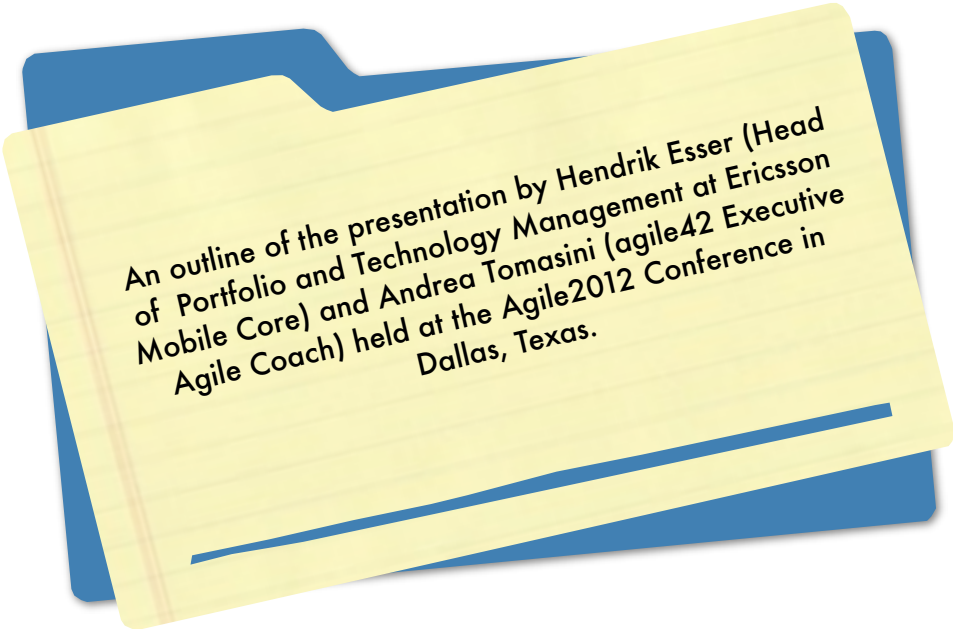


# Tales of Agile Change

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An outline of the presentation by Hendrik Esser (Head of Portfolio and Technology Management at Ericsson Mobile Core) and Andrea Tomasini (agile42 Executive Agile Coach) held at the Agile2012 Conference in Dallas, Texas.

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Organizational change is inherently complex. There is no single formula for approaching a transition that can guarantee success. Every situation truly is unique, and requires a tailored approach. However, there are many similarities in organizational change, pitfalls to avoid and pinnacles of achievement to aim for. Here we consider six key pitfalls and pinnacles of a large-scale agile transformation, told through the eyes of a leading telecommunications network manufacturer.

This is an exciting tale. In just three short years, Ericsson Mobile Core has made monumental changes, including significantly improving:

- Predictability, in particular in relation to customers and the business department. The product pipeline is solid and reliable, and managed through business value, not release content;
- Quality, allowing Ericsson to exceed expectations even of the most demanding customers, releasing newly developed functionality ahead of schedule and reducing cycle time by streamlining integration and verification.

## Background

Beginning in 2009, Ericsson Mobile Core, a division of Ericsson responsible for developing the mobile soft-switch solution used to carry signals across a mobile network, recognized the need to fundamentally shift their way of working. Following an increasingly frustrating cycle of portfolio review meetings, project reviews, and ever tighter management oversight, Ericsson Mobile Core recognized that their established practices were failing. Projects were delayed. Quality was difficult to maintain. And even with the best project management oversight, they still had problems to obtain a believable picture of where they were. Something had to change, and in the summer of 2009, Ericsson Mobile Core started looking for the answer in earnest.

The following story describes the essence of the resulting change – an agile transformation that delivered an internal agile capability that has continued to evolve and improve in the years since the formal transition was complete in 2010. You can see the results of the transition everywhere, from the first Ericsson Agile Conference earlier this year, to the expansion of agile methods at Ericsson to over 6,500 people. Hopefully, in what follows you may get some inspiration on what to do in order to lay the foundations of sustainable agile change in your organization.

## Training Alone Cannot Create Cultural Change

After a six-month internal analysis and planning, during which the leadership team aligned on the critical problems to be addressed and the desired culture towards which the organization should move, the leadership team decided on an agile implementation strategy based on 80 trainings worldwide. After a pilot leadership workshop, the leadership team had the opportunity to learn more about Agile as a mindset rather than a simple methodology, and quickly came to realize that a training-only approach was doomed to fail. The leadership team elected to use the Train the Trainer, Coach the Coach approach recommended by the agile coaching partner, agile42.

## Experiences of the Ericsson Mobile Core Agile Transformation

### Train the Trainers, Coach the Coaches

After some coaching to the leadership team a workshop was organized to evaluate possible strategies to roll out Agile across the whole organization. The conclusion was that in order to guarantee sustainability and establish a capability to evolve into the future independent of external help, the company needed to build internal agile coaching and training skills.

With the help of nine external coaches, an intensive training and coaching camp in one of the company's locations was initiated. Twenty-three people selected from different parts of the organization were trained and coached to become coaches and trainers for agile approaches and practices.

After nearly two months together the members of the group returned to their home organizations and became part of the local transformation — each one with the help of at least one external coach. They remained in contact remotely to continue to share experiences and exchange good practices. The transition team worked directly with the leadership team, who supported the transformation by rapidly solving structural or organizational impediments. The local transition teams - coordinated by a global transition strategy - worked on integrating local needs with the overall strategic needs, as well as providing training and coaching for new teams.

The legacy of this initial investment can be seen in several ways. Many of the original 23 still meet on a regular basis today, over two years after the transition started. Some of the original 23 have become the agile champions within Ericsson, carrying the torch for Agile far beyond Ericsson Mobile Core or moving on to leadership roles with a deep understanding and appreciation for Agile. And some have become active members of the agile community, contributing at conferences and other international events.

### Shift Entrenched Behaviors

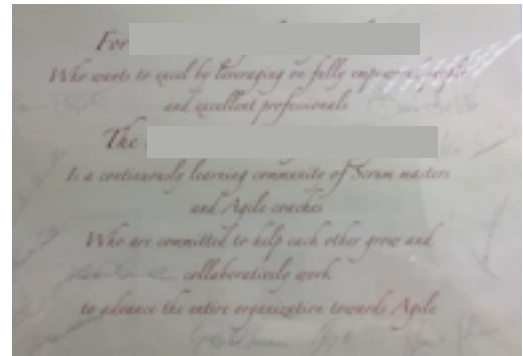
An agile mindset represents a fundamental shift from our entrenched ways of thinking. Cultural norms, such as speeding up to do more, multi-tasking as a skill not a waste, or overtime as a rule not an exception, work against us when trying to adopt new ways of working. Under pressure and without a lot of will power and a very understanding management, organizations easily revert back to these norms and move further away from benefits and practices based on agile principles, in many cases mistakenly believing the return to old habits is a sign that Agile does not work; Like a golfer learning a new swing, although it is easier to return to the old swing, the benefits of the new swing will not appear.



Teams are serious about their working agreements. This team made a small descriptive picture for each part of the Working Agreement.

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To overcome the entrenched habits, Ericsson Mobile Core made two key decisions. First, they isolated the pilot teams, bringing the transition team and several pilot teams to one place for a full eight weeks to work together and learn how the Scrum methodology would be applied in the field. This allowed the teams to dedicate completely to the task at hand, rather than be continually interrupted by other responsibilities. Second, they used a strong team of external coaches to provide mentoring and coaching support. Changing habits does not happen to a fixed timeframe – rather, opportunities for learning and refining working behaviors occur throughout a working day. In retrospect, the deep bench of experience on hand observing work was critical to effectively mentoring the transition team on how best to create an environment for self-organizing teams.



How do you get buy-in from all participants in the Scrum Master Community of Practice? You print the Vision on serious-looking paper, you have everybody sign it and you hang it on the wall.

## Invest Time in Leadership Buy-in

Initially, it was hard to communicate the new approach to upper management. The concepts were very different to what they were used to, and getting their understanding, let alone support, took time and effort. Coaching upper management required time and only really took off when they were encouraged to visit the offices where the teams were working.

This investment paid dividends, but came at a cost. During this period, it was necessary to protect the agile development teams from the broader environment that was using more traditional ways of management. As more and more successes become obvious the skepticism decreased.

One key success factor was the early involvement of business management. This created an excellent cooperation between R&D and business management. Other organizations which started with agile purely in an R&D environment, excluding business management, found difficulties in sustaining the momentum for agile. They were much more likely to fall back due to rising friction between agile and traditional management.

## Experiencing the Pendulum of Change

Implementing change has to be an iterative process simply because of the tendency of change to move too sharply in one direction, and then the other. Overreaction is a natural outcome of defining new ways of working in an uncertain environment.

## Experiences of the Ericsson Mobile Core Agile Transformation

The key is to continually review and refine these changes empirically, as new information surfaces.

For example, at the start of the change process, the high levels of enthusiasm for process change led people to use their experience to define procedures and practices for better ways of working. Instead of an empirical approach in which the practices emerged through collaborative experience, a community of people were over-thinking and over-analyzing the new processes, resulting in 400 pages of process descriptions. Although distracting, the activity did allow stakeholders with a passion for process to be heard, and so engage with the transition more fully with time. In hindsight, a more structured approach to gathering input would have been less distracting and time consuming.

Another overreaction was driven by the enthusiasm for the Scrum roles, with those involved in the transition sometimes giving the impression that “if you are not a Scrum Master or a Product Owner, you are nobody!” as a protection from further change. Over time, and with regular feedback, this tendency was later developed into a more contextualized understanding.

### Working to Fixed Deadlines

At Ericsson Mobile Core, one of the challenges that led directly to the adoption of new working practices was the illusion of control existing project management methods provided. The true state of a project was never truly clear, and delivery was unpredictable.

On the other hand, iterative development regularly stops to review increments of a working product, enabling teams to see incrementally complete work, and identify and act well in advance of potential problems.

After the agile transition, Ericsson Mobile Core established a planning flow involving all levels of planning – from strategic goals to user stories and back. They abandoned the “illusion of control” and embraced the uncertainty of having tolerances in the plan, which were worked on incrementally. At the beginning of a release cycle, the range of uncertainty was large, but sprint-by-sprint, this range narrowed, so that as the release loomed, the content of the release was well known. To begin with, the uncertainty of what would be in a fixed-date release was disconcerting. As the business understood how much control they had into what went into a release, and how much certainty they had on the overall content and quality, they warmed to the approach.



Random toy: the post-it toilet (for recycling). There are loads of funny little ideas like this all around the place.



The receptionist's board. No kidding, this 3-girl team rules. They noticed all the boards in the company, they grew curious and decided to try. It's working great for them.



Most rooms all across the facilities look like these. Task boards and post-its everywhere, in organization where the first coaching teams needed permission from facilities to use stickies.

## Summary

Three years ago Ericsson started on a long journey to agility - over 1000 people adopting an agile mindset after over 30 years of entrenched control gate processes. Back then, there was fear and uncertainty, a will to control and preserve what made the organization successful. Today there is a completely different culture. A culture that allows the organization to sustain and keep on evolving, that allows them to achieve significant results long after the external coaches left.

Though many organizations achieve this while being coached, Ericsson Mobile Core has built up an internal capability able to continually learn and improve. Reflecting on what went well, we have identified five keys to sustainable change. The first two, People and Practices, are well-understood. The last three, Perseverance, Protection and Patience, are more cultural characteristics. Achieving lasting agile change takes time and commitment; the journey is often long and, at times, difficult. But the results can be game changing. We hope that some of the experiences described here help show what can be achieved, and provide some insight into the patience and perseverance required to internalize agile principles into large organizations.

## About agile42

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agile42 is a market leader in providing agile transformation services to companies looking to adopt a more efficient and adaptive way of working.

By continually refining the approach, agile42 has developed a unique and proven framework for supporting organizations in realizing the benefits of an agile mindset and way of working.

Following the adoption of agile methods and an incremental and iterative mindset, our customers regularly confirm that they see:

- Accelerated revenue generation
- Faster Return on Investment
- Improved technical quality
- Rapid delivery to market
- Increased team motivation



For more information:  
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