Short Communication

Reinventing Communication for an Agile World?

Demarmels S*

Lucerne School of Business, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland

*Corresponding author: Demarmels Sascha, Lucerne School of Business, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland

Abstract

Globalization and digitalization shape the world in new ways. Complexity and faster pace lead organizations to an agile transformation: they become self-organized. This demands a lot more communication of employees. There is no need for new communication means, though: old communication tools can be adapted easily to become agile and to support agile values as courage, focus, commitment, respect, and openness.

Keywords: Business communication; Agile communication; Interaction; Collaboration; Self-organization; Scrum; Agile Manifesto

Introduction

The world is constantly changing and so is business. Things tend to go a lot faster and therefore many organizations have decided to become "agile". They flatten their hierarchies and let teams self-organize in order to become faster and more flexible. What started in IT takes broader waves everyday now. There are some frameworks like Scrum [1] and some reflections on society like Teal [2]. They all aim for smoother working processes where those people decide who are at the core of the questions. Holacracy [3] and Sociocracy 3.0 (online) reshape organizations and how people in a company make decisions. So, is there need for a new communication? – No. There are a lot of suitable communication tools that existed long before the Agile Manifesto (online). Though, agile might shed some new light on them and help bring out the best in our communication.

Agile Communication follows agile values like for example the values of Scrum: We have the courage to speak about problems and negative critique. We focus on what is helpful at that moment. We are committed to the topic at hand and we speak up, whenever our contribution is valuable. We respect others when they speak, in what they say and in how they feel. And we are open to what others say, even if they tell us something negative. Agile communication is appreciative and on eye-level [4].

Why communicate in an agile way?

Self-organizing does not mean "no organization at all", but rather that work is not organized top-down. More than in a hierarchical organized company people in self-organized environments have to communicate on how they will get things done. They have to have a mutual understanding of processes and split of labor. Although there might be roles (e.g. experts for certain topics or agile roles like Product Owners and Agile Coaches) people tend to be on the same level. They have an agile mindset, consisting of things like doing work iteratively, reflecting on outcomes and on processes as well as teamwork, and continuously improving what they are doing. It seems logical that they do not only work agile but also communicate in an agile way.

The Agile Manifesto gives some clues about communication: "Individuals and interactions over processes and tools" as well as "customer collaboration over contract negotiation" signal the importance of communication. And in the twelve principles it says: "The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a [...] team is face-to-face conversation [5]." This can be ascribed to the direct feedback loops in face-to-face: First of all, in direct contact we get immediate feedback on whether someone understands what we are saying and whether they agree approximately with us through facial expression and preverbal signals like modulation. Secondly, if there are misunderstandings there is an easy way to ask further questions.

Furthermore, appreciation is not motivating that much, if it is bound on materiality [6]. Valuing people by being on eye-level and let them have a part in decision-making is much more rewarding regarding intrinsic motivation. Self-organization also needs people to have common goals and know about the bigger sense of their work. Communicating there actually means conversing more than telling [7]. And then there is the aspect of humans beings organized in networks rather than hierarchies, which leads to new paths of communication that affects not only a company's culture but also corporate communication in its very foundation [8].

Where communicate in agile contexts?

Typical agile frameworks have several containers where collaborating teams communicate: planning and prioritizing work, give (a daily) statement about how the work progresses, review products and product increments and reflect on the collaboration of the team. Through communication collaboration improves across time. And this is not limited on teams; it goes beyond departments and even beyond organizations: In Scrum, teams start to collaborate with customers to find the really valuable items for a new product [9]. In planning sessions, hundreds of people come together to plan their collaboration for the next months. In daily stand ups a team reflects briefly about the past 24 hours and the work they have done since the last daily meeting. Really hard are the containers for feedback: Humans seem to be rather lousy at giving valuable feedback. Some people just say anything is good. Others are too harsh with their critique. And some people take negative critique very badly, especially from subordinates. Instead of making the best out of it – instead of continuous improvement –, they put their head in the sand and play ostrich. Organizational culture must not only tolerate mistakes but enforce experiments: Through failure they can learn (e.g. [10]). Fail fast and learn, instead of letting things glide. This means that we have to be open to feedback on the one hand and we have to have the courage to bluntly tell others if we detect problems.

How communicate in an agile way?

Despite of digitalization people working in agile contexts often use very analog means of communication. They stand together in front of boards, writing and sketching and using sticky notes to collect ideas. They understand the power of face-to-face communication and of direct interaction. And often, their communication in reviews or retrospectives even seems playful and fun. It is not, that they do not take it seriously, playing poker or drawing or even going outside to have a group discussion. They go new ways to be more efficient and more effective in their communicative interactions.

There are a lot of old communication tools that can be used for agile communication. Some might be transferred to be used on boards or sticky notes. Others work the same as they always have. There seems to be a huge revival of nonviolent communication [11]: A way of communicating with others while distinguishing what facts and what feelings are, as well as what we actually want. There is the evergreen of powerful questions (open questions that have no predefined answers like "Why?"). There are conversations techniques to help overcome group dynamics in a discussion in order to make room for everybody to speak. And there are many more.

Conclusion

So, we do not have to reinvent communication for the age of agile. We simply have to remember some of the old techniques and methods and be aware of the values we prioritize in agile. As easy as that we can bring agility into communication and collaboration. As for current research questions we should focus on how to encourage people – through communication. How to value company culture – through communication. And how to ensure people to embrace failures as chances to evaluate learning – through communication. It is not about reinvention but rather about selection and prioritization, on fitting old tools into a new world of complexity and high pace. A world where everything comes down to interaction of human beings. Communication becomes literally an item of the value stream. How can applied research measure it, improve it, and teach it to leaders and teams in order to make future workplaces better?

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