

BEYOND THE CEREMONY

# The Agile Promise and the Enterprise Reality — Why Scaling Agile Keeps Failing

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Gap Between Team-Level Agility and Organisational Inertia



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September 2011

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Programme · No. 144

Originally written September 2011 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

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## 1. The Promise That Landed Differently

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Ten years after the Manifesto, agile has won the argument. No serious programme director would stand before a steering committee and argue against iterative delivery, working software over comprehensive documentation, or responding to change over following a plan. The language has been absorbed wholesale. The practices, however, have been absorbed selectively – and that selectivity has created something the original signatories would barely recognise.

Across every sector I work in – financial services, telecoms, government – the same pattern plays out. Small, co-located teams adopt Scrum or XP and deliver at a pace that embarrasses the rest of the organisation. Results are visible, morale is high, and stakeholders start asking the obvious question: why can't the whole organisation work like this?

The answer to that question is where things go wrong. Not because the question is bad, but because the answer the organisation constructs – the scaling answer – systematically dismantles the conditions that made the small team successful in the first place.

## 2. The Scaling Instinct and Its Consequences

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When an organisation decides to scale agile, it reaches for the tools it already has. Governance frameworks. Reporting hierarchies. Stage gates. Certification programmes. Procurement processes that require fixed scope, fixed price, and fixed timelines – the exact opposite of what iterative delivery demands.

The instinct is understandable. Large organisations exist because they have learned to manage complexity through structure, standardisation, and control. A programme board that oversees a £50 million portfolio cannot simply say "trust the teams" and walk away. There are regulatory obligations, interdependencies between workstreams, and commitments to the market that require coordination at scale.

But the response – layering agile ceremonies on top of waterfall governance – creates something worse than either approach alone. It creates the illusion of agility without its substance.

*The most dangerous outcome is not failed agile adoption. It is successful agile theatre – where every ceremony is observed, every artefact is produced, and every sprint ends on time, yet the organisation remains no more responsive than it was before.*

I see this pattern with depressing regularity. Sprint reviews attended by forty people, none of whom can make a decision. Product backlogs maintained by project managers who have been renamed "product owners" but whose authority has not changed. Daily stand-ups that last forty-five minutes because the team is too large and the dependencies too numerous for a fifteen-minute check-in to function. Retrospectives that surface the same impediments quarter after quarter because no one with structural authority is listening.

### 3. Three Structural Reasons the Gap Persists

#### 3.1 The Funding Model

Most large organisations fund work through annual budget cycles tied to business cases with fixed scope and fixed benefits. Agile delivery assumes that scope will change as learning accumulates. These two assumptions are fundamentally incompatible, and in every conflict between the funding model and the delivery method, the funding model wins.

A team cannot genuinely respond to change when every change requires a formal change request, a revised business case, and re-approval from an investment committee that meets monthly. The team learns quickly that the cost of changing direction exceeds the cost of delivering the wrong thing – and adjusts its behaviour accordingly. Backlogs become fixed roadmaps with different formatting. Sprint planning becomes resource allocation with post-it notes.

#### 3.2 The Governance Architecture

Programme governance in most organisations was designed for predictive delivery. Status reports measure progress against a baseline plan. RAG ratings assess schedule and budget variance. Milestone reviews ask whether deliverables are on track against dates agreed eighteen months ago.

None of these mechanisms can answer the questions that matter in an iterative world: Are we building the right thing? Is the product becoming more valuable with each iteration? Are we learning fast enough to justify continued investment?

The typical organisational response is not to redesign governance but to add an agile layer beneath it. Teams run sprints. Programme boards still want Gantt charts. Someone in the middle – usually a PMO analyst – translates between the two worlds, producing documents that satisfy neither. The teams feel over-governed. The programme board feels under-informed. Both are right.

#### 3.3 The Career Structure

This is the reason no one talks about. Agile assumes self-organising teams with empowered product owners who can make binding decisions about scope and priority. Enterprise reality assumes hierarchical decision-making where seniority correlates with authority.

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A product owner who can say "we are not building that feature" is exercising real authority. In most large organisations, that authority sits two or three levels above the person who carries the product owner title. The result is a role that looks empowered on the team board but is in practice a proxy – passing decisions upward and relaying answers downward, adding delay at every step.

Project managers, meanwhile, face an existential question. If teams are self-organising, what is the project manager's role? The honest answer – that many of the coordination activities a project manager performs become unnecessary when teams are small, co-located, and empowered – is not one that organisations are willing to articulate. Instead, project managers are retrained, retitled, and repositioned as Scrum Masters or agile coaches, regardless of whether their instincts and skills align with facilitation rather than direction.

#### 4. What Honest Adoption Would Require

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The uncomfortable truth is that genuinely scaling agile is not a delivery methodology problem. It is an organisational design problem. And organisational design changes are harder, slower, and more politically dangerous than methodology changes.

Honest adoption would require at minimum:

- Funding models that allocate investment to outcomes, not projects. This means moving from project-based funding with fixed scope to capacity-based funding with defined outcomes and measurable learning cycles. Few finance functions are ready for this conversation, let alone the procurement frameworks that sit beneath them.
- Governance that measures value delivered, not plan adherence. This means retiring the Gantt chart as the primary reporting instrument and replacing it with something that asks harder questions: What did users do differently this sprint? What did we learn that changed our direction? What is the cost of delay if we do not release now?
- Authority structures that match the delivery model. If a product owner cannot reprioritise the backlog without committee approval, the role is a fiction. If a team cannot release without a six-week change management process, the sprint boundary is a fiction. The fiction erodes trust and teaches teams that agile is something the organisation says, not something it means.
- Career paths that do not depend on headcount and hierarchy. As long as a senior programme manager's grade depends on the number of people they direct and the budget they control, they have a structural incentive to resist self-organisation. This is not a character failing – it is a rational response to the incentive system.

#### 5. The Certification Industry and Its Discontents

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A word on the industry that has grown up around agile adoption. The proliferation of certifications — Certified ScrumMaster, PMI-ACP, DSDM practitioner, and the growing number of enterprise-level offerings — has created a paradox. Agile began as a rebellion against heavyweight process. It is now itself a heavyweight industry, complete with training providers, accreditation bodies, and conferences where the debates are increasingly theological.

I am not against training. But I observe that the organisations with the most certified practitioners are not noticeably more agile than those with fewer. What correlates with genuine agility is not certification but structural permission: the authority to change scope, the ability to release frequently, and the trust to let teams make decisions without seeking approval from three layers above.

The certification industry feeds the illusion that agile is a skills problem. It is not. It is a power problem. Teaching a thousand people Scrum does not make an organisation agile. Changing the funding model, the governance architecture, and the authority structure does — but no training provider sells that course.

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## 6. The Path Forward — If We Choose It

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None of this means agile has failed. At team level, it works. The evidence from a decade of adoption is clear: small, empowered teams delivering iteratively produce better outcomes than large teams following sequential plans. That finding is robust across sectors and geographies.

What has failed is the assumption that you can transplant a team-level practice into an enterprise-level operating model without changing the operating model. The agile teams are fine. The organisations they sit inside are not structured to let them succeed.

The path forward is not another scaling framework. It is not a new certification. It is not a maturity model or an agile transformation programme — the irony of which should not be lost on anyone.

The path forward is the hard, unglamorous work of redesigning the structures that govern how work is funded, how decisions are made, how authority is distributed, and how careers are built. Until organisations are willing to do that work, agile at scale will remain what it largely is today: a better set of team practices trapped inside an unreformed institution.

The question for every programme director is simple and uncomfortable: Are you willing to change the organisation, or only the methodology?