



BELBIN® AND AGILE: **BUILDING RESPONSIVE TEAMS AND 'FAILING FAST'**

Agile empowers cross-functional teams, enabling them to come together, self-manage and produce complex products in challenging environments. It is credited with higher employee engagement, decreasing the time taken to bring a product to market and greater customer satisfaction.

As a philosophy, Agile is all about identifying the uncertainties within your working environment, and figuring out how to adapt on the fly. With its tenets of prioritising people over process and responding to change, rather than sticking rigidly to a plan, it isn't difficult to see why it might be a popular approach for our current circumstances.

But of course, working at speed with cross-functional teams – who are now primarily virtual teams too – is a big ask. Fortunately, there are a number of synergies between Agile and Belbin Team Roles. Here we examine how Belbin can inform the Agile mindset and boost the performance of Agile teams.

How Agile works

The Agile team is made up of: the Product Owner (a stakeholder and visionary, who understands how the product will fit in with business strategy); a Scrum Leader (the 'player-coach' who manages the project day-to-day), and the Team Members (the project's 'crew', who carry out the project work).

Unlike traditional project management which is focused on a final deliverable, Agile breaks goals down into smaller 'sprints', so that work products can be developed, reviewed and released quickly. This speeds up the process of failure, feedback and improvement.

As well as sprints, the Agile workflow might include a 'daily standup' – a daily meeting to discuss yesterday's work, today's work, and any questions arising. It also includes reviews by the team, peers and managers after each sprint and before the completion of a task.

THE AGILE TEAM IN ACTION

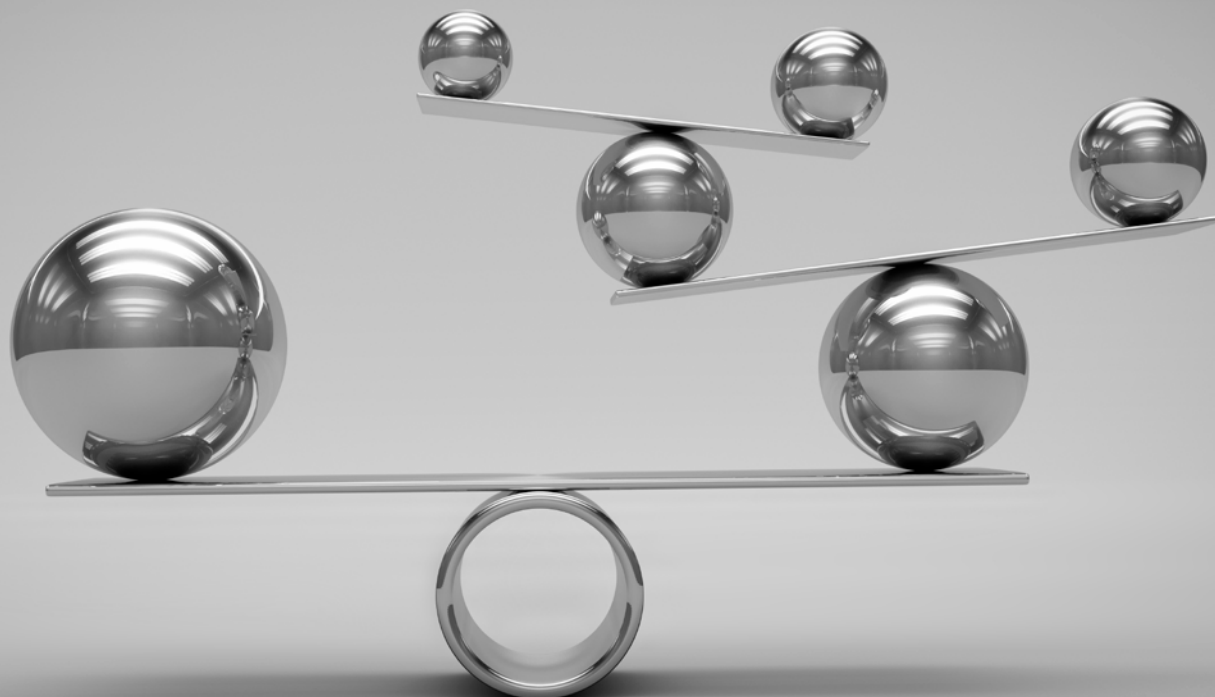
Team composition

Agile teams are cross-functional, yet within the teams, functional role assignment is less explicit, so team members are likely to participate in many different stages of a project, from development to testing and beyond. The idea is that roles should be clear, but also flexible, to allow team members to take initiative. Whilst this way of working can present enormous advantages (the idea is that the team is not dependent on outsiders to progress), it can also result in considerable uncertainty and disruption, and therefore engenders a higher risk of failure.

When composing an Agile team, therefore, it's crucial to consider behavioural roles, so as to understand and anticipate the team's needs throughout the project, and to set individuals up for success.

For example, when testing a product, an Implementer is likely to follow an efficient process, documenting their findings as they go. A Completer Finisher will tend to focus on the finer details (the type face here, the text alignment there), whereas a Resource Investigator is likely to test more sporadically, perhaps following the testing paths they consider most interesting to themselves or the user in question, or following current trends. Anticipating these differences in advance will mean fewer unwelcome surprises at each stage of the project, and can help individuals in the team to appreciate the values of approaches other than their own.





Team size

Another area of synergy with Belbin is that Agile teams are often smaller than traditional working teams, which means that team (rather than group) behaviours are likely to be at play, and enables a more precise calibration of the Team Roles involved. It is worth noting that Dr Belbin's ideal team size is four, carefully constructed to cover all nine roles (or whichever may be required for the team's purposes). With an even number, no one team member has a casting vote, thus placing greater emphasis on decision-making by consensus. (Read more about Belbin and team size.)

With its origins in software development and pair programming, the Agile methodology also espouses the value of working in pairs. This kind of working has the potential for high efficiency and productivity. However, it necessitates even closer scrutiny to Team Role chemistry to promote success, since it leaves nowhere for individuals to hide when disagreements occur. Whilst it is important to pair individuals with complementary working styles, having some shared behaviours ensures common ground. The Belbin Working Relationship Reports provide an in-depth analysis on behavioural similarities and differences between two individuals, identifying synergies and pointing up potential pitfalls.



Playing up, playing down

When choosing a 'Scrum Master', teams are advised to select someone with considerable experience in executing the role. In addition, facing both Product Owners and Team Members, this person—the 'player-coach'—needs to call upon the greatest diversity of behaviours and skills, in order to meet the expectations of both parties. Whilst some individuals have a smaller number of defined Team Role preferences, others can call upon a greater variety of behaviours in their preferred and manageable range, which would perhaps lend them to the role.



SUCCESS AND FAILURE: THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF AN AGILE TEAM

Adaptability

The Agile process is intended to be iterative, which has notable benefits for an ever-changing market. Right now, pursuing a long-term campaign which doesn't fit the

market in a couple of months' time is likely to result in lost revenue and considerable frustration.



Accountability, transparency and trust

Speaking to Forbes, Nahia Arduna speaks of the importance of building and maintaining transparency and trust, especially in a virtual environment. Continuous coaching and delivery feedback is key, she claims, to creating a ‘listening culture’ in which Agile teams thrive.

Whilst ideas, hopes and concerns might be fed back informally and ad hoc, the Belbin Report helps consolidate feedback on individual and team behaviours into a key metric and a great starting point for 1:1s and team discussions. Agile teams are democratic (there is no one leader) and so is Belbin. Whilst some measures rely on an individual’s self-knowledge, Belbin uses Observer feedback, giving each team member the opportunity to express how individual behaviours impact them and the team as a whole. This builds a coherent picture of how the team (and each of its constituents) operates. What’s more, this process can be repeated whenever things change in the team, to help diagnose problems arising or flag up issues that may pose problems further down the line.

For Scrum leaders, understanding how the behavioural diversity in a team plays out is crucial to building trust between team members. For a cross-functional Agile team who has never shared office space, different working styles take some adjustment. It might be concerning to a strong Implementer (who takes pride in updating the Kanban board by the hour) that someone with Plant behaviours spends a long time off-grid only to return with a new idea. It is up to the team, of course, to decide what is acceptable within their ways of working, but understanding behaviours and motivations can help to build trust, so long as everyone is delivering.



Failing fast

A key tenet of Agile is that teams should feel safe to fail, and fail fast. This means encouraging an environment where failures are not only acknowledged, but celebrated as part of the learning process. The rationale is that accepting and encouraging failure allows teams to become more adventurous, open and trusting, to learn from past mistakes and to avoid wasting time on non-starters and blame culture.

However, encouraging failure—and the kind of trust which allows teams to fail without fear of individual or group recriminations—is easier said than done. For many organisations, failure is not part of business discourse.

The language of Belbin Team Roles shares the same frankness. We believe in focusing on strengths, but also in giving airtime to weaknesses, to areas where we might struggle and call on others for help. The process of doing so identifies individual failures (and how these might hinder the team) and allows the team to formulate strategies to compensate, building interdependence, trust between team members, and psychological safety in the team as a whole.



PRACTICAL STEPS TO USE BELBIN WITH YOUR AGILE TEAM

Discover your Team Roles

Belbin Individual Reports build a portrait of the contribution each person makes to a team. When cross-functional teams are assembled quickly, the Report can act as a kind of behavioural 'passport', enabling others in the team to gain a quick understanding how someone likes to work. Once the team has been working together for six months or so, each team member can invite colleagues to complete Observer Assessments to inform their Report and identify any differences between the Team Roles the individual aspires to play, and those the rest of the team have observed.

Build a picture of the team

Team Reports aggregate the team's Belbin data to build an overall picture of the team, including any gaps or overlaps and the overall 'culture' that's likely to prevail. Armed with this knowledge, the team can forestall difficulties likely to be caused by Team Role chemistry and take advantage of complementary roles where possible.



Strategise for success

Agile working is likely to suit some Team Role styles more than others. Whilst those with Shaper and Resource Investigator tendencies might thrive on the fast pace, and strong Plants will likely welcome the chance to jettison an old idea in favour of a new one, those with Completer Finisher or Monitor Evaluator amongst their strengths might not welcome the idea of ‘failing fast’ with open arms, and strong Implementers are unlikely to enjoy the frequent change involved.

However, this doesn’t mean that these behaviours ought to be excluded or downplayed—their contributions are no less important to the team’s success. Rather, the team needs to develop strategies to ensure that these team members buy in to the Agile process and can participate in a way that mitigates their discomfort. For example, Completer Finisher workloads might be carefully managed. ‘Lessons learnt’ sessions could be led by those with strong Monitor Evaluator strengths, to capitalise on their analytical and strategic proclivities.



No more guessing

In short, Belbin takes some of the guesswork out of what is potentially high-stakes, high-gains teamwork. It promotes transparency and trust between individuals via a common language, constructive feedback and recognition of potential failures, even when teams cannot meet in person. It allows teams to respond to their environment and adapt as they progress.



NEXT STEPS

Do you work with Agile teams and Belbin?

Are you embarking on Agile as a result of the pandemic?

Do you have insights on using Agile and Belbin in virtual teams?

We'd love to hear from you. Why not drop us a line?