

Five Ways to Align the Agile Enterprise

1. SET THE TERMINOLOGY

Terminology should be set across the enterprise to break down communication barriers from the teams through to the executives. Agile is acronym rich and confusing for business people with limited agile training to begin with. If the groups do not use common terminology this challenge is accentuated. AgileCraft can enforce a common terminology set and can optionally be aligned with Jira's terminology as well. This gets the enterprise speaking the same language.

2. CONNECT THE BUSINESS TO THE TECHNOLOGY

The epic (similar to a project historically) in AgileCraft should be consistently used to link business to development. The epic should require a base level of data to capture intake, budget, approval, high level estimation, business case and link to corporate strategy. By using this feature all business units and portfolios are aligned for financial, strategic and progress reporting.

3. FIX THE NUMBER OF BACKLOG LEVELS & ESTIMATION METHODS

The enterprise should require a consistent level of backlog decomposition across all teams regardless of agile maturity level and a common unit of estimation across those levels (i.e. the enterprise uses the same method to estimate the epic - either team week, person week, points, WSJF or t-shirt size). A common structure is Strategy -> Theme -> Epic -> Feature -> Story. The flatter this hierarchy the easier it will become for the portfolio, programs and teams to right-size their backlogs and become predictable. Other levels can be added but the complexity and estimation accuracy will likely be affected. The task level below the story can be optional depending on level of agile maturity. Often a portfolio will work with tasks until the teams reach a high level of predictability and are able to break stories down to low point levels at all times. Once predictability is achieved, tasks can be removed and the teams can rely on story points alone. A standard depth of backlog and method to size the backlog improves predictability, visibility and communication across the enterprise.

4. GET A COMMON PLANNING CADENCE

A common planning cadence is needed to drive consistency across the enterprise and enable cross-program / cross-portfolio planning. Decoupling planning from delivery is virtually the only reliable way to help all of the teams align risks, objectives and dependencies. Getting all teams to line up around quarters, for example, is a common way to get everyone rowing and planning together. Although not required, getting the teams on a common sprint cadence increases efficiency and productivity with another frequent alignment mechanism across teams.

5. IMPLEMENT DEPENDENCY MANAGEMENT

A team to team dependency management process for all feature level delivery is required. This process enables the teams to plan their roadmaps and delivery schedules. Without a firm commitment of teams that is strongly aligned to the calendar, it is near impossible for teams to commit to dates if they are dependent on another team. Best practices once this is in place is to analyze dependency clustering activity in AgileCraft and then optimize programs and teams to reduce the amount of dependencies. Dependencies are an agility killer and the best way to reduce them is to modify the technology or the structure of portfolios, programs and teams (or a combination of both). This is very difficult to do so the first step is strong management of dependencies.

Other items that are important to consider in the early stages of transformation after the baseline above is in place: Dedicated teams are the cornerstone to predictability with agile and should be sought wherever possible. Having a good level of backlog groomed before planning begins is critical to success as well. Teams need to have well understood backlogs that are out in front of the delivery side of the house. If possible aligning the states and workflow across all teams would streamline reporting and communication. Risk definition and regular risk management for all Feature level delivery items where a significant impact on variation in outcomes is advised for better outcomes. Acceptance Criteria used at the Epic, Feature, Story level is a very solid way to ensure that needs are met once the backlog item is delivered. Constraints on acceptance criteria is great way to add guardrails for compliance by program as needed. Aligning the work to strategies and themes for all business units (with placeholders where definition does not exist) provides invaluable reporting at the executive level that can be used in the future to place better bets and ensure that we are working on what will impact the business the most.