

INNOVATION, AGILITY AND CULTURE

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Abstract

In a globalizing world there is a growing focus on innovation. Businesses and governments are aware of the importance of investing in knowledge and in finding ways to keep up to date, or to get an edge on global competition.

In this article we sort out the cultural elements that play a role in understanding how culture influences innovation. More specifically we analyze how a contemporary concept like “agility” is related to innovation and culture. We discuss the potential barriers by clusters of similar cultures, and give advice how to overcome these barriers. While all of Wursten’s 7 Mental Images of Culture are covered, deeper analysis focuses on the Contest, Japan and Machine cultures.]

Keywords: Agility, Cultural dimensions, Mental Images, Management, Innovation, Bridging

Introduction

Innovate Differently

Right now, you’re probably reading these words on an electronic device. It won’t be long before that device grows impatient with you.

Once a month, your iPhone *Settings* icon glows with a red dot that urges you to update your operating system. Microsoft regularly niggles you to quit your Office applications and restart so the latest version can load; in January 2020, Microsoft released [four new builds](#) for retail customers of Office. *Updated* is the new *new*.

These reminders form the tip of a very large iceberg which has revolutionized design, development, and innovation. We know it as the *Agile* movement. Yet, what do we mean when we talk about agile? Is agile a culture?

How do we use the terms agile, Agile and agility in this paper? In short, Agile with a capital *A* refers to a bundling of concepts, principles, processes and methods which support a state of mind in a team or organization enabling permanent adaptation to changing environments. When we use agile with a small *a*, we are using it in the colloquial sense.

Describing the history of Agile can sound like a movement for political or social change. In 2001, a hard-core of *believers* met and declared a *revolution*. They wrote a [manifesto](#), which states clear values which diverge from the status quo. The manifesto lists [practical principles](#) to guide daily decisions. The believers had a radical *vision* of what a *reinvented world* will look like, and what qualities the citizens of this new world should possess. A passionate group of adherents followed the revolutionaries, and *upset the status quo*. More people began to taste the fruits of Agile thinking, and the status quo yielded. As happens with so many movements, the revolutionaries are now the Establishment.

Agile methods have their roots in two distinctive places, Japan and the United States. But the need for business to adopt Agile methods respects neither national borders nor cultural boundaries. The authors take the view that the culture of Agility is nationally agnostic; its values and principles don't map onto any country perfectly. In every cultural environment, Agile leaders must adjust their methods, and tailor their practices.

We'll explore the nuts-and-bolts application of Agile processes, using Scrum as an example. But any discussion of Agile must go further. Clearly, Agile is not just a way to make software; it's changed the mechanics of progress in a digital world. Beyond business, Agile affects how we look at innovation, creativity and education.

Before discussing agility let's first analyze the concept of innovation.

Innovation

When speaking about innovation it is important to make a distinction between true innovation and simply the process of improving existing processes and products.

Talking about innovation in this paper refers to the notion of doing something different rather than doing the same thing marginally better. An improvement amounts to an innovation when it is a step-change; a difference in degree which becomes a difference in kind.

Innovation is an important element in the survival of companies in times of *creative destruction*. This is a concept first formulated some 70 years ago by economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter, saying that corporations maintain their leadership positions only if they creatively and continuously reconstruct themselves.

Innovation is equally important for economic growth of countries. Education plays an essential role in this in emphasizing needed special skills and competencies for the future. Economists who have studied the relationship between education and economic growth confirm however that, once a certain level of knowledge is reached, other factors become more important. Baker (Baker, 2007) says:

“What matters most for the economic, cultural, and technological success is “ambition, inquisitiveness, independence, and perhaps most important, the absence of a fixation on testing and test scores.” He adds some strong advice: ” The more we focus on tests, the more we kill creativity, ingenuity, and the ability to think differently. Students who think differently get lower scores. The more we focus on tests, the more we reward conformity and compliance, getting the right answer.”

To avoid conformity and compliance, two competences are important: critical thinking and creative thinking

Critical thinking is not the same as logical thinking. It is about engaging critically with knowledge, but also develop powers of critical self-reflection and critical action. ” Critical thinking is, in short, self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking”. (Brandt, 1986) He explains the relationship between critical thinking and creative thinking. He argues that:

“Good **creative** thinking depends on multiple evaluations of options (i.e. a critical thinking task), whereas good **critical** thinking relies on the imagination of different perspectives (i.e., a creative thinking task). Therefore, the two kinds of thinking are in fact

interrelated and interdependent on one another, and it would be difficult (or even impossible) to make a clear distinction between them.”

They might be different in terms of their goals. The goal of critical thinking is to **evaluate and assess ideas**, whereas the goal of creative thinking is to **generate original ideas**.

The question is how does critical and creative thinking relate to an approach that is “hot” in discussions about organizational behavior business strategy: Agility?

Agility

Agile innovation is, at its core, easily explained by the exponential growth and importance of software development.

Traditional innovation uses specialist teams to develop atomized elements of a product before handing the results over to the next set of specialists—this process is known as a *waterfall* or *monochronic* approach. Silos are seen as both productive and efficient. While the result minimizes flaws, it consumes time and hence financial resources. Many see a kind of “perfection paralysis” in traditional innovation methods.

The problem becomes acute when creating software. Software is complex, mercurial, and fickle. Even the simplest software is composed of millions of moving parts which depend on each other, often in surprising ways. Silos become counterproductive. If one followed traditional innovation protocol, most of the software we use today would be stuck in Version 1.0. Conventional innovators plan-to-perfection. Agile innovators launch-and-debug. Fast beats best.

It goes beyond a simple change to management process. When a company adopts Agile values, it alters how employees judge a good outcome, or a bad outcome. Agile principles encourage new, perhaps unsettling interactions among individuals; defined roles become more ambiguous and hierarchies grow less important. You listen to your customer more than your boss. Agile leaders distribute rewards and incentives on new criteria, and assign individual responsibility along new lines. Agile methodology defines tasks in new ways, and assumes an acceptance of uncertainty which some may find uncomfortable. Communication takes on an urgent and democratizing role.

This goes some way to explaining why so few companies have fully embraced Agile when scaled up to a global level. In 2018, HBR (HBR, 2018) reported a CA Technologies study of 1300 global leaders. Only 44% of companies employ agile methods to develop software, and 41% employ it in IT. In general, 78% of leaders say they employ Agile methods throughout their company. But only 13%-18% say they employ it in any depth or breadth, or with consistency. Among the barriers reported in the 2018, State of Scrum (Scrum Alliance, 2017, p. 22), 51% cited the inertia of their organizational culture, 41% the need for definitive metrics, 38% a lack of trust, 35% a need for predictability, and over a quarter simply declared that their stakeholders didn’t like the transparency that Agile demands.

Planning, ambiguity, hierarchy, transparency, trust, predictability, comfort with uncertainty, individual responsibility, personal incentives, metrics, even good and bad. When interculturalists hear such words, the work of Geert Hofstede leaps to mind.

Hofstede’s dimensions of national culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010)

demonstrate how cultures are rooted in deeply-held values, and that these values can be measured. Building on Hofstede’s work, Huib Wursten has shown that nations with similar values can be bundled together, making the influence of culture tangible and more understandable. He calls these clusters of culture the *Mental Images*, simplifying a world of well over 200 separate value-systems. The 7 combinations generate a distinctive model, one which helps to define the rules of the game for how human beings interact. When it comes to understanding human behavior,

This article looks at Agile through that cultural lens. We use the 7 *Mental Images* to demonstrate the barriers to Agility in national cultures, and how organizations can leverage their cultural strengths to become more Agile. Culture is a powerful enabling force for global business in this bold, new software-driven world.

What is Agility? Drivers, Principles, Benefits

First of all it is an approach to product development that originated in Japan and the USA. It started as a system for software development. The scope is much broader now.

Our Japanese colleague Chika Miyamori wrote:

“Agile is not a development process, or method. It is **a state of team/org to adapt to ever changing environment**. It is not how to run the project, it is about how to continuously develop teams that can adapt to changes, to collaborate effectively and to innovate. **Agile is not verb, it is not an action. it is adjective** and there is no end- goal.”

What then is at the core of Agility?

It's about:

- Placing value for the customer at the center of all decisions.
- Increasing the pace of learning to quickly create highest quality solutions;
- Pushing standards higher to foster faster decisions and “corrections”. By using Agile methods, the promise is that you leave your competition in the dust by moving faster.

Agile is a *process* that helps teams provide quick and unpredictable responses to the feedback they receive on their project. It creates opportunities to assess a project's direction during the *development* cycle. Teams assess the project in regular meetings called sprints or iterations”.

Does this “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective process is something that is equally feasible in all cultures? In other words, does the agile promise apply across cultures seamlessly?.

Let's analyze the key elements: Agile in the workplace is about

1. Placing value for the customer at the center of all decisions.

Responsiveness: decentralization of decision making (low PDI), accepting that the customer drives what is important.

The customer, represented by the product owner is defines the What and Why of the development. The specialists define the how. This leads to quick and continuous trade-offs between specialists and generalists in the team the interest of the customer's issues. “Silo” thinking is expunged. The mantra is “Whatever works” and embraces low UAI.

Managers are not in “charge” of specialists. Instead, the principle is self-steering teams (low PDI)which strive for negotiated win-win approaches between team members.

Team members are expected to have consensual and communicative approaches; this requires effective listening, learning and to customer's needs (low PDI, Low MAS, Low UAI)

2. increasing the pace of learning to quickly create tentative solutions.

This is about moving the ball forward quickly. It is about deliberately accepting sub-optimal solutions in the name of progress. It is about creating something that performs well enough to be useful, and working out the bugs later (Low UAI).

3. pushing standards higher and thinking in terms of **sustainability (long term ramifications)**

4. fast decisions(low PDI (flat decision-making hierarchies) and Low UAI (taking unfamiliar risks) and

5. “corrections”

Team members should not be afraid of creating disharmony, losing face. They should accept diversity in opinions as view themselves as equals in the team. This is more difficult in

Collectivist cultures. Mutual *Trust* is a real issue in creating teams in Collectivist cultures. Team work between relative strangers is proven to be easier in Individualistic cultures. The members should not have a strong fear of losing focus and, outcomes are more important than output formulated in operationalized targets (low

MAS)

Agile is a process that requires teams to create:

6. quick and unpredictable responses to the feedback they receive on their project. (low UAI) and embrace incremental change (low MAS and Low UAI)

7. It creates opportunities **to assess a project's direction during** the development cycle relying on incremental development and emerging insight (low MAS and low UAI)

8. The scrum/agile team decide two important things.

They decide **which** tasks to take on and determine **what's possible** in a sprint and what isn't. (low PDI) for every task, the team agrees on a **"definition of done"**, what's *good enough* to cross off the list or iterate or pass on to the next team. (low PDI, Low UAI).

Summarizing the attributes of Agility in a cultural context:

Agility	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
	Low Quick decisions Independent thinking Self-steering teams	High Straight talk No fear of losing face Group harmony is not disturbed by heterogeneous ideas Diversity is accepted as contributing to team quality	Mix required High: Pushing standards higher Low: -Incremental development -Outcome instead of output - Accepting suboptimal standards in the name of progress	Low Ambiguity is accepted. Unstructured. Incremental process of development High: Sustainability is required

From original principle to paradigm shift

A new book written by Pia-Maria Thoren describes Agile, from its original principle up to its more recent developments in terms of a paradigm shift. A table summarizing this shift from traditional to agile is shown below.

FROM → TO	Traditional	Agile
Processes	Episodic	Ongoing
	One size fits all	No size fits all
	Standardized	On a needs basis
	Reactive	Proactive
	Push	Pull
Organization	Machine	Network
	Individual	Team
Leadership	Management	Employeeeship
Human view	Negative (X)	Positive (Y)
Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Feedback	Seldom	Often
HR's role	Control, implement standards	Support and coach organizational agility

Fig.1. Paradigm Change From Traditional into Agile HR. Source: Thoren (2017, p.41)

How does national culture enter into this new agile equation?

Thoren puts a lot of emphasis on self-organizing teams. The general dilemma is how to combine hierarchical management and agility in realms where dynamism and „time-to-market“ is crucial

In this paper provides some direction taking the elements of national culture into account.

Saying that agile working has to reflect the values of cultures in which it is applied is complex in a world of over 200 countries. The Mental Images, based on validated empirical research, allows for the reduction of complexity in analyzing what this means. The analysis will show what elements in the culture are supportive and which ones are restraining the potentials of Agile working. Advice will be given about how potential restraints can be overcome.

How to Create an Agile Culture Anywhere

As we can see, *no culture fits perfectly.*

The passages which follow illustrate a selection of the issues which Agile methods face in diverse global cultures. In each case, we argue that culture can be viewed as both as a barrier to, and an enabler of Agile. Knowing the values-based “rules of the game” can unleash Agile deliver its full productive potential.

Again, we stress that we have looked in detail at Contest, Japan, and Machine cultures from Wursten’s 7 Mental Images, with added commentary on the remaining four.

1. An Agile Contest

One would think that in the birthplace of the Agile Manifesto it would be easy to implement agility. Not necessarily.

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓
CONTEST	↓	↑	↑	↓

Cultural Positives for Agility

- Agile Values and Practice
 - Low UAI: “truth is truth when it works”. Revealing saying: “whatever works”
 - Low UAI: Just Do It. Do first, action orientation.
 - Low UAI: flexibility
 - High IDV: makes it easier to accept teamwork with “strangers” based on different skills
- Agile Mindset
 - Low PDI: Groups feel comfortable asserting control over their workloads, taking responsibility.
- Agile Imagination
 - Pragmatism: what works doesn’t always need to be true. What is true does not always work.

Cultural Barriers to Agility

- Agile Principle and Practice
 - High IDV: People want ownership of ideas. Uneasiness when it comes to the collective ownership of results.. Resentment of stragglers or “dead weight”. Solution: Self-selecting teams, take time for teams to settle.
 - High IDV: Management by objectives can make people unwilling to change course. The operationalized targets and the related assessment procedures make it difficult to steer on outcome. Incremental development is frequently experienced as “chaotic”. Solution: Assessment procedures should allow for qualitative elements. They should also should Include training and management of Product Owners and Scrum Masters in incremental approaches.

- Short term thinking: Expectation that progress will be made by breakthroughs which instantly change the game (which undervalues incremental improvement) and diminishes the Deming Cycle. Solution: Special training for Scrum Masters
- High MAS: Low sensitivity for psychological safety in assertive environments Solution: Training and management of Product Owners and Scrum Masters
- Agile Mindset:
 - High IDV: dazzling, self-aggrandizing resumes get to the top of the pile, even when they may not be best for the task. Solution: self-selection by the team
 - High IDV: reward structure becomes problematic in a collective team situation. Does transparency include salaries? Team cohesion efforts and initiatives are needed. Solution: De-link to team financial achievement, but link to company overall profit.
- Agile Imagination

Too much focus on target setting and measuring performance can kill thinking outside the box. Enable group time to review best practices from other MI that are successful (e.g Spotify)

2. An Agile Japan

Again, one of the birthplaces of Agile can pose its own challenges.

Cultural Positives for Agility:

- Agile Values and Practice
 - High MAS: Kaizen
 - High LTO: Perseverance
- Agile Mindset
 - IDV: Good balance of individual responsibility and teamwork
 - IDV: Harmony.
 - IDV: Creating an in-group among small teams accelerates Agile
- Agile Imagination
 - Constant drive to improve and constant testing to avoid failures

Cultural Barriers to Agility:

- Agile Principle and Practice
 - High UAI: Confounds the “Definition of Done”
 - High MAS: Stigma of making a mistake in defining “done”.
- Mindset:
 - Fear of failure can be a barrier. *Ho Ren So* makes quick progress difficult
- Agile Imagination
 - Disruptive ideas are problematic in a collectivist environment emphasizing harmony and equilibrium

Solutions: Managing uncertainties

- Clear and inspirational goals
- Double loop learning: The modification of goals or decision-making rules in the light of experience.
- Strong emphasis on creating psychological safety and security

3. An Agile Machine

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓
JAPAN	↔	↔	↑	↑

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓

Cultural positives for Agility

MACHINE	↓	↑	↑	↑
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- *Structural, systematic thinking*
High IDV + high UAI The focus on systematic structural thinking and emphasis on avoiding failure forms the foundation of Machine culture Agility. If you pose a problem, a Machine culture responds with a forward-looking plan, not an *ad hoc* response. The shared belief in future-focused planning boosts the ability of an Agile innovation team to self-manage, and move forward. Progress is a mantra.
- *Egalitarianism*
Low PDI has created a culture of *Mitbestimmung*, where worker participation in management is the norm.
- *Education for Everyone*
High UAI focuses on acquired knowledge, and puts a great deal of emphasis on education, especially in the sciences and trades.
- Low PDI distributes the benefits of such education broadly. This leads to a respect for *Tiefe des Fachwissens*, a richness of subject knowledge and expertise which enables every team member to spot opportunities for improvement quickly—especially the repeated, minute, detailed technical improvements.

Cultural Barriers to Agility.

- High UAI: An emphasis on expert knowledge can lead to unshakable silos. Machine culture undervalues generalists
- With high IDV and high UAI, Machine cultures feel ill at ease with the non-linear time management which Agile requires
- *Deductive reasoning*. Part of what makes Agility work is that the team learns by doing, as much as by thinking. This is a challenge for high IDV cultures

Solutions:

- Remove matrix management to allow for self-organizing teams
- Rewire the company to give functional experts more power than operational teams.
- Make the role of the servant-leader crucial in Agile innovation. A scrum master, for example, must be alert to assertive behavior (high MAS) in the team—for example, an individual declaring a decision unilaterally based on expertise, rather than sharing his expertise to obtain group buy-in.
Put personal qualities before qualifications. Recruiting must balance the soft and hard skills of a candidate. Personal qualities of openness, and curiosity become as important or more important than technical skills.
Strict policing of the Definition of Done. The role of the Scrum Master is crucial here; she must keep the bar of “done” deliberately low
- New legal and commercial frameworks for client engagement. To transform a client into a collaborator, the Product Owner plays an indispensable role. They need to manage expectations of the end-purchaser while clients need to be aware of their role in the Agile process, and be held accountable for collaboration.
- Involve non-experts in specialist tasks
- Create time and resources to experiment. Transform the organization into a learning culture allowing for freedom to fail.

4. An Agile Network

Cultural positives for Agility

- Higher IDV: The system is driven by the need for people to be recognized as an autonomous stakeholder being responsible to make one’s own “shop” successful.

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓
NETWORK	↓	↑	↓	↔

- Lower UAI: The conviction is that “truth lies in the middle” and nobody “owns the truth” As a result people are willing to listen to and deal with the opinions and interests of other independent stakeholders and try to operate based on shared interest
- Lower UAI: openness for “*emerging insight*”
- Low PDI: Autonomous actors have a constant reality check in Network cultures. If they discover that the approach is not successful than it is seen as completely acceptable that they approach the others in the corridors and propose to do it in a different way. This leads to a constant adaptation to external challenges.

Possible barriers

- Lower MAS: Sometimes changes can take a long time before consensus is reached among the autonomous stakeholders

Solutions:

- Lower MAS Network cultures sometimes need a “burning platform” to rovoke action, a sense of urgency to act now. Promise the possibility to fully discuss and review actions at a later moment, and keep that promise. It will

5. An Agile Solar System

Positive attributes for agility:

- Enlist high PDI. Many cite that the greatest impediment to Agile processes is insufficient buy-in from all levels of the chain of command. Solar System cultures work top-down. The moment the top has committed, then Agile can be implemented quickly by providing new mandates downward.
- The paradox of High PDI & High IDV. Individuals respect hierarchy but also wish to distinguish and promote themselves. When a large enough mandate is given from above, great creativity is unleashed when the one is promoted and placed in a trusted environment.

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓
SOLAR SYSTEM	↑	↑	↔	↑

Possible barriers

- High UAI creates deductive rather than inductive thinking. “Just do it” is not acceptable; the first step is the understanding of the “philosophy” behind a proposal. This requires time because of the [intellectual] debate about the merits that is required. “Truth emerges from the clash of opinions.”
- High PDI creates hierarchies with a high sense of responsibility traced back to title. This may block or slow down momentum by too much control, making it difficult to empower and evoke trust.
- High PDI often requires too much reporting to management.

Solution:

- Highly qualified project team reporting directly to the upper management, with instructions to develop scenarios for adapting to a changing environment. In short, consider making the product owner a direct report to the top manager or even the top managers themselves.
- “Just do it” can be become acceptable if strong vision for the project is repeated often and supported by management.

Encouraging creativity within a mandate (no danger) and reassessing the mandate on a regular basis.

6. An Agile Pyramid

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓

Positive attributes for agility:

PYRAMID	↑	↓	↔	↑
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- High PDI: The system works top down. The moment the top is committed, things can be implemented quickly by providing new mandates downward.
- Low IDV: The top is mostly highly connected with decision makers from other companies and policy makers. This means clients can be managed more intensively, and encouraged to embrace new Agile methods more wholeheartedly.

Possible barriers

- High PDI. Difficult issues on the practical level are not reported upwards because of the fear of losing face or other negative consequences. These are built-in incentives for inaction.

Solutions:

- Enlist high PDI. A small team of trusted people with direct access to the top manager performs management and inspection.
- Encouraging creativity within a mandate (no danger) and reassessing the mandate on a regular basis
- Create an atmosphere of trust in PDI-sensitive ways

7. An Agile Family

Positive attributes for agility:

CULTURE	DIMENSIONS			
	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
AGILE	↓	↑	↔	↓
FAMILY	↑	↓	↔	↓

- High PDI: The system works top down. The moment the top is committed things can be implemented quickly by providing new mandates downward.
- High PDI: The top is mostly highly connected with decision makers from other companies and policy makers
- Low UAI: No emotional need for structure and procedures. Change is acceptable.
- Low IDV: Circular versus Linear time: “Time in a collectivist culture like China is seen as nonlinear, which considers multitasking, disruptions, and frequent change of plans normal. This also means that responding to change, Agile Value IV i.e. Fast Decisions, is engraved in Chinese culture.”

Possible barriers

- High PDI: Difficult issues on the practical level are not reported upwards because of the fear of losing face.
- Low IDV: Loyalty to in-group members can lead to hesitation for “creative destruction” Measurements that might hurt the interests of the “clan members”

Solutions:

- Enlist high PDI. A small team of trusted people with direct access to the top manager performs management and inspection.
- High PDI: The top manager must visibly show supportive to the Agile team at all times
- Create an atmosphere of trust in PDI-sensitive ways

Conclusion

With respect to international cooperation and collaboration, it is useful to go beyond talking about culture simply as a barrier. Particularly for Agile innovation.

It is our conviction that in all circumstances it is possible to build “bridges” that help people, through using the value-driven rules of the game. Barriers can be overcome, and can unleash success. This paper proposes solutions for overcoming barriers in implementing agility.

We believe that it is possible to reap the promise of agility without forcing cultures into a straightjacket and asking them to approach new management ideas by dropping the deeply-ingrained rules of interaction that are preprogrammed by the culture they from which team members come.

The prosperity of every culture depends on it.

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