

Agile – An Australian Journey Of Cultural Change

Fiona Mullen & Phil Abernathy

January 2014

Background

Suncorp Group includes leading general insurance, banking, life insurance and superannuation brands in Australia and New Zealand. The Group has 15,000 employees and relationships with nine million customers. We are a Top 20 ASX-listed company with \$96 billion in assets.

Suncorp has five core businesses: Personal Insurance, Commercial Insurance, Vero New Zealand, Suncorp Bank and Suncorp Life. These core businesses are supported by corporate and shared services divisions.

Why Change? - Approach

With the intent to improve delivery and minimise risk, it was identified that projects needed to be delivered differently if we were to optimise business value.

With this in mind, Suncorp announced to the market in 2007 that it would deliver all IT projects using Agile.

This created a sense of urgency and a formal change program was created in October 2007 to ensure this transformation created the cultural change needed for it to be embedded successfully.

The change program consisted of five main streams of work:

1. People

This stream of work was accountable for all of the people elements of the program including building culture, leadership, and support for our people. This was vital as we were moving from a traditional waterfall deliver method to a culture where we delivered business value in iterations whilst failing fast.

2. Capability – Blend of training and coaching

It was vital to ensure we had a capability program to build the skills required to work in an agile manner. The Agile Academy was formed and offered initially to staff within Suncorp, and this training curriculum has now expanded to an external audience. The curriculum provided a range of course offerings, enabling participants to build technical skills around running agile projects and leading in an agile culture.

We had a team of agile coaches on the ground who provided day-to-day support to staff on Agile. This ensured that what staff learnt in the classroom was transferred to business as usual activities.

3. Processes and Tools

We encouraged co-located teams to leverage off physical walls. These walls would then be utilised for daily stand ups and teams were encouraged to talk about what they had achieved and discuss any roadblocks that were hindering them. For the teams who were distributed, Jira was used along with photos of walls being shared.

4. Metrics

Regular reporting was provided to the exec team in relation to training numbers, and the application of Agile via walls, showcases, implementation of projects and presentations.

Over time we built an Agile Maturity Model, which was designed to track how we were improving from a qualitative and quantitative approach. The data gleaned from the model was used to have meaningful conversations with stakeholders on what was working well and what areas needed improvement.

5. Communication

Having a dedicated communication stream was vital to ensure we leveraged off all mediums of communication, including regular broadcasts which provided the teams an opportunity to share their successes and failures so others could learn. We also leveraged off exec and leader messages.

Insights and Learnings

Having a program of work set up to support the rollout was key to our success. This ensured the rollout received the dedicated focus it required.

Leadership from the top gave the mandate that this is how work was going to be done and why. This ensured that Agile was the focus.

Offering a “troaching” model, providing training and coaching, was vital for ensuring what was learnt was applied in a standardised manner back in the office.

The Agile Academy was the first to market, global, blended learning offering which enabled our staff and the market to access world class training. This has proven to be very successful.

When the ground swell of interest occurred we did not have enough coaches to support every team so we had to think creatively – the “Dr Is In” approach was born from this thinking. The format gave all employees an opportunity to discuss with a coach any agile problems they were having. This was done via a one hour consultation, with a follow-up if required.

The creation of the Agile Maturity Model was critical in giving us data on how we were improving and what areas we needed to focus on. This provided us with a backlog of focus areas which later became

projects, to help us address gaps identified from our model. For example, testing was an issue and this was evident in our reporting so a project was kicked off to look at “Building Quality In” into all facets. This ensured that quality and testing became everyone’s accountability and ensured quality improved.

Whilst we had many successes there were still challenges along the way at all levels in the organisation:

Leadership – How do I lead in an Agile culture? This was a change in mindset for a lot of our leaders who were not use to having teams making decisions. There needed to be a balance here which ensured teams were encouraged to make decisions.

Vendor challenges – How do we work with partners who may not know Agile? Selecting partners who could learn and adapt was key.

Conclusion

In summary, Agile has been very successful in Suncorp. There were many learnings and successes along the way. Our tips for success are:

- Sponsorship from the top is key
- Creating a groundswell of interest and curiosity is vital
- Identify and leverage off champions who can advocate the cause to assist you with your journey
When you announce the change, stay true to it and don’t waiver, even when there are skeptics
Have a structured, standard approach for executing the cultural change
- Don’t accept No as an answer. Agile can be applied everywhere
- Persistence!

In our presentation we will discuss these in more detail.