

Agile / Management and Consensus / Hierarchy: Oxymorons of Descriptors in Project Management?

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ABSTRACT

From a worldview outside of the strictly constructed nomos of Project Management Institute (PMI)-type project management, certain terms used within the social construct wherein PMI experts as well as Agile experts work appear to be self-contradictory. This paper will explore these seeming oxymorons and explore whether the Project Management Institute has simply adapted language, or rather introduced new meanings within the PMI-nomos, adapting language from outside of the social order imposed by the PMI-construct.

I. AGILE / MANAGEMENT

At first glance, the notion of such a combination as “Agile Project Management” would appear to be an oxymoron. While the purpose of Agile computing is to provide a systems engineering method incorporating “quick movement, fast adaptability and extreme flexibility”¹, project management appears to be rigidly structured, with “42 logically grouped project management processes comprising the 5 Process Groups.”²

According to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), the project management plan in and of itself is iterative.³ However, unlike Portfolio Management, scope does not expand; it simply becomes more elaborate, and success has a built-in time factor, unlike Portfolio Management.⁴ Unless agility is implemented in such a manner as to avoid scope creep, agility in and of itself will violate the time constraints; “customer satisfaction” is a hallmark of Project Management⁵, and customers who have hired experts in project management may not understand why a project implemented in an “Agile” way could not shift priorities quickly enough to incorporate changes in scope within the originally agreed time period. This failure to shift priorities could, in turn, lessen customer satisfaction.

Thus, it would seem that Agile Project Management has gotten itself into a discipline-oriented jargon box. Within the relatively small group of people who are experts on the specific project design methodology as contained in the Agile manifesto, and are also experts in (PMI) terminology as applied to various types of PMI workflow management (Projects, Programs, and Portfolios⁶), “agility” and “PMI-style Project Management” can work together. However, advertising “Agile Project Management” to a public that has some idea of PMI standards, but whose concept of agility is “having the faculty of quick

¹ Cao, J. (2003, June). *Agile computing*. Retrieved from http://www.mit.edu/~caoj/pub/doc/jcaot_agilecomp.pdf

² Project Management Institute. (2008). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge*. (4th ed., p. 6). Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, Inc.

³ Institute, Project Management (2008). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge*. (4th ed., p. 7). Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ *Op. cit.*

⁶ *Op. cit.*

motion; nimble, active, ready”⁷, will set a project management vendor down the road to customer dissatisfaction even before the first word is written into the Project Charter.

II. HIERARCHY / CONSENSUS WITHIN THE PMI-NOMOS

Similarly to the problem posed in section I, while consensus process may complement Agile computing by creating quick “buy-in” to adaptations, those consensus agreements still must be signed off – as per a Project Management Project Charter – by a specified person serving as the project manager. This is not typical of widely-accepted consensus process, which usually involves the agreement of the all or many, rather than the one. The Oxford English Dictionary defines consensus not relating to physiology as “Agreement in opinion; the collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons.”⁸

PMI-style Project Management has a detailed group of subprocesses to manage stakeholder expectations, including the discussion of concerns and the clarification of newly-arising issues.⁹ However, these tools require the project manager, as a last resort, to overcome “resistance to change.”¹⁰ When a PMI-style managed process reaches this resort, it moves from the unanimity of consensus as widely accepted as a group decision making activity, to what PMI’s own body of knowledge calls “Dictatorship.”¹¹

Again, we have a disjoint between the legitimate expectations of customers, on the one hand, who are expecting a consensus process for all group decision making, to the practice of PMI-style vendors, who may invite stakeholder groups for discussions, only to result in a non-consensus dictatorial decision by the Project Manager. The provision for discussions then appears to the customers as being a false-front discussion, and may impair stakeholder participation in future clarification discussions, once again resulting in customer dissatisfaction.

This is not so easily solved as part I. There are strict hierarchies within the PMI-nomos; and although unanimity is *permissible* in group decision making, it is only one of four specifically recommended methods of making decisions.¹² On the other hand, the Agile Manifesto stresses “Individuals and interactions over processes and tools”, as well as “Responding to change over following a plan.”¹³ (The Agile Manifesto is, in and of itself, a “consensus around four main values”¹⁴.) A customer familiar with the Agile nomos, but not with the PMI Project Management nomos, will likely feel alienated if the Project Manager must resort to dictatorship as a group decision making technique.

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary. *Agile*. Second edition, 1989; online version September 2011.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3979>>; accessed 05 December 2011. Earlier version first published in New English Dictionary, 1884.

⁸ (Oxford). *Consensus*. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39516>>; accessed 05 December 2011. Earlier version first published in New English Dictionary, 1891.

⁹ (Institute) pp.261-264.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*

¹¹ (Institute) p. 108.

¹² *Op. cit.*

¹³ Alliance, Agile. "The Agile Manifesto." Agile Alliance. Agile Alliance, 2011. Web. 5 Dec 2011.

<http://www.agilealliance.org/the-alliance/the-agile-manifesto/>.

¹⁴ *Op.cit.*

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This disjoint can only be resolved by making “Agile” clearly adjectival within the phrase “Agile Project Management”: the PMI-nomos is the ruling social dialectic in the world-construction,¹⁵ taking only those aspects of the Agile Manifesto which can be used without violating the tools, processes, and hierarchies essential to PMI-style project management.

III. CONCLUSIONS

PMI-style Project Management and Agile development have some points of commonality, but they also have certain irreconcilable differences. The term “Agile project management” – if used to refer to PMI-style Project Management – is a term only understandable within the PMI nomos, where PMI-established hierarchies, processes, and rules are understood by practitioners to be the overriding factor when conflicts arise between the Agile nomos and the PMI nomos. The term may have been formed by a dialectic in which PMI practitioners attempted to incorporate certain Agile processes into PMI projects.

It is important that practitioners of PMI-style project management – especially those new to the field, or those unfamiliar with the Agile nomos – keep in mind that this term only makes sense in a limited way within the practice of PMI-style project management. The terms “agile”, “consensus”, and so forth, in the larger world as well as in the Agile nomos impose unacceptable limitations on the required processes within PMI-style project management. For this reason, it is strongly suggested that PMI practitioners not advertise “Agile project management” or “Consensus around arising issues”, as this will lead to customer confusion and dissatisfaction. Suggested mitigations include the following:

- Instead of “Agile project management”, use another, more ambiguous term such as “balanced project management”. A balance between the rules espoused by PMI and the desire for consensus is what is really being sold to the customer.
- Include in any Agile-oriented PMI project charter a reference to evaluation of changing or emerging needs over the course of the project, being sure to include in the charter and/or contract that such needs, if required by consensus of the customer’s stakeholders, may require a reopener of the charter and/or contract for increased time and/or increased cost.

IV. SPECIAL NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although only one explicit reference was made to Dr. Peter L. Berger’s seminal sociological work, The Sacred Canopy, in this paper, the overall methodology employed in analyzing the world-creations of PMI and Agile – and their interaction with the larger society – was heavily dependent on Dr. Berger’s theories as expounded in that book.

¹⁵ Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1969. 18-19. Print.