

Deep Practices of Agile Project Management

Presented by Steve March

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11 – 12:30pm and 1:15-2:30pm

Abstract

We're all generating our product backlog, planning sprints, holding daily stand-up meetings, building potentially shippable product increments, and conducting retrospectives. These are great and essential agile practices. But what does it really take from us as human beings to BE agile? In this experiential workshop, we will explore the deep human practices of agile project management. These practices will reorient us to ourselves and our team mates in ways that takes us beyond the technical practices of agile project management.

In this workshop, we will explore these deep practices by doing them. Please come prepared to learn something about yourself. You will leave this workshop with new observations about yourself and how you interact with others that will take you to the next step in your learning. And we'll have a lot of fun along the way.

Bio of Presenter

I am a leadership coach and business consultant who partners with leaders and teams in software companies to generate new and innovative ways of working (and living) that are more effective and sustainable than traditional ways.

My approach is founded upon the observation that people not technologies, are at the center of software development. When we take technology to be at the center, we adopt practices for developing software that tend to be very wasteful and are not sustainable.

I have worked in the software industry for 15 years as a developer, tester, process designer, and quality manager. The last 10 years have been spent applying key insights from developmental psychology, practical philosophy, and somatics to help leaders and teams re-center their efforts on people and eliminate wasteful practices. My current position is manager of a team of internal coaches and consultants. Together we are exploring new frontiers of effectiveness and agility at the nexus of people, technologies, and practices.

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Overview

On September 7, I offered an introduction to applying Somatic Coaching to learning and building fundamental “deep practices” that are helpful in agile project management. The distinctions and practices that I introduced come from the tradition of Somatic Coaching founded by Dr. Richard Strozzi Heckler which is a synthesis of several other traditions including Ontological Coaching founded by Dr. Fernando Flores. Both traditions are deep in their maturity and rich in application having been in use for more than 25 years.

When skillfully introduced to agile teams, these practices build the skills of the team members in how to work together more effectively especially in situations where there is a lot of uncertainty and a lot of change.

The practices I introduced come from about 10 days worth of training which can be packaged and customized to suit the needs of teams down to 1 day of training.

This brief paper accompanies the live presentation at the 2006 Scrum Exchange. Given the experiential nature of the presentation, it is not intended to stand on its own but instead to serve as a reminder of the exercises and practices to those who participated and to offer some additional background and reading for those who have an interest.

What is a Deep Practice?

Generating product backlogs, planning sprints, daily stand-up meetings, and even retrospectives are not deep practices. Deep practices are the practices that we do because we are human beings living with and coordinating with other human beings. They have more to do with our humanness than with Scrum or any other approach to agile project management.

Why study them if we already do them? Because, for the most part, they are invisible to us. These deep practices are to us humans as water is to fish. And because they are invisible to us it is nearly impossible to develop skill in using these practices. So the point in distinguishing them and practicing them in a safe environment is to 1) assess how skillful we are with these practices and 2) to build our skill through repeated practicing.

The list of deep practices is long. Here are the ones that I covered in the presentation.

- Centering and extending
- Listening (and listening to our listening)
- Coping with breakdowns in listening through open conversation
- Coordinating action using requests
- Accepting and declining requests
- Building trust
- Cultivating empowering moods

There are certainly other deep practices that I didn't cover. Some of them are:

- Blending (which builds on centering and extending)
- Resolving breakdowns
- Responding to the future (instead of the past)
- Leading
- Coaching
- Learning and learning to learn
- Authenticity
- Dignity
- Inquiry
- Cultivating empowering narratives
- Coordinating action using offers
- Working with declarations
- Working with assessments
- Working with emotions
- Resolving conflict
- Building public identity
- ...

At first it may seem like a strange idea to do practices with our bodies as a way of learning agile project management. After all, isn't project management really a mental activity? My answer to that is yes, it is a mental activity but it is also something we do with our bodies. Here's how I think about it.

Think of learning to do agile project management like learning to play a sport. In learning to play a sport – say basketball – there are certain skills that you need to have (e.g., lay ups, free throws, dribbling the ball, passing, defensive moves, offensive moves, etc.). You learn those skills through practicing them until they become second nature. Why? Because when you need to rely on your skills, you usually don't have time to think about how to do them. Instead, you just have to do them automatically and quickly. And your actions had better be skillful if you want to win the game.

If we understand that learning results in the ability to take new actions skillfully, then we can see that the body – the domain of action – has a critical role in learning. So the body is also the domain of learning as well as action. When we learn a skill to the point that it is second nature, we say that we embody that skill.

I see learning to be a skillful player on an agile project like learning to be a skillful basketball player. There are certain skills that we need in order to respond effectively to the challenges of agile projects (e.g., make requests, accept requests, decline requests, stay empowered, build trust, listen and skillfully cope with breakdowns in listening, etc.).

So my invitation to you is to engage these deep practices, to learn about yourself, your current level of skill, and to work with them to become a more skillful player on your next agile project.

Background Reading

The practices that I presented come from a tradition called Somatic Coaching. I recommend all of his books, but particularly:

Holding the Center: Sanctuary in a Time of Confusion by Richard Strozzi Heckler

The Anatomy of Change: A Way to Move Through Life's Transitions by Richard Strozzi Heckler

Being Human At Work: Brining Somatic Intelligence Into Your Professional Life edited by Richard Strozzi Heckler

In addition, a series of volumes on Ontological Coaching is emerging from the writings of Alan Sieler. At the present, only Volume 1 is available. The focus of this volume is the linguistic basis of Ontological Coaching. I recommend this series of books as well.

Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change by Alan Sieler

All of these books are available from Amazon.

Centering Practice

Engage the practice of centering from the moment you rise in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night. Simple but not easy at first.

Read the chapter on *Centering: The Unity of Action and Being* in “Holding the Center” by Richard Strozzi Heckler. In this chapter, he writes:

To center ourselves is to shape ourselves in a particular way to life. It is a pattern of organization that expresses the self we are at any given moment. Center is a state of unity in which effective action, emotional balance, mental alertness, and spiritual vision are in a harmonious balance. *When we're centered, our actions are coherent with what we care about [emphasis, mine].* [p. 96]

Practice standing centered. Experience yourself in length, width, and depth. Drop your attention into your belly a few inches below your navel.

Length	Grounded in the Earth and connected to Spirit or a higher purpose
Width	Connected to other people and the environment around you
Depth	Situated in your history, looking into your future

Experience your body sensations, your emotions, and your mood.

When you are centered you are connected to what's most important to you (concerns) and you can move powerfully to take care of your concerns. So, when you are not centered, you may not be connected to what's most important to you and your movement will not be as powerful.

Practice moving from center. Walk around the room from center. Walk into your day from center. Drive from center. Maintain center throughout your day. Every time you touch a door knob, check to see if you are centered.

Practice re-centering. When you notice that you have been thrown off center, come back to center. You might be thrown off center by something someone else said or did. The practice of centering is probably more appropriately named the practice of re-centering. Pay attention to what kinds of things tend to throw you off center. Also pay attention to how you re-center.

The relevance of centering to agile project management is simple. We are at our peak of agility, adaptability, and effectiveness when we can meet the chaos, confusion, uncertainty, and change inherent in life from a place of centeredness.

On a typical agile project (or any project for that matter), there are many things that can throw us off center: we discover new tasks, the demo fails, we realize we forgot to add something to the backlog, our product owner or our customer changes their mind about priorities, we receive feedback that our work isn't good enough, it doesn't look like we'll

get everything done, our task burn down is behind the curve, our mother-in-law pays a surprise visit two days before our deadline, our cat has babies and some of the die, etc.

Life is full of things that throw us off center. Think of life as a school for centering. It is constantly challenging us by throwing us off center, into ineffectiveness, into disempowering moods, into negative self-judgment, into disconnection from what we deeply care about, into disconnection from our talents and skills. Centering restores all of that.

Listening Practice

The first thing to get is that listening is not a passive thing. It is not just registering the sound waves echoing from others on the surface of your ear and hearing exactly what they are communicating to you. Instead listening is an active thing. Let me say this in a more pointed way – listening is an action.

Passive Interpretation of Listening	Active Interpretation of Listening
I speak.	I say what I say.
You listen.	You “listen” what you “listen.”
Then, responding to what I said, you speak.	You reply to me based on what you chose to hear me say or what you believe you heard me say – that is, you reply based on your interpretation of what I said, or what you “listened.”
I listen.	I “listen” what I “listen.”

Notice that in the active interpretation column I am using the work “listen” in a peculiar way in saying things like “You ‘listen’ what you ‘listen.’” I’m doing this on purpose to support you in taking on this new, active, interpretation of listening.

Now, is it any surprise why there are miscommunications? Isn’t it also a miracle that we sometimes actually do understand each other?

In introducing this distinction I want to open up a few avenues into the area of listening and communication.

First, it is okay to say “I don’t understand.” or “I don’t think you’re understanding me.” The best way to work with a communication breakdown is first to declare it. This allows us to slow down and back track if necessary to try to fill in what isn’t being understood.

As the listener, the more our “listening” is the same as the “listening” of the speaker, the more likely we are to communicate effectively. Said another way, the more similar our ways of making interpretations are, the less likely we are to misinterpret each other.

The practice we have for building shared “listening” – shared ways of making interpretations – is conversation. But not just any old conversation. It must be conversation in which we recognize that we are miscommunicating and we take the time to resolve the breakdowns in communicating. As we resolve these breakdowns, we build sharing “listening.”

In order to have this kind of conversation which building shared listening, we have to employ the skill of listening to each other's listening. That is to say we have to learn to listen for how we each make interpretations.

Making, Accepting, and Declining Requests

Effectively coordinating action with others on the team is critical to the success of agile projects.

One of the key ways that coordination is accomplished is through making effective requests for what you need from others. An effective request is made by directly requesting the fulfillment of certain conditions of satisfaction. These conditions include standards for the work and a time-frame for the work to be completed.

And when receiving requests from others, it is important to effectively either accept or decline those requests¹.

There are several coordination breakdowns that can arise from this simple practice of requesting and promising.

- Not making requests. Expecting that everyone simply knows what needs to be done and will do it. This includes not communicating expectations.
- Making unclear and therefore ineffective requests. The request doesn't specify conditions of satisfaction including standards and time-frame.
- Not observing the mood of requesting. Some people make requests aggressively as demands or orders and some people make requests indirectly, slyly, or in negative moods like frustration, skepticism, cynicism, etc. The mood of the requestor affects how the listener "listens" the request. And this affects how they understand the request and whether they are inclined to accept it.
- Promising even when you aren't clear what is being requested. Promising to deliver something and not understanding what that is, is a recipe for generating dissatisfaction and distrust.
- Not declining requests when you are already fully committed. Not declining – saying NO – is one of the primary sources of over-commitment.
- Breaking promises without care. This erodes trust (see next section). It is possible to break promises with care by revoking them as soon as you know you can't fulfill them, by apologizing, by making new offers that you can fulfill, and by being open to new and/or changed requests.

¹ There are other possible responses such as counter-offering. Since we didn't cover these in the live presentation, I'm not going to discuss them here.

Building Trust

What is trust? Trust is a rich and complex subject. We all want to be trusted and to work and live with others that we trust. But what is it?

In the tradition of Ontological Coaching in which I practice, trust is distinguished as an compound assessment that we make that is composed of four distinct assessments. They are:

1. Assessment of **sincerity** – this is an assessment that the person is being genuine and that their public actions align with their private intentions. We assess someone as sincere when we feel that they don't have a "hidden agenda" for their involvement with us.
2. Assessment of **competence** – this is an assessment that the person making a commitment to you has the necessary skill to fulfill the commitment to your satisfaction.
3. Assessment of **reliability** – this is an assessment that the person making a commitment will meet the commitment. We make this assessment based on our history with the person. Assessments of reliability are closely related to assessments of competence. One cannot be reliable without being competent.
4. Assessment of **involvement** (care) – this is an assessment that the person either shares our concerns or is sufficiently attuned to our concerns. We aren't likely to trust someone if we feel that their concerns do not overlap with our concerns.

Breakdowns in trust can happen in any one or more of these assessments. And because we have these distinctions, we can be more specific in the actions we take to cope with distrust.

Furthermore, we can make these assessments in different domains. For example, we might trust someone to pick our child up after school and drop them off at our house but not trust someone to debug a problem with an interrupt handler.

In addition, trust is not a static assessment. Instead, trust is dynamic and can be built just as well as it can be eroded.

Trust is relevant to the concerns of agile project management because when it is present between the team members, things flow more smoothly. When it is absent – when there is distrust instead – there is more friction and resistance that must be worked against in order to get work done.

Trust is built through making and fulfilling commitments. Trust is eroded by either not making commitments or making them but not fulfilling them. This is the good news. Because what it says is that if we find ourselves in a relationship of distrust, trust can be built.

Trust is a deep subject. We aren't fully doing it justice in this brief exploration but this will have to suffice for now.

Cultivating Empowering Moods

What is a mood? How is it different from an emotion? Emotions are to the daily weather, as moods are to the climate. Moods are in the background. Their presence colors all of the interpretations we make.

- Moods determine how you feel.
- Moods determine how you see the future.
- Moods make certain possibilities for action doable while others aren't doable.
- Different moods produce different listening.
- Moods determine morale.

Moods are relevant to agile project management because they are predispositions to action. When we are in certain moods, certain actions aren't possible for us. Take the moods in the following table as examples.

Some Empowering Moods

Ambition
Awe
Committed
Curiosity
Diligent
Energized
Hopeful
Inspired
Looking forward
Openness
Playfulness
Respect
Trust

Some Disempowering Moods

Cynicism
Depressed
Despair
Frustration
Guilt
Resentment
Resignation
Skepticism
Stoic
Uncaring
Victimization

The moods in each column predispose us to certain kinds of interpretations and certain kinds of actions. And some of those actions are helpful on agile projects and some are actually harmful to the project.

Here's the rub - we don't get to choose our moods, instead we get thrown into our moods. Here is an example. Pretend that you are the Scrum Master of a project and you got the following email from your boss.

I got your report last week that your team was significantly behind on your planned task burn down for this sprint. I'm sure that your team has been putting in overtime to catch back up before the end of the sprint in two weeks.

I forgot to tell you last week that the VP wants to meet with your team tomorrow at 9am to see a demo.

I assume that's not a problem since we're always working on potentially shippable product.

See ya tomorrow,

-Steve

What mood does this throw you into? Frustration? Playfulness? Resentment? Curiosity? Despair? Excitement? Optimism? Or something else? (Different people will be thrown into different moods.)

Our moods arise (we get thrown into them) as a result of the interpretations we have about the future. This is a key point. What future did you imagine after reading this email? And what mood did your interpretation about the future throw you into? Is it the kind of mood that you want to show up to a meeting with the VP in? Will it be helpful to you? If your mood is frustration, the meeting with the VP may not go very well. If your mood is ambition, the meeting may go a different way. Why? Because the mood shapes your "listening" and the actions that are possible for you in that meeting. An empowering mood opens your "listening," allows you to be more responsible and agile, and frankly, more fun to team with.

Notice that the name of this practice is cultivating empowering moods and not changing your mood. What is cultivating? Cultivating is a practice of developing and conditioning. When we cultivate empowering moods we are increasing the likelihood that we will be thrown into empowering moods instead of disempowering moods in the face of adversity, confusion, uncertainty, and change.

There are many practices for cultivating new moods:

1. Change the conversations you are in (particularly about the future) – both the people you converse with and what you converse about (moods can be contagious)
2. Being careful not to project the past into the future by cultivating new narratives (stories) about what is possible in the future
3. Change your posture (try centering as a regular practice)
4. Make new declarations for possibility
5. Move your body (walking, running, dancing, exercise, stretching, yoga, tai chi, Pilates, etc.)
6. Change your physical surroundings (art, plants, flowers, use of space, windows, etc.)
7. Spend time in nature
8. Spend time with children, family, and loved ones
9. Listen to music

10. Get a coach

When working on a team, take responsibility for your moods, how contagious they are, and the impact – both positive and negative – that they have on your team members. Give people permission to point out your rotten moods.