crazy.”

Many project managers smitten with agile will demand that teams implement new methods perfectly right out of the gate. It makes sense: They want to do it “right” so teams can excel faster. Unfortunately, the frustrated project manager I spoke with was so fixated on the technique of continuous collaboration that she missed what mattered: Her team’s imperfect agile processes had dramatically accelerated delivery.

Anyone new to agile goes through a very bumpy progression: Nobody is perfect on day one. Agile practitioners have developed a rather esoteric shorthand for this progression borrowed from the idea of *shuhari* in the Japanese martial art aikido: from shu (follow the rules explicitly) to ha (bend the rules by tailoring to context) to ri (transcend the rules by doing only what is necessary). I prefer a more familiar analogy: crawl, walk, run.

Start by crawling. In the beginning, your team is confused. Decomposing large deliverables into incremental pieces is a skill that takes practice, so half-completed work might be all you have at the next iteration. Having people collaborate across silos can be uncomfortable, so you might only get a few people talking in those multi-vendor meetings. The key objective in these early stages is to encourage and praise progress of any kind.

Begin to walk. Eventually, you’ll see momentum.

That monthly life cycle will begin to feel routine; incremental deliverables will become more substantive; stakeholders will start to engage in the project. Once the team members gain confidence, a project leader can start to challenge them to experiment with new approaches and techniques. The objective is to keep improving. Forget perfect—celebrate better.

Evolve to run. If your team sticks together long enough, it might break through to a high-performing state. Almost always, this kind of super-charged dynamic involves a significant change in work practices over time initiated by the team itself. For example, meetings are replaced with organic coordination; designers and testers volunteer to help each other; somebody finds a shortcut through repetitive tasks. Wise project leaders guide a team from where it is, not where they wish it were. Wrong at first is okay—give it time. **PM**

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