Agility through Gratitude

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I.   Abstract

Context: Agility has played a prominent role across industries in the last few years and noticeably during the COVID pandemic. While organisations have had to keep up with their goals and commitments, people continue to find motivation, through virtual life and beyond.

The focus remains not only on what needs to be done but also on how individuals can take ownership and feel that they belong. This is where Gratitude can be a powerful tool, often seen as a key contributor of compassion and good relations. How exactly are gratitude and agility related? Could this lead to better organisations?

Objective: The goal of this paper is to 1) understand the impact gratitude has on individuals and in the agile world; and 2) if gratitude is a key contributor and when consistently practiced can enable individuals/companies in their Agile journeys.

Methods: The findings of this paper are outcomes of experimentation on gratitude journaling, polls, and interviews with agile professionals and stakeholders.

Keywords: *Agile, Gratitude, Personal Agility, Gratitude practices, Agile ways of working, Gratitude into Agility*

II.   Introduction

Androcles was a slave who runs away from his master into a forest. Unfortunately, he finds himself facing a lion. He is initially frightened but then finds that the Lion is in great pain due to a thorn stuck in its paw. He picks up courage and removes the thorn and the Lion disappears quickly into its den.

Androcles finds himself captured by the master's men. As per the custom during those days, he is thrown to a Lion to die a painful death. The Lion comes out from its cage and instead of attacking Androcles, licks and strokes him. It was the same Lion that Androcles helped in releasing its pain. Surprised with this amnesty, the master sets both the man and the Lion free.

This is a Greek fable from Aesop explaining the impact of Gratitude. Beings of different nature and characteristics, a man and an animal, recognised kindness and reciprocated. What happens if it is practiced by similar beings who might have different personalities but a common purpose?!

Identifying any goodness in and around us could be a gateway to gratitude. The fundamental shift in mindsets is about acknowledging every needed emotion, goodness being a part of it.

The Agile Manifesto [1] and various ways of working set across time are key inputs to Agile implementations picking pace across domains and organisations. As we drive towards acknowledging the importance of products and processes, the impact of the human-factor cannot be ignored.

With agile software development, there has been explicit value placed on the people involved and their interactions. The manifesto [1] talks about this in two of its values:

1.   Individuals & Interactions Over Processes & tools
2.   Customer collaboration Over Contract negotiation.

Agility strives upon some core human factors of interaction – Collaboration, Communication, Trust and Respect, to name a few. Questions that arose during the ideation of this study were:

1.   How does one find the ability to stay continuously motivated for displaying agile values?
2.   Is there a chance of personal practices guiding our professional behaviour?
3.   If personal agility can be enhanced with gratitude, could it rub off or be practiced in professional agile spaces?
4.   Can being thankful reap true benefits to being agile?

A lot of brain activity happens when a person is grateful. Happiness neurotransmitters aka Dopamine and Serotonin make us feel good. They act as natural shields against depression thereby reducing any toxicity in feelings and emotions. Chemicals like

norepinephrine help fight stress and regulate the fight or flight response modes. As a result, good hormones become more impactful and ensure a better functioning of the immune system.

The right anterior part of the temporal cortex is responsible for the feeling of gratefulness in a person. The right inferior temporal gyrus contains more grey matter in people who feel and express gratitude. Given expression of gratitude is not a trait for a lot of people, practicing continuously through small steps could restructure the cognitive aspects. Exchange of gratitude between individuals and teams helps alter the views as it activates the reward centre of the brain.

Figure 1: The Brain connection

Research has shown that a high number of projects fail due to the lack of social stability among the team/s. However, there has been limited study on identifying the impact a person's traits can have on a team or organisation. People of different personalities work as a cohesive unit on a team and in turn a team of teams, where acknowledging the differences is important. The starting point towards understanding people is to recognize the fact that each individual is different in their own way.

A paper in the Information and Technology Journal, studied the importance of individual personalities on a software team [2]. Studies such as DISC [3]/MBTI [4] also classify the different personalities and their impacts in workplaces. In the assessments of collective personalities, it is vital to understand the individuals' innate need for recognition and reciprocation.

While pursuing a doctorate from Harvard University in 1928, Dr William Marstone published "The emotions of normal people". According to him, there are four intrinsic drives that drive individual behaviours. They are classified as Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Conscientiousness. Based on the type, there are some key observations on developing relationships with such people.
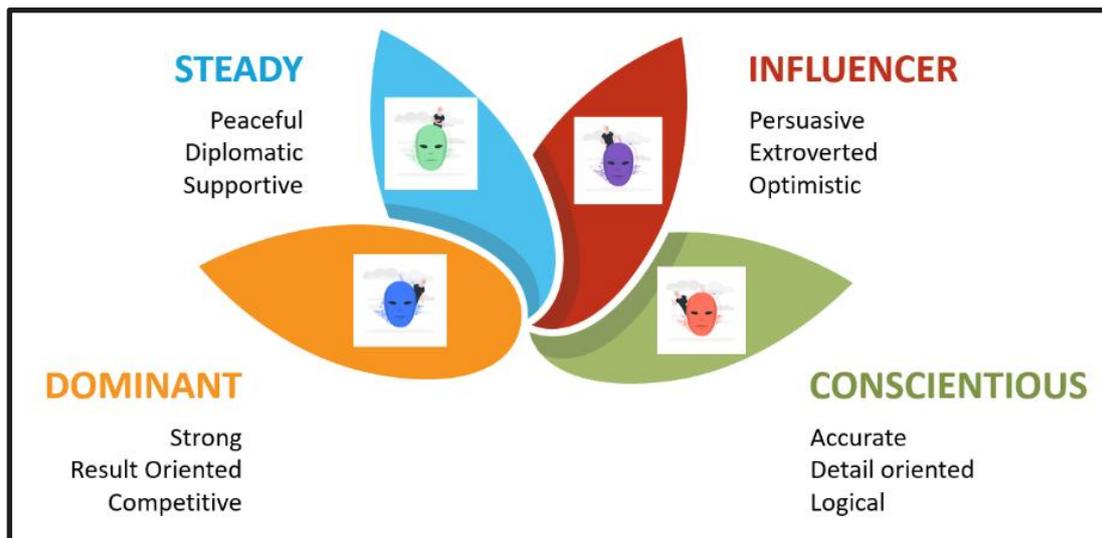

Figure 2: DISC Personality types

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator does not check for traits or character. Instead, the results are based on the preferences. Formulated by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Briggs,there are 16 types of personalities that are determined by the assessment under the categories listed below:

Figure 3: MBTI Index

A summary of research works on Gratitude [5] by the Greater Good Science Centre, at UC Berkeley sheds light on how displays evidence of how gratitude can improve on individual performance, job satisfaction and workplace culture [6]. Gratitude is not just an action but accommodates the motivation for individuals and their surroundings as a positive emotion, serving a biological purpose. With a deeper appreciation is created a long-lasting impact of positivity.

There have been multiple articles on how grateful we can be about the concept of Agility or how to feel gratitude with Agility [7]. In a first of its kind, **this paper intends to bring to light if one can enhance their Agility through the practice of gratitude and the possible impacts.**

A point to note is that this paper is part of an initial research into understanding gratitude as a motivation towards practicing agility – personally or professionally.

II.   Gratitude

Most people have an intuitive understanding of what gratitude means to them and could refer to it being a feeling, emotion, state of mind, virtue, or behavior. There has not been much research on the importance of gratitude in Agility, although fairly recently 'gratitude at workplaces' is being explored.

For scientific research, many studies have categorized gratitude into frameworks. Robert Emmons, a leading expert in gratitude, states that there are 2 key components of gratitude – 1) Affirmation of goodness 2) recognizing the sources of goodness, outside of ourselves [8]. To this point, gratitude can be received from other people and also be experienced towards God, animals, nature, coincidences, and more [6]. According to Fitzgerald, there are 3 components of Gratitude [9] - 1) a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something, 2) a sense of goodwill towards that person or thing, 3) a disposition to act, that flows from appreciation and goodwill.

We see a commonality in both the listed definitions and have combined the respective views, presenting them to represent a common view. These aspects are listed as part of our version of the Tree of Gratitude:
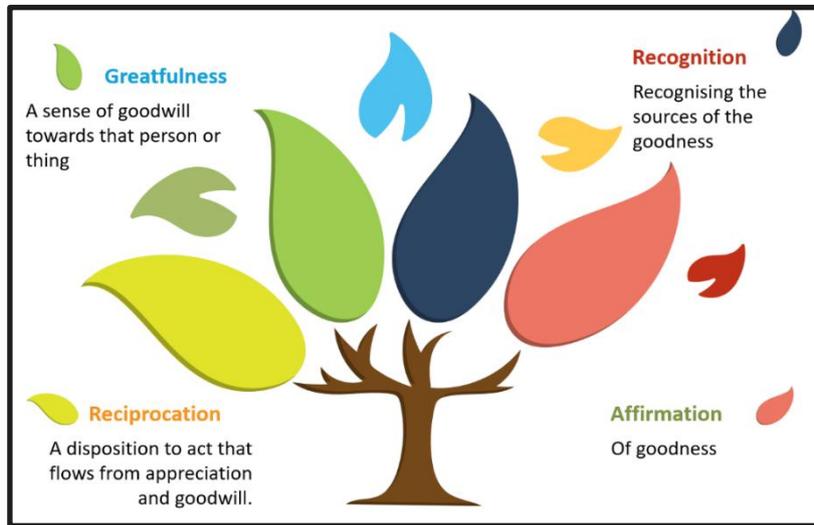
Figure 4: The Tree of Gratitude

Gratitude and Wellness

Positive psychologists have been studying mental health and wellbeing by building on the initial works of Rogers [10], Maslow [11], [12], and many others for years. This entails studying positive emotions and character traits. Mental health researchers have spent the last few decades establishing a strong connection between gratitude and good health. Gratitude is correlated to more energy and enthusiasm towards work, as the wellbeing of an individual contributes towards their ability to perform professionally.

Positive Psychology Progress [13] study reported Gratitude to be a character strength under the virtue of Transcendence. This stated gratitude to be a contributor to outcomes of forging connections and providing a purpose; these outcomes assist in collaborations and working towards a common goal.

Research has shown that feeling grateful enhances functioning in the brain that is responsible for governing social bonds and understanding others, leading to empathy. A recent study regarding the emotion of gratitude supports the theory that a momentary response to someone's kind gesture evolves into people making high-quality partnerships. The positive emotion of gratitude provides for an increase in mutual responsiveness, improving relations over time.

Though understood as limited to an emotional state, gratitude also enhances cognitive functioning and decision making. As published in the New York Times, "gratitude stimulates the hypothalamus (a key part of the brain that regulates stress) and the ventral tegmental area (part of our "reward circuitry" that produces the sensation of pleasure)." [14]. Forbes also covered seven scientifically validated benefits of gratitude, stating that it improves on physical and mental health [15].

According to Nathaniel Branden, there is a direct connection between self-esteem and integrity [16].
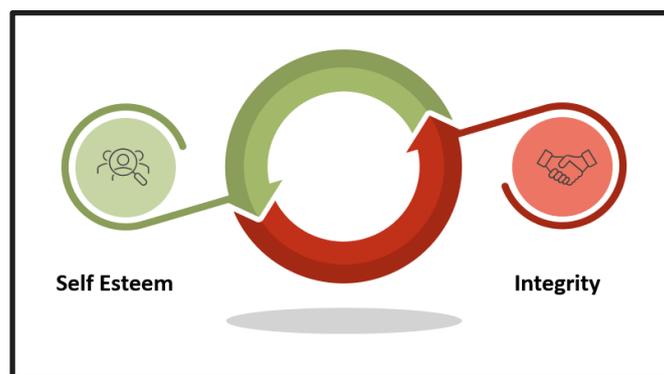

Figure 5: The balance between Self-esteem and Integrity

When esteem needs are met by individuals and teams, the likelihood of higher integrity increases. This is greatly beneficial to organizations because at this point everyone honors their commitments even without being directed towards the common purpose. To be able to do this, there is a need for asking empowering questions ijnd not challenging questions. This would ensure that common complaints such as senior-junior relationships, ego states of the seniors, and hesitation of junior/ newer members are taken care of. When self-esteem is given due importance, teams realize the benefits of cohesion a lot better.

In a culture that sometimes equates work with suffering, it is revolutionary to suggest that the best inward sign of vocation is deep gladness; revolutionary but true —Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach.

But esteem needs are just one piece of the puzzle. There are several other needs of individuals and teams. Abraham Maslow [17] discussed the hierarchy of needs through his studies. The concept central to this proposal was understanding what makes people happy and motivated to achieve bigger things in life.

Up until this point, the paper has displayed gratitude and agility separately. Understanding each person and personality has certain needs, we observed a connection between Gratitude, Agility, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. When superimposing the needs hierarchy along with Gratitude and practicing at work, we see that the aspects driving the needs at agile workspaces are met. This leads to individuals and teams achieving their fullest potential. Mapping Maslow's hierarchy of needs [17] to agile workspaces, these needs appeal from the lowest level to the ultimate stage; self-organization and self-management can be improved. Defining this as the Mapping of Needs, gratitude, and Agility.
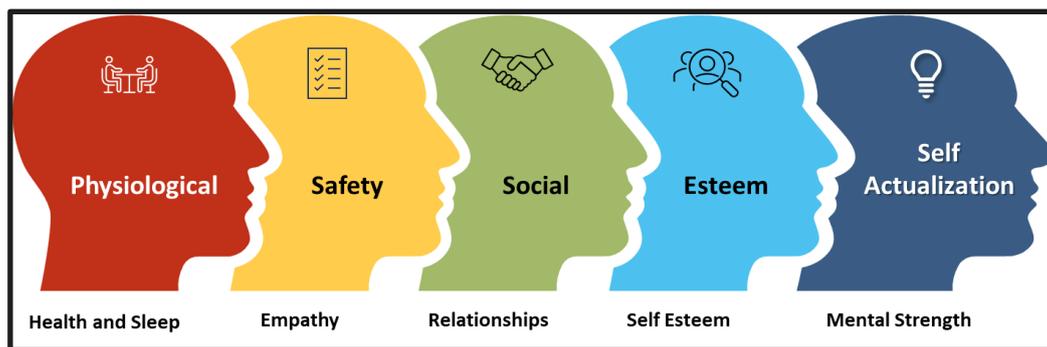

Figure 6: Mapping Needs x Gratitude x Agility

Health and Sleep (Physiological Safety)
Apparently vital to one's survival are physiological needs. As they say, "Takers eat better, Givers sleep better". In the practice of gratitude, both parties can experience better sleep. Since gratitude is not just economic exchanges but strengthening human connections, mental health becomes better. When essentials are satisfied at work, people have less stress and better sleep.

Empathy (Safety)
Gratitude helps develop Empathy for others. With mutual empathy, the feeling of safety increases. Many studies have mentioned the importance of empathy in Agile environments [18]. A few volunteers from the journaling experiment on this study mentioned empathy to be a key skill for agility.

Relationships (Social)
Improved relationships with the teams help with living the Agile Values. People feel accepted by others and their acceptance also in turn becomes better.

Self Esteem (Esteem)
The need for appreciation and respect is acknowledged at work when Gratitude is practiced. In fact, this stage is directly influenced by gratitude. People feel valued.

Mental Strength (Self-Actualization)
Teams/ individuals achieve their optimal points as they realize their full potential. Teams become aware of each other's strengths. Unnecessary criticisms and negativity get removed, leading to orderliness.

III. The Connection to Agility

Gratitude is a global language and its practice dates back to the beginning of human civilization, where a primitive Barter system existed. However eminent, gratitude is not a one-stop quick-fix and as with a muscle, requires continuous practice for realization.

Both Agility and Gratitude are not an afterthought or an add-on practice to resolve one issue and kept aside until required next. Upon practice and realization, they are fundamental life orientations. Gratitude might not be able to display long-lasting changes if it is treated as an item to strike off the list.

As the concept of Continuous improvement resonates really well with Agility, the practice of Gratitude at work is all about smaller steps towards embracing everyday happenings instead of aiming for radical changes. As James Clear says, it is the power of tiny gains and the compounding effect as a result of that journey [19].

Gratitude can be side-lined as a "soft skill" many-a-time. "Soft skills" are those which may seem good to have, but not seemingly foundational for ones' progress. This may not be completely true in the case of Gratitude and hence, it is key to understand what Agile circumstances it can benefit.

Below are listed Agile opportunities where gratitude and its outcomes can be realized.
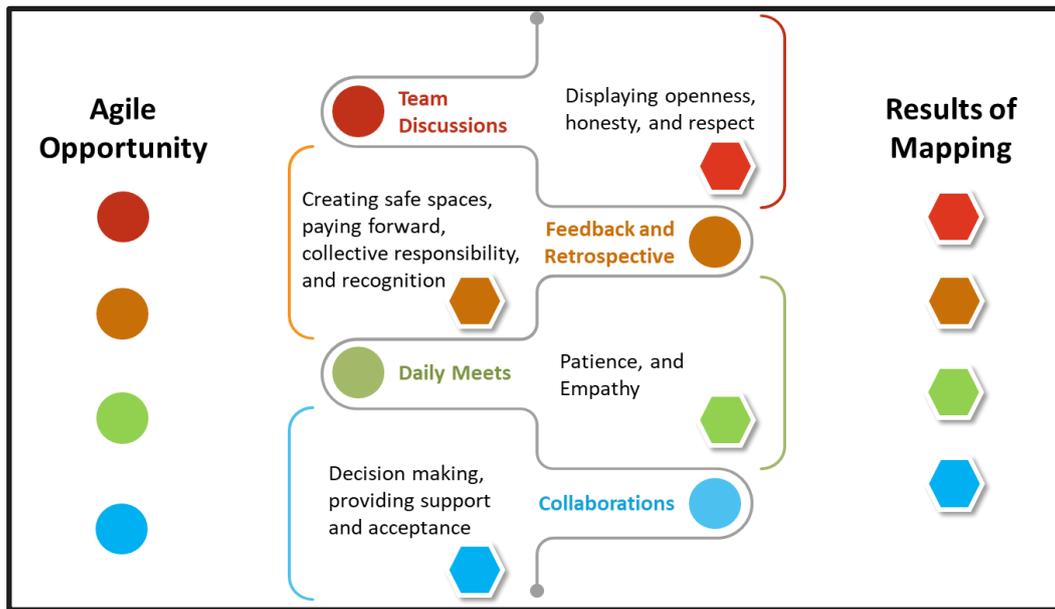

Figure 7: Agile Opportunities

Team Discussions - In general, any team discussions from backlog refinements to architecture design discussions, displaying openness, honesty, and respect are highly required. Understanding others' perspectives during collaborations is what helps reach a common concluding point or solution.

Feedbacks & Retrospectives - When multiple teams are a part of a product, project, or organization, creating safe spaces is important. This enables creativity, ideas, and innovation. In line with practicing gratitude, supporting one another out in completing accomplishments is a way of paying forward that's experienced.

Daily Meets - There is no better way to inspect and adapt when teams meet on a daily basis. This helps establish patience and empathy with any issues that individuals are facing which in turn impacts the team goals. Individuals will be more forthcoming and likely to volunteer for any help needed. Team swarms together and the cross-functionality of the team becomes a reality quickly.

Collaborations - When gratefulness is felt and expressed, the members have a stronger cohesiveness and better productivity. Since Gratitude is not specifically sought and is a result of the good intentions of other people involved, people start feeling valued. This results in collective intelligence coming out more powerful than ever. Better decisions are made, and value is created.

During this research, when we recorded the gratitude journal at work, we did not want a very specific or precise account of all things to be grateful for. The idea was to make a sense of how the overall proceedings of the day could possibly bring continued agility in the subsequent days.

We could create a list of activities at the end of the complete experiment, with the effort involved in expressing gratitude and how much impact it had created. Once the list is ready, we could decide if a particular activity or activities yield better results and so would need more of our time. This serves as a guiding map and helps us determine how we can cultivate a culture of Gratitude with the things that matter; the things that have more meaning and provide joy. This also is a mitigation mechanism towards any unintentional resistance or constraints that individuals/ teams impose on themselves.

IV. The Dark Side

Research on gratitude has proven that when people feel valued, they have higher job satisfaction, act like owners, are motivated, and have productive relations at work and in life. Being "positive" has also become a new form of moral correctness. However, it is not a one-feeling-fixes-all medicine. Normal human emotions are now categorized as good vs bad. There might be certain scenarios where one could overdose on gratitude, only to backfire.

Is there such a thing as overdoing gratitude?
It is very possible.

Being relentlessly negative is seen as a toxic trait and if it is claimed that the exact opposite does only good, it would be quite paradoxical. In both cases, it is tiresome and exhausting. In the case of overdoing gratitude, one could experience the pressure of

being in a state of constant happiness. During this study, a few cautions came to sight that one must be mindful of when practicing gratitude:

1. **Over the board**

Tracking gratitude is proven to do well. When you set the standard for noting achievements or any "highs" through a seemingly mundane day, you can find yourself falling short and ironically feeling "less grateful". During the gratitude experiment, some volunteers mentioned that they skipped writing in the gratitude journal on days they did not do anything "great" or "noteworthy" to mention in a journal. This in turn implies a lack of appreciation for the day/learning they've had as a high standard of gratitude is set.

The true value of being agile is not only to experience greatness but also to acknowledge any learnings made towards continuous improvements, where all emotions can be felt.

2. **Risking authenticity**

With the increased awareness of gratitude and its benefits, expressing the same has become a socially popular act. Individuals can feel compelled to mention all "positives". If no such events are noticed from their point of view, finding the least of their likable moments and journaling them as much more than reality could be an outcome.

Toxic positivity can be destructive to authenticity. The intent of journaling gratitude is to express true authenticity, instead of creating something that is Not.

3. **State of denial or avoidance**

Gratitude can help focus on what's important and ignore what bothers you. This can be an issue when what is bothering you is actually a serious problem and needs to be addressed. Even if the required emotion is negative, it may be the need of the hour that can get hidden under the covers of gratitude.

There is a state of toxic gratitude that can force individuals to sail past any pain or discomfort. We could be pushing aside natural emotions, only to embrace false positivity.

Gratitude is to be practiced consciously and cautiously. If gratitude is blocking you from being authentic, experiencing all feelings, addressing critical issues, and owning your space, then it's probably not as helpful and it may be time to take a step back.

V.   The Practice

Crediting other people/things for our progress could be considered central to the concept of gratitude. Acknowledging any support goes a long way in establishing trust between individuals and in turn paves the way for collaborations. The benefits of gratitude have been studied in detail and to the most part, there is no monetary need to do so, yet gratitude is an underutilized tool.

It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself — Ralph Waldo Emerson

An act of kindness, in general, could be a trigger for gratitude. The expression of gratitude might come naturally to some (called Gratitude by trait) while it might be triggered by a certain condition or situation (called Gratitude by State). It might not be inherent to us that we recognize any possible acts of kindness or good deeds but a conscious effort could help cause happiness to us as well as others. Gratitude could be for - self, work, colleagues, friends, family, situations, coincidences, religion, and more.

Taking from the Agile principles, we understand that it is imperative to create motivation for individuals/teams for the ultimate success of a product/project.

- Businesspeople and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need and trust them to get the job done.
- The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.

These interactions, which are the very heart of Agile, when combined with Gratitude lead to improved outcomes. Individuals and teams have Openness and Trust with each other when they feel/know that they are appreciated by others either through visible means or even otherwise. Visible means could be much more significant since it would lead to intra-team bonding as well as inter-teams. As suggested by Tuckman [20], there are multiple stages in team development, and practice of gratitude would help accelerate movement into the next stages.
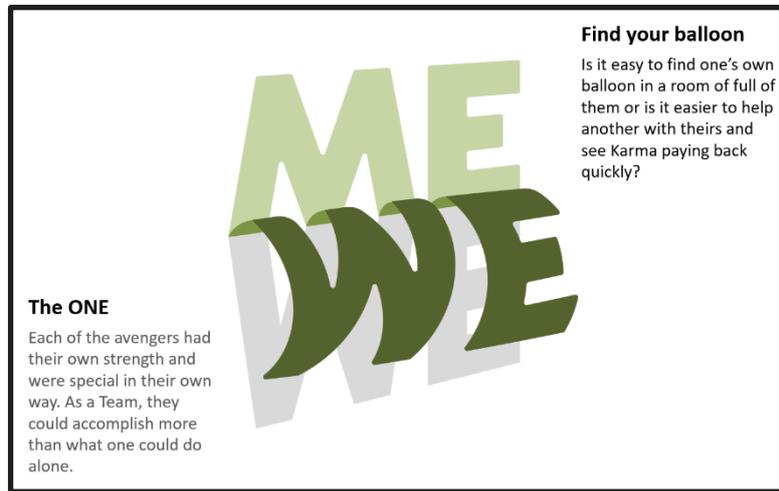
Figure 8: Bringing about Unity

Scientific studies carried out on practicing gratitude at the workplace have suggested that there is/ are:

- Increased productivity
- Better culture
- Improved Leadership
- Enhanced cohesion and sense of belonging
- Happier employees
- Reduced complaints
- Innovation
- Better decision making

The question is how Gratitude can be visibly practiced at work on a continued basis. From not-so-subtle ways to starting simple, there are many ways in which it can be done. In our discussions with various Agile practitioners across organizations, we found out that practices revealed were:

- Greeting colleagues
- Saying Thank You
- Recognizing and appreciating efforts publicly/privately
- Being respectful
- Staying responsive
- Acknowledging the inputs
- Being empathetic
- Usage of positive words

Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it — William Arthur Ward

Following the image below, various activities towards expressing gratitude can involve more than one party at times, including oneself.

Figure 9: The Bag of Gratitude

There are various tools in the market that provide an opportunity for individuals and organizations to recognize and applaud employees. During our discussions with agilists, this method of expressing gratitude took the lead.

Additionally, when trying to understand what may impede the practice of Gratitude, the following came up as the main factors:

- Feeling of Entitlement
- Comparison
- Lack of introspection
- Self-centeredness
- Privilege
- Cynicism

Gratitude can act as a natural fertilizer for the mind – improving brain functionality and spreading connections, supporting in producing measurable, long-lasting brain changes.

VI.   Research Analysis

When we set out to understand how gratitude could possibly enhance agility, there are two ways of research we ventured into. While both are based on primary research, one catered to a survey with various agile practitioners and the other was an experiment conducted through a select set of agile practitioners.
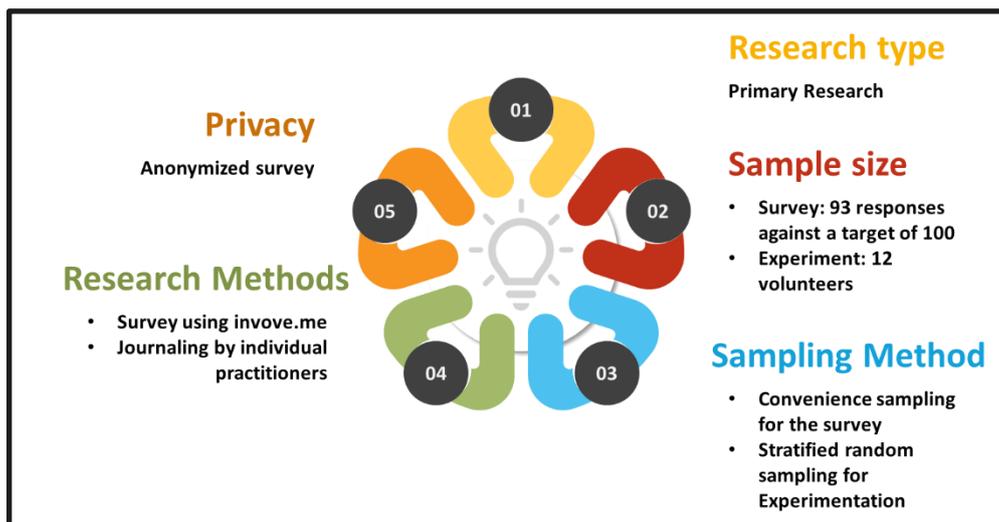

Figure 10: Research

The research was initiated with a survey of 17 questions, designed for agile practitioners. The aim was to understand if having a higher Gratitude Quotient (GQ) would be a significant factor contributing to improved Agility among individuals and teams.

The focus of the study was four-fold. It dealt with the below aspects:

- For what does someone show gratitude?

- How often does one express gratitude?
- How intensely does one express gratitude?
- How many receive and express gratitude?

Our findings revealed that while people expect others to express gratitude, their expression towards others is not at the very same level. There are not many people excited at the prospect of meeting others unless necessary. When the workday does not go so well, people often look for brightening their mood or solace through family interactions.

In response to the survey:

- 78% of participants held over 4 years of experience in practicing Agility
- 29% of respondents are really happy with the work they do.
- 33.3% of respondents are excited to start their workday.
- 33% are grateful for their colleagues.
- 86% feel that it is important to have gratitude.
- 63.5% experience being thanked by their colleagues.
- 91% mentioned that they thank their colleagues either explicitly or in subtle ways
- 70% of the respondents agree that they promote others' work and contributions.

The second aspect of the study was through an experiment where we asked 9 volunteers to practice gratitude journaling on an everyday basis for a period of 2 weeks to understand the impact on their agility. The exercise was simple and did not warrant spending more than 5 minutes per day. They were to journal the replies to 3 questions every day:

- How was your day?
- What did not make you feel good?
- Anything you are grateful for?

Once this exercise was conducted for the specified duration, we decided to have a meeting with each of the practitioners to understand the responses to the following questions:

- What changes, if any, have you experienced since you began writing? Has it been of any value?
- Were there days where you skipped or felt like it? What helped you jump back if you did?
- Has it helped your ways of working? How?
- Was there a difference in your day or mood between writing vs not writing?
- What do you think are important qualities for agility?
- Are there any practices you follow to enable these qualities?
- What does gratitude mean to you?
- What do you think are possible ways to express gratitude?

Journaling outcomes

Apart from the previously mentioned outcomes of this study, the opinions shared during the interviews were insights into the practice of journaling in itself. Mentioned below are the findings:

1. Journaling gratitude displayed a list of benefits, such as:
   a. increased focus on continuous improvement
   b. retrospection about decisions made
   c. reflecting on the choices to understand what to continue or not.
1. People, who felt grateful, also believed in paying it forward in one way or the other. At work, listening to others' issues, understanding others' personal limitations, and appreciating their strengths were mentioned as a part of the process.
2. People acknowledged that when they received any support, it was from someone who felt grateful as well. So mutual gratitude was noticed.
3. Journaling helped provide an acknowledgement or documentation of how one was feeling. This helps to look back at learnings.
4. People also related gratitude to believing in a higher power at play (as God).
5. When expressing gratitude to a person or group, understanding how they accept gratitude is important. The context of culture, countries, personalities is considered important. It is key to finding a balance between the receiver and giver of gratitude so both sides feel respected. This in turn motivates individuals to know each other better.
6. The feeling that was noticed among certain practitioners was - If nothing's 'great' in the day, it is not noteworthy.
7. Being naturally good at change and adaptability, had little impact from journaling.

VII.   Conclusion

One's Physical, Emotional, Social, and Mental wellbeing can be improved by practicing Gratitude. Studies show that Gratitude is Prosocial. When practiced at the workplace, it could enhance and promote agility thereby achieving better individual and organizational capabilities.

During the course of this research, agilists mentioned the same positive impacts of gratitude. However, actions did not resonate with the speech in this aspect. There was a certain pressure felt of mentioning and acknowledging only the positives, which could be seen leading to thoughts of failure or dullness when the high standards set are unmet. This is where agile practitioners can benefit from being mindful during the practice of gratitude and expressing the same.

Setting high or impractical standards can be a blocker to acknowledging or accessing emotions, which may be the need of the hour, also leading to procrastination. We have come to observe that the practice of gratitude requires an appropriate context.

Gratitude is like a medicine that one needs to consume to stay in the pink of health. But, ensuring that it is at the right dose, right quantity, and in the right context is essential to achieve any positive outcome. Some days, we might feel like skipping even if we know it's the right thing to do. But a sustained effort towards the cultivation of gratitude with the right constraints' paves way for better agility.

VIII.   Acknowledgement

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