

FACE CULTURE OR FACE FAILURE

Why using agile approaches demands culture change

Mike Russell

Are you thinking about trying agile approaches? Do you have an agile transition underway? Is your team or organization trying to become agile, but achieving less than anticipated results? If so, you must go beyond technical aspects and understand how *culture*¹ – the behaviors and beliefs of your particular organization – affects your success or failure.

Culture – What’s the Point?

Here's a quick exercise²: Jot down the first three things that come to mind when you think of Google’s™ culture. Now do the same thing with the U.S.’s Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Ready? Should Google and the IRS have the same culture? Could Google be as effective in its mission if it had the culture of the IRS? Could the IRS achieve its goals as effectively with Google’s culture? You probably came to a “no” conclusion. “Culture” is as much a part of organizational success as mission and strategy and is complementary to them. Just as there is no “one size fits all” strategy, there is no “one size fits all” culture. The worth of culture is not culture itself, but the way culture affects how the organization produces value for all stakeholders.

Why the Agile and Culture Connection?

Culture and agile development approaches are intertwined but not always seen that way. Culture is typically thought of as an accessory, a “nice to consider” aspect, if thought of at all. However, at agile-related conferences and in discussions everywhere about “agile,” a frequent element is culture, even if not stated explicitly or intentionally.

Furthermore, a foundational implication – and the biggest potential roadblock – of the agile manifesto is culture change. Therefore, if your organization is to be successful with agile approaches, it must simultaneously tackle related culture changes.

The Agile Manifesto – Basic Culture Analysis

Here is the agile manifesto³:

Manifesto for Agile Software Development

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.
Through this work we have come to value:

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
Working software over comprehensive documentation
Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
Responding to change over following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

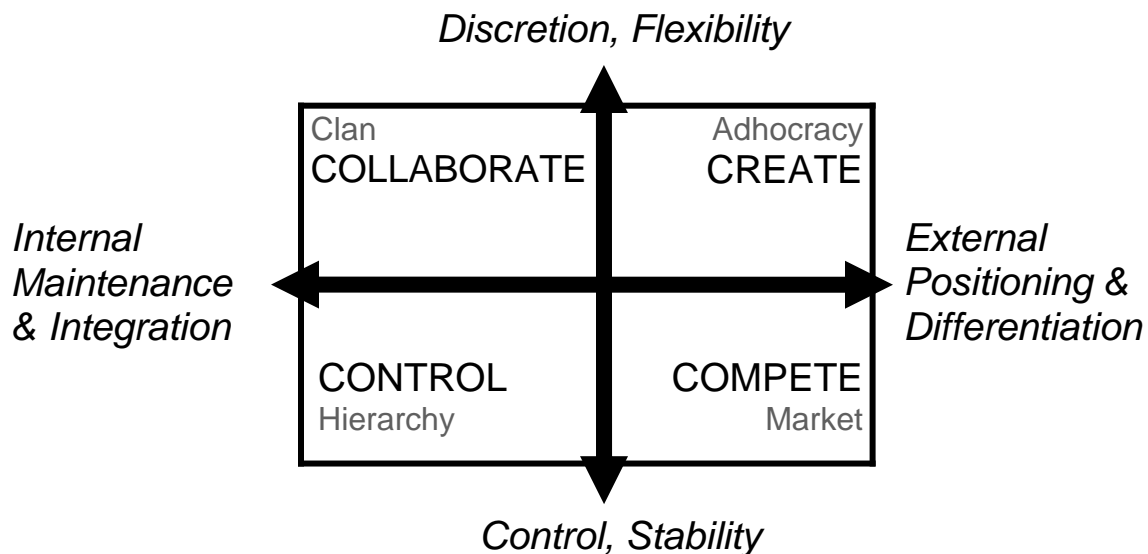
You can look at the manifesto and see how it implies culture change even if you do not have much experience with any formal culture or change models. Here are some examples:

- Referring back to the Google versus IRS example, Google culture is more “left” in manifesto terms, IRS is more “right.” What would happen if you dropped a 20-year IRS manager into Google? Would it be an easy or difficult transition? Why? What about the reverse situation?
- Someone who is highly process and/or detail-oriented will not like the idea of moving toward the left and away from comfort zones on the right.
- If focus has been on the right side, past success was built on doing things the “right side way.” Hiring, indoctrination, training, and performance evaluation all center on doing “right side” things well. If you ask team members to emphasize left side, you are asking them to abandon the very practices that have made them “successful.” Furthermore, without changes to the “system,” including performance evaluation criteria, team members will be probably classified as unsuccessful even if they are successful in transitioning to agile.
- Most executives, if they have familiarity with software project management at all, will probably be acquainted only with general industry “best practices”⁴ promulgated over the past 30 or so years. These “best practices” are mostly right side in prescription. This makes changing to agile approaches harder, since you will have to argue why you will not be using “best” practices.

The Competing Values Framework

A quick overview of the Competing Values Framework⁵ (CVF) will help analyze the agile manifesto further and help you understand more clearly why the manifesto demands culture change. The CVF is based on studies of over 1,000 organizations and can be used to analyze and prescribe culture for any situation.

The “competing” part of the CVF name comes from the core dimensions of the model that are “competing” or opposite in nature, shown by the arrows in the following diagram. The dimensions create four quadrants, also “competing” diagonally. The quadrant names (nouns) and predominant activities (verbs in all capitals) in each quadrant further show the competing nature.



Here are some brief descriptions of what the quadrants “look like”:

<p style="text-align: center;">CLAN – COLLABORATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime value: Obey the Norms • Emphasis for long term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Taking good care of people – Professional development – Cohesion and high morale • Held together by loyalty & tradition • Leaders, or head of the organization, considered to be mentors and, possibly, parent figures • Success = sensitivity to customers, concern for people, teamwork, participation • Friendly place to work; like family 	<p style="text-align: center;">ADHOCRACY – CREATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime value: Do What It Takes • Emphasis for long term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Organization’s growth – Acquiring new resources • Held together by commitment to initiative, freedom, experimentation, & innovation • Leaders considered to be innovators and risk takers • Success = new, unique products/services; being on the leading edge • Dynamic, entrepreneurial, creative work place
<p style="text-align: center;">HIERARCHY – CONTROL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime value: Follow the Rules • Emphasis for long term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stability & performance, including secure employment – Predictability and efficiency • Held together by formal rules & policies • Leaders are efficiency-minded and good coordinators/organizers • Success = smooth scheduling, dependability, low cost • Formalized & structured workplace 	<p style="text-align: center;">MARKET – COMPETE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime value: Fulfill Commitments • Emphasis for long term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Competitive actions – Achieving measurable goals, hitting “targets” • Held together by emphasis on winning • Leaders are hard drivers, producers, competitors, tough, and demanding • Success = market share and leadership, new markets • Results oriented, “get the job done” workplace

The paradox of the competing components is that while diagonal quadrants are contradictory, no quadrant is ever “zero” or missing totally. Any organization will have some weighting or emphasis in each of the four quadrants. The cultural difference between organizations, and even of the same organization at different points in time, is in the relative weighting of the quadrants⁶.

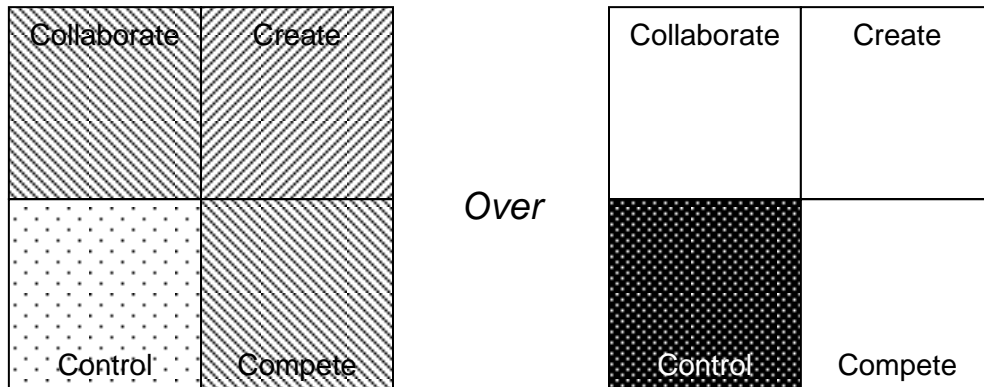
The Agile Manifesto – CVF Culture Analysis

Now we will analyze the agile manifesto using the CVF. The manifesto’s more highly valued (left side) aspects generally correspond to these CVF quadrants:

- Collaborate (“individuals and interactions” and “customer collaboration”)
- Create (“working software” and “customer collaboration”)
- Compete (“working software” and “responding to change”)

The right side is primarily about control, since “control” in CVF terms is more about someone else or something (e.g., process) doing the “controlling” (recall that the name for the control activity quadrant is “hierarchy”) and not about self-control or discipline. Therefore, the right side – as stated – concentrates on the “control” quadrant.

Here is a pictorial view of the manifesto in terms of the CVF, using weighting indicated by quadrant shading:



Based on this analysis, the agile manifesto clearly mandates tremendous, almost stunning, cultural change if your organization is more toward the “right side.” Without attention to this change, chances of agile success will be low and failure high. Compounding the problem is that organizations, left alone, will gravitate toward “control” as they grow, add more and more “controls,” and tend to become more inwardly focused in the process. Fighting gravity is tough, but possible; however, it takes energy and focus to do so.

Now what?

Any good change methodology will help you with action steps. The best way to approach this is in an agile fashion: do “just enough” to get a first answer/information and move on, moving through the questions iteratively. Here is a general change checklist adapted for cultural change and some sample questions to get you started:

- Why? Analyze your situation. Are you in an agile transition? Do you want to try agile approaches? What is your motivation? Your preliminary objectives?
- Where (scope of the change)? Where in the organization will the changes occur? In a team? The entire company? Somewhere in between? This is a critical issue from a culture perspective; see the discussion below this list.
- Who? Who is included in the change scope? Will they be willing, interested, unwilling? Who might be advocates or blockers? Will you be guiding this alone or with others?
- When? What is the urgency? Can the value of change timing be quantified?
- What? What is the change and how will you communicate it?
 - Decide what framework to use. Does your organization already have an effective culture change framework? If so, try it first. If not, try the CVF. Learn it just enough to get started, ask for help as needed, and make any adaptations for your situation.⁷
 - Determine both current and preferred/target cultures for your organization. How big is the gap between your current culture and that dictated by agile approaches? Most change agents have no way to formally analyze or show the extent of cultural change associated with the manifesto. The CVF and other frameworks provide both assessment tools and a means of determining gap size between current and target cultures.
 - Describe what the future – preferred/target culture – “looks like” in more detail and what changes will/will not mean in practical terms.
 - At a minimum, all leaders of the organization to be changed must be in general agreement about the changes to be made and absolutely committed to proactive support. Include them in the current/preferred discussions to get both their perspectives and buy-in “real time.”
 - Use assessments for individuals, especially leaders or change agents, since individual change is necessary as part of any overall change.
- How? Plan (just enough!) so you will be consciously addressing, designing, and acting on the tangible aspects of needed culture changes. Assess value against investment and generally pick the “low hanging fruit” of higher value/investment ratio first for short-term “wins” and success stories to build momentum. Example plan elements are communication, training, tools, alignment of performance evaluation and rewards/recognition with changes, leaders as examples, etc.
- Begin implementing the plan, communicating constantly and making sure change agents are recognized and rewarded.

- Review/refine the plan, incorporating any lessons learned, and keep going!

The critical issue of “the rest of the organization”

Organizationally, you can begin and end your analysis at the team/small group level. However, to be most successful, you should also analyze the culture of the surrounding organization and of your organization’s external environment. This will help you determine if external factors point to a certain culture pattern.

Rethink your plans if either:

- The internal organization surrounding the agile group-to-be appears significantly different from one supportive of agile practices and highly resistant – or even hostile – to change, and/or
- External factors, including customers, indicate a culture weighting opposite or not supportive of what agile emphasizes.

In the first case, you must determine if you can sufficiently insulate the agile culture from the broader organization’s culture. If not, you must determine if you can change the broader organization’s culture to be close enough for success. In the second case, it is possible to maintain a duality of cultures – one external-facing and one internal – but it takes more time and effort. You should really understand what your customers truly value – stated or not – and deliver accordingly. Fortunately, once agile results are seen externally, the difference becomes less of an issue as customer or others’ fears are addressed.

If you do not consider your environment, you might find you do all the right things for a successful agile transition within your team and still not succeed. Because any group must exist in larger contexts, those contexts can provide too much resistance for a single team to overcome, or to overcome soon enough, for a lasting transition. It is possible to change things from the inside out, but you must “consider the costs” of time and effort.

Ready, Set, Go!

You are now aware that the agile manifesto dictates change and indicates cultural emphases needed for agile practices to succeed. Use this knowledge to help you face culture changes and avoid failure. No “one size fits all” culture exists, so be ready to do some thinking and work to adapt frameworks and others’ experiences to your situation.

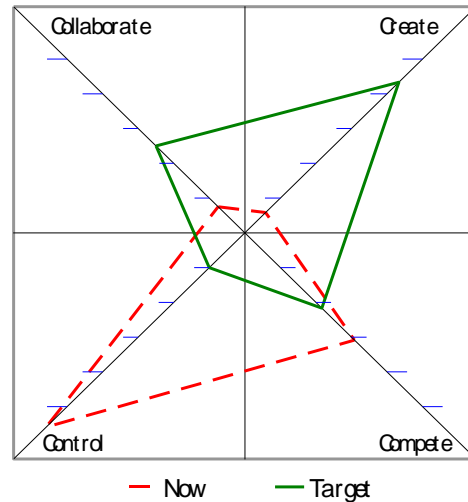
Go forth and change your world!

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NOTES

1. Beyond dictionary definitions, we can simply say that culture involves things like:
 - a. Written AND Unwritten/Unspoken Guidelines
 - b. Underlying Assumptions
 - c. Expectations
 - d. Memories
 - e. Ways of working
 - f. “How Things Are Around Here”
2. This example is from colleague Brian Emerson (Riverstone Endeavors LLC, brian@riverstoneendeavors.com).
3. www.agilemanifesto.org.
4. Project management is fundamentally about reducing risk below what it would be otherwise, and project leaders should assess the risks of a particular situation and adapt accordingly. My statements about best practices are neither an indictment of project management nor of past excellent work in identifying and codifying key risk reduction principles. Rather, the issue is unthinking adoption of best practices for all situations. The agile manifesto is both one reaction to this mentality and recognition that overly deterministic project approaches (project management taken to a control-oriented extreme) do not match the more empirical nature of most software work. A full discussion of this topic is outside the scope of this article; contact me if you wish to discuss further.
5. K. S. Cameron, R. E. Quinn, J. DeGraff, and A. V. Thakor, *Competing Values Leadership*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2006. Another source of information is the revised edition of K. S. Cameron and R. E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006; originally published under the same title by Addison-Wesley in 1999.

6. CVF quadrant weighting can provide a picture, in the form of a quadrilateral shape, of what a particular culture “looks like” at a given point in time. The example below uses diagonals for weighting measures, with the center being zero and the corners representing 100% for each quadrant, with the solid green line showing the culture target and the dashed red line the current culture snapshot:



This visual approach provides an easy and powerful way to describe past or future changes in summary form. Through multiple “snapshots” of culture over time in a single picture, we can show pictorially how culture changes.

7. Take heart! If you are not a “culture” expert, you do not have to hope for a miracle or abdicate to the HR or OD folks. You can lead or assist culture change, but you need a culture framework that reflects agility:
- Accessible – can be used by most everyone without in-depth training,
 - Adaptable – can fit your particular situation,
 - Applicable – provides tangible results without months of fuzzy "prep" work.

I believe the Competing Values Framework is an answer to that need. It is not the only framework available, and I cannot say with certainty that it is the “best” available. However, I can say it works well, especially for people who have little background in culture or organizational development. The CVF provides practical ways of discussing culture that people can grasp quickly and easily, avoiding the usual vague culture discussions that yield few results beyond frustration for all involved.

Do not take my comment about abdicating the wrong way. You should take advantage of the expertise and experience of HR and organizational development experts as much as you can. However, as a leader or team member, you have the primary ability and responsibility for leading change.