



Excerpted from the book *The Human Side of Agile*. More at www.TheHumanSideOfAgile.com

How Can I Help the Team Buy In?

A common challenge with Agile adoption (and other instances of organizational change) is team members' buy-in. "Buying in" means being convinced and willing to work a certain way. As the team's leader, you will need to help them buy into the Agile way and the particular work being undertaken.

Buying into Agile means accepting, and agreeing to, the mind-set and the process:

- Short cycles as opposed to months-long projects
- Less detailed up-front planning; working with incomplete information
- Being members of a *whole* self-organizing team, possibly in an open space
- Having freedom and responsibility to make rules, decisions ... and mistakes
- Delivering features as opposed to developing blocks

A CTO decided to switch his department to Agile for the next major undertaking: a product rewrite. Once his management staff and the product managers returned from an Agile fundamentals course, they divided the department into teams of programmers and testers. They established iteration planning and reviews, daily standups, and a product backlog with user stories.

The product definition team loved their new "powers" but did not balance them with the requisite negotiation and collaboration. The delivery teams had trouble buying into the "getting to done" concept; since the database group's boss wanted no part in Agile, the database would be developed on a separate track. The expectation of hardening sprints allowed developers to keep their coding habits, thinking they would fix defects before the release. The managers controlled the planning and retrospective meetings; some team members would drop in just to make an appearance. Even their brightest developers realized that results meant demonstrated stories, regardless of the underlying code's quality — collaboration was nonexistent in the rush to collect story points. When reality didn't agree with the planned schedule, the CTO's solution was to work evenings and weekends.

Buy-in is a voluntary choice to spend one's energy a certain way. A person is not guaranteed to buy in merely on account of working willingly for the organization. Without sufficient buy-in, Agile will not stick,

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and motivation will be low. Your support is needed both at the individual member level and at the team level. The critical period for your efforts is the first few weeks of a team's life cycle.

Individual Buy-In

For someone to buy into Agile and the project, she must know what she is getting into. Therefore, basic education in both is an absolute prerequisite for buy-in. If team members are new to Agile, arrange for proper training. (Unfortunately, too many teams receive only a one-hour PowerPoint presentation.) If people were dropped in without prior exposure to the project, allow them the time to find their footing.

You need to understand and speak to each person's motivators. Why should the person buy into Agile, or this particular development effort? What's in it for him? If he and the team are new to Agile, expect a somewhat different set of drivers to be satisfied than in the pre-Agile environment.

For greater intrinsic motivation, have one-on-one conversations with each individual. Specific, personalized answers from you will counteract the weak effect of such blanket statements as "Agile will be good for you and for the company" or "This project will help us catch up to the competition." Don't just list out deliverables; express *why* they have been chosen. How will they make a difference?

Let each team member have a say in determining the project's direction and customizing the methods for it. An effective way to do this is to include the person, along with the entire team, in the project's kickoff or in chartering sessions.

Developing new software, or using new methods, involves risk. Most software professionals realize that some risk is necessary for progress. What they won't do, however, is commit career suicide. Unless a person is educated or experienced in proper Agile practice, she might fear that it is unsound or reckless, especially if her familiar, pre-Agile methods felt safe (or at least organizationally sanctioned). The following fears are prevalent before starting an Agile rollout and even during its first few iterations:

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"If we always do quick work on small stories, we'll produce low-grade code." This fear is the unfortunate reality of many teams that misunderstand the iteration concept, underdefine "done," or just want to pass a demo unscathed. Help the team put measures in place to avoid this trap, including proper Agile engineering practices, a strong definition of "done," and true-capacity (not wishful) planning.

"We can produce small working features, but there's no time for enough system-level and regression testing." Testers as well as business people share this fear of experiencing an increase in nasty surprises.

"The iterations are so short, we can't demo anything valuable." This fear stems from inexperience in decomposing large features and from the mistaken belief that every story must have a visible, demonstrable element. Left unchecked, this fear gives rise to stress, haste, and an improper prioritization of work.

"Management says they support the new process, but it's still business as usual." In other words, if management still expects to nail ship dates, scope, quality, and cost, the Agile planning mechanisms become moot.

You will see these fears play out and also hear them stated. With practice, patience, and support, they are likely to dissipate.

Buy-in trouble may stem from several additional concerns:

Working with incomplete information. No one had complete knowledge in the pre-Agile environment or could predict every detail – but everybody proceeded to plan as if they did. The Agile thought process is more relaxed: "You will *not* know enough, and we can't wait forever to gather every possible detail. Run with the information you have, or wait just until the last responsible moment to proceed." That makes some people very nervous.

Having to choose what to work on next. While it's less motivating, having an authority determine your next steps feels safe and comforting. Greater Agility, however, comes from greater autonomy and personal responsibility.

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Adriana, a new product owner and designer by training, created new backlog items with ease. When it came to prioritizing them, her trepidation almost paralyzed her. She would privately ask the team lead to do the prioritization, and then she would indicate her agreement with his suggestions.

Being swallowed up into a faceless team. The old regime's system of conferring status and distinction helped people feel important. While folks recognize the potential of teamwork, they do not want to be generic team members; they want to be noticed for their individuality. Agile teams do recognize individual contributions but don't translate them into formal status.

Since professionals avoid admitting these concerns, you can't address them directly. Instead, have regular one-on-one conversations with your team members, coach them, and be highly supportive and patient until, hopefully, those concerns disappear.

Team-Level Buy-In

Before a team will buy in as a group, some interpersonal foundation is absolutely required. It has three elements: professional trust, respect, and basic capability to work through conflicts.

Members need to *trust* each other enough to buy into a methodology that is predicated on teamwork. Even if they don't expect to collaborate or cooperate with each other, do they assume others would at least do their parts? Do they trust that they have the necessary skills and would apply them?

Beyond professional trust, do team members *respect* their colleagues as people? They do not need to feel admiration or subservience, although an absence of respect will hamper team buy-in.

Not all *conflict* is confrontation, and not everybody knows or believes that. Evolved teams respect conflict and use it for personal growth, for team evolution, and for heightened involvement. The team would benefit from having at least one person who can help resolve conflict usefully when it arises; that person would be you, by default. Just as in marriage, team members share the same roof for hours every day, and they can make each other happy or miserable. The team should rely on rules and agreements – even implicit ones – to know what is acceptable and how to deal with conflict.

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Do *you* believe that all members are required for successful project completion? Do all team members share this belief, or do some consider themselves heroes who could shoulder the load on their own? The Agile philosophy attracts people who can pull their weight together and understand that “all alone” is not an option. Moreover, this interdependence applies across the entire team, not within functional subgroups. From the very beginning, reinforce that team members are in it together.

I always gather entire project communities together for their kickoff. Some spend two or three days together in structured activities that draw everybody’s participation — even if some folks remain mostly quiet. Without exception, the mere presence and engagement of the full community results in palpable excitement and buy-in.

You may have been the first one to bring Agile into the company or the team, but if people can offer suggestions to tailor the implementation, they will feel it’s their idea. Allow them to do so, both in individual conversations and in team settings where ideas build on each other.

Do you remember the old saying, “Seek forgiveness, not permission”? It is synonymous with autonomy, which is a core intrinsic motivator also at the team level and thus a catalyst to buy-in. Instead of creating a system of approval rules and workflows, build a loose framework in which people are free to experiment, informed initiative is welcome, and risks (even mistakes) are permitted.

Even though you have access to more project information than most members, don’t keep it all to yourself. Every team member should have access to information that affects the team. Establish an atmosphere of transparency and sharing so people know what they are buying into. Involve the whole team in significant discussions. Even when they know their input has limited influence, they will feel valued and important, and thus more inclined to participate.

Always remember that you may not be the only leader. Most groups have a number of people who are fairly dominant and influential — whether their formal title implies it or not. Make sure that they are on your side and that they comprehend the Agile concepts and why they work. Tread carefully around overly dominant people.

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