Trends in Agile Updated
Perspectives from the Practitioners

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THE AGILE CONFERENCE is the largest global conference on agile software development, catering particularly to practitioners. Agile 2017 (www.agilealliance.org/agile2017) had 2,200 participants. Here, we report on three keynotes and the second year of an IEEE Software conference initiative.

Lessons in Leadership
In the first keynote, David Marquet, author of *Turn This Ship Around*, shared his experience as the (former) commander of the nuclear submarine Santa Fe. He discussed how he realized that a single point of command was dangerous and limited the efficiency of submarine operations.

Marquet’s experience is similar to the reality faced by organizations and managers that are trying to empower teams to be more autonomous and flexible, thus becoming more agile. For this reason, he talked about self-organization, leadership, and engagement at every organizational level. These are well-known principles in the agile manifesto and are crucial for agile teams’ success.

He defined intent-based leadership as characterizing an organization in which

- people are proud of being part of something bigger than themselves,
- people know and contribute toward the organization’s goal,
- people are leaders at all levels,
- people feel inspired because decision and control flow down to all levels of the organization, and
- organizational success is on everyone’s shoulders.

Marquet also presented the interesting concept of blue work and red work. Blue work is cognitive work, decision work, and leadership work. Red work is execution, doing the physical work, following the processes, and performing compliant work. He suggested that you can characterize an organization by identifying who’s doing blue work and who’s doing red work.

In traditional, industrial-age organizational design, the need exists for only a small number of blue workers. Most organizations (mainly those that still maintain the command-and-control mindset) have a few blue workers at the top who decide what everyone else will do. Marquet advocated for increasing the number of blue workers by pushing blue work further down the organizational hierarchy. In his view, bots, algorithms, and robots increasingly perform the red work, ultimately reducing the need for red-work jobs. By making and encouraging more blue workers, organizations will build more leaders because more people will do cognitive work and be involved in decision making. These organizations will change from mostly red to mostly blue.

A video of Marquet’s keynote is at bit.ly/PD_2018_Jan_1, and he discusses this keynote in a podcast at bit.ly/PD_2018_Jan_2. His website (www.davidmarquet.com) has more information about this topic.

Adopting Continuous Delivery
Jez Humble, known for his books on continuous delivery and lean enterprise, presented a keynote about continuous delivery. He first discussed common objections organizations have to introducing continuous delivery, including, “We’re regulated,” “We’re not building websites,” “We’ve got too much legacy,” and “Our people are too stupid.” He believes that the real reasons for resistance are poor organizational culture and poor product architecture. He described how organizations can overcome the obstacles to adoption.

Humble used several real-world examples, including cloud.gov, HP firmware development, and the NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.) car plant, to convey his main point that most organizations can likely benefit from
adopting agile practices and continuous delivery. But obtaining those benefits can require organizations to make a difficult cultural change and perform an architectural refactoring of existing systems.


**Overcoming Your Inner Critic**

In the third keynote, Denise Jacobs talked about how people can overcome their own inner criticism. This topic is particularly important for agile teams because they’re expected to self-organize and because the team members are expected to be empowered. However, these expectations are sometimes blocked by the individual team members’ inner criticism.

Jacobs believes the key to success is to identify this criticism’s source and, more important, what triggers this criticism. Her call to action is for people to fire their inner critic and get rid of the evil voices in their head. She encourages people to be inspired, be clear, tell everyone what you want to do, and take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves.

The full video of Jacob’s keynote is at bit.ly/PD_2018_Jan_5.

**The Practitioner Conference Outreach Initiative**

At Agile 2017, *IEEE Software* had the second installment in its practitioner conference outreach initiative to increase the magazine’s visibility and recognition among practitioners. In collaboration with the Agile Alliance (www.agilealliance.org), *Software* chaired the Future of Agile Software Development track. Here we report on two of the track’s eight presentations, which drew more than 600 participants.

**Needed: Business Analysts and Systems Engineers**

In “Do We Still Need Business Analysts and Systems Engineers? Now More Than Ever?,” Amy Silberbauer from IBM discussed the importance of business analysts and systems engineers for coping with the challenges that organizations and agile teams face. Because a project is more than just a single feature, business analysts and system engineers are important for moving from an initial idea to a “wow” feature. The business analyst’s role is to bridge the gap relative to business needs, problems, and specifications. The system engineer’s role is to bridge the gap in the design and the details of how requirements are implemented in the code.

Silberbauer believes that business analysts and system engineers are the new sheriff in town, who wear many hats. They must have a significant skill set to be customer advocates, designers, architects, engineers, and orchestrators.

More Than Agile
In “Integral but Insignificant: Why the Future Needs More Than Agile to Be Successful,” Mike Griffiths explained that organizations need more than just agile practices to execute a successful project. Organizations should adopt a multidisciplinary, context-sensitive model using leadership concepts, emotional intelligence, plan-driven development approaches, and industry-specific knowledge. All processes carry execution weight, whereas knowledge is weightless. So, teams should learn a lot while implementing a process that’s as lightweight as possible.

Griffiths suggested that current scaling frameworks such as SAFe (Scaled Agile Framework) and LeSS (Large-Scale Scrum) suffer from “Agile Myopia” (believing that agile is the answer to everything) and the “Buffet Syndrome” (when presented with an array of processes, choosing too many). As a solution, he introduced an elastic model that suggests only the most effective approaches for a project’s characteristics.

More details about this presentation are at bit.ly/PD_2018_Jan_7. For more information, contact Griffiths at mike@lendinganswers.com.

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References