



Proceedings of GLOGIFT 12
July 30 – August 1, 2012
University of Vienna, Austria
pp. 1-10

Agile Management Needs Agile Persons – Developing Inner Flexibility

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Abstract

Agile management methods call for reacting to change at any time of a project's lifecycle. This requires a high degree of flexibility in organizations, tools, and, in particular, human beings. The paper proposes an innovative educational offering that aims to help persons, regardless of their cultural background, to develop selves that are gradually more flexible and devoid of rigid mental models often standing in the way of meeting others openly. By quoting students' reflections, it will be illustrated how a humanistic, person-centered approach can contribute to developing more openness to experience, acceptance and understanding of the Other and of new situations, even though this development needs time and repeated experience to unfold. Consequences for business, education, and human resource development will be discussed.

Introduction

Much has been written about innovative, agile methods for management and software development. Such methods, in particular, take into account the need for change, even if it arises late in development (Beck *et al.*, 2001). This is but one instance of a more general characteristic of our time. According to Verna Allee (1997, p. 5): "Change is All there is" in modern thinking – as opposed to traditional thinking where change is described as "Something to worry about". In fact, new communication media make fast communication available anytime and almost anywhere and modern, more democratic management styles favor team- and customer participation – as it is easier to achieve than ever before (Highsmith, 2004; Senge, 2006). These are just two factors that promote interaction and fast feedback cycles to increase the probability of the "final" product meeting the customer's needs. Naturally, adapting continuously to the changing environment is an advantage in business as it has been in the evolution of species and cultural- and legal systems (Damasio, 2012).

As evident as the advantages of flexibly reacting to the changed and changing environment are, and as timely agile management methods respond to the zeitgeist, so hard it is to understand that only little actually is being done in Western educational systems to help human beings become more flexible inwardly, in their psychological and whole organismic substance. Very little, for instance, has changed at universities, to take up an example from an area the author is familiar with, to support students in acquiring interpersonal competences to become psychologically fit for increased and ubiquitous change. Rather, ever more intellectual information, sophisticated modeling, documentation and precise planning for research is required, emphasizing intellectual processes while disengaging experiential ones. While, of course, leading to new data

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and insight in very special areas, this intellectual over-emphasis bears the danger of extinguishing creativity and diminishing openness to new ideas and relationships (Rogers, 1961).

To propose an alternative, in this chapter we first revisit the values called for by agile methods and then briefly introduce a humanistic, person-centered approach that holds the promise of supporting the development of inner flexibility and creativity (Cornelius-White and Harbaugh, 2010; McCombs, 2011; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger, 2002; Ryback, 1998). In the author's view this provides some counterbalance to the cognitive dominance of (not only) most of academic education. The main part of the paper, however, is devoted to illustrating how the proposed approach works in practice. For this reason the author will present a case example of an international, academic course in "Person-Centered Communication" that she conducted in the current term (2012) at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.

Agile Values and Principles

In the last decade, agile methods have come to be appreciated in a variety of fields (Highsmith, 2004). One prominent example is software development. In that field, the authors of the "Manifesto for Agile Software Development" (Beck *et al.*, 2001) could improve the ways of developing software by adopting the following value *preferences*, although not completely discarding the "traditional" values. They value:

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

Interestingly, these value preferences show a clear shift towards the human being in collaborative relationship with fellow human beings – be it a team mate or a customer – and away from "design constructs" like contracts, plans, tools, documentations. This may be the response to traditional methods' overemphasis on the artificial constructs and a perceived missing satisfaction of the human "players". Some preferences of the agile "philosophy" are expressed still more distinctly in agile principles. Let us quote 6 out of the 12 items from the Principles behind the Agile Manifesto (Beck *et al.* 2001) that most clearly indicate the human qualities they call for (italicized by this author for emphasis):

- Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness *change* for the customer's competitive advantage.
- Business people and developers must *work together daily* throughout the project.
- Build projects around *motivated individuals*. *Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them* to get the job done.
- The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is *face-to-face conversation*.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from *self-organizing teams*.
- At regular intervals, the team *reflects* on how to become more effective, then *tunes and adjusts* its behavior accordingly.

The next section is aimed at giving an idea on how the required personal and interpersonal qualities can be understood in a psychological context and how their unfolding might be supported. Already at this point the reader will sense that the qualities can't be learned by purely intellectual learning but will need to be experienced, developed, and shaped gradually.

The Person-Centered Approach, Significant Learning, and Encounter Groups

The Person Centered Approach was developed by the American psychologist Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987). While having its roots in psychology, psychotherapy, and counselling, it has spread to several areas as close or distant as education, management, social work, cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution, peace work, etc. Interestingly, Rogers envisaged the primary value of education in *dealing with and adapting to change*. Almost half a century ago he wrote (1983; p. 196-197):

We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education [. . .] is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn [. . .] how to adapt and change [. . .]. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world. [. . .] Out of such a context arise true students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate but ever-changing balance between what is presently known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future.

But how can the facilitation of change and learning be achieved in practice? The basic motive upon which Rogers relies for *significant learning* to happen is that in each person there is a directional, forward-moving tendency, referred to as an *actualizing tendency* (Kriz, 2007; Rogers, 1951; 1980). Students “who are in real contact with life problems wish to learn, want to grow, seek to find out, hope to master, desire to create” (Rogers, 1961, p. 289). Rogers characterized significant learning as a kind of whole-person learning that integrates various aspects of human capacities. In Rogers’ words (1983, p. 20): “Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole.” Since various processes are involved in this kind of learning the formation of rigid, preconceived mental models is kept to a minimum.

According to research and practice conducted by Rogers and his colleagues, for significant learning to happen it is essential that learners are provided an atmosphere in which the facilitator (manager, instructor, teacher, etc.) holds three core attitudes such that the students actually perceive them, at least to some degree (Rogers, 1961). These attitudes are:

- Congruence, with synonyms such as, realness, transparency, genuineness, authenticity; it also includes a lived, moment to moment openness to experience;
- Acceptance, else referred to as respect, unconditional positive regard, caring attitude, concern for the individual; it implies a non-judgmental attitude;
- Empathic understanding, a deep form of understanding of the meanings as well as feelings of the other person from his or her point of view.

In the context of significant learning person-centered encounter groups, i.e. unstructured meetings allowing people to freely express their thoughts, feelings, meanings have proved to be potent vehicles for developing (inter-)personal qualities such as constructive communication, collaborative decision making, and creative problem solving in a rather self-organized way (Rogers, 1970). The author has experienced that such group meetings can provide sources of motivation, collaboration, reflection, deep learning, rich communication and personal growth unmet in other educational settings (Lago and McMillan, 1999; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2008; Nykl and Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; Rogers, 1970). The basic *encounter group* – a setting for self-experience and problem solving – if well facilitated, has been regarded as one of the most potent social inventions of the 20th century. The group as a whole and its participants as members move through a group process that is characterized by smalltalk, superficial conversation and a

resistance against expressing own feelings in its beginning and moving towards trust, open and respectful interaction, deep understanding and helpful relationships inside and outside the group setting as the group process continues.

From the perspective of theorizing in the Person-Centered Approach, perceiving a person-centered climate, for example in an encounter group, favors certain features of personal development. Below 5 (out of 10) features are listed that characterize the developmental direction in a person-centered climate (Rogers, 1959) and are related to inner flexibility:

- Openness to one's experience.
- The self-structure will be a fluid gestalt, changing flexibly in the process of assimilation of new experience.
- Full absence of conditions of worth (such as prejudices, valuing conditions, rigid constructs)
- Each situation will be met with behavior which is a unique and creative adaptation to the newness of that moment.
- Persons will live with others in the maximum possible harmony, because of the rewarding character of reciprocal positive regard.

In order to illustrate how person-centered learning including encounter groups can contribute to flexibility and personal agility the reader is invited to join the author in her journey through the most recent course on Person-Centered Communication that she facilitated in the spring term 2012.

Case Example: An academic Course on Person-Centered Communication

The course on *Person-Centered Communication* is an elective course for Masters and PhD students offered at the Faculty of Informatics at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Although attracting primarily advanced students of Informatics, the course is open to students of other faculties and to international students. It is conducted in English and consists of three 1,5 day face-to-face blocks that are interconnected by a web-space providing the course description, course goals, online learning resources, a virtual space for sharing reactions between the course units and a space for uploading the students' self-evaluation at the end of the course.

Course description. The primary goal of this course is to allow students to communicate more sensitively and effectively. The course is highly student-centered in so far as the instructor acts as a facilitator to the group by providing resources and, most importantly, a facilitative atmosphere. Students are expected to contribute actively by attentive listening to one another as well as sharing their feelings, meanings and thoughts, while sitting in a circle to ease mutual perception. It is the way participants communicate with each that is pivotal. Students are invited to contribute themes according to their personal and/or professional concerns. Examples of concerns are various conflicts, decisions, particular challenges to meet, problems, opportunities, or just anything participants (students and facilitators) consider important from their personal and subjective point of view.

Besides participating in the group sessions, students work in teams of 2-3 persons to elaborate theory topics in a self-directed way. The course assessment takes into account the students' active participation in face-to-face sessions, online reflections, a brief seminar thesis, and includes an element of self-evaluation.

Course goals. Participants acquire personal experience, skills, and background knowledge in situations of professional and everyday communication (such as listening, articulating, speaking

in a group, conflict resolution, decision making, etc.). Participants build a learning community around the concern for better communication and understanding.

- At the *level of knowledge and intellect*, students acquire knowledge about the basics of the Person Centered Approach and Person Centered Encounter Groups.
- At the *level of skills and capabilities*, the course aims at allowing students to gain active listening skills and to improve their abilities in spontaneous communication and decision making in a group setting as well as in reflecting their experiences.
- Finally, the *level of attitudes and awareness* is addressed by letting students gain self-experience while expressing own feelings, meanings, and intentions and perceiving those of others. They experience active listening and develop their own attitude towards it. Students become more sensitive and open to their own experience and loosen preconceived, rigidly held constructs. Students move towards acceptance and better understanding of themselves and others. Students move from more stereotyped behavior and facades to more personal expressiveness.

In the following students speak for themselves. This is accomplished by presenting excerpts for students' online postings of their reactions after each of the three blocks and by arguing how the reflected experiences may be seen as contributing to developing inner flexibility. Note that the course in 2012 was exceptionally rich in international attendance: Besides Czech and Slovak participants we had students from South Africa, South-East Asia and Russia. In sum, 10 students participated in the course which is about an ideal number for this intensive and just loosely structured event.

Excerpts from Students' Reactions after the First Block

"Talking and sharing with new people gives me new perspectives on communication and I am thankful for everybody's contribution, whether I already knew them or not. I am constantly learning, an example: I got it quite right with empathy when I felt that some of us were afraid to move the chairs to the middle ..."

"Though I have never attended any kind of subject like Person-Centered Communication, it's enriching and I'm really glad I can participate here. In the first block we spoke about problems of communication, [...] tried to solve some problems and so on. I think this is really useful for social life. I've met here many new people and listened to their interesting opinions that gave me new stimulations for other ways of thinking. "

An international student shared an important question the course had raised in him: "During the end of first block, I said that I had a pretty difficult question to think about. I told about active listening, and how it's hard to find a balance between listening to a person and being congruent with myself at the same time. This is indeed a tricky question, because when you are really actively listening to someone, you have to hide your ego, and in some extreme case - you do not perceive yourself, but put all your attention into perceiving the other person. [...] So, how to be a truly active listener, but at the same time be authentic?"

Another international student wrote: "During one of the discussions the following words were uttered: 'Experience is always broader than theory because theory is always shortened or cut down to the version of the one who had experienced it.' [...] This is because experience comes with emotion and feelings as opposed to reading which can be limited to just theory. For me this was the most interesting topic that really stood out and I have since read articles about it :-). I also enjoyed the atmosphere in the seminar. :-)"

“An interesting part of lesson for me was the discussion about the article on active listening. I was surprised in how many ways the same text can be understood.”

“I really liked the way the course is given, especially on Friday when we were sitting in the circle not hiding ourselves behind the desk. Our teacher and all the students are open to new ideas and trying to understand the others and this is what I really miss at other courses and generally in normal life. Maybe this could be a reason why the learning progress of this group is very unique.”

Summarizing, the reactions illustrate, first of all, the positive atmosphere in the class. Based on that, students' are motivated, open to the unusual new experience and curious to learn from both theory and multiple participants' viewpoints. Note that the initial phases in a group process often tend to be more difficult and exhibiting more conflict. One reason why this was not the case in the particular course may be the fact that the majority of students had attended another person-centered course they liked and thus trusted this course would be equally exciting and enriching.

Excerpts from Students' Reactions after the Second Block

“Sharing is simply a great way of thinking, speaking out gives the idea somewhat new perspective.”

“I can see the concept of significant learning - I like the attitude of PCA, I try to implement it into my life, I am experiencing it, reading the theory of it and also practicing it in a kind of a learning mode in our group, which is also as a whole keen on PCA - and I see that it works. [...] This road is hard and slow, the goal is never to be fully achieved even after decades, but it is still exciting and fun. I was actually a bit sad for a moment last time when I thought about the fact that the next session will be the last one. Thank you everyone, I am looking forward to the next class.”

A Czech participant notes: “Every opinion can change us in some way. Anyway, about this topic we have also talked at the beginning of the block. [...] I also like that we are not only Czechs, so we have to speak English all the time – also at lunch. Our soft skills are simply improving the whole day. I also consider it great that we can listen to the different ideas and experiences from people from other countries - this way we can also learn something new about our own nationality.”

An international student reflects: “We somehow started helping each other in our ideas. Theory, suggested by M., found some support, we tried to develop it, add some personal ideas and explanation. Another remarkable point was our dialog exercise. I was surprised, that sometimes it's so hard to paraphrase what your partner said, and it's so extremely hard to explain your mind in simple understandable words. Concerning our group dynamics, sometimes I felt some disappointment, that some participants were more active and spoke a lot, and others were more silent. I always want more balance in interpersonal interactions, and it seemed to me that some participants were too shy to say something. So I really wanted to help them somehow, but I didn't know how. [...] We are growing and accepting more interesting and challenging tasks. And I believe that next session will be even better.”

“First I must say that I like our international mix. I think that this group is good for discovering ideas, or may be making myself (and the others) think about my (their) patterns of behavior or responses. This is a condition for possible improvements.”

“I was surprised, how many things in person-centered communication can be drawn by a line

similar to the discussion - dialogue line, with no sharp divisions but as a continuum. The game with the ball (listening, repeating what the previous person said in my own words and only then articulating your message) seems like a very simple game, but it was not! I recognized how complicated and exhausting listening can be when we tried to do it really well.”

Summarizing, the continued positive atmosphere in class encourages participants to accept challenges, like questioning one’s patterns of behavior and accepting that something like accurate listening that they thought would be simple if not trivial, in fact is not! Students acknowledge (rather than distort or deny) their current limits and welcome the opportunities for development offered by and to each other in the course.

Excerpts from Students’ Reactions after the Third Block

“I really liked especially how Thursday began. Sharing from the first minute, running even long time after we should have had a break and nobody complained. That means real interest was among us in the group. [...] It was great when we went to lunch together. Even during the search for the right restaurant we learned something about H.’s religion and habits related to it, talked, had fun...This is the great thing about these person-centered courses - the relationships that are created and strengthened through it. Amazing. We also continued after the course ended and played outside for two hours. [...] When I mentioned H., I must say that she enriched our group in many ways, but really significantly in the multicultural aspect and we got to think about many more perspectives. My learning is that everything is not black and white but fuzzy is strengthening. [...] Actually, I feel this approach strongly supports creativity. New ideas are not judged, fear is not necessary, people cooperatively develop and learn ... [...] I now remember one more thing - how we developed an acceptance of silence. At least I personally had a feeling that I enjoy some time for digestion of so many inputs after intensive sharing and was not feeling awkward in any way. [...] Well, there is one wish I had, it was that this course does not end so fast. It could be partially fulfilled by the ideas we had at the end and the agreement on continuity of our person centered efforts...”

“I can say that the atmosphere in our group has changed during the whole course in the right way. We have known each other better and I think all of us feel very good and comfortable there.”

“For me, the last block was the most ‘relaxing’. But not because I did nothing, but because I was much more calm inside and had very few worries about everything. I didn’t worry if something was right or wrong in the group, if someone speaks more or less, if I have to add something, or not. I was just enjoying the process, and I think that it was a great achievement.”

“This workshop was the last and in my opinion the one I enjoyed the most. I do not know how to really put this in words but when I left this session I felt that the people who shared in depth on their experiences felt lighter and in turn I felt lighter. I believe that the level of respect keeps growing as we continue to learn so much about each other on a personal level. I really appreciated H.’s openness about her culture/country and her courage to share what was not entirely positive in her eyes, thus she said before sharing ‘I do not want to say anything bad about my country/culture’. I believe I have learned a lot from her character. During the sessions there were times when there would be some awkward silences and in my personal view I appreciated the silences as it gave me time to ponder on the previous speakers’ shared thoughts. The combination of the theory that we have learned during the course has facilitated our growth through our own experiences.”

“The atmosphere got really open and more than friendly. I realized that I have a lot in common with many others - personal problems, communication problems with others and even with

myself. I appreciate our intercultural experience where we were openly discussing topics [...]. It is hard to name all the benefits by words, but I feel this is one of the strongest impulses to improve myself I have ever faced.”

In general, the third and final block is characterized by participants’ coming to realize that often things are not black or white and are best understood in context and with some sort of “empathy to the whole situation”. For example, the fact that some persons spoke more than others initially has been perceived as disturbing while finally it became o.k. This also illustrates the increased acceptance for individual differences. Intriguingly, some participants changed their attitudes to basic phenomena like silence. While it had been perceived as “awkward” in the beginning, it turned to be experienced as meaningful for “digesting” the rich sharing and/or preparing for a new theme. These changes are directed towards inner “lightness”, calmness and relaxation, using the participants’ wording. This could indicate a higher degree of flexibility and less rigidity that tends to cause tension (Rogers, 1959; Senge, 2006). Another fascinating effect is the participants’ wish to continue the experience. Some of them intend to actively act on that wish in a self-organized way (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2008; Motschnig-Pitrik and Barrett-Lennard, 2010).

Concluding Remarks and Looking Out for Continuation

This article voiced the need for developing inner flexibility if we want to implement flexibility in organizations and apply agile methods wholeheartedly and in coherence with human resources. To illustrate how personal flexibility can be developed, Rogers’ setting of an encounter group has been adopted and complemented with web-technology to meet the demands on academic education in the 21st century. Based on an innovative course design and on students’ online reflections it was argued that such settings have the potential to loosen mental models and to promote significant learning that makes a difference in the learners’ thought as well as behavior. Amazingly, students themselves confirmed an important fact: To retain and increase the effect on personal growth, significant learning needs to be followed up. Indeed, students started searching for opportunities how to accomplish this, since, currently, no follow up course offering at the university can be accommodated. - Since participants (including facilitators) of successful encounter groups often wish some kind of continuation, the author proposed the notion of a Significant Learning Community (SILC) (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2008). In a nutshell, a SILC is a largely self-organized socio-technical system that is based on the Person-Centered Approach and combines knowledge construction with personal growth. Web-technology is used to connect participants between encounter-like meetings that provide the nurturing ground for significant learning to unfold, pervade the system, and radiate its constructive influence to the environment.

Given we trust person-centered theorizing and the students’ and author’s experience, activities and events sharing essential features with the course described above would hold promise to promote learning from multiple perspectives and authentic experiences. This kind of experiential, collaborative learning is known to be deep and influential on building a self-structure that is a fluent gestalt acceptant of new situations arising in the richness of each moment rather than a rigid, made-up structure of pre-fabricated facts and beliefs (Rogers, 1951; 1961; 1983). In any case, more research is needed to confirm the hypothesis that settings involving person-centered encounter groups (such as SILCs), sustainably build the kind of inner flexibility needed for agile (or any service-oriented) management. These benefits, as evident from our case example, would apply regardless of the cultural background of participants.

Currently, a sample manifestation of a significant learning community is “on the way” in a joint EU project on “constructive international Communication in the context of ICT” (iCom) between

the University of Vienna, Austria, and the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. In iCom, the two Universities collaborate with regional small and medium enterprises on a PhD course offering for (ICT-) professionals who aim to improve their practice through scientific work. More generally, the project aims to facilitate higher qualification and constructive communication as a key success factor in (ICT-) projects.

Acknowledgements. The author thanks her colleague Tomas Pitner at the Masaryk University for his constant support and the students of Person-Centered Communication (2012) for their wonderful engagement in the course. This work was in part supported by the European Union's territorial cooperation program "European Territorial Co-Operation Austria-Czech Republic 2007-2013" under the EFRE grant M00171, project "iCom" (Constructive International Communication in the Context of ICT).

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