

HUMBLE Agile

An Individual's guide to overall Agility

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Abstract: With the ever-increasing popularity and rapid adaptation of Agile, there has been a visible increase in its imposters. Knowledge of the values and principles determines the ability of our Agile journey. Numerous researches have been conducted on how abiding by the Agile Manifesto, we stay in-line with the stream of thought, the mindset. However, we continue to note differences in the claims of being Agile and 'people' remain the differentiating factor.

A person's behavioral characteristics drive their thoughts and choices. This paper specifies a collection of 6 qualities an individual can practice and build on. HUMBLE Agile as an approach, guides through the qualities Honesty, Unbiased, Mindful, Bravery, Listening and Empathy, with the underlying foundation of Kindness and Compassion, to provide a significant predictability of being truly Agile. These aspects help in identifying adaptability quotients and improvement areas.

The findings of this paper are an outcome of research, experience, numerous discussions and the HUMBLE Agile survey. They are applied to understand individual and collective progress. It provides a preliminary base for future research on personal agility.

Keywords: Agile, Agile Values, Personal Agility, HUMBLE Agile, Being Agile

I. INTRODUCTION

As an umbrella for various pragmatic approaches, "Agile" has become quite the catch phrase over the last few decades. As Professor Julian Birkinshaw provocatively declared at the 2016 Drucker Forum, we have entered "the Age of Agile" [1].

Individuals consider themselves experts by gaining initial knowledge of the Agile Manifesto [2]. The manifesto clearly states the 4 values, guiding all agile ways of work. These values are[2]: (1) *Individuals and Interactions* Over processes and tools, (2) *Working Software* Over comprehensive documentation, (3) *Customer Satisfaction* Over contract negotiation and (4) *Responding to Change* Over following a plan

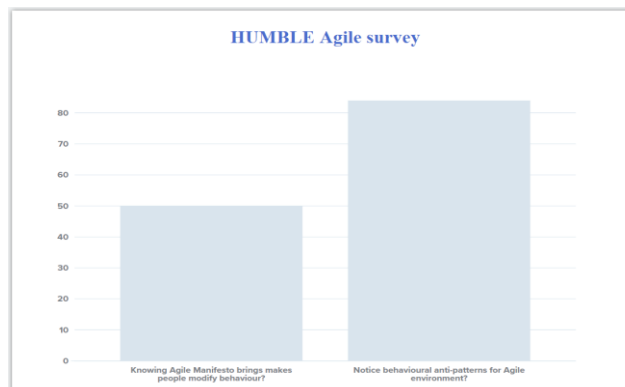


Figure 1. HUMBLE Agile survey: Agile Manifesto knowledge still lead to anti-patterns

Agile mindsets are encouraged by tweaking on values of a person, but it's much deeper than that. Every person has experiences, bitter-sweet, that lead to specific behavior and bias. These factors contribute towards our adaptability quotients, in-turn setting our mindset. The low- hanging fruit is Agile.

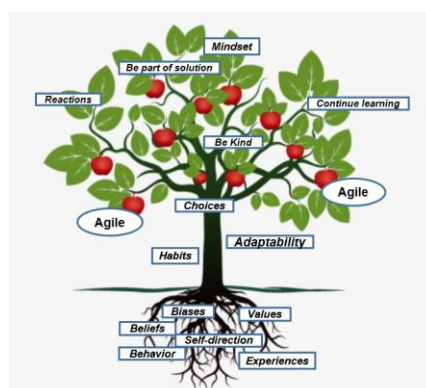


Figure 2. HUMBLE Agile tree

Agile is an adjective and unadmitted often seen limited to reading upon or acquiring certifications but primarily also requires making everyday choices. This paper concentrates on:

1. A combination of qualities that help us make choices.
2. Connecting these choices to agile values and its impact on “being better” than merely “doing better”.

This is achieved by researching deeper on – Agile is a mindset, a behavior [3]. From the early days of when the researchers have been curious on behavioral skills, Agile has certainly been a milestone of how adaptable humans are. The point to note is – **Adaptability is a behavior and Agility is a consequence of that behavior.**

The HUMBLE Agile survey taken by agile practitioners shows that 91% agree that a person’s belief system and identity drive his/her behavior. 59% respondents do not separate their personal and professional personalities, nor do they make an effort. This gives us an idea of their authenticity in behaviour at work.

The often-heard axiom “Agile is a mindset” defines that the processes emerged are actually a paradigm shift. Dr. Carol Dweck’s detailed study led to her deduction of the Mindset Theory, distinguishing between Fixed and Growth mindsets [4]. The difference between the two began with identifying the motivation to practice and learn.

	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Definition	<i>Individuals believe that their qualities (including personal traits) are “set in stone”.</i>	<i>Individuals believe that with enough effort and training, one can change their qualities/traits.</i>
Response to feedback	Interested in feedback only to evaluate and confirm their underlying qualities.	Feedback is taken as a learning opportunity.
Response to failure	Dread failure, as it may suggest limitations, they might not be able to overcome or cope with.	Attribute success to learning so, not frightened by failure. This signals the need to pay attention and invest effort.

Table 1. Fixed mindset vs Growth mindset

II. HUMBLE EXPLAINED

HUMBLE Agile is an approach and the acronym stands for the collection of qualities advised to possess and practice for being equipped with Agility. **As a result of the HUMBLE Agile survey, humility is by far a person’s most expected trait to see among peers.**

Going forward, based on various forms of findings, this paper is an approach toward individual qualities that can support being Agile. The HUMBLE Agile qualities are as follows:

- Honesty
- Unbiased
- Mindful
- Brave
- Listen
- Empathy

This approach is created to inspire a deeper thought about our actions and choices. Various permutations and combinations of these qualities are required to benefit from the approach. Being humble through this Agile journey, in an introspective and collaborative way, whilst on the foundation of **Kindness** and **Compassion** can yield better results.

A. The Basis – Theoretical Background

The agile community is an exciting and buzzing one. Being agile does not only mean promoting change, but also *being the change*.

Be the change you want to see – Mahatma Gandhi

There has been a considerate amount of emphasis on Leaders possessing strong moral values, commitment towards having an Agile mindset and driving change. While Agile “experts” and “Leaders” are expected to truly possess the advantageous *Growth Mindset*, every individual on the Agile journey will benefit from practicing corresponding behaviors, considering the promotion of self-managing and disciplined teams. Leaders can do all that’s possible to pave the path, but it’s also up-to the individuals to play their role. Agile is now not only about having the mindset anymore. It’s also about having the traits that can support this mindset and lead to personal & professional agility.

During Agile transformations, varied steps are set in place to establish the mindsets in companies. However, in reality not every individual takes the path of Agile with eagerness. In which case, we have the following concerns to deal with:

1. Higher attrition rates.
2. Visible conflict among teammates.

3. Employees uncomfortable with micromanagement.
4. A tug of credit for the work done.
5. Difficulty to have a conversation with opposed views.
6. Lack of energy or zeal to join the 'Change wagon'.

If any of these seem familiar, then you are not far from facing reality.

Our behavior and personal characteristics combined is what leads us to building better teams. The Agile Manifesto mentions aspects that one needs to **do** in order to make Agility successful. What it does not specify is what an individual needs to **be** to ensure their actions and thoughts can lead them to being Agile. **To solve for the enlisted concerns and build a community of progress and growth mindset individuals, this paper lists top 6 qualities to make us further equipped to be Agile.**

*Having spoken to experienced Agile Coaches,
adaptation of Agility is 80% psychology and 20% action.*

The full benefits of Agility can be experienced by applying the mindset into creating a sustainable habit of it, which is tough. It surely takes patience and willingness to practice such habits. A higher challenge is if you are dealing with fundamentally changing the way your mind approaches problems. This particular challenge can be a contributing factor to why individuals have a difficulty in successful agile transitions.

Changing our habits is challenging for 2 reasons [5]:
1. *We try to change the wrong thing and*
2. *We try to change our habits in the wrong way.*

This paper will be a guide to help the second point and hopefully provide tools to support the first.

III. THE FOUNDATION – KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

Every Agile team member is known to be on-board in order to solve a problem but it is often noticed that many are drained due to people related concerns. Equipping individuals with the personal skills to practice Agility, is a way to safeguard and magnify the energy with which highly skilled people are hired in organizations.

Being helpful is in human nature. Learning and practicing otherwise is how individuals end up with the lack of it. Kindness and Compassion is what makes us human and keeping this intact and re-learning the same is towards the benefit of all involved.

A. Kindness

Popularly considered the missing Agile value, Kindness is a virtue that can support our agile journey, be it professional or personal.

*If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for a reward,
then we are a sorry lot indeed. – Albert Einstein*

Kindness could take a lifetime to master but with small mindful steps, it can be achieved providing amazing results. The challenge across domains of work has been that - Kindness can often be seen as a *sign of weakness*. This is said mostly by individuals who have had sour experiences with trust. On the contrary, kindness shows the presence of courage. This has various facets to its proof that can be determined in the likes of how we:

- Greet each other.
- Accept when initial iterations are not perfect.
- Display patience to those who cling onto predictive processes/control mindsets and more.
- Provide feedback to one another.
- Have a conversation with opposing views.
- Accept collective failure and work towards a plan.
- Give credit where credit is due and appreciate each other, while potential is key and not position.

These acts and more can be surprisingly significant in supporting agility of an individual and teams around. Genuine kindness, defined as an act or quality of action that conveys respect for the dignity of another person, signals to others that we do not seek to harm them[6].

Few features of practice that make kindness impactful are:

1. **Make your kindness genuine** – Authenticity is quite important. Leaders are expected to have this skill. In order to tick the box or refrain from consequences, when fake kindness is exhibited, the difference is quite noticeable.
2. **Be persistent in your acts** – Many astounding leaders have shared experiences on the fact that we should hold on to our 'kind nature' irrespective of how others behave. However, this is in no form an indication to endure abuse. In such cases, being kind to yourself is primary. Kindness is not only an external entity but an internal one too.
3. **Practice the first 2 steps on a daily basis** – Repeat being genuine and consistent. Other daily practices that are part of your passion or interest, can be a constant motivator to sustain a kind pattern of thought. Ex: painting, reading, yoga etc.

Human beings are extremely resilient and can deal with almost anything when not in silos. Kindness supports in creating a safe environment for collaboration and progress, both being core parts of agile.

A systematic review with meta-analysis on kindness at workplaces [7] deduced that *kindness increases happiness and well-being*. Additional research also shows that doing an act of kindness, receiving an act or observing an act of kindness – all have positive effects.

Hence, **Kindness is identified as the first pillar of HUMBLE Agile.**

B. Compassion

Many world leaders and researchers have spoken of the importance of compassion in a human's journey. Exploring this virtue would help in understanding its role in being agile as well.

“Compassion is empathy plus action.”

Compassion is not limited to feeling what the other is feeling, but also being kind and understanding to their point of view. The Dalai Lama in his book, *The Art of Happiness*[8], explains - **Compassion is about putting yourself in other people's shoes and seeing the world through their lens in order to lessen their suffering of any kind.**

Reflecting upon his learning of this book, Jeff Weiner [9] as a keynote speaker at Wharton said that an advice, he'd give his 22-year-old self is to “Be Compassionate” [10]. He also spoke of how applying compassion to his role, helped him build not just a better team, but a better company.

Compassion brings about a transformation, eventually. It helps to understand and reflect upon reality, all while distancing yourself from the emotion involved. As Agilists, it is not only up-to the leaders to keep harmony and emotions in check. **It is up-to each person to contribute towards being a change agent.**

Based on Next Element's decade long research, Dr. Nate Regier [11] proposed a Compassion Mindset as an antidote to workplace division. His work emphasized that compassion has 3 switches - Value, Capability and Responsibility [12]. When these switches are turned on, we can respectively:

1. View ourselves/others as valuable, equal and deserving, without any prejudice towards experiences, feelings or motivations.
2. View people to be capable of being part of the solution and not giving up when faced with failure.
3. Accept that no matter what happens, we are all equally responsible, focusing on taking ownership.

When this model is studied deeply, it can fundamentally assist in building a growth mindset and create a safe learning opportunity for everyone. Compassion helps you be an impactful agent of change and also be generous with helping others grow.

For these reasons, **Compassion is identified as the second pillar of HUMBLE Agile.**

IV. THE “HUMBLE” QUALITIES

A. Honesty

Agile ways of working rely upon the fact that people involved are honest and maintain integrity [13]. Though the product is at the center of it all and delivering value is the focus, honesty plays a vital role as to how each person involved sees reality and acts accordingly. It improves on transparency, which is built-in to the agile value stream.

Honesty eventually improves upon an extremely important entity – Trust. Trust can be defined as assuming vulnerability with an optimistic expectation. In the 2019 Gartner Agile Enterprise Survey[14], *people cited shifting from a culture of control to one based on trust was the top inhibitor to agile success.*

Challenges

- i. As simple as it sounds, Agilists know that the language spoken by business and developers for instance, is often different. For this reason, collaboration can be cumbersome. Be it a retrospective, discussing complexity, contract negotiations, providing delivery timelines or building a product roadmap, lack of honesty can erode the trust among employees, affect stakeholder relationships and display insincerity.
- ii. If people on your team see you bend the truth once, even for the best intention, this behavior can become a norm. Visible concerns could include higher costs and overall goals being compromised.
- iii. A key aspect that goes unnoticed is that dishonesty can take a toll on health as well. Research suggests that dishonest acts might be embodied, meaning that when a person anticipates or acts dishonestly, the choice reflects on the mind and body [15]. It triggers higher levels of blood pressure, heart rate and stress. With stress hormones awake, it leads to the “fight or flight mode” that limits logical thinking and better decision making. Observers of this act may experience similar physiological effects as well [15].
- iv. Historically, many agile professionals have winced from feedback provided in a “harsh” way, when a “smoother” way would have been equally effective. This has also increased popularity of terms like “too much information” and “oversharing”. As a result, Agile team members have refrained from being honest as a mechanism to not deal with any resistance or consequences they might have to face.

Practice Honesty

Like any activity, practicing honesty is good to ensure the increase of it in Agile environments.

- i. **Do not assume** – Observe and keep judgments aside. Preparing who you speak with by asking for clarity is a form of respect. It allows the person listening to be open to your thoughts.
- ii. **Ask for feedback** – Be open to listen and learn from an opportunity instead of jumping to a defensive mode. Curiosity for deeper understanding will help achieve common goals.
- iii. **Be clear** – Agile ways of working are incremental, so there is always scope for improvement. Having honest conversations about positive and negative aspects is important.
- iv. **Be Accountable** – If you are responsible for a slip up, then share the same. Hold yourself accountable to the same standard as you would expect from others.

At this point, practicing the pillars of foundation, Kindness and Compassionate can surely improve your experience with honesty.

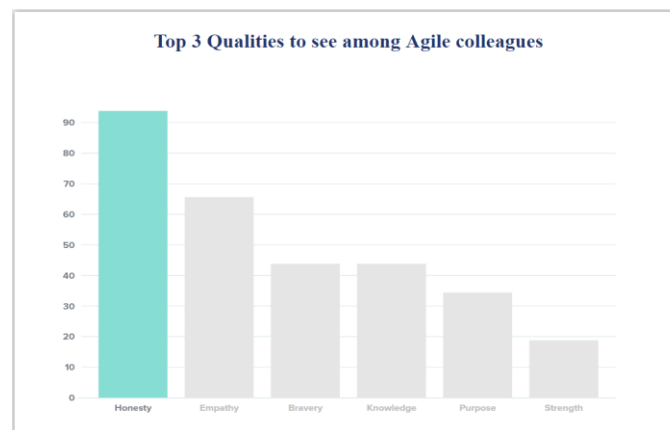


Figure 3. HUMBLE Agile Survey - Top 3 qualities

The HUMBLE Agile survey results show 91% respondents agreed honesty to be among the top 3 qualities. 45.5% individuals identify that Honesty is the first quality they wish to see among colleagues. Honesty is a factor for productivity that we ought to be deliberate with. Constant thought and action towards improving honest conversations, will lead to respect and trust towards each other.

B. Unbiased

Human beings are naturally biased. Scientific research [16] has concluded that there are no convincing methods to entirely eradicate bias or prejudice. When individuals display high biases, it becomes difficult to bring about change. However, limiting the bias to achieve common goals, while improving on personal agility is the mentioned quality of **Unbiased towards Unity**.

Biases help us make quick decisions with minimal cognitive effort. So, though they help us form and confirm our own opinions helping with allies, it is very easy to give into stubborn prejudices. There are an overwhelming number of biases that exist (~200) and can be easily found via google. Over time, all humans develop cognitive biases, which are predictable patterns of thoughts and behaviors that lead us to retain and process information while filtering through the context of our past experiences. These biases are elusive and hard to escape.

Individuals are notoriously poor at recognizing their own biases, because our brains are wired to promote fast and efficient processing.[17]

Challenges

- i. Biases can be unhelpful by keeping us from considering a wide range of options/possibilities and/or blinding us from new information.
- ii. It is not a surprise that this is the basis from which the common sentence of “this is how we’ve always done it” comes from. Most change agents experience this challenge.
- iii. Unconscious processing is prone to errors that remain unrecognized and uncorrected. Resistance is an added factor to this state.

Agile ways of working have collaboration at its center. Biases worm into the very core of collaborative efforts. Some social biases thrive on teamwork like the Bandwagon effect. Though invisible, they contribute to a team’s long-term concerns. As individuals, being mindful of our individual biases can in-turn help reduce social biases.

Example of Bandwagon Effect: Estimation - Though the whole team is encouraged to provide estimates for a user story, one might say - “I’m fine with whatever team says”. This bias prevents the individual from speaking up and sharing views. It could also relate to the person’s experiences, that have not shown value in this exercise.

Practice being Unbiased

While eliminating bias is impossible, we can display degrees of bias[18] to our benefit and be lesser biased versions of ourselves.

*Awareness of your biases and letting your curiosity lead you to new experiences,
can help you be a less biased version of yourself.*

2 techniques to achieving this are[19]:

1. **Interact with people who have different opinions and values than your own.** Being exposed to different people, including sociodemographic and ethnic diversity, makes you more open-minded and tolerant. Additionally, travel is also seen as an infallible elixir to biases, conscious and unconscious.
2. **Be mindful of your own bias.** Willingness to make an effort to address and minimize the biases is a proactive approach to introspection.

Breaking Bias[17] proposes a model to address bias and can be extended to personal agility as well:

1. **Accept** that people and systems are deeply biased and are unaware.
2. **Label** the biases that occur in given systems or decisions. Identification is key to mitigation.
3. **Mitigate** biases according to specific strategies targeting the neurobiological mechanisms associated with each category of bias.

Sidelining the common goal of an agile team is in nobody's interest. So, while we appreciate that our brain's default setting is egocentric, we must ensure to seek out strategies to actively encourage more viewpoints that can be helpful.

C. Mindful

Mindfulness can easily be the underlying trait for practicing other qualities. It is an ancient Buddhist concept with evolving definitions. Mindfulness has been applied to many fields resulting in stimulating positive responses and improved decision making. There has been extensive work on this topic alone and extending the application to agile professionals is still at infancy.

According to Dr. Langer[24], **mindfulness includes the attention to detail, willingness to consider alternatives and responsiveness to change** [25]. She conceptualized mindfulness [25] describing 5 components:

Component	Characteristic
Openness to novelty	Ability to reason about and to cope with novel kinds of stimuli
Alertness to distinction	Ability to compare, contrast and judge about how things are same or different
Sensitivity to different contexts	Awareness to situational characteristics to notice when and whether a setting changes
Awareness of multiple perspectives	Appreciation of things from different and opposing points of view
Orientation in the present	Individual's attention to their immediate situation and their actual surroundings

Aspects of Individual Mindfulness [25]

The Agile approach places noticeable significance on people, collaboration and responsiveness to change, while benefiting from early feedback, problem identification and return on investment.

Few fundamental principles of mindfulness are adaptability, focused evaluation, reflection, openness to new thoughts and pragmatic decision making. As the overlap is observed, there are natural benefits of being mindful in an agile environment:

Agile Values	Mindfulness Benefits
Individual & Interactions	Collaboration & Communication Building relationships Emotional Intelligence
Working Software	Focus on Value and quality Clarity and Innovation Satisfaction in work
Customer Satisfaction	Empathy Continuous learning Unbiased
Responding to change	Observation & Acceptance Flexibility and adaptation Openness and willingness Inclusive decision making

Table 2. Mindfulness benefits towards Agile values [26]

*A mindful response is not one that makes the best choice among available options,
but also, one that creates options [25].*

Applying the concept of Agile Mindset, without taking into consideration the situational context, has a potential to do more harm than good, especially while working on complex products. Connecting the dots of similarity, thought leader Michelle Trudgian[27], recently conceptualised The Mindful Agile Enthusiast.

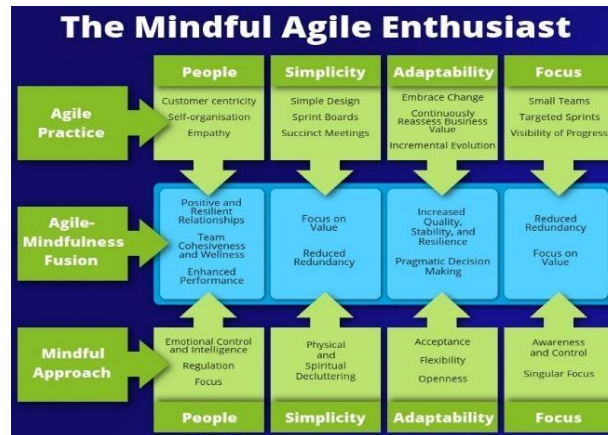


Figure 4. The Mindful Agile Enthusiast Diagram [27]

The core areas from the fusion of Agile and Mindfulness are the defining characteristics of each approach – People, Simplicity, Adaptability and Focus. The two approaches can be termed complementary.

Challenges

During interviews with Agile Coaches and leaders concerns with mindfulness were pointed out.

- i. Mindfulness can lead to over awareness and be completely pulled into the current state. It becomes a cause of increased frustration and lack of focus on vision.
- ii. The required practice and effort spent on mulling, adds to the extended time of “fixing the situation”.
- iii. Due to increased distractions and multitasking trends, building focus and being mindful is more challenging now.

Practice Mindfulness

There is more than one way to practice mindfulness. The goal of any technique however, is to acquire a state of alert and focused relaxation. A few ways to doing so are:

- i. Deliberately paying utmost attention to your thoughts and sensations, keeping judgment aside and staying current, be unbiased. This helps in collaboration towards a common goal.
- ii. In a controlled trial experiment [28], it was found that a 3-minute breathing exercise had an immediate positive impact on decision making and improved listening in group activities.



Figure 5. Breathing Exercise Benefits

- iii. Meditation is a more formal practice that you can take-up to improve on the mindfulness quality. The practice helps to build a one-point focus.

On the HUMBLE Agile survey, 96% of Agile practitioners agreed on the increased likeability of higher productivity if we are mindful.

D. Brave

Bravery is generally the ability to confront danger, fear or difficulty. Being brave is a quality that you simply possess and building on this quality improves a person’s chance of facing unfamiliar or unknown situations. Often confused with courage, which is a state of mind and a choice that you continue with *despite* the fear present.

A person can demonstrate bravery by honest communications and exercising humility.

Autonomy, as a concept, is agreed upon by most but is difficult to practice. The concept of “letting go” gives way to more uncertainty and loss of complete control. People are hired for their skill sets and if those are not trusted and respected then it might defeat the purpose of being agile. **High alignment, less bias, honesty and kindness encourage individuals to be brave and trust in each-other.**

Another block to being brave is fear of being vulnerable. A significant driving force of purpose to life is creating a connection, no matter the field of work. This is hard to achieve when we numb the emotion of vulnerability. In her extensive research, Brené Brown[29] deduced that the feeling of shame is associated with the reason why we struggle with vulnerability[30]. Embracing this feeling opens gateways to joyfulness.

Challenges

- i. Fear in general, is a much greater obstacle of progress than what we hold fear of. Fear controls our actions, which set tremendous constraints to experience our full potential.
- ii. Lack of bravery leads to indecisiveness, that can cause higher losses than a wrong decision.
- iii. A common reflection of resistance - “We’ve always done it this way”. When nothing is broken, change is hard to justify for many individuals.
- iv. Individuals tend to be settled in comfort zones and fear any change in known territories.
- v. Talking about “learning from failures” but overplanning, dreading the very same ourself.

“Being brave is not about removing fear or not being afraid – it is about doing what is necessary even when you are afraid.” [31]

Practicing Bravery

Bravery applied to key Agile practices; help achieve desirable results.

1. Inspect and Adapt

- i. Providing and receiving feedback can be difficult, especially when the outcomes are not favorable. It takes a brave person to admit any miss and open up-to vulnerability. Acknowledging, inspecting and specifying your fears helps in accepting and understanding the risks to be overcome.
- ii. Anxiety is a common feeling when we are unaware of our fears and hold back from discovering the same. Being brave for this identification leads to adaptability and creativity to *do* exactly what’s needed.

2. Responding to change

- i. A critical part of being agile is ‘daring to change’. Gitte Kligaard[31] stated - One has to change what does not work. When a change is implemented, ***you need to be brave to face the consequences of stepping into unknown territory.***
- ii. The reason to change is to find improved ways and create a safe environment for experimentation. Every adaptation is an input to the next inspection, following the cycle of change.

3. Continuous Learning

- i. Being mindful of our current knowledge and the lack of it, is key. The confidence that existing knowledge has led to a certain path and the same is good enough for the future can be misleading in a disruptive environment that demands agility. After-all, learning is an incremental process as well.

4. Having difficult conversations

- i. Innovation without risk or uncertainty is rarely possible. Bravery provides a platform to address risks and have difficult or uncomfortable conversations. **Practicing honest and mindful conversations, while being kind can build on our bravery.**
- ii. Ex: During an estimation process, though one developer does not agree with the rest, he/she is afraid to speak up and finds it easier to ‘go with the flow’. Creating a safe space to speak up is everyone’s responsibility but also, having the willingness to be brave and kind to voice your thoughts is up-to the individual.

There’s no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty and opening ourselves to emotional exposure equals weakness. – Brené Brown

E. Listening

Effective communication is known to be the foundation of all human interactions that can bring people together and work towards a unified goal. Listening is a vital part of communication skills to reciprocate our understanding. While most people agree to the fact that listening effectively is an important skill, the same individuals don’t feel a strong desire to improve on the very skill[32].

Effective Listening = Hearing + Interpretation.

As simple as the formula, the practice of the skill is seemingly challenging for many. Author Stephen Covey [33] famously said – “The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply”.

Research has proven that listening effectively can enable us to gain more information, reduce conflicts, improve the trust factor, motivate ourselves and others, and inspire higher levels of commitment.

A study from the 1970s of over 8000 people employed in businesses, hospitals, universities and military found that almost all of the respondents believed that they communicate as effectively or more effectively than their co-workers [34]. This could lead us to believe that everyone is above average. However, research has also shown that the average person listens at only 25% efficiency [35]. Lack of self-awareness and mindfulness in this regard can be misleading for your own growth in life.

Challenges

- i. Listening is probably harder for people who tend to be habitual interrupters or are constantly distracted.
- ii. Being veiled with perception and biases, keeps people afar from perfecting the skill.
- iii. Oftentimes than not, in the Agile world, we come across individuals who believe they know more than the speaker at all times. This might lead to one of the 3 states of –
 - a. Selective Listening
 - b. Talking over the speaker
 - c. Listening to identify the next question.

Practice Listening

A few requirements to being effective listeners are:

1. **Focus** – Building focus involves removing distractions and yourself from the center stage. One of the Time Management [36] techniques invented to help focus on the current activity was Pomodoro [37], which suggests working in a time frame rather than struggling against it.
2. **Unbiased** - Carrying minimum bias, enables a person to truly open their ears and minds to what others are saying.
3. **Awareness** – Being mindful about a conversation can help an individual be a better listener. Eliminating conflict completely might not always be possible but being aware of the factors involved surely increases the likelihood of an emerging conflict leading into a win-win solution.
4. **Interest, Effort and Context** – Without an actual interest in the speaker, it is difficult to focus on what is being spoken. We ought to be kind towards the effort being made for sharing information. Context is really important to effectively listen and understand, as it may differ based on the interpretation. With cross-functional and distributed Agile teams, Culture can also be seen as a form of context that we need to be mindful of.

Following the second pillar of HUMBLE Agile, Compassion combined with Effective listening brings about Compassionate Listening. There are innumerable types of listening that are listed through research and web, but being able to practice effectively is key.

As per the HUMBLE Agile survey, 70% individuals claiming to be agile experts lack the key skill of listening. Though 26% feel comfortable talking to their teams, it is contradicting the fact that 57% of the group have claimed that getting their agile teams to genuinely listen has been a challenge, that comes at a cost of immense patience, effort and time. This is also a contributing factor to people resenting their work and teams.

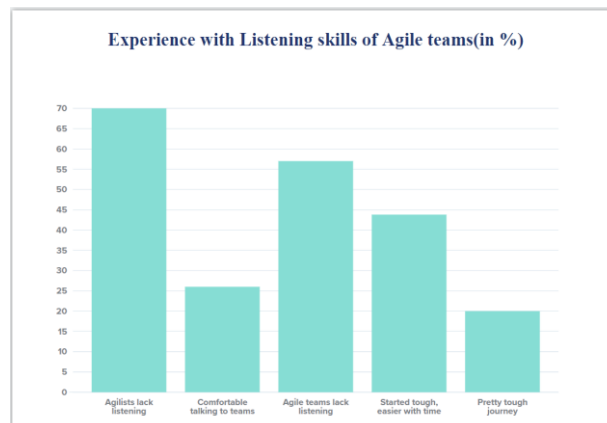


Figure 6. HUMBLE Agile Survey - Listening

Agile is team-based and high on collaboration. Being heard and understood is a requirement of all. Understanding people along with the processes and principles are all important.

F. Empathy

Empathy, in its simplest form, is awareness of the feelings and emotions of other people, while understanding their perspective. This is often mistaken for Sympathy, which is a feeling of concern for the other person and hoping they will be better off.

We are not thinking machines. We are feeling machines who think.

– Richard Restak, Neurologist and Clinical Professor[38].

In today's disrupted and ever-changing world, we are bound to improve upon our personal attributes in order to work with people, considering most work habits involve various levels of collaboration. A simple definition is - **Empathy is connecting the emotions of an individual that emerge from an experience.**

According to the influential author Daniel Goleman[39], Empathy is one among the 4 key components of Emotional Intelligence – a vital leadership skill. For reference, Goleman defines Emotional Intelligence as how well we handle ourselves in 4 domains: 1. Self-awareness, 2. Self-Management, 3. Empathy, 4. Social Skills [40].

Challenges

- i. Teamwork and collaboration can seem challenging for individuals with lack of empathy.
- ii. Interpersonal differences are ignored during poor team dynamics and seen as reason to add processes.
- iii. Empathy is considered important for and limited to customer facing roles.
- iv. Placing blame on one individual can be a natural, yet destructive, pattern in teams.
- v. People fear getting sunk into emotional turmoil others are feeling.

Practicing Empathy

As Goleman states, Empathy is developed in an individual over 3 stages [40]. Each of these stages has their significance and some may also have liabilities:

1. **Cognitive Empathy** – Realizing how you see the situation and understanding their perspective. This is an effective approach to have especially in scenarios where performance feedback needs to be provided, as you can respond in a manner that would be understood by the listener. Stakeholders can use this skill to understand their team’s feelings and decide on a leadership style more suited.

The flip-side

Cognitive empathy is mostly an intellectual, rational and emotionally neutral ability so only having this skill, with a twisted motive, can do more harm. This way, it is easy to manipulate someone into believing false information.

2. **Emotional Empathy** – Feeling with the person of how they feel can be termed as Emotional Empathy. It is also called “affective empathy” because it affects/changes a person. Not caring about how the other person feels could be a free pass for not being bothered about making that person feel terrible or distressed. The fact of caring makes it harder to misguide anyone. Caring changes it all. This is what helps in creating a rapport and chemistry with people. It is vital in leadership roles, working in teams, customer collaboration and also making friends. It helps in building trust and developing an environment for honesty and openness.

The flip-side

The circle of harmony created from this type of empathy can become a liability during high emotional situations like having to lay people off or provide negative review, which can make the decision maker feel overwhelmed. It can be emotionally exhausting, taking a toll on your own performance. A counter to this burnout would be to utilize practice self-management and mindfulness. This helps in handling distressing emotions in effective ways such as taking breaks and/or verifying boundaries.

3. **Compassionate Empathy** – The felt sense of seeing someone in trouble, sharing their emotional pain and spontaneously finding the need to help them out. This is also known as “empathic concern”. As is mentioned with the pillar of Compassion earlier on, people with compassionate empathy turn out as best organizational citizens who are good team players and are generous to help others rise.

Empathy is like a universal solvent. Any problem immersed in empathy becomes soluble.
– Simon Baron-Cohen, Clinical Psychologist

Building a connection with people we work with is a concept that is increasingly gaining rhythm considering the ever-changing world we live in. For building a connection, noticing is the very first step. With technology having most of our attention now-a-days, it is a challenge for the pre-biased brain to fully notice others. A recent theory conceptualized is of The Social Brain[41]. When this is activated, we are capable of knowing what the other person is going through and truly connect with them[41]. So, how each person in an organization leaves the other feeling is important for the business as this is what drives their work too.

A few more techniques to improve empathy are effective listening, being mindful and genuinely considering others’ perspective. Empathy can be taken to the next level by avoiding arguments, be open to flexibility where the conversation can change direction at any point.

V. HUMBLE AGILE OBSERVATIONS

87% of respondents on the HUMBLE Agile survey mentioned Agile being a challenge, which might be seen as normal or even expected by many. The surprising facts were more personal, given only 22% people had received appreciation for their efforts, showing us levels of compassion.

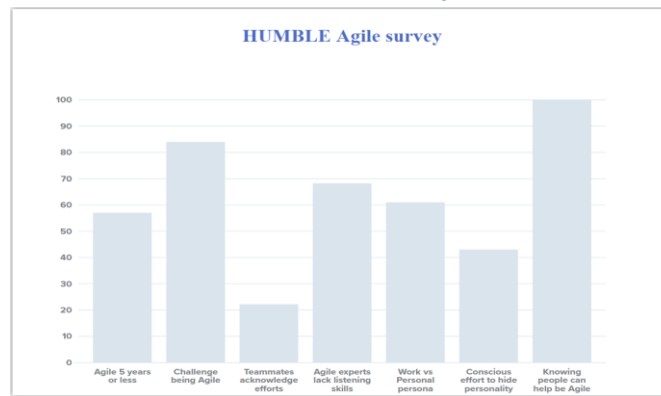


Figure 7. HUMBLE Agile Survey - Observations

- ❖ All qualities have an overlap with one another, are interlinked
- ❖ Without Kindness and Compassion, we can lose emphasis on collective growth.
- ❖ Practice of all qualities requires immense willingness for personal growth and also a moral obligation for collective growth, without which there is not much value from this approach.
- ❖ Identifying when to use which quality and making it second nature requires practice.
- ❖ Acquiring and practicing all qualities together, reap better results in the long run.
- ❖ Practicing these qualities in personal lives can be equally beneficial.

VI. Conclusion

Practicing agility has become a box ticking affair among people in organizations and in general. Agile says that “we are uncovering how to build software by doing it”, but in reality, **we are actually discovering How to discover and react to it early on.** This process of discovery becomes much more acceptable and tolerable when it is a common virtue for all people involved.

Though we see a delta in views about being agile, 100% of the survey respondents agreed knowing people better can improve the experience of being agile. This thought is our guiding star to know ourselves too. The key take-away from this paper is to build upon the qualities and learn who to become in the journey of Agility. More than our mindsets and beliefs, our behaviour reflects who we are.

A recent Harvard Business study defined “The Human Moment” [42] to be an authentic psychological encounter that can happen with 2 requisites – physical presence and complete attention. The fact that a study was created to remind humans about an interaction that everyone is naturally capable of, shows how important it is to get back to the roots.

Creating an army of “same humans” is Not the idea of this paper. While we celebrate our differences, *the intention is to assist each individual build upon Kindness and Compassion towards each other while holding qualities of progress.*

While this approach is just being written about and a considerable amount of research is needed in both theory and practice, the approach can be a helpful step into creating great team players, employees and leaders.



Figure 8. The HUMBLE Agile Approach

VII. Future Work

HUMBLE Agile is an initial part of an ongoing study, mentioning details that have been spoken and researched in silos but the collation of these 6 qualities and 2 pillars of foundation has not been explored earlier. This study has considered sample data from 100 agile professionals and further avenues of gender, age, demographic and cultures are part of the study.

HUMBLE Agile intends to be an add-on practice and a standard, supported by customized training and workshops. Addressing the delta of the belief system among Agilists, will evidently make way for equipped individuals. Feedback, support and inputs from academicians and practitioners alike is highly welcome.

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This has been a great learning experience for a debut independent research, that I wish to continue. Errors are quite possible and hence the request for feedback is open. Hoping to improve on them in my future works. I have been honored to have had the kind support of many to complete this paper. I may not be able to enlist all here but I sincerely appreciate everyone's contribution and am grateful. Thank you all.

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