

Politics and Religion in Agile Development

Angela Martin, Rachel Davies, Jutta Eckstein,
David Hussman, Mary Poppendieck.

Abstract. Politics and Religion are traditionally taboo topics in polite after-dinner conversation. In this panel, we are going to discuss taboo topics in agile software development. Technical teams ought to choose technology based on the immediate needs of the current project and organization. But we all know that technology and methodology choices are often driven by people enhancing their resume - this conflict can start religious wars! On agile projects, we ask our customers to prioritize stories purely by business value, as if this is a straightforward thing to do and company politics are irrelevant. We need to recognize that projects that only deliver working software can still be classed as failures from an organizational perspective. If we pretend that the political dimension does not exist on agile projects then we cannot develop and share practices that help us handle these situations. This panel brings industry professionals together to share their perspectives and experiences, the audience should come prepared to both ask and answer questions.

Angela Martin (amartin@thoughtworks.com) – Panel Moderator

Being agile does not insulate us from failure, some agile projects succeed and some agile projects fail. Newsflash: the key difference between the projects that have failed and succeeded is not whether they did all of the agile practices – for example, pair programming has had little bearing on whether the project failed neither has delivering working software that delivers business value been enough – the key difference has been the presence of a political player either directly on or supporting the team. The political player keeps up with organization's politics and power structure, identifying the organisational players and the rules: Who needs to say "yes!", Who needs to stop saying "no!", Which rules to follow and finally Which rules to break. To ensure project success we need to not only get our internal practices (e.g. pair programming etc) right but also our external facing practices right, we need to recognize the importance of politics in software development.

Angela Martin, ThoughtWorks Limited: Angela Martin is a consultant with eleven years of professional software development experience; she works directly with programmers and customers on agile projects to deliver software that works. She is also completing her PhD research at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, supervised by James Noble and Robert Biddle. Her research utilises in-depth case studies of the XP Customer Role, on a wide range of projects world-wide. Angela is also an Agile Alliance Board Member.

Rachel Davies (rachel@agilexp.com)

Whatever your role, you need to balance your long-term career development against short-term project constraints. When these needs are in conflict, we look for creative ways to align them. Life is a political act. We all create and leverage alliances as part of our daily work life. I would like to be able to discuss openly issues and trade-offs that shape our technology and methodology choices on software development projects rather than leave them shrouded by rhetoric to conceal underlying motivations. I believe the agile community needs tools that help teams explore such issues in a non-confrontational way rather than denying their existence.

Rachel Davies, Agile Experience Ltd - www.agilexp.com. Rachel is an XP practitioner and makes her living training and coaching agile teams in industry. She is also a director of the Agile Alliance.

Jutta Eckstein (www.jeckstein.com, info@jeckstein.com)

I experience religion often more on "our" side: Every so often I see coaches focusing and insisting on specific practices and ignoring the fact that those (agile) practices are not appropriate for the specific team in its environment. And even worse by insisting on the use of those practices - the agile value system is completely ignored. So the focus on the practices can even undermine the value system.

I see the challenges of politics more often created by the organisation surrounding the team. For example, I saw the project management acknowledging the message of the team and the team's past achievements, but the good(?) connections way up the hierarchy ignored the team's message and promised the customer everything - this is unavoidably leading to disappointment on all sides if not to a disaster of the whole project. Agility provides the key advantage of being an early trouble detector which helps also to surface religious and politic issues early on. However, the difficulty is to address them appropriately.

Jutta Eckstein is an independent consultant and trainer for over ten years. She has a unique experience in applying agile processes within medium-sized to large mission-critical projects. This is also the topic of her book *Agile Software Development in the Large*. She is a member of the board of the AgileAlliance and a member of the program committee of many different European and American conferences in the area of agile development, object-orientation and patterns.

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Helping companies transition to sustainable agile development means looking beyond a first project or an individual who is passionate about agile change. There is no shortage of writings which stress the importance of values and principles, yet their writings also challenge agilists to step up and address concepts difficult in our daily lives outside of the creation of software products.

Tools available to aid the agile community with this challenge – and common to many agile styles – include the many forums which allow for people to take small ventures into politically or religiously charged territory, and the role of someone who is in the community to create a space where it is safe to investigate options or alternative views (XP Coach – SCRUM Master). Similar to anyone who takes a savant lead-

ership role, these roles do not magically remove the issues, but they go along way toward building a community that can adapt as needed to survive and succeed in the face of human challenges created, be these political or dogmatic.

David Hussman has designed and created software for more than 13 years in a variety of domains: digital audio, digital biometrics, medical, retail, banking, mortgage, and education to name a few. For the past 6 years, David has mentored and coached agile teams in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and Ukraine. Along with leading workshops and presenting at conferences in North America and Europe, David has contributed to numerous publications and several books (including “Managing Agile Projects” and “Agile in the Large”). David co-owns the Minneapolis based SGF Software, is a senior consultant with The Cutter Consortium, and has contributed to the agile curriculum for Capella University and the University of Minnesota.

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When I heard there was going to be a panel on taboo topics, I didn’t know if I had the courage to write about my most closely held taboo topic: *Some are more equal than others*. But I decided to take a deep breath and jump in. I hope the water isn’t too cold.

Women: The first presentation I heard about XP discussed how pair programming was implemented at an early adopting company. Everyone was required to work fixed hours in order to be available to ‘pair.’ Years before, as a young mother, I had lobbied long and hard for flexible hours so I could be home with my kids in the late afternoons. Was this thing called pair programming going to take away all of the flexible working hours I had fought so hard to obtain? While I’m on the subject, when I was a young programmer, a good third of programmers were female. What’s happened to all of the women anyway?

Sides: What is this nonsense called a “Bill of Rights”? Customer SIDE and Team ‘SIDE’? As if the people who really understand the problem to be solved are the visitors. Oh, yes, the ‘customer’ may be a customer ‘team’, but that’s a different team than the ‘real’ team. I don’t get why there would be more than one team, more than one side. I don’t get how developers think they can be successful if customers don’t do their job well. I don’t believe in “technical success.” I can’t understand why we aren’t all in this together.

Managers: Why do people equate bad management with management? Why does something as important as leadership make us nervous? How do we think that changes are going to be made if we speak ill of those we need to champion the changes? How are we ever going to grow leaders if we give the impression that leadership is a bad thing?

Barnyard Language: What’s wrong with the courtesy and respect shown by using politically correct language? Which indirectly brings me full circle to the first taboo....

Mary Poppendieck has been in the Information Technology industry for thirty years. She has managed solutions for companies in several disciplines, including supply chain management, manufacturing systems, and digital media. As a seasoned leader in both operations and new product development, she provides a business perspective to software development problems. A popular writer and speaker, Mary’s

classes on managing software development have been popular with both large and small companies. She is co-author of the book *Lean Software Development: An Agile Toolkit*, published by Addison Wesley in May, 2003 and winner of the Software Development Productivity Award in 2004.