

The Agile Work Axioms

A Brief Exposition of the Basic Truths Supporting the Middle Way to Excellence

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The Practices of Agile Work look simple on the surface, but there is a depth, subtlety and relationship among them, predicated on foundational truths or principles that I call the Agile Axioms. The essence of agility is to adhere to these Axioms and adjust the Practices. Gaining an understanding of this depth by examining these Axioms is a critical step along the Middle Way to Excellence.

Axioms of the Middle Way

What exactly are the underlying truths and assumptions of Agile Work? We start with our foundation: Trust and Truthfulness. Everything we do with agile should be about truthfulness (visibility, transparency) and building trust.

*"Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues."**

With this as a strong foundation, we can look at the three [Agile Axioms](#):

We are Creators
Reality is Perceived
Change is Natural

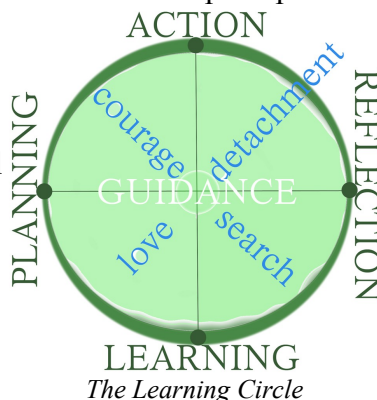
All of the other disciplines, processes and practices associated with Agile Work flow from these basic assumptions about the world. We can't prove that the above three axioms are "true" – they either resonate with us or they don't. If they do, then it will be easy to use these axioms as a checkpoint for all the activities we engage in using Agile Work, wherever we apply it.

We are creators... we derive our sense of value from our

ability to create. This is an inherent part of being human, though sometimes this natural drive is suppressed. One excellent way to reactivate it is to work in empowered teams.

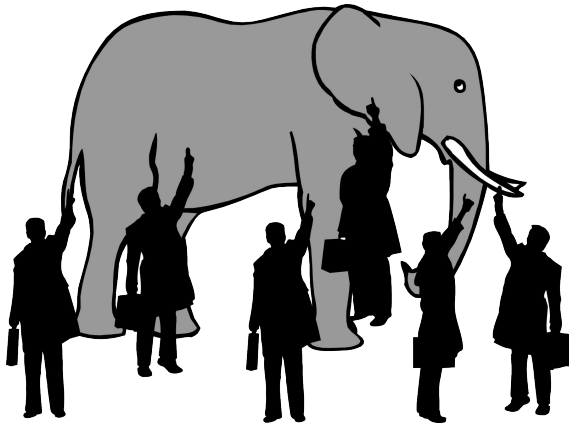
Have you ever experienced "flow" or joy when working with another person? Perhaps you were solving a problem, or playing a musical instrument - jamming - and found yourself carried away by inspiration? Or perhaps you were teaching something to your children and created the light of understanding in them. You might have been immersed in building a beautiful set of bookshelves for your home, or maybe you told a joke that created a moment of genuine pleasure among friends. We are all constantly creating!

This basic truth suggests that Agile Work methods and practices must not be imposed. Taught to us, given to us as a template, perhaps... but once we understand them and have tried them, we should be free to use the [Learning Circle](#) to be creative with the process and practices of Agile Work itself. When we do not participate creatively in our own work, we find ourselves dis-empowered, eventually leading to resentment or apathy.



Reality is perceived... therefore we need to work hard to build a common perception of reality. We can't assume that our own understanding of a situation is going to be shared by others. At the very least we need to check: "do you see this the way I do?"

Let's recognize that in some way or another we are all blind:



In the fable*, each blind man senses something different: a rope, a wall, a tree trunk, a fan, a spear, a snake. None are wrong, but their partial perception of the elephant limits their ability to understand the whole animal. Only by sharing their diverse perceptions do they have a hope of "seeing" the truth.

Again, the Learning Circle comes into play. The guidance, detachment, love, courage and search that emerge from going through the circle help us to build a common understanding of reality. This allows us to see new ways to apply the Agile Work disciplines and practices that make sense not only for our context, but also to everyone else participating in the work.

Change is natural... therefore instead of fighting change, we need to expect it, embrace it, and adjust to it graciously or even enthusiastically! Not only does change happen to us, but we also instigate change. When life gets too boring, we find ways to shake things up. We rebel against stasis and ennui.

Each work practice that we develop while doing Agile Work must be explicitly and implicitly accommodating of change. If a procedure can't tolerate change it will eventually cause dissonance or conflict. However, if we embrace change, we may modify or discard the procedure. We love to create original things and ideas, but if we become too attached, too "in love" with our creations, we will support them past their point of relevance.

Our latest, greatest idea will be good for a while. But eventually change will make it inadequate or irrelevant.

All three Agile Axioms are also deeply interrelated:

Our creations will be washed away through change and if we are lucky or wise we will perceive the change in reality – be truthful to ourselves and others – and allow a new creation to take the place of the old one.

When we perceive a certain truth, and try to share that with others, we will be asking those others to reconsider their own perceptions. This kind of change can be difficult, it may even require the destruction of a mental model that person has created with love and care over a lifetime. Sensitivity to this loss, and encouragement to build a new creation will help build a shared perception... as long as we too are open to new perceptions!

Adjust the Practices

Of course, creation, perception and change must be connected to the practical day-to-day reality of our lives. Our family lives, our work lives, our social lives, our volunteer lives, our intellectual lives, our emotional lives, our spiritual lives... our whole lives.

The Agile Work practices are simple to state:

Manage Ourselves
Deliver Frequently
Adapt our Plans
Communicate Powerfully
Test Everything
Measure Value
Remove Obstacles

These practices provide a starting point, a basic set of activities to assist you, your team or your organization in advancing towards the goal you have set for yourselves. You can make these practices succeed by making sure that the Agile Axioms are always remembered and their implications accepted. These practices will set up a virtuous cycle by building trust and allowing truthfulness. More trust and truthfulness will allow for a fuller and more nuanced expression of the practices...

But if these practices become canonized, if they become a rote process imposed and followed blindly, then we have lost sight of the Axioms. We have forgotten to check our practices against the context of *creation, perception and change*.

Agile Work is not about blindly following a list of practices. We follow these practices because we believe that we contribute our most valuable work when we engage *creatively*, when we share and learn from our diverse *perceptions*, and when we recognize that *change* is not a problem, but simply a trigger for growth.

What Do You Do Now?

Ponder the Axioms, use the Practices. Follow the links provided here and in the references. Learn more about all this, and talk about it with friends. Promote the Agile Axioms.

Try Agile Work... at work! Try this out in your family. Try Agile Work with your volunteer community.

*"Let deeds, not words, be
your adorning."**

If you have stories to tell about trying out Agile Work and the Middle Way to Excellence, feel free to write them up as a [guest on Agile Advice](#).



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About Mishkin Berteig

Mishkin Berteig leads, mentors, trains and coaches teams and organizations using agile methodologies including Agile Work, Scrum and Extreme Programming. Mishkin has served as a project manager, a senior consultant, a mentor, a methodology consultant, an instructor, a senior software architect and a team lead on various projects, mostly in the financial services industry. Mishkin has 15 years of professional experience. Mishkin publishes articles and thoughts about Agile Work, Lean thinking and team dynamics on [Agile Advice – Thoughts and Experiences for Practitioners of the Middle Way to Excellence](#). For more details, please view [Mishkin's online resume](#) [pdf].

About Berteig Consulting Inc.

Berteig Consulting Inc. specializes in helping organizations adopt agile practices and disciplines in project management, product development, business management and human resources development. Berteig Consulting Inc., based in Toronto, offers Agile Work speaking, training, consulting, coaching and strategic assessment services around the globe. Berteig Consulting Inc. is the corporate sponsor for the [Agile Advice](#) web site. For more information please visit our web site at <http://www.berteigconsulting.com/> or call us at +1 416 559 1919 or email us at sales@berteigconsulting.com.

Resources

Books

The Goal – Eli Goldratt

Good to Great – Jim Collins

Built to Last – Jim Colling and Jerry Porras

An Introduction to General Systems Thinking – Gerald M. Weinberg

The Answer to How is Yes – Peter Block

Web Sites

Agile Advice – <http://www.agileadvice.com/>

* The quotes are from Baha'u'llah and the Fable of Elephant and Blind Men is traditional from India.