

AGILE TRANSFORMATION: A LEADER'S GUIDE TO OVERCOMING THREE FUNDAMENTAL OBSTACLES

It's About Mindset



Where are you on your transformation journey?

In this guide, Agile transformation experts will review three common obstacles that may be holding your organization back from realizing the benefits you expect. We will walk you through how we approach issues and develop key strategies to gain and sustain Agile transformation momentum.

About This Guide

This guide provides insights into how experienced Agile transformation experts break down and assess an organization's challenges by examining three common obstacles with brief case studies and recommendations for addressing these patterns. It is designed to help leaders reflect on the state of their organization's Agile transformation journey by looking at some key indicators.

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Introduction

The Transformation Journey

The Agile Manifesto was first applied to software development² but over time organizations realized that Agile's values and principles could have broader benefits to the organization as a whole. They began seeking to become more "agile" (with a small "a") — in the sense of responding to changing competitive landscapes and customer needs³. What's more, organizations began to realize that, at scale, Agile is of limited use without broad application of the principles beyond the IT departments. Today we recognize that agility is more about the entire system operating effectively. Relentless commitment to improving and delivering for our customers applies practically everywhere and collaboration at scale is necessary and difficult. McKinsey & Company defines "agile transformation" as a holistic change that requires a fundamental evolution from "organizations as machines" to "organizations as organisms."⁴

Agile transformation is a radical shift for most organizations. Clear objectives and shared values are required to weather the structural and cultural challenges.

Agile is a journey. Many organizations have stopped their journey at the water's edge of their engineering or IT departments. More ambitious organizations have embraced the vision of a truly Agile organization and have pushed onward to real organizational transformation and beyond, seeking the promise of high performance, delighting customers and building a culture strengthened by transparency, collaboration, alignment and high morale.

Overview

Obstacles are common

Having worked with diverse teams across a wide variety of industries and organizations, experienced Agile leaders, consultants and coaches have learned that many serious issues stem from a few foundational roadblocks. While you may encounter many other challenges, following are three good examples of what can cause major impediments to your successful transformation. If you have a strategy to identify and deal with these obstacles, you will have an easier time overcoming similar challenges.

Agile consultants and experts often find these three obstacles when working with an organization that is either new to Agile or struggling. They know how to spot these issues based on patterns they've recognized through helping other groups transform. Fortunately, there are proven approaches to overcome these challenges to keep the Agile transformation moving forward.

Three Fundamental Agile Transformation Obstacles



Obstacle 1

Lack of alignment on the Agile transformation's vision and goals



Obstacle 2

A disconnect between transformation expectations across teams



Obstacle 3

Cultural barriers blocking the path to agility



Obstacle 1:

Lack of Alignment on the Agile Transformation's Vision and Goals

A Real-World Experience

A Fortune 500 organization in the process of executing an enterprise-wide Agile transformation strategy engaged us to work with a team struggling to embrace Agile. Leaders wanted this team to become high-performing — hoping to use it as an example of Agile excellence in the organization. But the team wasn't delivering products on time, and leaders didn't understand why.

After working with the team and its leaders, it became clear that morale was low — in fact, several people had left the company. The team voiced frequent concerns about unclear roles and responsibilities. They focused on work that didn't

align with leadership's expectations. There were differing opinions on Agile versus non-Agile approaches, tensions between standards and innovation, and mixed messages about what was important.

Digging further, we found the team didn't know why they had to move to Agile (i.e., the vision) or what the organization was trying to get out of it (i.e., the goals). Their direct manager was putting pressure on them to deliver despite their inability to meet commitments. So, time wasn't being spent reflecting on what needed improvement. Instead, they perceived Agile as an impediment and a referendum on their performance, not as an opportunity to do better work and become more engaged. Leaders had clarity and alignment, but a lack of communication and insufficient executive support caused a disconnect between the executives and the team, so the team didn't know what was important. They saw management using Agile as an excuse to punish and control them. This is, of course, the opposite of the point of becoming Agile.

Once we connected the dots for the team and their management — helping them understand why the transition was valuable and how they could contribute and would benefit, they stopped doing work that wasn't aligned with the vision and goals and started focusing on the work of most value. They gained a sense of purpose and ownership, because they understood how they connected to the bigger picture. The management learned how to help the team by supporting them rather than telling them what they were doing wrong. This led to the team feeling more supported and willing to take risks and innovate on their process.

Why Alignment Matters

What does alignment look like? Everyone has a sound understanding of the vision and mission for the Agile transformation — the highest-level purpose for making the change. They grasp the goals and objectives and see how their work contributes to them. And they do their work with a focus on moving the organization in the charted direction. They are willing — and often excited and passionate — to be part of the journey.

Without strong alignment, people can do the work they “think” is important, rather than that of most value. The team as a whole may move forward, but not necessarily in the right direction. Leaders may spread inconsistent messages, which trickle down to teams and affect their work. For instance, an Agile coach may say, “we don't want time to drive our decisions, we want to deliver high-quality customer value as fast as we can.” Meanwhile, a manager may say, “if we don't hit the date, you will be in trouble.” These mixed messages destroy morale and productivity. People at all levels can be confused, uncertain, and skeptical of where they're headed and how Agile will help. In the end, progress is slowed, and it takes longer to realize Agile's benefits.

This is why alignment across the organization is a critical success factor for moving your Agile transformation forward. To achieve real alignment, transparency is critical. Transparency is often hampered due to a lack of safety. Teams don't want to show their progress when it's not going well for fear of reprisals. When they feel safe, they will be more transparent and that helps set expectations everywhere. This is how we achieve real alignment: clarity of purpose, safe working environment, transparency and honest discussions.

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Alignment enables autonomy.

– Henrick Kneiberg, Agile Coach at Spotify⁵

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Laying a Strong Foundation

Misalignment often occurs when the vision and goals are poorly-defined, under-communicated, or not bought into at all levels of the organization. Components may be unclear, confusing, or missing altogether. They might make sense to people in leadership but not be relatable to those in the trenches. So, when signs indicate alignment is missing during an Agile transformation, begin by making sure these fundamental elements are in place:

- **A strong, clear vision for the transformation:** A well-crafted vision gives everyone the same North star to follow. It should paint a clear picture of where the organization is trying to go and why — emphasizing how a more Agile mindset can benefit the organization, its customers, and its employees. It should reflect the company's values and trigger an emotional response to drive connection. Saying "Agile will make us faster" is not very motivating. An employee hears, "Being Agile means you will work more, and we will have higher expectations of your output." Instead, consider a vision like this: "Being Agile will allow us to work in a way that every day will be one of new discoveries and delighting our customers, such that we will completely change our industry and serve our communities in a more productive and profitable fashion." Leadership can get behind this. Employees can be proud of this, and customers love the idea you want to delight them. Everyone can align to a vision like this.

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“Software development is not a rational process. It's a process made by people, with feelings and with bodies and with thinking. And by putting all those together, I can be a more effective software developer”

– Kent Beck, engineer, original signer of the Agile Manifesto

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- **Effective goals traceable to the team:** When well-written goals and objectives are in place, people can see how the organization expects to realize its vision. Goals should be clear, actionable, and measurable, and the team should know how their work contributes to them — goals should connect teams to the bigger picture. They shouldn't be too prescriptive or impose too many boundaries on how teams do their work. Standards can be useful, but they can also be limiting in an Agile environment. Remember, giving a team a "Why" is more important than "What." However, "What" the team should accomplish is useful for alignment as long as it doesn't define "How." When the team is told how to get their work done, autonomy and morale are significantly limited. Another consideration is how goals are formed. The more input the team into their goals, the more ownership and alignment they will feel. This can be a significant contributing factor to their overall success. One recommendation is to consider implementing a Key Performance Indicators (KPI)⁶ program where teams define their own KPIs to align with the larger goals of the organization.
- **A clear picture of the customers and what they value:** Agile prioritizes early, continuous delivery of value to the customer. So, it's essential that every person and team knows who their customers are — both internal and external to the organization — and what value means to them. This enables them to understand their purpose and what's most important as they leverage Agile techniques to meet their goals. One of the biggest failings in Agile organizations is to not prioritize direct interaction with customers and the teams serving them. This impacts the feedback loop, morale, and ultimately deliverables.

- **Measures of success that matter:** Success measures at the goals and objectives level should be well-understood across the organization. Teams, however, should also develop their own measures of success based on what they value as a team and how they want to improve. If they have bought into the vision and goals, they will develop success measures that align with higher-level metrics and will likely feel greater ownership in the process. When measurements and tracking are pushed on teams to satisfy the trust and transparency issues of management, it tends to put pressure on teams to change their behavior to address the measurement, regardless if it is best for their team or their customer. This is a “management knows best” approach, which often leads to teams turning into uninspired order-takers. It’s considered an anti-Agile practice, but it’s pretty common.
- **Leadership alignment and support for the transformation:** Many Agile roadblocks start at the top, because executive support and a culture of servant leadership or something akin to it are needed to provide the safe spaces teams need to experiment, fail, and learn. Leaders should be visually and vocally behind the movement, and teams should feel trusted and empowered. Often, leaders will embrace the idea of Agile but will not practice themselves. Their grip on power and authority cascade down into the culture, and they are often frustrated and surprised by the issues with delivery that result from this. It’s not uncommon that they are completely unaware of their impact. Often they will bring in third-party consultants to help “fix their teams” only to learn that the root cause begins with them. In the cases where they try to use internal resources to ferret out the issue they often never get to the root cause because the internal expert is balancing politics with observation.
- **Communication and collaboration, early and often:** Leaders often use town halls or other meetings to introduce the transformation vision and goals. They may print them on posters that are taped to walls and whiteboards. Unfortunately, it often ends there. A full Agile transformation requires a fundamental shift in mindset across the company and that depends on a shared understanding and emotional connection to the vision. It isn’t a leader’s lecture, rather it’s a leader’s listening that results in real change.

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Retrospectives should be enjoyable and engaging. We need people at their best and motivated when solving systemic issues. Here is one site with many ideas on how to run fun retrospectives: <http://www.funretrospectives.com/>

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A Checklist for Success

When you hit alignment issues, hold lessons-learned sessions or retrospectives using this list to see where you have opportunities to learn and improve. While not an exhaustive list, it will inspire conversation and collaboration that can help you find ways to overcome this obstacle.

- ✓ **Is there a strong clear vision for the transformation and effective goals and objectives as described above?**
- ✓ **Are the vision and/or goals overly-prescriptive about how the work gets done?**
- ✓ **Are leaders aligned on the vision and goals and sending the same messages to teams?
Do they have Agile mindsets?**
- ✓ **Are you communicating the transformation’s vision and goals early
and often in a personal, interactive way?**

- ✓ Do teams understand and buy in to the vision and goals and have a clear picture of how their work contributes to the higher-level vision?
- ✓ Do people have a safe way to express their questions and concerns?
- ✓ Is there a shared understanding of who the customers are and what they value?
Are teams prioritizing work that's most important for delivering customer value?
- ✓ Are measures of success for the transformation clearly stated? Do teams understand and buy in to them?
- ✓ Are teams empowered to define their own team-level measures of success versus having them imposed by management? Do they align with those of the transformation?
- ✓ Are leaders acting as servant-leaders, providing teams with what they need and creating a safe space for them to experiment, fail, and learn?
- ✓ Is the team able to articulate in their own words what the vision is, who the customer is, what matters to the customer, and why they are personally excited to contribute to this work?



Obstacle 2: A Disconnect Between Transformation Expectations Across Teams

A Real-World Experience

A development organization in an educational software and services firm had been struggling to effectively deploy Agile methodologies across their 80+ teams and weren't seeing the improvements they wanted to predictability, quality, and time-to-market. Engineering challenges were slowing them down, but the biggest problems arose when the Agile teams needed help from their non-Agile colleagues in other departments. The development organization had bought into Agile's values and principles and were aligned on a strong transformation vision and goals, but other groups didn't want to change the way they worked. This lack of alignment led to friction between groups and kept development teams from being able to work in a fully Agile way.

Processes in non-Agile departments took longer than Agile teams could accommodate within an iteration. For example, when development teams required expertise or approval from compliance or legal teams, they had to fill out paperwork, put their requests in the queue, and wait weeks or months to get what they needed. Marketing teams didn't understand why they should change the way they worked. And product management didn't know how Agile would benefit them and resisted changing their traditional, sequential, waterfall practices⁷. There was an obvious lack of enterprise-wide alignment on the transformation vision and goals.

Much of the disconnect was driven by the company's traditional, siloed organizational structure. In an ideal Agile world, compliance, marketing, and product management experts are embedded in Agile teams, collaborating and providing feedback in real-time and focused on the same goals. This wasn't an option, so we needed to help the development team figure out how to remove or work around these roadblocks. We began by determining which teams were the most critical to the development group's Agile success and then worked with each, taking a ground-up *and* top-down approach to educate, coach, and eventually, improve alignment.

These efforts drove incremental improvements that have been key to moving them forward. To be clear, we would have preferred to support reorganizing people around the mission, instead of continuing with the departmental silos. However, like many mature companies, set in their ways, the management decided to change was not as critical as reducing risk and they did not fully embrace the Agile mindset sufficiently to look at the impediments of their silos as a critical factor. We were helping them find pockets of benefit from Agile but this was never going to be a high performing organization as long as this approach continued. Nevertheless, we helped them mitigate the impact of the silos through transparency and measurements and focus on outcomes.

Why Cross-Team Disconnects Matter

Lack of alignment across silos — whether the silos are by skillset or domain — creates inefficiencies. Breaking down silos isn't always possible or optimal, but it is a strong preference when enabling agility. Silos of work create friction because each silo has a different understanding of their mission, their priorities, their cadence. Communication between silos also creates friction in many forms such as redundant meetings and power struggles on decision making. People tend to prioritize what they value or what they are individually measured on, instead of what's most important to the organization as a whole. They don't have a global outlook, so they create solutions that work for them, which hinders effective cross-team collaboration. An Agile organization's mission is to deliver as much value to customers as quickly as possible — and that requires optimization of the entire end-to-end value stream and all the people, processes, and technologies involved in delivery. Therefore resolving cross-team disconnects is a critical success factor for transformation success.

Laying a Strong Foundation

Disconnects between transformation expectations across teams will impede a full Agile transformation. There should be enterprise-wide alignment on the transformation's vision and goals and a shared focus on getting there. Breaking down silos often requires changes to the organization's structure, and that's not always an option. If this is your situation, develop a clear picture of the future vision and move toward it incrementally. The organization can still realize some of Agile's benefits, even if non-Agile practices happen in pockets of the organization.

Here are some tips for addressing this challenge:

- **Identify where silos are slowing progress:** Alignment of purpose, education, coaching, collaboration, and work-arounds are all ways to alleviate the challenges associated with cross-team disconnects. Talk with other leaders and teams to identify where disconnects are slowing progress. Prioritize roadblocks based on how critical they are for achieving Agile benefits. Look for opportunities to compromise and establish a path forward that is mutually workable. This is not always easy for Agile purists, but it's often necessary in real life.
- **Seek to develop some level of agility in non-Agile teams:** Agile transformation is a journey, which often starts with small steps. As people experiment with Agile approaches and become more familiar and comfortable with its values and principles, they can begin to see its benefits and be more willing to let go of old habits. Leverage existing relationships between people on Agile and non-Agile teams and look for opportunities to put Agile techniques in place. Find Agile champions on non-Agile teams to enlist their help. Engage people and find out where their challenges are. Map them to Agile and Lean practices to see that they can get them where they want to go. Solving their challenges will help gain their commitment.
- **Strive for a flatter organization:** Disconnects can happen at all levels of the organization. Agile teams will struggle to work with non-Agile groups. Middle layers of management may disagree on whether Agile matters or not. Non-Agile executives can push back on changes their Agile counterparts are trying to drive. Develop strategies for addressing these disconnects, and look to reduce the layers wherever possible. Shared understanding is easier when it isn't being translated through multiple layers of bureaucracy, politics, and redundancy.

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A company could put a top [person] at every position and be swallowed by a competitor with people only half as good, but who are working together.

– W. Edwards Deming⁸

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A Checklist for Success

If your organization can't withstand a "big-bang" reorganization, and disconnects between Agile and non-Agile teams are slowing progress, use this list to identify opportunities to gain incremental improvement of agility over time.

- ✓ **Is there friction between Agile and non-Agile teams that is hindering Agile teams from being fully Agile?**
- ✓ **Have you identified where those points of conflict are and prioritized them based on their impact to Agile progress?**
- ✓ **Have you developed strategies for addressing the most important disconnects?**
- ✓ **Have you identified Agile champions in non-Agile groups and engaged their energy?**
- ✓ **Are you making efforts both bottom up and top down to find ways to instill agility in non-Agile teams?**
- ✓ **Have you identified what non-Agile stakeholders value, where their challenges lie, and how Agile approaches can help remedy them?**



Obstacle 3: Cultural Barriers Blocking the Path to Agility

A Real-World Experience

A large organization engaged us to develop programs to scale Agile-related improvements when a high-profile team was brought to our attention that was delivering products but following very few Agile practices. The team of about 25 people consisted of three functional areas — engineering, R&D, and a business unit. They had achieved early success on a highly-visible, data-intensive project, and executives wanted to invest more in the work they were doing, but they were concerned with the team's ability to deliver predictably at scale.

The larger organization had been on its Agile journey for about a decade, with varying outcomes across the company, but this particular team had no real Agile methodology in place. Leaders believed that transitioning them to an Agile method would improve predictability and transparency, helping the organization plan more effectively. The team, however, was skeptical that Agile could work in their context, which is about building data models at scale versus customer-facing software applications or websites. We needed to help them see how Agile approaches, when adapted to their unique set of circumstances, could benefit them.

We recognized familiar cultural barriers holding them back: Strong team collaboration and cohesion were lacking. There was a traditional, top-down — not team-driven — culture. The team's manager, who was part of the team and designated Technical Lead, tended to dictate how the team should solve problems and do their work. And while failing fast and learning from it is part of an Agile culture, leaders struggled to let teams make decisions they believed required greater oversight. As a result, the team was struggling to grow and lacked a sense of purpose and ownership. They weren't empowered and didn't have a safe space in which to self-organize and experiment.

We implemented a strategic plan with four key characteristics:⁹

1. Working with leadership to provide transparency and create space to experiment and learn
2. Adopting a retrospective process and using it as an engine for change
3. Educating the team on the value of Agile (the “why”) while focusing on a small set of goals
4. Building trust and a shared understanding by avoiding imposing a method — instead problem-solving collaboratively toward a method that works for them

After a few months working with both leadership and the team, a stream of small, incremental changes had improved performance, teamwork, and culture. Leaders and teams developed a shared understanding by aligning on meaningful metrics, clear goals, and expectations of what “good” means. Leadership began to understand the importance of trust, respect, risk-taking, and continuous improvement as requirements for Agile success. It can be difficult to overcome cultural barriers, but with sound strategies and open minds, it can be easy to make real progress in the right direction.

“While many companies are striving to become agile, only four percent of survey respondents have completed an organization-wide transformation, the latest McKinsey research finds. **The No 1. problem they cite is culture.**”¹⁰

Why Culture Matters

Most transformation issues can be tied — either directly or indirectly — to culture. Cultural barriers can be more damaging than process or technology issues. And they’re usually more difficult to resolve — involving people, brain styles, and emotions. But becoming truly Agile requires more than just adopting new practices and techniques — it relies on the development of an enterprise-wide culture of agility — which some also call an Agile mindset.

Unfortunately, most traditional organizations are hierarchical and promote command-and-control management approaches. They usually reward people for individual accomplishments, not for the achievement of higher-level goals. They impose standards and frameworks to control work. And they resist change. Compare that to a culture of agility, which, among other characteristics, encourages transparency, trust, and respect. You may think your company promotes these ideals because they’re in a value statement and posters on the wall, but, ask yourself, does your company enable self-forming teams? This means teams of people that choose to work together to solve a problem and have the ability to hire and fire team off that team. Does your company promote self-organizing teams? Teams that choose their own work and their own standards for tools and processes to achieve their goals as optimally as possible? These forms of trust and respect are inherent in high-performing organizations. It promotes flatter hierarchies and team empowerment. It accepts that change is the norm and encourages experimentation and learning. Making this cultural transformation is fundamental to realizing Agile’s full benefits.

Laying a Strong Foundation

If your vision is to become a high-performing, Agile enterprise, it’s impossible to ignore culture, because gaps between existing culture and the values and principles Agile seeks to instill can drive resistance and hinder adoption. Cultural obstacles are often complex, hard to fully understand, and intertwined with other barriers. They involve people and emotions, making them difficult to conquer. And there’s rarely a quick fix or prescriptive approach for doing so — every situation will be unique.

Watch for signs cultural challenges may be blocking your path forward, for example, low morale, lack of servant leadership, or role confusion. Take steps to address them before, during, and after your Agile transformation journey. Education and coaching can be very effective at developing an Agile mindset, but some people will be unable to make the shift to a new way of thinking and working. If a full Agile transformation is the goal, be prepared to move them to other roles or out of the organization. It can be helpful to bring in experienced objective, third-party expertise to help facilitate cultural shifts. Culture is like the air you breathe — you don't always recognize it but a new person will pick up odors much quicker and that identification is key to successfully addressing the issues.

While not an exhaustive list of characteristics of a strong Agile culture you should try to drive, these are among the most important to get right.

- **Executive commitment to an Agile culture:** It's virtually impossible to develop a truly Agile culture without full leadership commitment. They may not be knowledgeable about Agile practices, and that can be addressed through education and strategic-level coaching. Ultimately, however, for Agile to succeed, leaders need to be bought into the transformation and open about their support. They should seek to overcome resistance, convert non-believers to champions, and promote transformation through effective, ongoing communication and "walking the walk." If you're not seeing these behaviors, dig in to learn more about how you might be able to get them more fully on board.
- **A servant leadership culture:** Lack of a servant leadership culture is one of the most prevalent challenges we see during engagements. Overcoming this obstacle empowers high-performing teams by creating a safe space for them to iterate on their process and take risks. Leaders that learn to give the team what they need to do their work, remove barriers, and trust them to get the job done reap great rewards in the form of loyalty and productivity. The team still needs someone to provide a vision and higher-level goals, but servant-leaders don't dictate how teams work. If there's friction between teams and leaders, explore attitudes and behaviors at all leadership levels. Watch and listen for opportunities to educate and coach YOUR leaders into a servant leadership mindset, and consider moving them out of leadership roles if they can't make the shift.
- **Empowered teams:** High-performing Agile teams prioritize what the team needs over individual interests. They self-organize to make decisions and execute work that is most important. They establish their own measures of success and hold themselves accountable. They can only do this if they are given this level of autonomy and a safe environment in which to work. Observe and listen to leaders and teams to make sure a team-first mindset is firmly in place. Change rewards structures to focus on team, versus individual, accomplishments.
- **Support for experimentation and rewards based on failure:** High-performing Agile cultures encourage experimentation and risk-taking. People expect failure and accept it, knowing they will learn from it to arrive at the best possible solution. When this culture is firmly in place and accompanied by strong servant leadership, teams feel safe, and this is where innovation is most likely to happen. If evidence suggests it's missing, take steps to address any underlying issues.
- **A culture of retrospection and continuous improvement:** Retrospection is the engine of change. Without it, teams lack a regular way to take stock of what is working and what is not and act on it. They discuss what happened, identify opportunities to improve, and develop strategies to improve. Unlike lessons-learned at the end of a project, this process is one of constant and continual reflections of progress, allowing for micro-adjustments and constant improvement. This becomes a way of life for many — teams start by holding retrospectives after each sprint and may end up holding them almost daily. This regular reflection helps solidify a culture of continuous improvement. When implementing change to your process, remember that the entire team needs to change so without full consensus you cannot do this. However, consensus can be difficult to attain all the time, instead consider going for consent, which simply means no one has a compelling argument not to attempt the change.

Implementing change from a retrospective

A foolproof formula for trying new processes without demotivating dissenters:

1. Define the problem, and get consensus that you have identified a root cause.
2. Agree on the impact that the problem is having and if at all possible, quantify the impact. For example: "Our status meetings are taking an hour and that is cutting into our work day too much and demotivating us."
3. Agree on a metric for success from any solution as well as expected outcome, such as "We should not need more than a 15-minute status meeting, and should see an improvement in our morale as measured by a niko-niko¹¹ calendar."
4. Gain consent on a possible solution, e.g., "We will do jumping jacks while we talk to reduce our willingness to speak too long."
5. Set a time box. This is critical. The timebox allows the dissenters to feel that the change is not forever. This small piece is the difference between making people feel they lost an argument versus feeling they are part of a short experiment. Who wouldn't try something for a week? e.g. "We'll try this for one week and then reassess."

A Checklist for Success

When cultural barriers are impacting progress, use this list to help identify ways you may be able to overcome them. While not comprehensive, it will guide you to uncover cultural issues that can be addressed.

- ✓ Are all executives fully committed to the vision and goals for the Agile transformation?
- ✓ Are executives vocal about how they believe Agile will help their teams and the organization?
- ✓ Are executives educating and coaching people, teams and themselves into a more Agile mindset?
- ✓ Are executives exhibiting non-Agile behaviors that could be addressed?
- ✓ Are executives expressing doubt that Agile is the right way to go?
- ✓ Do leaders at all levels of the organization understand what servant leadership is and how to provide it?
- ✓ Are conversations about hitting dates and comparing velocities, or are they about delighting customers?
- ✓ Are leaders consistently acting as servant-leaders or are they exhibiting non-servant-leader behaviors, for example, dictating approaches or not trusting the team?
- ✓ Do leaders express doubts servant-leadership is an effective way to lead?
- ✓ Is there friction between teams and leaders?
- ✓ Have teams been empowered to self-organize, determine how to work, solve their own problems, and establish their own measures of success?
- ✓ Do teams have a safe place in which to experiment and fail?
- ✓ Do teams learn from failure to drive continuous improvement?
- ✓ Are retrospectives embedded in the organization's culture and teams?
- ✓ Do teams take responsibility for their outcomes?

Conclusion

Additional Challenges and Moving Forward

The word “transformation” has been defined as “a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.” It implies big, bold, and all-encompassing. It’s daunting, particularly for long-lived companies with traditional, hierarchical organizational structures and cultures. But transformation is simply about change — the accumulation of incremental improvements to accomplish a long-term goal. Yes, it can be tough, but experienced leaders are adept at it — familiar with the work it takes to facilitate it gradually, balancing the lofty vision of what people call “transformation” with an understanding of the need to manage change and its impact on the organization — and the realization that sometimes it’s the culmination of a lot of incremental progress.

If your Agile transformation vision and goals seem sound but you’re not getting the results you want, take a step back, and look for opportunities to improve. Talk to leaders, teams, and your external experts, listen with an open mind, and validate what you hear. Look for anti-Agile behaviors, analyze the environment to interpret root causes, and create a pragmatic plan to move forward. Take small steps to meet short-term goals that will help you achieve your long-term Agile transformation vision. Ultimately, this can lay the foundation you need to become a high-performing organization.

Need Help?

NeuEon’s experienced business and technology leaders have provided high-performing organization and Agile transformation services for more than a decade, working with dozens of companies across industries to develop a depth and breadth of knowledge and experience. Through these engagements, the company has developed proven approaches that enable them to quickly identify and address roadblocks to progress and leverage opportunities for improvement. They are trusted advisors and servant-leaders that help their clients cut through the noise to meet their goals.

No matter where you are on your Agile journey — just getting started, midway through, or far along — contact us to learn more about how we can help you move forward as efficiently and effectively as possible and get the results you expect. We can help with:

- **Development or assessment of your Agile transformation vision, goals, and strategies**
- **Pattern matching and root cause analysis to identify obstacles that may be holding you back**
- **Creation of strategies to overcome obstacles and drive forward progress**
- **Collaborative workshops to educate and establish alignment and buy-in**
- **Targeted coaching for leaders and teams to instill servant leadership principles and behaviors**
- **Facilitation of cultural change to establish an enterprise-wide Agile mindset**



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Sources

¹Throughout this guide we use the term "Agile" as a noun or adjective to mean the Agile principles and mindset and values from the manifesto. When we refer to "being" or "becoming" Agile we mean the practicing and embracing of this mindset.

²Agile Manifesto for Software Development, <http://agilemanifesto.org>

³McKinsey & Company, Leading agile transformation: The new capabilities leaders need to build 21st-century Organizations, <https://mck.co/2ygKuXz>

⁴McKinsey & Company, The five trademarks of agile organizations, <https://mck.co/2nfsgAg>

⁵<https://firstdoit.com/spotify-engineering-culture-lessons-on-autonomy-and-alignment-e86abe5ebca7>

⁶<https://kpi.org/KPI-Basics>

⁷The waterfall model is a relatively linear sequential design approach for certain areas of engineering design. In software development, it tends to be among the less iterative and flexible approaches, as progress flows in largely one direction ("downwards" like a waterfall) through the phases of conception, initiation, analysis, design, construction, testing, deployment and maintenance. Wikipedia, <https://bit.ly/1FBq4sl>

⁸ NeuEon, Coaching Case Study: How a Skeptical Team Forged Its Own Path to Agility, <https://bit.ly/2U2wfn5>

¹⁰ Culture can make or break agility, McKinsey & Company

¹¹ <https://www.agilealliance.org/glossary/nikoniko/>