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Why Does a Lean-Agile Approach Encourage Collaborative Decision Making?

> "Diversity trumps ability" - Scott Page John Seely Brown Distinguished University Professor of Complexity, Social Science, and Management

In general, lean and agile thinking moves us away from the traditional approach to making important business decisions - "the leader decides" - to a more collaborative approach.

In the past, the idea that the "leader decides" seemed to worked well. However in today's world this approach is less effective. Today's world is getting more and more complex. The tools we use for decision making in a complicated world are not effective in this complex world. See Why Doesn't Traditional Project Management Work For Software Projects? for more on this.

Many organizations realize that the old approaches don't work, that more perspectives are required, and so put in place increasingly complicated processes to ensure that they pull together all the information required to make a decision. One place I worked put in place a 12-step process "portfolio initiative approval workflow" each with multiple sub-workflows supported by a tool where each person in that workflow was assigned "work" as part of the decision process which then moved on to the next step, and so on. The problem with this approach is there is still no total understanding or alignment on the decisions as each discipline is treated as an independent silo. Worse since it is a serial workflow, it takes a long time for any decision to go through the system (in this case, the decision to do something often took longer than the process of implementation) which reduces our ability to respond to change.

Lean and agile approaches encourage collaboration to address problems with more traditional approaches to decision making. Collaboration:

- Ensures that we hear all the aspects of a subject we are making a decision on through direct involvement from all the different disciplines involved and so become aware not only of what we are intending, but also potential constraints and risks, and even contrary viewpoints.
- Ensures we have an aligned view of the subject as a result of modifying what we thought based on the other sources of information. People come into the discussion with their viewpoint on a specific decision, but as a result of collaboration they end up with an aligned view:
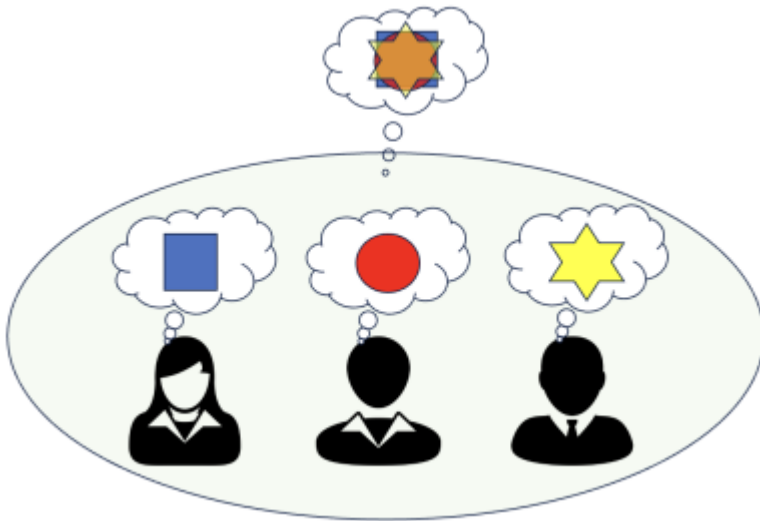
- Helps us to overcome our personal biases when making decisions. See What Inbuilt Biases Do We Have That Impede Good Decision Making? for some ideas on this.
- Creates a "better" decision by leveraging everyone's perspective and working together toward the decision. Often I am surprised by the decision a team of people comes up with in that
  - I have to acknowledge that the final decision was better than mine when I work collaboratively.
  - I have found that I will often not know who had the "better" idea as it emerges from the discussion - people pinging off each other.
- Usually means a faster decision. This drive for collaboration does not mean that we do not make decisions, or that decisions will necessarily take a long time. The point of getting everyone together on a decision is to ensure we hear everyone and then decide. There may be preparation work required before getting to this nexus, but the overall process should be very quick. It is especially quick when you compare it to the serial "process" (X hands over to Y who hands over to Z …) approach described above, or when you think about how many meetings you would have to schedule to get to a specific decision on something (setup meeting, missed a key person, setup next meeting, need more data, setup next meeting, …, revisit decision, …)

All this collaboration can sound a little "namby-pamby". There is no doubt the approach will improve decision making. But if the decision is not supported by execution, then we might as well not have bothered. Once we have made a decision we need to support that decision with a working agreement from all those involved. The working agreement is:

> "Disagree and commit" - Various attributions

In other words, once we have made a decision, all the people involved in that decision commit to doing what is required to execute, even if the decision was not what they wanted. We cannot get the benefit of the decision if some people do not support the execution because "well, I didn't want to do it that way". Further, the working agreement is that we will continue this level of execution until a new, joint decision is made.

While the context of this discussion is Portfolio and Program Management, the reality is that this discussion holds true for all levels of an organization, teams to executive - collaboration amongst diverse

opinions improves decision making in complex environments.

This does not mean all decisions are made this way. If the problem you are dealing with is pretty clear, apply the best practice and get on with it. If the problem you are dealing seems to be chaotic, then just make a call (do something, anything) so you can understand better what you need to do. Or sometimes, someone has just decided, and we just need to get on with it. The purpose of this discussion is to recognize our world is increasingly complex, and that we should use decision making approaches have the potential to offer better outcomes where that makes sense.

And while it might be implied in the discussion above, it should be noted that the benefits of collaboration also apply to work products. For example, this is the reason we work with teams when we are working business cases at the portfolio level, all the way to user story definition for teams. This is why "pair programming" is more effective than a single developer working something. This is the reason most effective coaches like to pair with other coaches and other interested parties when developing new materials, courses, etc.

Want To Know More?

- For more on the systems case for collaboration see What is the Best Approach to Making Decisions in Our Context?
- A specific example of the wrong approach to decision making putting a project plan in place which includes identification of individuals to do the work - FTE's - see Under what conditions is Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) resource planning effective?.

FAQ, Collaboration, DecisionMaking, WorkingAgreement

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