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DEI and Agile: Beyond Buzzwords Toward Transformation

by Samin Saadat

This *Executive Update* seeks to illuminate two concepts that are extremely important but are at risk of becoming mere buzzwords: “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) and “Agile teams.” Most teams do not have an accurate understanding of these terms. And while the majority promote their workplace as embracing DEI and Agile methodologies, they often do not “walk the talk.” But this dichotomy makes perfect sense. How can we take appropriate actions based on certain values when we lack a mutual understanding of those values? In fact, this is one of the most common barriers we find in change management projects. Companies spend a great deal of time on executing solutions but neglect to devote adequate resources to building a mutual understanding of the problems and ideal state. Therefore, the outcomes are either failures or merely good learning opportunities. Now it is time to pause and think about what DEI and Agile really mean.

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In my work in change management, among distinct company cultures across many different industries, I have confirmed two important facts about workforce trends:

1. The workforce is increasingly diverse due to globalization, mobility, and technology.
2. The workforce must continuously evolve to keep up with an ever-changing, fast-paced workplace.

I have also discovered there are a lot of misconceptions, misinformation, and misunderstandings revolving around how to adapt within this diverse and ever-changing world.

You might wonder why I chose to focus this *Update* on two seemingly disconnected concepts and how they could be related. Briefly, I have realized that for change management projects to proceed, those involved must understand the following key points:

1. Regardless of industry, in order to outperform and thrive in today's world, it is important to understand and begin to execute DEI and Agile values within your teams, although the extent of that effort may vary depending on your industry and your company's vision.
2. The terms DEI and Agile are both currently trending across the business world and are frequently and increasingly misused.
3. There is a lot of overlap between the two concepts that can help in understanding both.

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The purpose of this *Update* is to empower you to develop the right mindset on how to approach learning more about DEI and Agile teams. To begin, let's try to grasp each concept in simple language.

What Does *Diversity* Really Mean?

Diversity in the workforce is mainly about having opinions and perspectives driven by differences in backgrounds and life experiences.

Have you ever been to a family dinner with your siblings and/or parents where you felt excluded? You may have wondered how, coming from almost the same genetic set and growing up in almost the same environment, you still feel so different from them. You feel like you are not understood. In fact, you may prefer to stay quiet during the meal because you don't feel safe enough to share your own perspective. This is because your perspective and perception are different and unique from the rest of your family members.

There is a commonly held sentiment that diversity is all about differences — in race, gender, sex, socioeconomic status, age, physical disability, and other demographic information. Although this is an essential element of diversity, diversity in the workforce is mainly about having opinions and perspectives driven by differences in backgrounds and life experiences. These differences can arise simply from being the first or last born in your family, which has given you a perspective that varies from that of your siblings.

In the quest for diversity, it is important to remember that promoting the hiring of more women or single parents or people from some other group to the leadership team is not necessarily about being *nice* to those groups. It is about understanding that these particular groups may see things that others cannot see. They have a unique perspective because others have never experienced what they have due to their lifestyles, positions in life, individual differences, and various life experiences.

From the extensive DEI training we have conducted across the workforce, we fully understand that it is easier to say you need to listen to different perspectives regardless of individual differences

than actually doing it. A primary reason that these actions are difficult for people to engage in is that our own assumptions and stereotypical thoughts can act as a barrier to exploring the unique strength of others around us, regardless of their individual differences.

What Does *Equity* Really Mean?

When you provide resources to someone based on their starting point — their conditions and differences — you embrace the value of equity.

Equity is often confused with equality. Equality is about providing an equal amount of resources to everyone regardless of their individual differences. The intention is promoting fairness and ensuring that we eliminate discrimination. This approach makes sense if everyone has similar starting points with similar conditions and is going through similar challenges. But if we take this approach, we choose to ignore individual differences and the barriers people experience due to their differences.

The goal should be that everyone equally deserves to achieve X,Y,Z. However, not everyone requires similar resources to achieve X,Y,Z. When you provide resources to someone based on their starting point — their conditions and differences — you embrace the value of equity. For example, consider the following scenario: the onboarding training is facilitated by someone who speaks English very quickly and uses slang. Someone on the team is learning English and struggles to truly understand the facilitator. They are in the same training as everyone else and there are no other resources (such as videos, books, etc.) to help them. However, in order for them to learn the material equally as others, they need extra resources to assist them. The same is true for a single mom who may not be able to follow company policy fully and show up at 8:00 am sharp every day; or, in the home environment, a boy with autism who may not be as independent as his sister at age 16 and, therefore, may need additional resources to succeed in the same manner as his sister.

Equity infers that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. We need to constantly understand people's differences and evaluate and support them accordingly to ensure everyone has an *equal* chance of winning. In other words, not everyone is going through the same challenges to achieve a goal. In order to provide an equal chance for everyone to win, we need to provide resources based on what each person needs on an individual basis. What you *think* the person needs is not what they necessarily need.

What Does *Inclusion* Really Mean?

Diversity without elements of inclusion can be extremely destructive and detrimental to your company.

Another important thing to consider is that you should not seek to hire a diverse team if you do not have an inclusive culture and leadership. Diversity without elements of inclusion can be extremely destructive and detrimental to your company.

Let's take a closer look at that family dinner table. There is a mom who never got a chance to develop her career due to childcare responsibilities and stigma in the workforce. We have a dad who was never able to spend enough time with his kids due to his responsibility to ensure his family's health and comfort. There is a brother who is autistic and does not like making friends, preferring instead to spend hours in his room to code and read. And we have a little sister who has been neglected due to the challenges her family went through during her upbringing.

All of these family members have very different life perspectives. What one sees, another person cannot see at all because they never experienced exactly the same life due to their position in the family, their sex, their mental condition, and so on. The only way to broaden our perspective is to try to encourage people to speak up and make themselves understood.

Thus, we should empower people more to tell us what they see that we cannot, rather than relying on our own assumptions. When you try to understand a person's point of view, and why they see what

they see, you are being *inclusive*. Through this process, you gain access to many new ideas, perspectives, and solutions that allow you to thrive and be creative.

But why is diversity destructive without inclusion? Because it is like having a group of people that speak different languages and expecting them to work together without being fluent in the others' languages. It can become extremely difficult and frustrating for all involved parties. Inclusion is the key to unlocking the potential of diversity, allowing group members to utilize their unique strengths to achieve a desired outcome that can ignite everyone.

What Does an *Agile Team* Really Mean?

Among the biggest challenges we have had to overcome during the pandemic are the speed at which things can change and the fact that not everything goes as planned.

Among the biggest challenges we have had to overcome during the pandemic are the speed at which things can change and the fact that not everything goes as planned. Those who can embrace uncertainty and can adapt easily will thrive. In an effort to adapt to changes quickly, many companies have tried to become more Agile.

An Agile methodology empowers teams to deliver bite-sized deliverables with constant feedback for further readjustment and improvement. Instead of planning for the entire project from beginning to end and making it crystal clear what each step should achieve, Agile focuses on evolving the project through time based on constant feedback and reflection. In other words, the primary focus is on delivering a unique value. What one values varies from client to client, so Agile organizations don't take a one-size-fits-all approach in their project management planning.

Another example of Agile is a person who plans to, by age 24, graduate from X school. She decides her first job should be at company X, she should become a manager by the time she's 30, and she will marry by age 32. She plans to have her first child by age 34 and her second by the time she is 37 to ensure that, when she is 60, she can meet her own grandchildren.

This person is *not* being Agile.

On the other hand is a person who goes to school and explores different majors. She starts with biology and then realizes that psychology is more aligned with her values, so she spends an extra two years in university. After graduation, she starts working in a startup that may or may not offer her a promotion but provides a great learning opportunity. She may experience a breakup from a long-term relationship at the age of 30 because her life plans have changed. But she remains curious and reflective to ensure that her 30s are getting her closer to her life goals.

The key point about being Agile is acknowledging that every person is different; again, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach for everything.

This person is being Agile. Instead of planning out her whole life, she lives in the moment with a vision for the future. Most importantly, she constantly reflects and gathers feedback to see what is the right thing for her to do and she understands that what works for others may not necessarily work for her.

The key point about being Agile is acknowledging that every person is different; again, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach for everything. Agile people don't rely on all the assumptions that have been shaped in their minds; they constantly pause, gather feedback, reflect, and readjust their approach.

So How Do DEI and Agile Really Connect?

By now you may be thinking, "OK, I understand what DEI and Agile mean, but how are these two concepts related to each other?" If you asked this question and did not jump to the conclusion that you are already lost, you already have the foundation for embracing DEI and Agile values.

Reflecting on the philosophies of these two concepts, you will notice that both are telling you to *pause, reflect, and readjust*. Both try to tell you that you don't know what you don't know. To overcome your blind spots, you need to pause, ask, listen, and take action.

And do this more frequently.

If you take the time to learn other's perspectives, you will end up building a product that adds real value. You will build a team that can adapt quickly to the new needs of the market. You will create an engaged and diverse team that is constantly using its unique strengths to grow.

Why Is It so Hard to Build an Agile, Diverse, and Inclusive Team?

There is a difference between doing Agile (hardware) and being Agile (software). Similarly, there is a difference between being diverse (hardware) and being inclusive (software).

There are multiple factors that make such transformations complex. Some major impediments to building an Agile, diverse, and inclusive team include:

1. There is a lack of focus on building the "software."
2. The education system trains against these two concepts.
3. Technology creates a false reality.

Lack of Focus on Building the "Software"

With most projects, companies spend a lot of resources on building the "hardware" of Agile or diverse and inclusive teams without investing in building the "software." They may put resources into having Agile processes, reflection meetings, or hiring people from different backgrounds, but they forget that in order for the hardware to produce the desired outcome, they need to have functional software. The software here is your people's mindset and thought process, which builds your company cultures.

There is a difference between doing Agile (hardware) and being Agile (software). Similarly, there is a difference between being diverse (hardware) and being inclusive (software). Hardware without functional software is problematic, detrimental, and destructive. The same is true of diversity without being inclusive and equitable.

Education System Trains Against Them

The entire education system keeps telling us not to ask too many questions and gives us 100% certainty what to expect in each term. Students receive an “A” if they keep providing answers and don’t ask good questions. They learn to keep their heads down and follow instructions to get a good grade. As a result, by the age of eight or nine we have lost the skill to ask questions, remain intrigued, reflect, and not worry too much about having all the right answers.

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Technology Creates a False Reality

With the advancement of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), we have access to more information than ever before and we have the potential to become one big village. Instead, the use of technology further polarizes us, allowing any person to search for any false information and find a multitude of resources to validate their false assumptions. This can build a false reality, and instead of allowing a person to question assumptions, it actually reinforces them. AI also fosters and supports the habit of following patterns that do not empower you to pause and ask yourself, “Is this really what I need at this moment?”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the world is constantly changing and evolving, and what got us here will not take us to our vision. Building DEI teams and being Agile are extremely important and difficult tasks. They require a great effort to unlearn many things that may have served their purpose in the past — along with relearning many new thought processes that will allow us to build relationships with diverse people, adapt to all the quick changes, and to survive as well as thrive.

But in order to thrive, organizations will require a radical shift in the work culture to change the way people work and interact daily. We all must take time to pause, reflect, and ask questions simply to understand, not to judge, respond, or agree. *Just to understand.* It's time for your organizational transformation journey to begin!

About the Author



Samin Saadat is founder and Executive Director of Jalapeño, an organization that helps businesses cultivate a thriving workplace culture. Ms. Saadat has long been impressed by people's brains, behavior, and interactions with their environment. After spending long hours in psychology research labs at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, and completing her master's degree, she entered the workforce and observed a gap between what research suggests and what companies actually do to increase productivity and profitability. With the help of her research, problem-solving skills, and practical work experience in organizational development, employee engagement, and management consulting, Ms. Saadat supports people and companies to reach their full potential with the right mindset and right environment. She earned a master of management degree from UBC's Sauder School of Business and a bachelor of arts degree in psychology from UBC. She can be reached at samin@jalapeno.app.



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