

The Agility Code: Deciphering Contemporary Agile Discourse

Extended Abstract

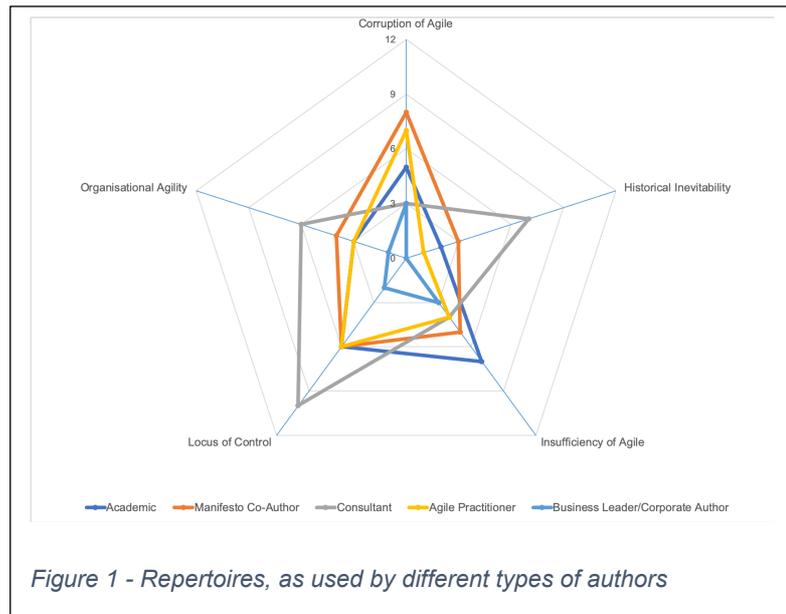
Agile is frequently talked about as a concept which emerged from software engineering practices around the turn of the millennium, often framed as a way to reduce the risk inherent in producing new products and services. However, the amorphousness of the concept in practice means what is meant by 'Agile' in one context is distinct and differs from what it means in other organisations with different objectives, markets and practices. It is not always clear what authors mean when they write about Agile, which can result in confusion about the applicability of writing to particular contexts.

A body of recent online writing about Agile was selected to explore the diverse ways Agile is written about. In order to ensure a variety of perspectives were included, forty articles were selected collectively from co-authors of the *Manifesto* (Beck et al., 2001a), from business publications (such as Harvard Business Review), and from other authors writing about Agility (eg. blogs). These were analysed using discourse analysis, a technique which seeks to identify the interpretive repertoires being used by authors. Interpretive repertoires are collections of stories, metaphors and characters used consistently across different articles in order to establish meaning. Repertoires don't seek to describe the objective reality of the subject but understand how language is used to achieve the goals of the authors, and the cultural resources they draw on.

Five types of author contributed to the collection: academics, seeking to understand or explain Agile ideas; *Manifesto* co-authors; consultants, who are often seeking to sell their services and Agile ideas into organisations; Agile practitioners, reflecting on and improving their practices; and business leaders and corporate authors, who focussed more on the benefit to the business than the details of implementation.

Five main repertoires were identified, and which authors tended to draw upon each repertoire were assessed. This is presented in Figure 4.

The first repertoire draws upon ideas of Historical Inevitability of the development of Agile, as though history were inexorably drawn towards the creation of Agility in response to ever-changing business environments. This repertoire was particularly popular with consultants, who are keen



to present Agile as the “next big thing” in management.

The next two repertoires are Corruption of Agile and Insufficiency of Agile. These are closely related but used at different times to achieve different objectives. Corruption of Agile was drawn upon by *Manifesto* co-authors and Agile practitioners, in an effort to highlight how contemporary Agility is in apparent conflict with that envisioned in 2001. Many authors identified pseudo-Agile ideas, where Agile practices were put in place, but which didn’t have the desired effects. In addition, Corruption of Agile suggests ignorance of Agility is a significant factor affecting success, and there is a Platonic form of ‘true’ Agile to which organisations should aspire.

Insufficiency of Agile suggests Agile can’t address all of the issues found in modern business domains, and practitioners need to have wider horizons than being merely Agile experts. When used in conjunction with the Corruption repertoire, the two together suggest that rather than misusing ideas, it’s important to identify ideas which will address the concerns people have in their specific contexts. In addition, organisations shouldn’t be wedded only to ideas which come out of Agile but consider any ideas compatible with Agile values. Again, this repertoire was invoked by *Manifesto* co-authors and practitioners.

The final two repertoires focus on specific concerns within Agile implementations. The first, Locus of Control, stresses the importance of the distribution of power within an organisation, such that bureaucracy is dissolved in favour of small teams close to

the problem being able to quickly make decisions in response to new information. The second, Organisational Agility, explores ideas about spreading Agile ideas to include entire organisations rather than just teams. This is an emerging field of practice. Both of these were drawn on heavily by consultants, who might be seen as been keen to demonstrate their mastery of power dynamics and of cutting-edge ideas.

The variety of ways in which the repertoires were drawn upon suggest Agile has a meaningful definition only when understood in the specific context being discussed. For example, two companies may both consider themselves to be Agile but have completely different practices cultures and approaches. As an observer, without a clear set of criteria as to what constitutes objective Agility, without understanding the details of the operational context, it is not possible to pass judgment as to the accuracy of their use of the label. Agility's founding idea is the ability to be able to react, rapidly, to change, so it would be surprising if two implementations bore more than a superficial similarity to each other.

In response to this, researchers of Agility should be encouraged to not merely focus on the easily defined aspects, such as methodologies and outcomes, but also on clear understanding of the ways in which Agile is being spoken and written about, and the ways in which it is constructed in each organisation. This will help to make apparent the relevance of research to different contexts.

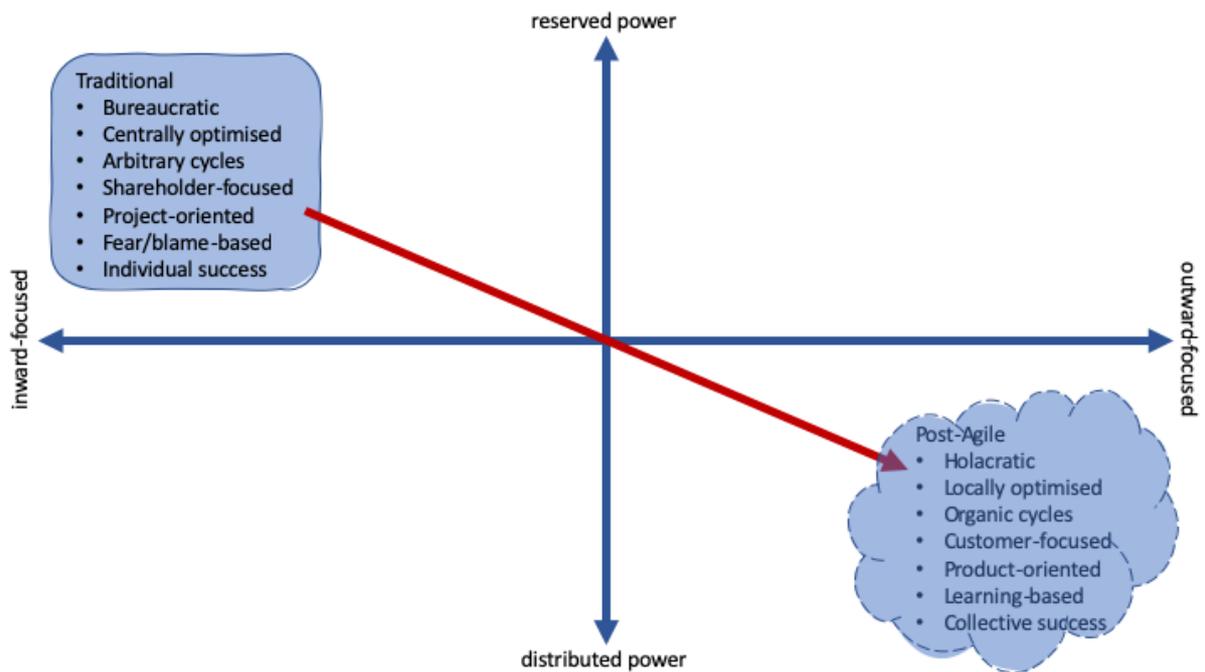


Figure 2 - Journey from Bureaucracy to Agility requires the organisation both distribute power and shift its focus

In order to achieve a change from traditional to Agile organisations, the organisation needs to consider both the distribution of power, and the focus of the organisation. Organisations that are inward-looking seek to maximise value for shareholders, whilst outward-looking organisations will focus on the value delivered to their customers. In addition, the shift from reserved power systems to distributed power system empower customer-focussed teams to deliver the value directly to the customer in response to their demands. This journey is shown in Figure 8.

Practitioners should also reflect on local discourse to understand the repertoires being used, to ensure their practices and ideas are aligned with language being used (see Figure 9). They should be aware their values in practice will either reinforce agile values (A and B), undermining bureaucracy (C and D), or will make bureaucratic values stronger and weaken Agility.

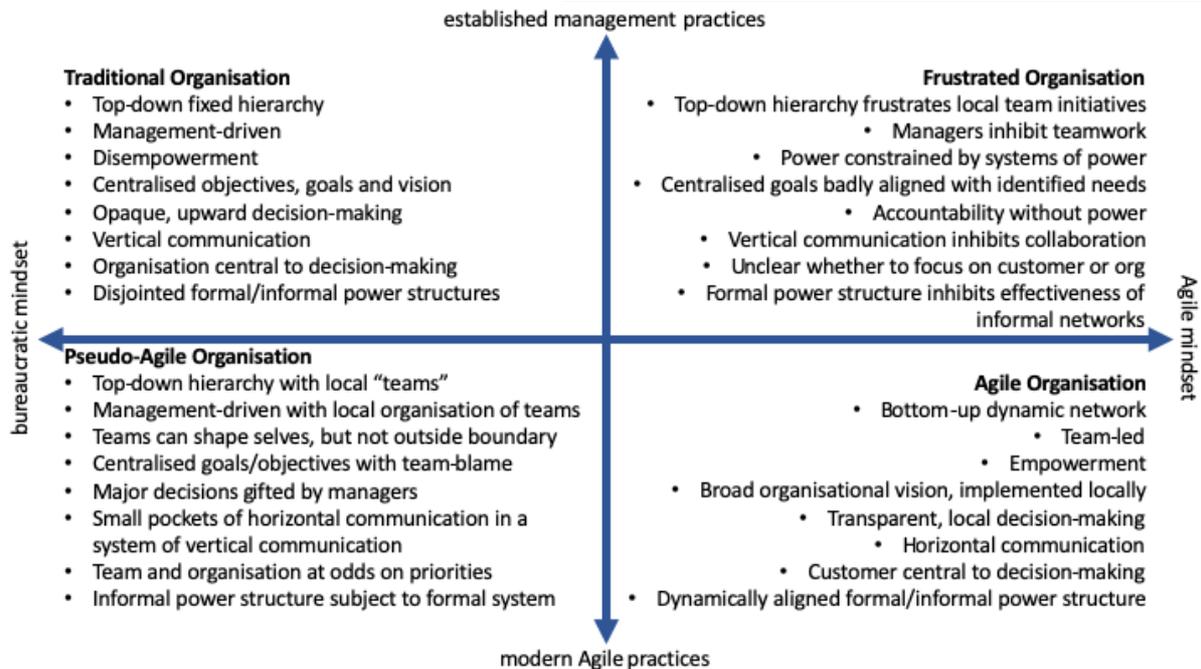
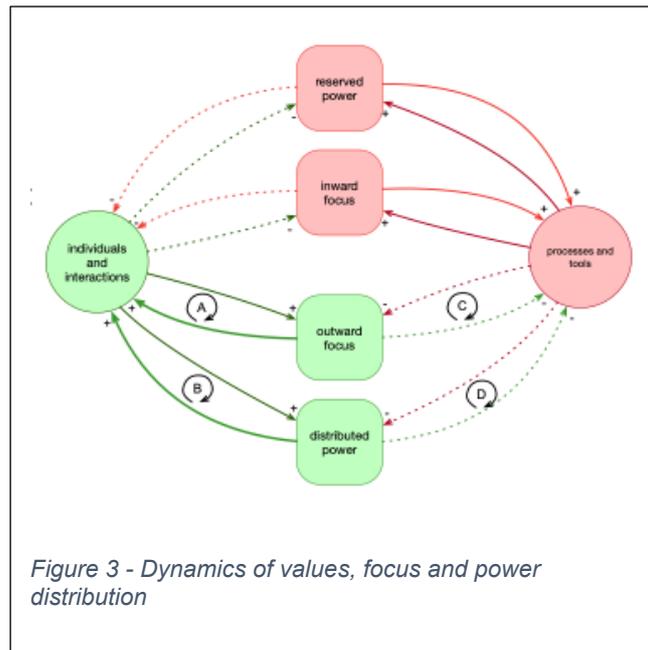


Figure 4 - Agile Traps: carefully balance practice and process changes with mindset and cultural changes to ensure the organisation avoids pseudo-Agility and Frustration

As the organisation moves from established management practices to Agile practices, and from a bureaucratic to an Agile mindset, managers should seek to avoid two traps, the Pseudo-Agile organisation and the Frustrated Organisation (Figure 10). The Pseudo-Agile organisation arises when practices have changes, but the mindset has not, resulting in a superficial form of Agile where teams are expected to deliver the benefits of Agility but without any management support. In a Frustrated organisation, the will is there, but the systems necessary to support teams

effect change are lacking. These aspects should be addressed in parallel to prevent loss of momentum and motivation (and to prevent Corruption).

In conclusion, Agility is a more complex concept than it first appears. It is not a single objective which can be achieved by simply changing practices but requires a fundamental change in the types of repertoires used by organisations to talk about itself, its practices and its organisation objective and culture.