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The Agile Management Philosophy In Design: How It Works

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The Agile Management Philosophy in Design: How it Works GEANDY PAVON

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Shortly after Antonio Argibay founded Meridian Design Associate Architects, the Pratt Institute-trained architect noticed a shift occurring within workplace culture. At first, clients were satisfied with seeing a conventional design: cubicles or shared spaces for employees; private offices for management. As digital replaced analog, though, clients wanted something else — even if they had difficulty articulating what that meant.

Companies worldwide realized that to remain competitive in the digital age, better, faster, and more nimble production was essential. After all, digital had revolutionized communications and other enterprise technologies. Workplace management strategies had to change, too. It struck Argibay and his team that workplace design was out of step with new dynamic ways of imagining interior and exterior spaces.

By 2001, a new philosophy, the Agile Manifesto, was codified by seventeen software developers. This product-centered management philosophy established a new dialogue between workplace design and business strategies and presented a novel quality process system that companies

in nearly every industry could adopt to be more flexible in response to customer needs.

The Manifesto's twelve principles had cross-industry applicability. Designers would soon adopt the philosophy's invaluable insights into a practical, space-planning tool. Architects could become advocates for creating environments that supported continuous design iterations early and often for their clients.

The twelve principles dovetailed with the #PeopleFirst values that Argibay and his team had developed over their decades of practices: sustainability, innovation, loyalty, perso nal development, quality, and opportunity. In keeping with Agile's commitment to continuous quality development, the team wove its values into foundational principles for the Agile design process.

- **Culture**: Embrace each other's intellectual achievements.

- **Relationships**: Encourage each other's wellbeing, lifestyle choices, social engagement, and pride in work.

- **Ongoing change**: Continuously advocate for improving product quality.

- **Velocity**: Keep an eye on getting better drafts out as fast as possible.

Argibay says:

Along the way, we learned that designing a workplace has to be more than fitting in people and selecting nice finishes. It's about the intersection of people, culture, workflow, process, and space. The workplace is really a tool for creating a deliverable a product.

Working in a flat world.

Applying Agile's methodology gives Meridian a practical, yet fluid, way to address design conundrums that have impeded clients from achieving goals. Where conventional design processes once called for top-down instructions constrained by political and economic considerations, adherence to contracts and documentation, and fixed processes and tools, Meridian's application of the Agile Philosophy frees up organizations to interact in a "flat," non-hierarchical way.

In an Agile workplace, team members focus on their relationships with each other and with clients. And they show willingness to go back to the drawing board rather than stick to rigid processes and tools.

Agile's emphasis on teamwork, selection of team members, and independence is well-suited to produce faster, better solutions than conventional management structures. The organization of teams in a non-

hierarchical way focuses an Agile workplace on the result rather than the process.

Design solutions that enhance and leverage teamwork are essential. Architectural elements, such as private nooks and biophilic design are critical to facilitating these interactions. Depending on a company's workplace values, the implementation of an egalitarian "civic commons" might be another solution proposed by Meridian's Agile application.

Additional spaces may provide for employees doing heads-down work, and for "sprint planning," a defined amount of time needed to achieve a development goal. Sprints may include discussions about product purpose, assignment of management roles, and selection of team members; a delivery schedule; a daily stand-up work review; a retrospective review to address pluses and minuses; a look forward to the next sprint goal and final product delivery.

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From philosophy to concrete action.

Tactically speaking, Meridian has set out management roles to provide an architectural layout from first client conversation to product delivery.

The product owner lays out the project vision. They define specific tasks and prioritize them so the development team can meet project objectives.

The team leader provides the team with the resources necessary to build out the product efficiently. They interface with people outside the development team, helping them determine if their interactions with the team are useful or not.

The development team executes the project. Team members, with their own specific set of skills, are empowered to manage their own work.

Business owners and stakeholders maintain regular communication with the project owner and team leader and speak with the development team as needed. Argibay says:

Agile gives us a blueprint to prioritize relationships aimed at solving problems — and enjoying each other as people. It lets us live out the values we define as necessary for our success as well as for our clients' success.

Meridian's team speaks often with each other about their workflow. Given the uncertainty that can hamstring the best systems and projects, teams recognize the importance of modifying the Agile Management Philosophy as they see fit, elevating one principle over another throughout the life of a project. Argibay says:

If we designed the same space over and over again, maybe this flexible

management philosophy would not be so critical to our work. But because our clients need solutions on the fly, so do we. Modifying, even changing, our plans has become a fact of life for everybody. Every project we do is unique because our clients have to respond to a competitive landscape in their own unique way.

Indeed, one principle in the Agile Manifesto recommends that teams "welcome changing requirements, even late in development."

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Agile paves a way to the future.

Argibay hopes that in the future people will embrace Agile as an asset in the decision-making process rather than an onerous systems analysis. Argibay says:

Agile is all about encouraging people to be their best selves — to become a citizen of your workplace, one who embraces a long-range design vision while serving colleagues and clients with joy.

Meridian is looking past COVID to a time when Agile continues to help people work with each other in a well-designed physical workplace again. Argibay says:

Virtual communication has been a lifesaver for a lot of companies. But virtual will never replace real-world interactions between people in green, well-designed spaces that contribute to a more efficient workflow.

With a design management philosophy that values individuals and interactions over processes and tools, product iterations over excessive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and agility over unbending rules, Meridian believes that change, coupled with a #PeopleFirst ethos, will be a positive asset for any business. As Argibay says:

Change can ennoble. And, as experience has shown us, Agile definitely lights the way into the future.

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