



"The Facilitative Mind of Agile"

By

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September 18, 2007

The intent of this article is to compare the behavioral expectations of an Agile Leader/Manager with those of a Professional Facilitator and use that comparison to better define leadership in an Agile environment. The first step is to offer a new metaphor for the Agile experience, which highlights the need for good communications between team members. Since this type of highly interactive conversation benefits from having a facilitator, the second step is to compare research on the behaviors and role expectations of Agile Leaders/Managers and those of Certified Professional Facilitators. And finally, using the metaphor and comparative research findings, this article concludes with a definition of leadership that focuses on developing and maintaining an appropriate collaborative environment.



David Spann, President, Executive Coach, consultant and trainer: focuses on developing the organizational capacity and management skills required by Agile and Adaptive Management processes. David was first introduced to Agile-like techniques fighting wildfires (e.g., daily debriefs, flexible planning, highly skilled people working together) and since then has been the MBA Director at Westminster College in Salt Lake, strategic consultant for several Technology Associations, and the co-host for each of the first four Agile Executive Summits held within the Agile Software Conferences.

Additional articles written by David Spann:

Agile Management Behaviors: what to look for and develop

Agile Adaptive Management Model: Building the Bridge from Innovation to Business Value

Coping with the Unexpected: Integrating Agile and HRO

Agile: Changing the Organization

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New Metaphor: The game of Software “Gossip”

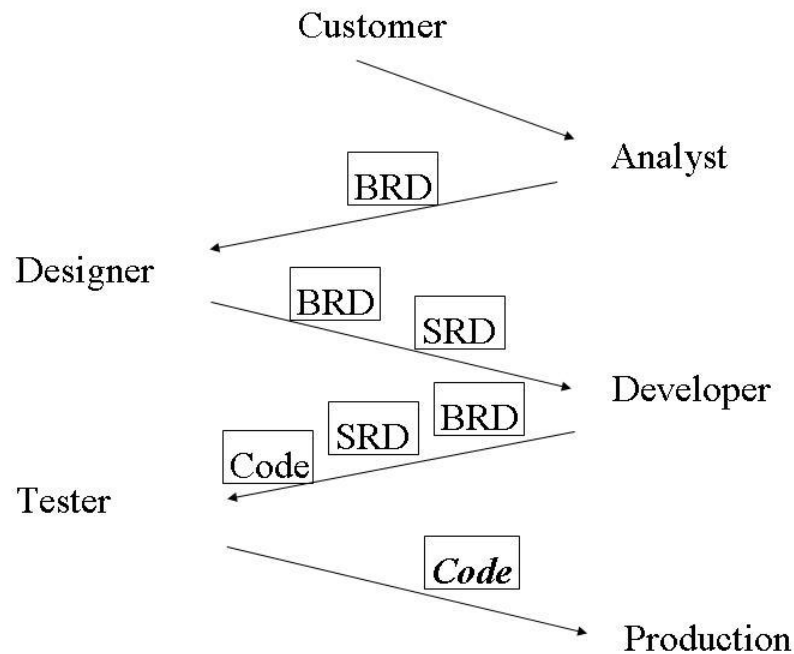
A psychologist friend of mine recently said he understood the Agile principles logically, but still couldn't explain it to others. So, he asked me to come up with a non-technical/business metaphor to help him better understand what Agile really means.

After some thinking I asked if he remembered playing the game of Gossip as a kid. The rules are simple: the first person whispers something in the ear of the next, that person turns to their neighbor and whispers something, the next person does the same, until the message gets to the last person. Most of the time, the message provided by the first person is nothing like what the last person heard. The intent is to show kids just how damaging gossip can be because it almost always changes the intent and the actual words used from one person to another.

The similarity between this kid's game and the more traditional/waterfall software development approach (and I'll argue business in general) comes from the fact that the players between and even within each role are isolated from each other and that they depend on documentation and tracking systems to protect everyone's interest and assure accountability. In general, the rules of the waterfall “game” include:

- 1) the Customer defines what they want;
- 2) the Business Analyst records the customer's specifications in a Business Requirements Document;
- 3) the Database Analyst or some other “Designer” creates a Systems (or Technical) Requirements Document;
- 4) the Developers use both a Business Requirement Document (BRD) and a Systems or Technical Requirements Document (SRD) to create the appropriate code;
- 5) the Testers use the BRD to test whether the code actually meets the needs of the Customer; and SRD to test the technical quality.
- 6) the final code is sent to others like the technical writers, marketers, production people to “ship”.

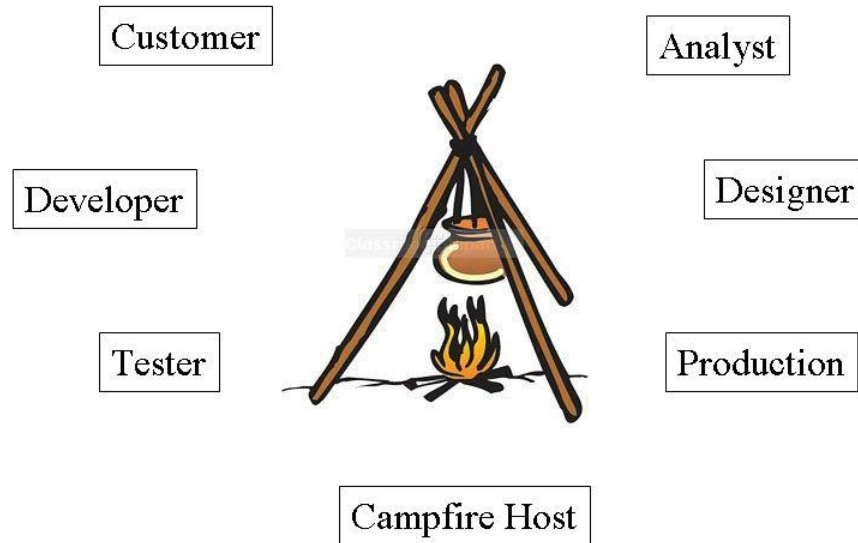
The Game of Software “Gossip”



Unfortunately, the results of this game (as defined by the number of times customers actually receive what they need or want) are not much different from those experienced when players whisper around the campfire; except that in the world of business the stakes are higher and no one laughs when the product doesn't actually meet the customer's needs.

With one simple rule change, the outcome of this “game” becomes more productive and thereby more effective. Like changing the rule in the Gossip game from whispering to speaking out loud, the Agile expectation for customer collaboration and team co-location helps assure everyone hears the same thing and focuses on delivering customer satisfaction. This change also helps team members discuss what can be improved without feeling like it is a personal assault. And like the kids roasting marshmallows, eating hotdogs and telling stories around the campfire, the Agile team shares a joint experience of innovation and creativity. It's as if the team (from customer to production) sits around the same metaphorical campfire hearing the same thing and sharing a common understanding of what's expected and how they are doing in meeting those expectations.

A Collaborative Game of Innovation & Creativity



Extending this metaphor one step further, the experience is further enhanced if someone's role is focused on making sure the right people are involved, everyone interacts well, and that the outcome meets customer and business expectations. Like a campfire host, the agile leader's role is mostly facilitative, helping the participant's feel safe enough to resolve major issues and iteratively tell new stories about what they've learned and experienced. Instead of telling people what to do, they help create the environment in which team members succeed and enjoys the experience.

Agile Management Behaviors

Sometime in 2004, Jim Highsmith (Cutter's VP of Agile Project Management) invited me to work with an Agile team that wanted additional Agile training. When we sat down to determine what they really needed, one of the lead managers said "we want to be more like Jim – we want you to teach us to be him". While Jim suggested they might rethink that request, these managers restated their need in terms of wanting to better facilitate release planning, iteration planning and other work meetings. Basically, they wanted their meetings to be more focused, productive and collaborative, and they wanted to be more facilitative in their leadership behavior.

Since that time, I have designed a course on Adaptive Facilitation, offered a 360 degree leadership development process and established a series of research initiatives on Agile Leader/Manager Behaviors and the role of Competencies and Certification in the Agile movement. During this research I asked 13 top Agile thought-leaders to complete a well-defined Roles Expectations Survey. Each of the participants was asked to identify the best Agile Leader/Manager they knew and use that "persona" while answering the survey. The results indicated these Agile Leaders/Managers were expected to behave in the following ways:

Expected Agile Leader/Manager Behaviors	
<p>INNOVATIVE Feeling comfortable in fast-changing environments; being willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - takes an experimental attitude - willing to take risks - provides a creative environment - keeps current on new trends - improves the organization's competitive position - develops the unit's pride in being first 	<p>DELEGATION Enlisting the talents of others to help meet objectives by giving them important activities and sufficient autonomy to exercise their own judgment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develops people - uses people's talents well - gets more done – May contribute more to the organization - builds helpful relationships
<p>STRATEGIC Taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead and planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Takes a longer, broader perspective - Creates greater organizational focus - Anticipates challenges, risks, opportunities - Develops a future orientation in workforce 	<p>COMMUNICATION Stating clearly what you want and expect from others; clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas; maintaining a precise and constant flow of information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - experiences fewer mistakes - ensures expectations are clearly understood - keeps others well informed - develops highly trained, competent people - reduces bad judgment, poor decisions
<p>EXCITEMENT Operating with a good deal of energy, intensity and emotional expression; having a capacity for keeping others enthusiastic and involved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - seen as involved, alive and dynamic - develops hard-charging enthusiasm - sets dramatic, inspiring goals - creates and reaches very high expectations - able to renew flagging spirits in a group 	<p>CONSENSUAL Valuing the ideas and opinions of others and collecting their input as part of your decision-making process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - encourage involving others - open to others' ideas and builds consensus - accepts the group's decisions - uses a participative approach to develop a more satisfied work group
<p>TACTICAL Emphasizing the production of immediate results by focusing on short-range, hands-on, practical strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - closely involved in day-to-day activities - uses a common sense approach - focuses a group on immediate issues - highly opportunistic and moves quickly - able to achieve very specific results 	<p>EMPATHY Demonstrating an active concern for people and their needs by forming close and supportive relationships with others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develops loyal friends - understands people's feelings - seen as caring and concerned - able to build strength through support - develops very positive morale

Likewise, but conversely, this same survey indicated there was agreement between these thought leaders that the following behaviors would not be expected in an Agile Leader/Manager:

Behaviors Not Expected from an Agile Leader/Manager	
<p>AUTHORITY Showing loyalty to the organization; respecting the ideas and opinions of people in authority and using them as resources for information, direction and decisions.</p>	<p>CONSERVATIVE Studying problems in light of past practices to ensure predictability, reinforce the status quo and minimize risk.</p>
<p>STRUCTURING Adopting a systematic and organized approach; preferring to work in a precise, methodical manner; developing and utilizing guidelines and procedures.</p>	<p>TECHNICAL Acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues in depth and draw conclusions</p>

(Note: the survey process and the full results are found in a previous Cutter Executive Report: *Agile Management Behaviors: what to look for and develop*; vol. 7 No. 9.)

I was impressed, but not exactly surprised by these expectations because most of the thought leaders who were involved in this survey had already written about Agile's dependency on less directive and more facilitative leadership/management behaviors. Basically, these results prove out the expectations derived in the original Agile Manifesto:

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

What Role does Facilitation play in Agile?

Most of the Agile methodologies, like Extreme Programming, Test Driven Design, Crystal, Scrum, Adaptive Software Development, Dynamic Systems Development Method (DSDM), etc. implicitly and in some cases explicitly define the same types of inclusive-like management behaviors expected in the Agile Manifesto. DSDM, for example, back in the early 1990's, was the first agile methodology to define a need for professional facilitators on Rapid Application Development teams. The intent was to assure workshops/meetings were designed to meet the intended purpose, engage the opinions of everyone and assure collaborative decisions were made effectively and efficiently.

In order to assure this level of service was provided, the DSDM Consortium and its associated Facilitator Accreditation Service developed a Professional Facilitator certification and assessment process. It required a candidate be able to write about their experience, be interviewed by two assessors, and demonstrate their skills in a facilitated event witnessed by four assessors. By 2001, this process was managed by the International Association of Facilitators (I.A.F.), which holds Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) assessment events around the world.

Even though this certification process extends to candidates well beyond the Agile community now, the original intent of assessing both the skill (i.e. be able to write and talk about knowledge) and the behaviors (i.e., be able to demonstrate in practice) stayed in place. This assessment approach thereby tests both the objective and subjective components of the profession and in the end helps the I.A.F. assure the best candidates are certified as Professional Facilitators.

Since I am both an assessor of the CPF and deeply involved in the Agile movement, I thought it might be interesting to compare the behaviors of a Professional Facilitator with those of an Agile Leader/Manager. My hypothesis was the Agile Leader/Manager behaviors defined in my previous research (noted above) should be close to those expected in the CPF assessment as well. So, I asked eighteen CPF's and CPF Assessors to take the same Role Expectations Survey conducted for the Agile Leader/Manager described above but instead of focusing on the Agile Leader Role I asked this group to focus on the Role Expectations of a Professional Facilitator.

In order to better understand the results of both these surveys, the reader should understand there is a database of more than 240,000 previous respondents to which all answers are compared and a normal distribution curve created. So, for example, the Professional Facilitator respondents' group average for the behavior defined as Consensual is 95%, which means the

person filling this role is expected to display Consensual characteristics similar to the top 5% of all the leaders previously surveyed; likewise, Authority was scored at 10%, which means very few leaders in this role would be expected to display the associated characteristics.

Likewise, the reader should understand there is a rater agreement score to better define the average score for each behavior:

- a. If the scores of three-quarters or more of participants fall within a range of 25 percentage points, the Rater Agreement is H or High for that Set.
- b. If the scores of half to three-quarters of participants fall within a range of 25 percentage points, the Rater Agreement is M or Medium for that Set.
- c. If the scores of less than half of the observers fall within a range of 25 percentage points, the Rater Agreement is L or Low for that Set.

Table below provides a breakdown of all the Management Research Group behavior definitions, the % score on a Normal Distribution and the Rater Agreements for both the Agile Leader/Manager Role Expectations Survey and for the Professional Facilitator survey.

MRG BEHAVIOR DEFINITIONS & ROLE EXPECTATION COMPARISONS

CONSERVATIVE

Studying problems in light of past practices to ensure predictability, reinforce the status quo and minimize risk.

	%	RA (Rater Agreement)
Professional Facilitator:	25	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	20	M

INNOVATIVE

Feeling comfortable in fast-changing environments; being willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	75	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	85	H

TECHNICAL

Acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues in depth and draw conclusions

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	35	L
Agile Leader/Manager:	20	M

SELF

Emphasizing the importance of making decisions independently; looking to yourself as the prime vehicle for decision making

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	40	L
Agile Leader/Manager:	45	L

STRATEGIC

Taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead and planning

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	85	H
Agile Leader/Manager:	80	M

DELEGATION

Enlisting the talents of others to help meet objectives by giving them important activities and sufficient autonomy to exercise their own judgment.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	85	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	95	H

COMMUNICATION

Stating clearly what you want and expect from others; clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas; maintaining a precise and constant flow of information.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	70	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	95	M

CONTROL

Adopting an approach in which you take nothing for granted, set deadlines for certain actions and are persistent in monitoring the progress of activities to ensure that they are completed on schedule.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	20	H
Agile Leader/Manager:	55	L

FEEDBACK

Letting others know in a straightforward manner what you think of them, how well they have performed and if they have met your needs and expectations.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	25	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	55	M

MANAGEMENT FOCUS

Seeking to exert influence by being in positions of authority, taking charge, and leading and directing the efforts of others.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	65	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	70	M

PERSUASIVE

Building commitment by convincing others and winning them over to your point of view.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	15	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	60	L

OUTGOING

Acting in an extroverted, friendly and informal manner; showing a capacity to quickly establish free and easy interpersonal relationships.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	55	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	40	M

EXCITEMENT

Operating with a good deal of energy, intensity and emotional expression; having a capacity for keeping others enthusiastic and involved

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	75	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	85	M

RESTRAINT

Maintaining a low-key, understated and quiet interpersonal demeanor by working to control your emotional expression.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	60	L
Agile Leader/Manager:	60	M

STRUCTURING

Adopting a systematic and organized approach; preferring to work in a precise, methodical manner; developing and utilizing guidelines and procedures.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	30	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	10	H

TACTICAL

Emphasizing the production of immediate results by focusing on short-range, hands-on, practical strategies

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	70	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	90	M

DOMINANT

Pushing vigorously to achieve results through an approach which is forceful, assertive and competitive.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	15	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	30	L

PRODUCTION

Adopting a strong orientation toward achievement; holding high expectations for yourself and others; pushing yourself and others to achieve at high levels.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	40	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	40	L

COOPERATION

Accommodating the needs and interests of others by being willing to defer performance on your own objectives in order to assist colleagues with theirs.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	50	M
Agile Leader/Manager:	60	M

CONSENSUAL

Valuing the ideas and opinions of others and collecting their input as part of your decision-making process.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	95	H
Agile Leader/Manager:	95	M

AUTHORITY

Showing loyalty to the organization; respecting the ideas and opinions of people in authority and using them as resources for information, direction and decisions.

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	10	H
Agile Leader/Manager:	10	H

EMPATHY

Demonstrating an active concern for people and their needs by forming close and supportive relationships with others

	%	RA
Professional Facilitator:	90	H
Agile Leader/Manager:	90	M

For the purposes of this report, the behaviors scoring above 75% and with a High or Medium rater agreement are presumed (and were similarly presumed in the earlier Agile Leader/Manager report) to be the one's best defining the Professional Facilitator role. Those expected behaviors are: Innovative, Strategic, Excitement, Delegation, Consensual and Empathy. Likewise, those scores with a 25% or less rating and a High or Medium Rater agreement (i.e., those which are not expected in the Professional Facilitator role) include: Persuasive, Control, Feedback, Conservative, Dominant and Authority.

Comparison and Conclusion

The similarities between the role of Professional Facilitator and Agile Leader/Manager are closer than I had imagined. If we accept those role behaviors scoring a 75% with a High or Medium rater agreement, there are six held in common. Additionally, both roles would have exactly the same expected behaviors if we include Tactical and Communication (both scoring just below the cutoff at 70%). Likewise and conversely, both roles have almost exactly the same expectation in terms of what they do not expect (i.e., the behaviors not expected in the given role).

Role Expectations Comparison				
Behavior	Agile Leader/Manager		Professional Facilitator	
	Normal Distribution	Rater Agreement	Normal Distribution	Rater Agreement
Expected:				
Strategic	80%	M	85%	H
Consensual	95%	M	95%	H
Empathy	90%	M	90%	H
Innovative	85%	H	75%	M
Delegation	95%	H	85%	M
Excitement	85%	M	75%	M
Tactical	90%	M	70%	M
Communication	95%	M	70%	M
Not Expected:				
Authority	10%	H	10%	H
Structuring	10%	H	30%	M
Conservative	20%	M	25%	M
Technical	20%	M	35%	L
Dominant	30%	L	15%	M
Control	55%	L	20%	H
Persuasive	60%	L	15%	M
Feedback	55%	M	25%	M

Except for the low rater agreement in one of the respondent groups, the behaviors defined as Technical (i.e., acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues in depth and draw conclusions) and Dominant (i.e., pushing vigorously to achieve results through an approach which is forceful, assertive and competitive) would have been included in the behaviors not expected in either role.

In every case but three (i.e., Control, Persuasive, and Feedback), the survey results for the percentage score and rater agreement between the Professional Facilitator and Agile Leader/Manager role expectations are similar. And in the case of these three behavioral expectations, the difference is probably directly related to other parts of the job that are important but not differentiating. For example, one can imagine a leadership/manager role would need to score higher, but not in the highest range for Control, Persuasive and giving Feedback than would a Professional Facilitator.

As a final note, this research was designed to help better define the role expectations of being an Agile Leader and to help organizations reconsider their leadership models. The campfire metaphor for instance depicts all the right stakeholders participating and openly discussing ideas, learning from their joint experiences, and collaboratively creating customer satisfaction (i.e., create business value). Likewise, if we are to extend the metaphor and utilize the results of the two Role Expectation Surveys (i.e., for the Professional Facilitator and for the Agile Leader/Manager), the role expectation of an Agile Leader/Manager is more like a campfire host or facilitator than the directive, authoritarian leader model present in many corporate settings.

So, for the purposes of further consideration and possibly for the use of selecting and developing future Agile Leaders/Managers, I'd like to propose the following definition:

***An Agile Leader/Manager helps to create and sustain the environment
in which others are innovative, creative and successful.***

About the Author

David Spann is a Senior Management Consultant located in Park City, Utah. He focuses on strategic planning, team building, executive coaching, and training for organizations wanting to be more agile and adaptive. Mr. Spann helped host the first *Agile Software Development* conference at Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2002; co-hosted the *Agile Executive Summit* in 2003, 2004, and 2005; teaches the only MBA course on adaptive project management in the US; is a Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) and Assessor for the CPF exam; and in past careers was a District Ranger in the USDA Forest Service and an MBA Director at Westminster College. In his spare time you can find him enjoying life teaching, hiking, singing and skiing, in Park City.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the memory of Jim Thrash, a friend, neighbor, and colleague in the Forest Service.