

Lets Not Start at the Very Beginning

I'm going to share with you the secret understanding why Agile is a better approach to project management than any kind of waterfall project management method. But first of all, I need to tell you a story. It's a story about a non-story.

When my wife was a little girl my father-in-law would occasionally try to tell her stories and nursery rhymes. Unfortunately, his memory for these kinds of thing wasn't very good. Whenever he would start "Mary had a little lamb" he would get past the first line, pause and then say "and then it died."

**My father-in-law is a good father and a great guy
but he's no story teller.**

What we Want from a Story is Open Loops

In stories people want what David Allen, author of [Getting Things Done](#) calls "open loops" - unfinished business - for a while at least. Because open loops attract our attention, they pull us in, they distract us from other things. And that's what we want an entertaining story to do. Open loops draw us into their world. To paraphrase [Keith Johnstone](#) author of a brilliant book on improvisation (of which of course, storytelling is a part) anything that can go wrong can be the subject of a story. The children open a wardrobe and there's a magic kingdom at the back of it. The butler brings in the master's morning tea only to find that he's been stabbed through the heart with his letter opener. A woman goes for a swim, there's a shark in the water.

But there's a really important point to understand here:

**the kind of excitement and involvement that you want
in a film, a novel, or a bedtime story
is exactly the *last* thing you want in real life.**

What we Want from Real Life is Certainty

You know what someone means if they say that getting their car repaired has been an "epic experience" or an "ongoing saga" - things didn't go well. People want their soap operas to be soap operas, they don't want their life, or their work to be one.

In real life most of the things that are "open-ended" or "unfinished business", or things that drag on and on are the really bad things. And like the kinds of stories that we love as entertainment, it is open-ended stories that consume our time and our attention in real life. But not in a good way: in a life-sapping, stress-inducing way.

Agile Looks Terrible at the Beginning

Most of the time when people talk about Agile to their clients, to their bosses, or maybe even members of their own team, we're trying to persuade people that our methods are better than conventional waterfall methods. And most of the time when we talk about Agile, just like when we talk about waterfall, we start talking about the *beginning* of the project.

But in an Agile project, the first few iterations are where all the open loops and all the uncertainties start to be exposed. One of the most awkward moments very often is when the product owner is asked to prioritise the stories that should go into the first iteration. Why is that so awkward? In response to questions about priority, why does the product owner so frequently say "I want all of them"? Because prioritising the stories can unearth a massive gaping hidden uncertainty – an open loop. Does the product owner really know which of the stories is most important? Does he or she really know what the product is trying to achieve? Once the aim of the product is made crystal clear, how is that going to match up with the business goal that this software is supposed to address.

**Suddenly this project that he or she thought was going to solve
all their problems is turning into a saga, a soap opera, an epic.**

And in real life, that isn't good.

Another potentially awkward moment is the demonstration of the working software at the end of the first iteration. This can be awkward for both product owners and developers. It's far easier for the two parties to convince themselves that they're talking about the same thing when all there is to talk about is words on bits of card. But when the first working software is actually there on the screen there is apt to be a *very* awkward silence broken by the product owner saying something like "I thought we'd agreed...". No doubt about it, this is nasty, unpleasant, stomach-churning.

The Secret - The Other end of the Telescope

"If I have seen further, it is because I have looked through the right end of the telescope" – Anon.

So, I promised I would tell you the secret of how to get anybody and everybody to understand why Agile is a better approach than waterfall to developing software and here it is. How about we don't talk about the beginning of this project? How about we talk about this project six months from now?

On an Agile project, you've been using some version of the software for nearly 5 months. The client has a good idea what the flaws were in their original thinking. There were some very sticky conversations with your developers in the first few months as you put them straight about *their* misunderstandings about what the software should do. There were some sharp words when the developers put the client straight about what the software *could and couldn't* do. There were some even stickier conversations with the client's bosses when it became clear that the software wasn't going to be the magic bullet to solve all their business problems. But then, over time, the awkward conversations reduced and the risk went down. Just a couple of months into the project, the clients got working software that they could use in their business. It's not solving all their problems, but it is delivering value.

And what about a waterfall project six months from now?

Can you feel the size of those huge, gaping open loops?

Remember all those difficult conversations that the Agile guys started having five or six months ago? What guarantee is there that the clients and the developers aren't going to have the same awkward conversations, now, six months too late, when there's no time and no money? Remember those awkward conversations between the client and their bosses about how the software met the business goals? Do you think it has a better chance of meeting them now? Six months later? What are the chances that those business goals have changed in the last six months? When you stop thinking about how a project might start and instead start thinking about how it might end, you see all the open loops that were hidden inside the waterfall project.

Six months down the line, the waterfall project

is the one that's beginning to look like the epic,

the soap opera, the long-running saga

- just when the Agile project is starting to feel done and dusted. An open and shut case.

Call me – Mark Stringer - now on 07736 807 604 if you want to know more about Agile methods can help your business.