

Team & Leadership

I met a SVP of a company at a conference last week, and we happened to strike a conversation on Agile. Upon learning that I am an active Agilist and have helped transform many organizations, he said, "I am hearing about it quite often. I hear it improves productivity. I will get you in touch with one of my managers. You can work with her to implement it in her team." "Sure," I responded followed by a long uneasy silence. The silence was uneasy for the SVP since he was probably thinking I will thank him for the opportunity (which I eventually did), and I was thinking about how long will it take before senior leadership in the organization realizes that Agile principles are not something that you implement only in the teams and expect them to deliver the results.

Not sure how to approach it, I broke the silence by thanking him and said, "Agile is a mind-set shift and a cultural change than a bag of tools to improve productivity." "Yes, I know," he responded with discouraging casualness, "You will help me reduce cost by delivering product faster and by shrinking my management layer." After much thought and a lurking risk of losing the project, I said, "Sir, if I may get 2-3 more minutes of your time, I would like to share a perspective with you." This unexpected request peeked his interest, he turned back as he was turning away, and said, "Sure, I am listening."

I explained to him, "Think of your team as a tree. Agile is a way the tree makes its own food to survive. The leaves are responsible for the process of photosynthesis, but at the same time, the roots are responsible to pull in the right minerals and water from the soil, and the trunk and the branches are responsible for transferring those to the leaves at the right time to aid the photosynthesis. The leaves are your team members, the branches are how teams work together, may be your management layer(s), the trunk is the senior management and leadership, and roots are the values and culture. Unless the senior leadership in the organization is not equally engaged in becoming Agile, and does not have the value system to sustain Agile practices, the teams by themselves would not yield all the benefits of Agile practice."

The smart person that he was, he immediately offered to meet again the following week and discuss this further. It was risk that I took, and it paid off. If I were to get this project, I now know that the transformation will be more wide-spread and smoother.

This however is true of many leaders in the industry today who believe that Agile is something that the teams do, and they do not need to do anything. The truth is that Agile is a cultural shift that needs to be supported and evangelized by senior management. Senior Management also needs to change from command and control to becoming torch-bearers of organizations values and becoming opportunity creators and impediment removers for the team.

