

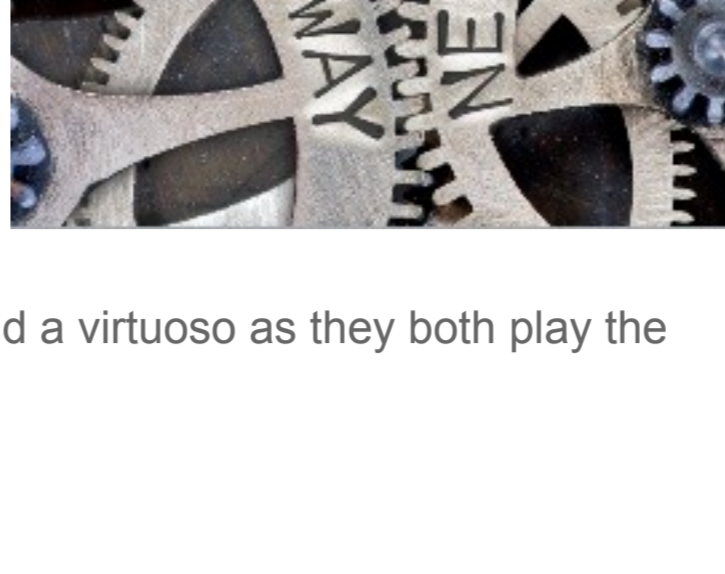
# Agile Grease: Improving Agile Project Management

RALPH SACCO · JANUARY 12, 2018 · UPDATED FEBRUARY 22, 2022

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## Overview

All projects have a ton of moving parts. The more efficient those parts, the more efficient the workings. Improving the most critical mechanism provides significant improvement to your overall machine. Now, depending on the program the agile development cycle can be the single biggest lever to improve quality, effectiveness and speed. Therefore, it is worth a look at even the smallest, intangible improvements.



There is a great deal of information available about the mechanics of this topic, but let's focus on some of the subtle intangibles. Think of the difference between a proficient violinist and a virtuoso as they both play the same notes.

## Inherited Benefits

*Trickle Down Lubrication*, Ì before going too far let's have a hat tip to what you get for free with an Agile framework. We owe a lot to the thought leaders such as the Manifesto 12 who put their finger on the nature of people and their role in a development cycle.

We can recap the skid greasing benefits as:

- Closer, better relationships with stakeholders
- Priorities – Work on the important stuff
- Productivity simply by unitasking
- Motivation – Working on bite size chunks sustainable workload
- Broader base of free-flowing ideas
- Course correct the app, process, team in near real time
- Find issues sooner
- Teaming to deliver value frequently
- Deliver value frequently
- Embrace change Ì Enjoy saying yes

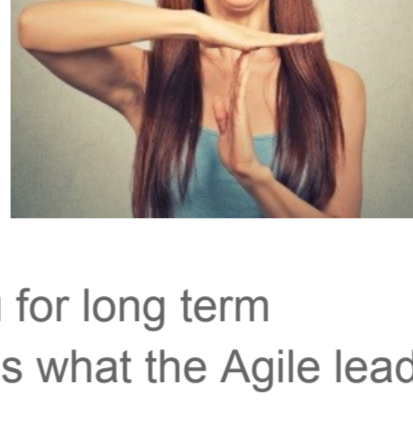
An elaboration of the last bullet – Smaller teams have a lubricating effect. The communications matrix widely expands as you add team members. A team of 5 has up to 10 channels of communications (5(5-1)/2). A team of 10 would have a mesh of interactions up to 45.

**Tools (More Freebies)**, Ì You might pay good money for team building exercises, but instead of falling backwards and have your team catch you, team built is built in:

- A simple thing like a daily Scrum 15 minutes with a shared purpose provides that foxhole type collaboration and the feeling you are all in this together.
- The simple fact that you are turning out something tangible and valuable in short periods of time is so much more gratifying than pushing a big design or development phase up a hill.
- Tools such as; the Planning Game, Paired Programming, Collective Code Ownership of XP providing a great deal of spreedecor right out of the box.
- Friction is removed, and grease is applied as all parties participate on the same level. Business and Technology groups collaborate through tasks such as; prioritization of user stories, user story mapping, estimating story points, and planning exercises. How can you not have fun with something called Planning Poker, true?

## Changing Minds

**Classical PMs and Other Heretics**, Ì We need to keep in mind not everyone thinks like you. An understanding of mind set differences is required. There is an irony when a classically trained PM thinks he/she failed when they actually succeeded. They kick themselves for letting a program get out of control. Out of control in the form of changes bypassing the control board, releases are out of cycle because the CIO is pounding on the table demanding action and so on. Another way of rationalizing this is the controlled chaos produced high priority results and they were one step closer to an Agile framework.



In an Agile workplace PMs should not get discouraged. The "Program" needs you for long term planning, equipment and human resource acquisition, risk management etc. This is what the Agile lead or Scrum Master might think of as the decorations around their project.

PMs are not the only ones resistant to change. All organizations have various levels of adoption and maturity. Not everyone you work with is an Agile religious fanatic. Some old school types measure success by how many weekends people work and how many times they have seen the sun rise from the office.

I once knew a CIO who had his company's PCs labeled Microcomputers, so employees realized they were business machines not their own personal plaything.

You can reduce some friction by being a little sensitive. For estimation exercises Ì Do you have to call it Planning Poker? Why not Index-card based User Story Estimation instead? What does it hurt? You can call T-Shirt sizing Fibonacci Rough Order of Magnitude Estimation. It is generally the same categories SM = 1 week, M=2, L=3, XL=5, XXL = 7 – a rose by any other name, Ì.

In the spirit of this topic, please do not use Ideal-Days estimation. While you are talking that exec is not listening, he is too busy making notes on the back of a napkin Ì OK 300 ideal days Ì If I triple the team, work double shifts, work weekends and Christmas Ì I will get my delivery bonus.

On the flip side, it is heartening when you finally win lingò battle. When the diehards start using terms like sprint, velocity, backlog and user stories.

**Moving to Agile**, Ì If these concepts are new to a department or division the Agile grease comes in the form of change management. From awareness to training to adoption it can be tough sledding.

No two situations are alike. Is the Agile Model a pilot program? Is it a major initiative? Are you using it successfully in one division and are expanding to another? Are teams centralized or disparate?

Whatever the scenario whether you need simple awareness or a full-time change manager, attention paid here will bring speed and quality benefits to the program faster. Small or large the high-level process is the same:

- Assess your scenario Ì Articulate the existing pain points, identify what is driving the change, etc.
- Organize and Plan Ì This is a wide spectrum. The process can be as big as a funded program with a dedicated change manager or as small as a few meetings or discussion driven by you.
- Execute your change plan Ì Don't expect too much too soon. Remember the nugget from Newton's First Law Ì A body at rest tends to stay at rest.

When it comes to change, transparency is key. I worked for a 200-person company that was acquired by **McDonnell Douglas Systems** (MDS). Their stated goal was to absorb us and close the doors in 1 year. One of the first things MDS did was put ALL of us though an "Overcoming Resistance to Change" class. For the next two-week period every employee from programmers to the executives took this facilitated 2-hour class. It was unorthodox yes, but effective. By being honest and transparent throughout, the natural attrition matched MDS's needs and the customers where not impacted. Also, oddly enough, morale was positive. It should be noted that this defuncted company has had a well-attended yearly reunion for over 25 years. Bottom line, communication and transparency can be powerful tools.

**Choosing an Agile Model**, Ì Good fit is surely another influence on overall quality and effectiveness. Something lightweight like Scrum may work best or if you are a complex regulated enterprise you may require Crystal Maroon. One approach is to develop a matrix with your characteristics on the horizontal axis and the Agile Method or Principles on the Vertical axis. Remember, be careful of analysis paralysis – Perfection is the enemy of good.

Method	Highly Adaptive	Adaptable	Structured	Highly Structured	Highly Regulated	Highly Regulated with Change	Highly Regulated with Change and Approval	Highly Regulated with Change and Approval and Approval
Scrum	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
XP Practices	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Lean	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Kanban	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Scrum-ban	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Crystal	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Clear	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Yellow	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Orange	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Red	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Miracron	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
FDD	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
BSCM	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Agile Modeling	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
DAD	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
TDD	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
BDD	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙

Also, a hybrid is a way to bridge whatever gaps you may have.

## Individuals, Collaboration and Culture

**Self-Organizing Teams**, Ì Unleash the power of the serving of a Jury, you would see d\@cor of a well-oiled machine. If you have ever had the privilege of diving on a jury, and the speed first-hand how 12 people who could not be more different produce a thoughtful solid outcome. In some cases, this can be in a very short timeframe. How do they so quickly get past Tuckman's stages of group dynamics (-forming, Ì storming, Ì norming, Ì performing) so quickly?

- Crystal clear goal
- Clear Parameters
- Deadline
- Self-Organization
- Co-location
- No Micro-Management Ì the team is clear to do their job
- Singular focus
- Understanding priorities

Sound familiar?

**Leadership in Team Formation**, Ì I was thinking about writing a child rearing book, but it would be too short. It would say "Love your kids and set a good example", Ì The End.

My observation is that successful Agile teams have a leader that IS a good example and has the faith to trust the process and the team.

There are many forms of leadership, among them are:

- Appointment Ì when someone is appointed to a leadership position. On the org chart Jane is the team lead period
- Popularity Ì The person who runs the football pool can have great sway and has an ability to drive the team.
- Demeanor Ì Person has a strong personality and gravitas.
- Knowledge Ì When an expert talks people listen and generally follow.

It is the last form of leadership works best in an Agile setting. The lead or Scrum Master is generally the focal point for a small team. This is the key individual that works with the Client Stakeholders to negotiate the payload in a sprint, manage the backlog, as well as the size and complexity of user stories. The individual must be well versed in the application, the technology and the solution.

Beyond the qualifications the persons modus operandi need to:

- Be Ethical Ì To build trust and set a good example to the team.
- Transparent Ì To improve communication, to foster a one-team attitude with the stakeholders, and reduce risk. Remember, bad news does not get better with age.
- Flexible Ì Open to continuous improvement.
- Have confidence in the team Ì Do not run down their morale by micro-managing other people's jobs. Let the teams succeed on their own and learn from their mistakes.

**Diversity**, Ì The goal of diversity is generally a given, but it is worth a mention why it is an intangible lubricating factor. Would a Jury reach the same conclusion if everyone thought the same?

In such a collaborative environment, new ideas from different perspectives can solve problems quickly and more elegantly.

Example: A team was running late to a client appointment at a large campus. The team parked at one entrance and rushed in only to find the path to the front desk was under construction. Back to the car and around the building would have made them very, very late.

Parallel to the walk was a freight elevator. The older member of the team headed for the elevator followed by a chorus of "but we need the first floor." When the door opened he pressed the "backdoor" button they walked straight through to the front desk. In terms of the benefits of diversity, you can add life experience to gender, culture, race and religion. In any case diversity means a diversity of solutions.

## Final Word

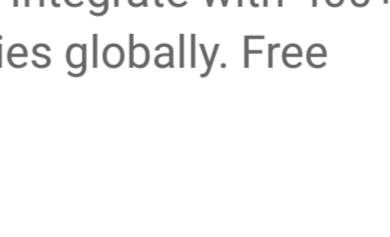
On top of the nuts and bolts of a project, a little attention to the factors that can grease the gears is in order. What is between the notes is the difference between the violinist and a virtuoso.

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If you're interested in learning more about top rated project management software, the editors at Project-Management.com actively recommend the following:

### 1. Wrike

**Wrike** is an award-winning work management software used by 2.3 million professionals that enables teams to plan and track projects, collaborate in real-time, and automate reports. Wrike's 100% scalable features include Gantt charts, Kanban boards, personalized dashboards, and custom request forms. Automate processes and get up to 50% more productive. Create 360° visibility with time tracking, budget management, and project portfolio analysis. Keep data protected with enterprise-level security features. Wrike's solutions include Wrike for Marketers and Wrike for Professional Services, along with specific team templates. Integrate with 400+ apps from the likes of Microsoft, Google, and Salesforce. Used by 20,000+ companies globally. Free plans available, with paid plans starting at \$9.80/user/month.



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### 2. Asana

**Asana** helps teams orchestrate their work, from daily tasks to strategic initiatives. With Asana, teams are more confident, move faster, and accomplish more with less, no matter where they are located. More than 107,000 paying organizations and millions of organizations across 190 countries rely on Asana to manage everything from company objectives to digital transformation to product launches and marketing campaigns. Get started in minutes to try Asana.



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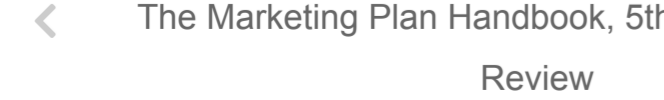
### 3. Rocketlane

**Rocketlane's** collaborative customer onboarding platform helps businesses accelerate time-to-value, streamline implementation journeys, and deliver exceptional customer experience. By replacing generic project management and document collaboration tools with a unique, unified workspace, Rocketlane helps improve communication, collaboration, and project visibility for businesses and their customers. We help businesses consistently hit their goals by making onboarding more delightful and friction-free.



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**Ralph Sacco**

Ralph has well over 30 years' experience and is a certified PMP in good standing since 2003. For the past 20 years, he has been having a blast implementing large scale solutions for countless clients as a Senior Project Manager with **IBM Global Business Services**.

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