Achieving greater agility is a goal among many federal agencies. While many federal CIOs may institute agile practices from the top down, others may promote self-organizing teams that bring about change from the bottom up. These approaches represent ends of a spectrum, any point on which agile transformation require focus on enabling team empowerment. In the federal workspace, governance and oversight vary greatly from one agency or office to another. As such, federal leaders should seek to implement strategies that will navigate typical organizational roadblocks to agile adoption, such as a forced separation of duties, vertical authority structures, and misaligned incentives. Macro Solutions uses a tailored approach to identify organizational impediments, develop successful agile implementation strategies, and enable project teams in each unique organization.

**ORGANIZATIONS WITH A FLEDGLING AGILE PRESENCE CAN BENEFIT FROM THE INSIGHTS GAINED FROM LESSONS LEARNED WHILE ANALYZING PREVIOUS SUCCESSFUL AGILE ADOPTION EFFORTS.**

**Below are Macro Solutions' five keys to agile success, as well as related recommendations and industry best practices that can help federal CIOs in the early stages of agile adoption.**

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# UNDERSTAND THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITES OF TEAM MEMBERS, ESPECIALLY THE PRODUCT OWNER.

## Federal leadership's understanding of and support for the three distinct roles in an agile team is critical to agile adoption.

**1. Product Owner** – The most important role on any agile team, the product owner is a "customer" with the responsibility (and authority) to set priorities and make decisions. The product owner role must be fully understood and embraced by its holder, not to mention fully empowered by agency leadership.

**2. Scrum Master** – The scrum master is an individual that is empowered to enforce agile execution and process adherence within the team. This is a full-time role during any iteration, as it is this person's objective to serve the agile team with focus on removing impediments. The scrum master must keep the product owner engaged in the scrum process. Employing a "coach" with prior success in developing an agile team is considered to be an important best practice when starting the scrum process in an organization that is new to agile.

**3. Team Members** – Agile team members embrace the collaborative process and work to identify areas of improvement, such as project estimation or the team's general ability to deliver on its commitments. Lone wolves are not effective team members. Scrum team members must look to understand what the rest of the team is doing and provide support when needed. Rotating the scrum master role among team members helps maintain enthusiasm and support for agile methods while reinforcing those methods and cadence.

**THE PRODUCT OWNER ROLE IS THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER WITH FULL RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY TO SET PRIORITIES AND MAKE DECISIONS.**

**RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION**
Federal leadership provide staunch support to designated product owners, encouraging them and allowing them to be more directly engaged with agile teams. Directors should find ways to eliminate any separation or organizational layers between product owners and teams. Recognizing organizational misalignment, improper incentives, or antiquated separations of duties is critical to thoughtful and empowered team collaboration.

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# CUSTOMIZE THE AGILE PROCESS TO FIT THE TEAMS' NEEDS.

**The agile team must establish its norms and not be afraid to tailor the process to accommodate organizational uniqueness. Well-performing agile teams will operate with tailored processes that are based on the Agile Manifesto and other core agile tenets. The following list provides attributes of the team norms:**

**1. Prescriptive** – The initial sprint (Sprint 0) establishes the team norms and provides the scrum footing in a lightweight and easy-to-understand format that allows for change. Subsequent iterations will include retrospective and review processes that help refine the norms so they are better suited to the team and the process.

**2. Enforceable** – Team norms are best crafted in a fashion that allows them to be easily maintained and followed. Scrum masters are charged with ensuring team adherence and maintenance, while each team member is responsible for the enforcement of norms.

**3. Documented** – While many people perceive documentation to be anathema to the agile process, in reality team norms should be properly documented in an agile environment. Team norms are malleable and subject to regular improvements through the retrospective and review processes. It is best to keep the team's norms documented in a wiki or another easily maintained and versioned collaboration tool.

**4. Transparent** – New team members ought to be able to "see" the norms in practice. Easily plugging into an agile team helps to maintain the velocity and quality goals of agile. Keep norms clear, up-to-date, and fully accessible.

**TEAMS THAT CLING TO A STRICT INTERPRETATION OF THE AGILE DOCTRINE OFTEN FAIL BECAUSE THEY NEGLECT TO CONSIDER HOW THEIR PROCESSES SHOULD BE TAILORED TO BEST SUIT THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT.**

**RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION**
Federal leadership should avoid forcing a pure interpretation of the Agile Manifesto on agile teams. Monitor agile teams and processes with the expectation that as a team matures its processes will deviate from Agile Manifesto guidelines to facilitate specific business needs.

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# EMBRACE THE DISCIPLINE OF THE AGILE CADENCE.

**As with any effectively managed process, agile has a rhythm (cadence) that must be followed and maintained in order to ensure efficiency and maximize agile value. There are two components to this practice:**

**1. Grooming the backlog** – This grooming process (i.e., the analysis and editing of team work following the business release schedule) should be done frequently and aligned with the iteration rhythm, with a full commitment from the team. Product owner participation and adherence to the grooming process is the single most powerful collaboration exercise in the agile model.

**2. Agency cadence commitment** – Support for the agile cadences can be infectious if allowed to flourish. Agile teams need to stay vigilant on maintaining the cadence, maintaining regular meetings, and keeping them short, efficient, and focused. An efficient meeting rhythm that produces results will help maintain support through the organizational hierarchy.

**AGILE TEAMS NEED TO STAY VIGILANT ON MAINTAINING THE CADENCE, MAINTAINING REGULAR MEETINGS, AND KEEPING THEM SHORT, EFFICIENT, AND FOCUSED.**

**RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION:**
Federal leadership should clear the way for staff and agile team members to stick to the rhythms that are established, yet be open to changes as necessary. Priority must be placed on following the cadence to receive the full value of agile. The grooming process is a critical element of agile because it has direct impact on efficiency and effectiveness. It is also especially important to maintain and value a grooming cadence.

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# TRANSITION WITH MOMENTUM.

**It is best to pursue agile with confidence, identifying and recovering from failures, with consistent reinforcement of the established norms, cadence, and methodology. Here are three practices to employ:**

**1. Identify smaller, achievable commitments and gain quick wins in the early iterations** – Getting good results early will get product owners and customers to crave the agile approach, especially if they're new to the practice. Typically, early success leads to self-regulation, clears the way for team members to collaborate, and eliminates unnecessary requirements that may slow higher value work.

**2. Failing fast and early is a desired outcome** – Failures present an opportunity to learn valuable lessons and improve future processes. Agile's retrospective process incorporates the routine capture of these opportunities and allows them to be identified without judgment from any team member.

**3. Establish baselines quickly, knowing they will change** – When transitioning to agile processes, teams should establish firm baseline metrics for capacity and estimation so that changes to the process can be measured as customization occurs. These baseline metrics can also help teams recognize opportunities for improvement. In agile, capacity baselining and estimation methods need only be "good enough" to begin work. Efficiency trumps perfection in these endeavors. Allow the retrospective process to improve capacity estimation methods over time.

**EMPOWER TEAMS AND MANAGERS TO START QUICKLY, AWARE THAT PERFECTION IN THE AGILE METHODOLOGY COMES FROM THE RETROSPECTIVE AND REVIEW PROCESSES OVER TIME.**

**RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION:**
Federal leadership should empower teams and managers to start quickly, and also be aware that perfection in the agile methodology comes from the retrospective and review processes over time. Have faith in the team and the process, and just get started!

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# EXPECT FAILED COMMITMENTS IN THE EARLY ITERATIONS.

**Even with the best of intentions, systems can naturally become disordered. With this awareness, agile teams should not shy away from missed commitments. Instead, they should respond quickly and supportively, allowing for potential improvements to the process, and ensuring better adherence to future commitments. The retrospective process will provide course corrections in ways that fit perfectly with the team's work and the work environment.**

**1. Embrace the retrospective and review process –** Talking about failures and finding lessons learned are critical team activities that improve each subsequent iteration. However, equally as important is the fact that recognizing success reinforces the right behaviors. The retrospective process is for the team and scrum master only, and the review process is for the entire team, including product owner and other relevant stakeholders. These concepts are the foundation of continuous improvement.

**2. Commitments are the balance of priorities and capacity –** Early agile team iterations may experience slippage in the delivery of commitments due to less than perfect or consistent estimating or baselining of the prioritized work. Transitioning with momentum may (and should) surface these commitment failures.

**3. Fail fast and recover quickly –** Agile teams flourish in a safe environment where all involved parties can feel comfortable to identify failures. Team members must be open and honest with one another, as thoughtful critiques will allow the team to identify problems. Lessons learned from failures allow teams to address issues.

**DEMONSTRATE SUPPORT AND TRUST FOR AGILE TEAMS BY ALLOWING THEM TO IDENTIFY FAILURES WITHOUT JUDGMENT, MAKING WAY FOR IMPROVEMENT.**

**RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION:**
Federal leadership should demonstrate its support and trust for agile teams by allowing them to identify failures without judgment, making way for improvement. Leadership should avoid the natural desire to interfere with team members so they are able to implement their changes and be responsive to adjustments as necessary. Support should be given to the teams as they perform rigorous retrospective and review, which are the foundational keys to agile success. By allowing agile teams to fail fast and recover quickly, the organization will benefit from better processes that improve quality and velocity.

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Agile is a modernized delivery process that enjoys a high adoption rate in the private sector due to its empirical success rate, and is perfectly suited for the federal government, which is striving to be leaner, faster, and more innovative. An agile approach is a different, but effective, method for getting work done quickly and efficiently. Most importantly, it can help agencies reach their goals more effectively than traditional and less productive methods. Agile's focus on velocity and quality is perfectly suited to the modern federal agency environment because it enables self-organizing teams to come together and be tremendously productive within traditional contracting relationships. As one federal agency CIO succinctly pointed out, "Agile creates a virtuous circle of smaller procurements, learning quickly, developing well, and failing fast with quick recoveries, to produce results faster and better than ever before."

**THE CHALLENGE IS IN ESTABLISHING THE RIGHT TEAM WITH THE RIGHT NORMS, DISCIPLINE, AND EMPOWERMENT FROM FEDERAL LEADERSHIP. IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO SIMPLY TALK ABOUT BEING AGILE; THAT TALK NEEDS TO BE BACKED UP WITH ACTIONS THAT ELIMINATE BARRIERS, ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION, AND PROPEL AGENCIES FORWARD.**

Learn more about achieving greater agility in the federal government at macrosolutions.com

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