

A group of people are gathered around a whiteboard in a meeting. A woman in a yellow sweater is writing on the whiteboard with a blue marker. Two men are standing next to her, looking at the whiteboard. The background is a blurred office environment.

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THE AGILE PMO: BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

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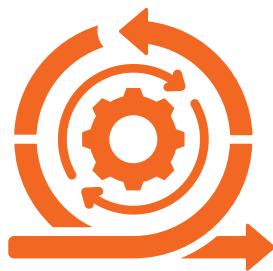
The business environment is a constant state of change, with new technologies, new business models, and new disrupters emerging on a regular basis. To maintain their competitive edge, organizations must constantly adapt. Customer expectations continue to escalate, requiring a focus on delivering personalized experiences with minimal friction. Competition has also gone global, demanding streamlined processes for delivering products and services quickly and efficiently, regardless of the customer's location.

Faced with these and other challenges, organizations are exploring **Agile program management organizations (PMOs)** in their quest to become more responsive to change and to deliver value to customers faster.

What's the difference between Agile and traditional PMOs?

Like traditional PMOs, Agile PMOs are internal organizations that standardize and govern delivery processes, policies, and methods across all areas of the business. However, Agile PMOs differ from their traditional counterparts in several essential ways:

- **Focus on advising and supporting rather than controlling.** Because Agile teams are self-organizing and self-managing, they need the flexibility to make their own decisions in order to adapt quickly to changing needs.
- **More collaborative and less hierarchical.** Agile teams are cross-functional and work together closely to deliver value to customers. Agile PMOs support this collaborative approach by providing teams with the resources and tools they need to succeed.
- **Oriented towards value delivery over process compliance.** Agile teams are constantly iterating and improving their products and services, and they need to be able to move quickly without being bogged down by bureaucracy.



Agile PMOs are more flexible, adaptable, and collaborative than their traditional counterparts.

In short, Agile PMOs are more flexible, adaptable, and collaborative than their traditional counterparts. Following the servant leadership principles of Agile, they're designed to support teams delivering value to customers as quickly and efficiently as possible.

	Traditional PMO	Agile PMO
Orientation	Controlling project teams	Advising and supporting Agile teams
Management style	More hierarchical	More collaborative
Primary focus	Process compliance	Value delivery



What does the Agile program manager (APM) do?

In an Agile PMO, the role of the Agile program manager (APM)—called the Agile release train engineer (ARTE) within SAFe frameworks—is pivotal to ensuring successful operation of Agile teams. The APM is responsible for the following deliverables:

With dozens of teams running Agile processes, the APM ensures they continue to ladder up to the larger goal, avoiding the risks of the program devolving into chaos or teams becoming entirely self-focused and delivering in a silo. Specific responsibilities include the following.

Coordination of Agile teams

- Maintaining transparency into what each team is working on
- Building a program backlog that's accessible to all
- Standardizing terminology, tools, and delivery increments
- Defining the right level of documentation
- Encouraging interaction between teams

The APM will also take a big-picture perspective in looking at high-performing and low-performing teams and identifying the issues that contribute to their success and struggles. An effective Agile program manager will learn from what is going well and step in to help shore up the teams that have room for improvement.

Schedule management

In Agile, time is a valuable resource, and iterative cycles are clearly defined. The APM ensures the Agile ceremonies such as Sprint planning, daily stand-ups, and retrospectives occur as needed.

These ceremonies are integral to Agile's iterative approach, enabling teams to inspect and adapt their work. The Agile program manager is instrumental in ensuring that as business needs change, the roadmap evolves while continuously adhering to Agile principles.



Dependency management

The APM takes on the crucial role of identifying, tracking, and managing stream dependencies within the program, working with team leads to ensure that these are addressed promptly, minimizing any delays or impediments.

Effective dependency management ensures that the work of individual teams is well-aligned and that all teams are progressing towards the common program goals. By addressing dependencies proactively, the APM helps keep the program on track and ensures that the value delivery remains consistent.

Risk management

The Agile PMO owns program-level risk assessments and remediation. If unique organizational risks are affecting delivery of value, it's up to the PMO to address them promptly—all while building an organization that avoids blame and empowers teams to work through problems quickly. Psychological safety for all Agile team members is vital for the success of the program. Creating a culture of safety is an important part of the APM's job.

Building the Agile PMO: 5 proven strategies for success



1. Establish the mission

Establishing a clear mission for the Agile PMO provides a foundation for

- Governance centered on how to drive the organization's evolution to Agile methodology
- Bridging the gap between the Agile team and other teams delivering value in the same Agile release trains (ARTs) that are not following Agile practices
- Coordination of efforts to evolve and mature Agile capabilities and to deliver value under the chosen methodology (SAFe, Scrum at Scale, etc.)

The mission also embodies the nature of how Agile teams measure success. In contrast to the "big-bang release" goals of legacy approaches, the Agile PMO gauges progress in terms of how well the organization is applying Agile concepts. Once a methodology is selected, the Agile PMO establishes governance, grounded in its mission, for adhering to the methodology across all the program's Agile teams.

The Agile PMO's mission should provide a big-picture vision that aligns with the organization's values and priorities. Ideally, all stakeholders are on board with this vision, and it serves as the basis for all team decisions, helping them stay on track as they deliver their increments.



2. Loosen up: focus on results, not process

One of the most critical principles of Agile transformation is embracing the shift from a process-centric approach to an outcome-driven mindset. By focusing on outcomes rather than rigid processes, Agile PMOs can unlock their teams' full potential and deliver true value to the organization.

Maintaining an outcome-centric focus requires being vigilant about not falling into traditional program management methods closely associated with waterfall processes. Waterfall, with its sequential and inflexible approach, can impede innovation and hinder the adaptive nature of Agile methodologies. Instead of rigidly following predefined processes,

effective Agile PMOs emphasize flexibility, responsiveness, and a customer-focused mindset.

To successfully shift the focus towards outcomes, it's essential to build a PMO team that is aligned with Agile principles. Best practices for achieving this include:

Coaching

Agile coaching can help team members understand the Agile mindset, principles, and practices, fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement within the PMO.



Training

Comprehensive training programs help ensure that teams are well-versed in Agile methodologies and tools. Training should cover a range of topics, from Agile fundamentals to advanced techniques that are relevant to the organization.

Change management across the organization

Recognize that Agile transformation is not limited to the PMO. To build a focus on outcomes, ensure that change management strategies are deployed

across the business, including defining roles and responsibilities for Agile practices and aligning other departments with Agile principles.

Staffing with Agile practitioners

When building the PMO team, seek out project and program managers who are seasoned Agile practitioners. Their experience will prove invaluable in guiding the PMO toward outcomes and away from traditional process-oriented thinking.



By focusing on outcomes, Agile PMOs can unlock their teams' full potential and deliver true value to the organization.

3. Push decisions downstream

Agile methodologies introduced a fundamental shift in decision-making philosophy—the concept of pushing decisions downstream. This strategic shift empowers teams, promotes collaboration, and fosters a more adaptive approach to project and product management.

Empowering the team

To push decisions downstream effectively, it's essential to empower the Agile teams responsible for delivering the work. Instead of relying heavily on a traditional steering committee or senior leaders to make every decision, Agile PMOs should embrace a culture of trust and delegation.

Moving away from a command-and-control mindset

The command-and-control model, prevalent in traditional project management, can be stifling in an Agile environment. Agile principles emphasize self-organizing teams. By relinquishing some control and giving teams the autonomy to make decisions within their domain, Agile PMOs enable faster responses to challenges and opportunities.





Engaging the teams in decision-making

Agile teams are closest to the work, making them best positioned to determine the most suitable path forward. Encourage teams to participate in decision-making processes related to scope, prioritization, and problem-solving. Their insights and expertise can lead to more informed and effective decisions.

Ensuring clear communication

Program managers (or RTEs in SAFe) act as communication hubs within ARTs. They facilitate the flow of information, ensuring that teams are informed and aligned with the overarching program goals. This transparency facilitates collective decision-making.

Removing obstacles at the program level

Program managers/RTEs embody servant leadership qualities. They are responsible for removing obstacles and impediments that arise at the program level, particularly those that affect the program's progress as a whole, allowing teams to focus on their work without undue distractions.

4. Always be measuring

An impactful Agile PMO is constantly measuring their results against the business' priorities, keeping the question "Are we making progress on things of value?" at top of mind. In an Agile framework, measuring results goes far beyond adhering to processes or hitting time and budget milestones.

Establishing measurement protocols for an Agile PMO involves three vital tasks:

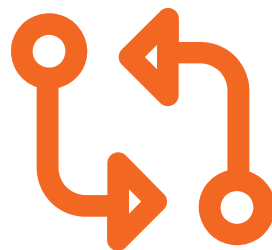
1. Decide on a handful of KPIs against which to measure progress. Ensure

the types of measurements selected are productive and not misused, creating a toxic team environment.

2. Establish feedback loops involving teams, stakeholders, and customers.

Use this information to make adjustments and measure progress on Agile adoption, and be transparent about what is and is not working.

3. Balance feedback against more measurable, data-driven KPIs and resolve any inconsistencies.



The Agile PMO constantly measures results against the business' priorities.

5. Be open to breaking the mold

You may encounter resistance to the Agile process or other aspects of Agile that the organization's culture cannot overcome quickly enough to move the program forward.

This can happen, for example, in certain industries with stringent regulations (e.g. banking, healthcare) or product requirements (e.g. manufacturing,

construction) that have hard milestones they are required to achieve. These milestones are difficult to adjust after the fact due to factors outside the team. In these cases, Agile PMOs should remain adaptable and open to adding components that may not be "textbook Agile" in the interest of meeting the ultimate goal of delivering value to customers.



Playing the long game: next steps

The journey to establish an Agile PMO can be an enlightening and transformative experience. Throughout this ebook, we've explored best practices for creating an Agile PMO that drives innovation, collaboration, and adaptability. It's important to remember that establishing the Agile PMO is not the final destination, but a significant milestone in the broader evolution of the organizational culture.

These next steps will help ensure that the Agile PMO continues to thrive and deliver value:

1. Build in continuous improvement.

The Agile PMO is an ongoing initiative that must adapt to changing business needs. Teams should regularly review and reflect on their processes, identifying areas for enhancement and innovation. The business should continue to encourage feedback loops, retrospectives, and necessary adjustments to optimize efficiency and effectiveness.

2. Scale Agile across the organization.

While the Agile PMO might start as a pilot within one department or project, the ultimate goal is often to



scale Agile practices across the entire organization. This involves training more teams, standardizing Agile processes, and ensuring alignment with strategic objectives. Scaling Agile in a manner that aligns with the organization's unique context and culture is imperative.

3. Foster Agile leadership. Leadership is critical to the success of an Agile PMO. As the organization evolves in its Agile journey, it relies on the development and support of leaders who embrace the Agile mindset. Leadership training and coaching will help leaders understand

the nuances of leading in an Agile environment. Leaders should receive continuous encouragement to empower their teams, foster collaboration, and remove obstacles that hinder agility.

The Agile journey is a path of continuous learning and growth where change must be embraced, collaboration fostered, and a commitment to the Agile values and principles maintained. With the right mindset and dedication, the Agile PMO will play a pivotal role in driving the success of the organization in an ever-evolving business landscape.



Establishing the Agile PMO is a milestone in the broader evolution of the organizational culture.

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