Surviving Successful Projects

Position Paper "Human Issues of Agile Processes"

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"Today's problems come from yesterday's 'solutions'" writes Peter Senge in his "Fifth Discipline" [Sen90]. The problems agile development addresses are based on the solutions proposed in twenty years of traditional software engineering and it solves several of them, as I believe, successfully. Still we have to face the question, what new problems agile development gives rise to. There has been much debate on the pros and cons of single practices and those who apply agile development responsibly are well aware of the pitfalls they have to avoid using the techniques. However, there are other pitfall lurking, just as you think you've made it: the pitfalls of success.

An agile project shows many attributes our industry culture connects with success: Frequent delivery of working code, strong focus on customer requirements, and fast reaction to changing business needs, just to name a few. Therefore, most managers experience agile projects as successful projects.

Unfortunately, success is a goal and not a state of Elysium. But what happens, when that goal is reached, before the project has ended? What happens to a team that is considered successful for many increments and several years? I have seen some reactions in traditional organizations that lead me to the (quite provocative) statement, that many organizations today are so much used to managing crisis that they are just unable to deal with success.

I have seen several pitfalls a successful project can fall in, pitfalls that erode the feeling of success and may eventually blow up a successful team with the feeling they have failed. Among them are the "Greed Trap", the "Jealousy Trap", and the "Meets Expectations Trap".

Greed Trap

How to prepare the trap

The basic ingredient you need for this trap is an (unconscious) attitude in the organization that IT projects miss their deadlines anyhow. This attitude usually has developed over a long trail of projects that have missed their deadlines and disappointed their users. So managers tend to expect IT projects to be late and by far out of budget. Often enough they even shorten official budget and time by half to ensure that the project is at least done within the unofficial frame, and even this strategy fails.

How the trap works

In this mind frame there is a simple reason for an IT project that delivers in time: The project was too easy a task to do! The conscious rationale of the manager might go like this: "Finally I have a team that really knows how to build software on time. After they do so well during that running project, I can give them this very important task, too." The team may feel honoured or

the additional request may address their ambition and they accept the additional work. However, the workload now becomes the "reference" and a few weeks or months later the manager may remember this great team again, when the next workload comes up. Inch by inch the manager takes the complete ell.

What's it like inside the trap

After the team first welcomes the new challenges, thus delivering their part of the trap, they start to show more and more signs of stress. They will still deliver in time but more and more this will be due to classic "crisis management" such as overtime and sloppy work. After the trap has shut the team has been brought back to their traditional way of working, but now knowing better, the team probably leaves.

Traditional Evidence

There's an old German fairy-tale about a poor fisherman and his wife. One day the fisherman catches a talking butt. The butt promises to fulfill all his wishes if the fisherman lets him go. The fisherman wishes some more success in fishing and the butt grants it. When the fisherman returns home and tells his wife she shouts at him for not having wished more. So the fisherman goes back to the beach, calls the butt and asks him for more wealth, which the butt grants too. But the wife is not happy again, and after calling the butt several times, they are rich kings in a castle. But the wife still isn't satisfied, she wants to become God herself. So she sends the poor fisherman back to the beach but instead of granting that wish too, the butt sends both back into the poverty they lived in before.

Jealousy Trap

How to prepare the trap

You typically need a larger organization for this trap, that has a strong focus on their salary structure. A strong union influence may help to build this trap but is neither necessary nor sufficient. All forms of salary and rewards may have to pass some committee which takes care that no one overreaches somebody else. Or the management is quite focussed on keep piece inside their organisation. In any case, to avoid political struggles the project management may have used a duck and hide strategy lest no other team becomes jealous at the success and starts to through political bombs.

How the trap works

If an agile project is successful, the company will eventually start to earn money with the software. If it gains an competitive advantage or is able to market the software successfully, the company may earn serious amounts of money from the work of only a very small team. It usually takes some time to turn project success into financial success, so the manager may have already rewarded the team members to the extent the companies salary structure permits. When financial success comes, every team member can easily figure out, that her or his share of the profit is only a negligible fraction. On the other hand, the manager is not able to increase their share, because he already has exploited all his space before and pays more to his team than to any other developer. Giving more money or other rewards would disturb the carefully established salary balance and so would other forms of reward, such as stocks.

What's it like inside the trap

Team members in agile projects often have a Black Team attitude. They do deliver successfully on time and they earn a decent salary as reward, both enforcing their self esteem. However, when the financial success starts, they see the true value of their work — and they don't care about the overall structure of the organization. The weekly calls of local head-hunters already have planted a seed that now starts to grow. Eventually key members of the team give up to

some offer to double their income and the team falls apart, taking the project with it.

Meets Expectations Trap

How to prepare the trap

Often agile projects are critical to the organization and the team gets staffed accordingly. The team is assembled of some of the best developers the managers can get and they often report directly to the board. Upper management supports them to fight the battles with process police and formalistic QA. In short the management may invest much more in these projects than in their other projects — and they expect their investment to pay back.

How the trap works

After the first few increments the managers are pretty much satisfied. Board members may visit the team and congratulate them on their success. However, after being successful for years, everyone is just expecting the team to deliver on time. High performance becomes the norm, the team members just "meet their expectations". Personal visits are replaced by short emails and eventually seize completely. "These folks do their work anyhow" is what upper management may think.

What's it like inside the trap

The team often is founded with a strong sense of being an elite. At least running the projects reliably successful over a long period of time establishes this self esteem. When managers give them the feeling that this is just, what they expect, they feel disappointed. At least they do extraordinary work, much more that expected from an average developer. Over time this escalates until key members take the opportunity to leave the organization.

Traditional Evidence

A few year's ago, one of Scott Adam's Dilbert cartoons caricatured this trap. It showed one of Alice's performance reviews. The Pointy-Haired Boss tells her, that her performance last year "Met expectations". "What do you mean? Meets expectations?!" she shouts at him. "I have worked 80 hours a week and worked all weekends too!". "Well, I expected that." answers the boss. "I haven't taken a single break and did not take any vacation for five years!" adds Alice quite angry. "Well, I expected that too." answers the boss. "And I have donated bone-marrow to our most important client twice!" shouts Alice, even more incensed. The boss checks his files and finally answers: "Yes, I've noted that under 'Absences'."

Avoiding the pitfalls

All these pitfalls boil down to a quite sobering observation: It is very hard to run agile Development and traditional projects in the same organization with the same value system. Organizational changes are necessary to ensure sustainable success of agile development. These changes may include establishing an own organization to run agile projects or introduce practices of learning organizations. As Peter Senge writes: "Our organizations work the way they work, ultimately, because of how we think and how we interact. Only by changing how we think we can change deeply embedded policies and practices."

References

[Sen90] Peter Senge. "The Fifth Discipline - The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization", Currency Doubleday, New York, 1990; ISBN 0-385-26095-4