



APLN

AGILE PROJECT LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Project Leadership in the Future

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The story behind the Agile Project Leadership Network (APLN) and the Declaration Of Interdependence (DOI)

Introduction

Over the past couple of years a group of thought leaders in the agile and project management communities have discussed the need to examine ways for managing and leading projects that have produced reliable results. In January 2005 this group came up with a statement of their philosophy for project management – the **Declaration Of Interdependence for Agile Project Leadership (DOI)** (<http://pmdoi.org>). Shortly thereafter the group formed the **Agile Project Leadership Network (APLN)** (www.apln.org), a non-profit organization to forward this movement.

The APLN offers members guidance and networking with other members. This group intends to work closely with other organizations such as the Agile Alliance. The APLN will work closely with the software community and also work with people and companies outside of software and IT. Several of the founding members of the APLN come from the general project management and new product development communities.

The Declaration of Interdependence

Agile and adaptive approaches for linking people, projects and value.

We are a community of project leaders that are highly successful at delivering results. To achieve these results:

- We **increase return on investment** by making continuous flow of value our focus.
- We **deliver reliable results** by engaging customers in frequent interactions and shared ownership.

- We **expect uncertainty** and manage for it through iterations, anticipation, and adaptation.
- We **unleash creativity and innovation** by recognizing that individuals are the ultimate source of value, and creating an environment where they can make a difference.
- We **boost performance** through group accountability for results and shared responsibility for team effectiveness.
- We **improve effectiveness and reliability** through situationally specific strategies, processes, and practices.

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The title "Declaration of Interdependence" has multiple meanings. It means that project team members are part of an interdependent whole. It also means that the set of values are interconnected and that effective leadership techniques must recognize this interdependence. For example, Teams are dependent upon Individuals and Customers, and must deal with Uncertainty according to the Context of the project in order to maximize Value delivery.

Each of the value statements has a distinct form – “what” we desire to accomplish followed by “how” we have seen that result achieved. These six statements convey what the authors have witnessed to be the most important aspects of modern project management, which they have identified as an agile style of project leadership. These statements are discussed in more detail.

Value

We increase return on investment by making continuous flow of value our focus.

By *continuous flow* we mean leading the project in a way that is consistent with how real value is generated. We have witness many examples where Value is not maximized by conformance to a plan. Often it is the case that during the course of the project new value creating opportunities may arise, and project leadership needs to be ready to take advantage of those value opportunities. One way to focus on continuous flow of value is through early and frequent delivery of incremental improvements in the product. Frequency is dependent upon the context—in software development we expect to deliver working software on the order of weeks or months, while in the area of new product development it may mean the delivery of prototypes which may take longer.

Experience has shown us that it takes a real product or a tangible prototype rather than detailed documentation to get real and reliable feedback from the customer on the anticipated business value that the product will give.

Customers

We deliver reliable results by engaging customers in frequent interactions and shared ownership.

Our experience has shown that a close relationship with customers typically leads to better project results. The way to achieve this close relationship and trust is by interacting with the customers on a regular basis. Face-to-face communication is preferred as it provides the richest interaction. The exchange of written documentation is generally a poor form of interaction, yet can be valuable to supplement face-to-face communication. Most agile teams prefer to have a customer representative co-located with the team every day – others find other ways of interacting with the customers on a daily or at least weekly basis.

Once you have established a high level of mutual trust it is common that customers start taking on ownership of the project. Other contractual ways to create shared ownership (like risk sharing) exist, but are seldom needed in these teams with close relationships and mutual trust.

Uncertainty

We expect uncertainty and manage for it through iterations, anticipation, and adaptation.

The creation of a detailed plan leads to the mentality that success will occur through conformance to plan. We aim for a new definition of success—maximizing value creation. In the face of uncertain circumstances, removal of uncertainty almost invariably reduces value. Again, it depends on context--if a project does not have uncertainty, then it may makes sense to work up a detailed plan and to follow it.

We have seen that teams that know what they are building at a high level and that rely upon frequent feedback actually have better real project control than those teams that rely on detailed plans. Detailed plans give the illusion of control, but we experience that real control is better obtained through iterations, anticipation, and adaptation. Iterations provide the opportunity for feedback and correction. Anticipation means that we spend time looking forward at the appropriate level. We don't recommend making a detailed plan in advance, yet we do see value in an overall high level plan along with just-in-time planning for the iteration. During the iteration we learn and have the opportunity for adaptation to improve the product or the process.

Individuals

We unleash creativity and innovation by recognizing that individuals are the ultimate source of value, and creating an environment where they can make a difference.

We believe that great products are built by skilled and motivated people. Therefore an important part of project leadership is to build a highly motivating working climate by:

- Envisioning a clear common goal
- Enabling communication between all parties
- Empowering people to have personal influence on project success
- Establishing a high level of trust

- Ensuring that people have the tools to do their job

Project Leaders who know how to balance guidance with freedom are much more likely to succeed in motivating each individual to do their best. People are only creative and innovative when their leaders give them the room to be creative and innovative.

Teams

We boost performance through group accountability for results and shared responsibility for team effectiveness.

Great results are created by teams who dedicate their collaborative efforts to a common purpose. Likewise, teams interested in accomplishing a common purpose, depend on leaders who focus on developing the group environment in which great results can be accomplished. Relying on individual accountability often falls short when items fall into the gaps, or leads to finger pointing or excuses rather than results.

We do not believe that a great collaborative team spirit “happens” by coincidence. We have seen highly effective teams built deliberately by individuals who take the responsibility not only for their own parts but also for the product as a whole.

We also have experienced that effective teams take ownership and responsibility for being an effective team. We believe that teambuilding is an individual skill, and that great teams understand the importance of team dynamics. Great project leaders will motivate and guide each individual person to be a great team-player. The ultimate shame is when a project fails and someone says, "But my part worked."

Context

We improve effectiveness and reliability through situationally specific strategies, processes, and practices.

As has been mentioned several times, project leadership approaches depend on the context and the interrelationships of the people, the project, and the product. It is clear that a one-size-fits all approach is non-optimal. Highly complex and uncertain projects demand different approaches than required by simpler, more static projects. Some of the project attributes that can be considered in the project context include:

- Team co-location/distribution
- Customer-supplier relationship
- Experience (or lack of) with new technology
- Level of domain knowledge
- Project duration
- Team size
- Severity of consequence of errors

The leadership approach corresponds to this context. For example, projects with large distributed teams will likely require more written documentation to compensate for limited face-to-face communication.

The Agile Project Leadership Network (APLN)

In February 2005 Jim Highsmith wrote: *“The intention of this group is to form a membership organization to support agile, adaptive project and general management. Although this group is separate from the Agile Alliance, our intention is to work closely with that group within the software community, but also work with people and companies outside of software and IT.”*

Since then the founders have incorporated the APLN organization as a non-profit 501(c)6 organization with a professional board and officers. We have a web-site at www.apln.org where new members can register.

At the Agile 2005 Conference in Denver in July we launched the organization and signed up more than 100 charter members during the week. We also held the first APLN members meeting.

The core group – and the programs

A core group consisting of the 15 founders and a few more people are currently working on forming programs with the main purpose of creating value for the members.

We want APLN to be an open organization – and we accept new core group members and program participants on a regular basis. We invite everyone to provide us with input and participation in the individual programs – and we encourage you to propose new programs, that are not already on the list.

We continue to add to our website. Eventually we expect it to be the primary conduit to support the programs. If you wish to contact the APLN you can do so at info@apln.org.