

The evolution of the project manager: Task manager to servant leader

BY CLAYTON MILES

While project delivery methods have shifted from waterfall to agile over the last decade, so has the role of the project manager morphed. Fail to evolve and you will fail to deliver.

Over my 13 years in technology development I have experienced a vast range of project management styles, and indeed my own skills have shifted and changed over this time, but it is only in the last two and a half years – while working at Amido – that I have really grown to appreciate the distinct difference in outcomes that these approaches can effect.

As a technical consultancy, frequently working on large complex programmes, Amido delivery managers are often called on to work in partnership with project managers from other consultancies, software development houses, and indeed, the clients themselves. These collaborations are usually fruitful and productive – collegial relationships breeding effective outcomes and often long-term connections.

But there are (very rare) times when we find ourselves working alongside project managers whose skill sets yet haven't evolved to support the needs of an enlightened, agile-focused development team.

Most often, when we are working with a project manager whose style is at odds with ours, it is because they are working with a 'top down' approach with information flowing down, with little or no listening, and decisions being made by the leadership without any real team engagement.

The most common challenge in this situation is that this project manager sees the development team as a pool of resources that need to be fully utilised, and that that utilisation can only be measured in physical output. For this project manager a successful iteration is where the team are working at 100% capacity, or the velocity is higher than average. This attitude can often lead to teams feeling like resources rather than people, resulting in a lack of motivation and investment in the project and ultimately a lower quality product being developed. Agile delivery should be measured by working software being delivered at the highest quality, not team utilization. If the team is 100% utilized from the beginning of the sprint, there is no scope for improvement through learning, meaning the final product may not achieve the quality standards it has the potential to do.

And, although in the short term this utilisation may look and feel like success, our experience shows us that long term, sustainable success does not manifest in this way. Rather, the soft factors affected by good, modern delivery management of capable, skilled resources are those that really drive excellence in delivery and performance.

Simply put, to deliver a quality output, with an engaged and informed team, with no end of added value for the long term, a delivery manager should be as focused – if not more – on the following key factors across any length of activity, be it a 2-week iteration or an 18-month programme.

1) Promoting on-the-job learning

Allowing people to improve their skills on-the-job will increase productivity and quality output in the long term, whilst ensuring they are engaged and motivated by a feeling of being supported in their personal development. And all without losing project resources to training days.

2) Encouraging cross-competency skill sharing and mentoring

Supporting resources to learn skills from other competencies can help the project in future iterations where team members are on leave, or sick. Equally, colleagues can learn to appreciate the challenges that their peers and fellow project team members are working on, and offer solutions and support – or simply a sympathetic ear!

3) Giving ownership and building engagement

Treating resources as individually and collectively vital to any project, regardless of role, helps to build a sense of motivation and commitment. For an individual, job security can be assured by delivering the bare minimum, but a true sense of achievement only comes from a sense of ownership and purpose. The attitude and behavior of the delivery manager plays an essential role in driving this feeling of engagement.

4) Recognising that the freedom to question drives quality

Collective and shared responsibility is one of the core tenets of agile development, and therefore giving all resources the opportunity to give feedback, raise queries, posit theories and offer solutions is an essential part of running an effective delivery team. An environment where everyone looks beyond their own work to the project as a whole, and looks to improve and enhance the solution, is an environment where the quality of the product being delivered can truly be optimised. I often see developers, QAs, BAs and business leads bringing different perspectives on what 'good' looks like and coming to a collective agreement on a design that no single competency could have imagined.

All of these vital principles lie with the delivery manager to instill, reinforce and protect while managing and delivering a project. This makes the position of delivery manager a far more nuanced and softer role than it has been historically.

In essence, where a waterfall project manager needed to keep a firm hand on the tiller, overseeing tasks and providing the outward face of the project plan, the agile delivery manager is required to take a subtler, more empowering stance. Agile only works when individuals are allowed to own and manage their activities, giving them the flexibility to pivot and react. The delivery manager needs to be a leader, who creates the shape of the plan within which the team can work with autonomy.

A Task Manager

- Speaks
- Is task-focused
- Is detailed
- Makes decisions
- Measures success through output
- Represents the project to stakeholders

A Project Leader

- Listens
- Removes blockers
- Communicates clearly
- Collaborates
- Measures success through growth and development
- Gives each team member equal voice

At Amido we believe strongly in the vital role delivery managers play in empowering our colleagues to deliver greatness. Whether they are developers, BAs, Architects or QA leads, each individual equally owns their work and has a vital role to play on the success of the whole business. It is the role of the Amido delivery manager in any engagement to give team members the opportunity to celebrate their deliverables and defend their choices, to learn and grow and be a part of an excellent achievement. This way, we believe, success lies.

CLAYTON MILES IS A DELIVERY CONSULTANT AT AMIDO

If you like the sound of our methodology and would be interested in a career here at Amido, please contact our Talent team [here](#).