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Thinking Agile: Innovative Process Empowers Entrepreneurs

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Michael LeBeau, CEO, Managing Partner, Founder, Scrum50

As an entrepreneur, your job is to get new concepts converted into new products or services that you can launch into the market as quickly as possible. What Six Sigma did for continuous quality improvement, the "agile" process is now doing for innovators at companies large and small.

'Agile methodology' originated with software developers, whose goal it was to deliver more value to the users of software products. At the same time, manufacturing companies were pioneering 'lean management.' There is a great similarity between the two methods. Lean started at companies like Toyota, to promote collaboration, cost efficiencies, and speed to market.

Many have read about agile theory. But the plain fact is that few companies are actually *executing* agilely. True agility requires boldness. It entails re-learning how creativity happens. It calls for a forward-thinking leader who agrees with the paradigm shift inherent in agile methodology.

Agile is revolutionary in three ways:

- o Produces great work in the shortest period of time;
- o Gains huge efficiencies with leaner creative teams; and
- o Improves the quality of client output by staying highly focused.

The agile process also calls for less time to be spent in meetings in which you talk about what you might do and more time doing it. In this way, decisions are less subjective, since they're based on behavioral data.

Agile pushes the envelope, testing ideas so they sink or swim. The key is securing real-world feedback. You start by determining what a "minimally viable product" (MVP) may look like. You examine how quickly you can:

- o Articulate your MVP and create a prototype;
- o Get your MVP into the hands of would-be customers; and
- o Validate your idea via customer feedback. Specifically, do they like it? Would they buy it? And what can be improved?

The challenge is to perfect your MVP asap. This may take several attempts, i.e.,



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launching the product, measuring customer response, then modifying it to reflect that feedback — incrementally adding functionality.

In the process, agile methodology transforms your business to a culture of *doing*. Going agile means giving a role to each team member so that everyone is involved in getting things done. Agile flattens hierarchies by empowering middle managers to field test and prove out new concepts.

For sure, agile theory wasn't designed for companies' comfort. True agility means adjusting to creative disruption. Agile punctures complacency by:

- o Eliminating dog-and-pony shows;
- o Devaluing "gut" opinion in favor of objective data; and
- o Demonstrating that failure *is* an option. Failure not only needs to be tolerated, but is basic to any honest testing regime.

With each initiative, the agile practitioner is placing a small bet. Naturally, not every bet will pay off. But some will. One of the best features of the agile process is that failure occurs when your bets are small, i.e., below the radar — limiting any damage, but providing fruitful data.

Where success is concerned, agile is not only superior — it's inescapable. Agile leaves traditional business models in the dust. Today's always-on consumers mean the prized 12- to 18-month new-product planning cycle is a thing of the past. The traditional model was okay back when companies could still afford to make big bets, and be wrong once in a while. But companies no longer have the budgets — or timelines — to make investments in concepts that don't work. Today it's smarter and quicker to make a lot of small bets, then scale up those ideas that *do* work.

'Lean' and 'agile' are increasingly influencing entrepreneurs. Those brave enough to embrace agile learn to reconcile themselves to the fundamental changes they need to make internally. They also face up to the more difficult challenge of bringing clients along in the transition to 'thinking agile.'

About the Author

Michael LeBeau is founder, managing partner & CEO of Scrum50. A serial entrepreneur, LeBeau's first job was selling premiums to the beverage industry. After landing Miller Brewing and Pepsi-Cola as clients, he assumed management posts at several marketing agencies where accounts included Pepsi-Cola, Guinness, Cadbury Beverages, IBM, UST. In 1994, he formed an interactive division at Creative Alliance. In 1997, he founded Byte Interactive. Byte was acquired by Story Worldwide in 2007, and LeBeau stayed on for two years as CMO. In 2010, he founded digital shopper marketing agency WELD media. WELD was acquired by Marketing Drive in 2012; then both were acquired by Match Marketing Group, where LeBeau became managing partner, digital initiatives.

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