Continuous Improvement: Hell on Earth?

Katherine Kirk

Agile2014
INTRO
Intro

• Katherine Kirk
  – Over 10 years contracting and freelancing in a variety of roles within the IT and Media industries
  – Coach, PM, Delivery Improvement Specialist, DBA, Web Admin etc etc
  – Specialise working with really "troubled" projects, where simplistic solutions don't quite cut it
  – First class MSc in Multimedia Computer + PG studies at Oxford
Why Hell on Earth?

The Fundamental Issues

“Continuous Improvement is based inbuilt assumptions which can automatically predisposition it to failure”
Workshop format

• Sit in groups
  – Make sure you have
    • A flip chart
    • Pens
Rapid pace

If we have time – more exploration at the end....

• FORMAT
  1. Define Continuous Improvement
  2. Explore why it can ‘go-bad’
  3. Review eastern philosophy
  4. Apply it to a scenario
  5. Review
  6. If we have time: CREATIVE BIT
WHY CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT
Why Continuous Improvement

• Identify 3 issues which might make us want to establish continuous improvement
Some other reasons why we choose to want Continuous Improvement

- People are gaming management
- Quality is dropping
- Can’t deliver what we promised
- No predictability / consistency
- Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)
- Product is degrading (legacy code hell)
• Its an honourable intention to want to solve these problems!
PEOPLE DON’T LIKE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT
An interesting pattern

• Ask a software engineer (even from an Agile/Lean team)

• Ask an environmental scientist

• Ask an archaeologist
• Engineers are discovery junkies
  – Teen years in dark rooms ‘improving’!

Whaaa??
SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?
ACTIVITY: Find the definitions

Continuous Improvement
Definition?

Continuous
• Constantly

Improvement
• Not-good-enough

Honourable intention => Painful experience
We can see...

The Fundamental Issue

“Continuous Improvement is based on inbuilt assumptions which can automatically predisposition it to failure”
Dangerous Inbuilt Assumptions

Continuous

- Assumption 1:
  
  “Infinite improvement is possible”

  Allows unrealistic expectation

Improvement

- Assumption 2:

  “Something is wrong and must be fixed”

  Begins with negative judgement
3 main areas of weakness!

Continuous
• **Assumption 1:**
  “Infinite improvement is possible”
• **Assumption 2:**
  Allows unrealistic **expectation**

Improvement
• **Assumption 2:**
  “Something is wrong and must be fixed”
• **Begins with negative judgement**
• Someone from each table – come and get a copy of the definitions...
On reflection / investigation

• WEAK SPOTS can develop if...
  – **Expectation** is unrealistic/too high
    • This will be done by this time
  – **Judgement** is ‘out of touch’
    • This is an improvement
  – **Assumptions** are incorrect
    • We are able to do this

  – e.g. Apathy
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?
Drawing from eastern philosophy

• This is not a recent technique
  – Steve Jobs
  – Management & Mindfulness Research

• Mindfulness
  – Mahasi Vipassana – a very ‘practical’ strain of Buddhism
    • AIM 1: Reduce Suffering
    • AIM 2: Continually Improve indefinitely till enlightenment
Monks say: They’re ‘poisons’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• You’re not necessarily working with the REAL data!!</td>
<td>• Impossible goals breed apathy</td>
<td>• Subject to ignorant influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Getting what you expect might not be what is best (e.g. not innovative enough)</td>
<td>• Can be critical, and self-orientated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Too much emotional investment: expectation can create morale crashes when it isn’t achieved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE
Activity: Identify the Weak Spots

- As I’m telling a story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgement/Judge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Example**

*(ACTIVITY: Identify the weak spots)*

**Judgement & judge/Assumption/Expectation?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Will take</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Manager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
<td>10 items</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request</strong></td>
<td>2 weeks?</td>
<td>20 items?</td>
<td>Permissive</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 - achieved</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>20 items</td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Pleased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request</strong></td>
<td>1 week?</td>
<td>40 items?</td>
<td>Trepidation</td>
<td>Determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 – achieved</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>40 items</td>
<td>Surprise &amp; Exhausted</td>
<td>Confidence &amp; drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request</strong></td>
<td>2.5 days?</td>
<td>80 items?</td>
<td>Anger/Frustration</td>
<td>Convinced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PROVEN

Yes it works!!!!

(sack those who don’t believe it)

This is CRAP
What did you find?

• Shout out!
The GREAT divide

• Management confirms
  – I’ve seen a pattern
    • [ ]

• Team confirms
  – I’ve seen a pattern
    • [ ]
The GREAT divide

• Management confirms
  – I’ve seen a pattern
    • The team can ALWAYS do more than they say
    • There WAS something wrong with their attitude
    • Ignore the protestations of impossibility

• Team confirms
  – I’ve seen a pattern
    • Manager is disengaged from our situation
    • To make this work we now need to game the system
    • Trying to make it better never never works
    • Best to get left alone just to do our job
Ouch?

- They will revert to original behaviour
  - People are gaming management
  - Quality is dropping
  - Can’t deliver what we promised
  - No predictability / consistency
  - Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)
  - Product is degrading (legacy code hell)
Continuous Improvement can be hampered by

Expectation
Judgement
Assumption

(Interactions / culture)
Hmm.... notice... Even in Agile/Lean

• **PEOPLE OVER PROCESS**: Interactions / culture can sabotage even the best process!

**Manifesto**

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working software over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Agile, Lean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processes/Methods</td>
<td>Scrum, Kanban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>e.g. 2-4 week cadence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>continuous delivery,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>retrospectives, daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques</td>
<td>TDD, BDD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/ interactions</td>
<td>???</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHAT’S AN ALTERNATIVE?
A simple change in approach

- Mahasi Vipassana Monks
  - Just change the approach/how you interact with the world....
Change the WAY you interact

Expectation

Aspiration
Expectation (Demand)

• “Assumes, presumes, takes for granted. Its a manifestation of arrogance. **Expectation is bound to fail us one way or another for it projects an ideal, a concrete goal on the future whose parameters we don’t know.** We simply don’t know what is going to happen. So when our expectation fails to materialise we are disappointed, depressed by it. A life that rests on expectation is forever falling into ditches. Consider how many times we’ve been disappointed in our lives. Such is the measure of expectation.

• Expectation is a dangerous poison. **When we fail to get what we expect, we are disappointed, humiliated, depressed**

  Bhante Bodhidhamma
Aspiration (Aim)

- “Does not expect, assume, presume. It does not have a success time or finishing date. Aspiration does not presume fulfilment, does not presume on others. It is simply a movement in the mind, a desire for the wise, the beautiful and the virtuous. An inclination towards a goal. And so aspiration gathers all the necessary qualities and support to move in that direction.

- Aspiration is humble. Not the false humility of a prideful self. [Not] a cover to prevent the humiliation of failure in others eyes. Genuine humility is that groundedness that comes with seeing life not as success and failure, but as trial and error. If things dont work out, well, at least I know what is not for me. It clarifies future action”

Bhante Bodhidhamma
Change the WAY you interact

Judgement

Judiciousness
Judge vs Judicious (Command vs Collaborate)

- **Judging** – to take a position that is critical, and self-righteous.

- **Judicious** – there is a judging that is not judgmental; judicious means to be wise and sensible. To be judicious means to see the whole situation even from the other person’s or institution’s point of view. To do that we must drop our own little opinion and see it in a wider perspective. These are the virtues we expect in a judge – not to be hijacked by a crowd baying for blood or duped by the clever arguments of lawyers.

  Bhante Bodhidhamma
Change the WAY you interact

Assumption

Investigation
Assumption (expect) vs Investigation (ask/inquire)

• Assumption
  – We can (when we can’t)
  – We can’t (when we might)

• Investigation
  – How interesting: What can we do?
  – How interesting: What can’t we do?
Expectation – Aspiration
Judgement – Judiciousness
Assumption – Investigation

INTERACTIONS:
Directive, order, silence, demand, control, abide by plans, rules
INTERACTIONS:
Aim to do better
Collaborate / vote
Ask, strategise, check
Explore

Expectation – Aspiration
Judgement – Judiciousness
Assumption – Investigation
APPLICATION
Activity: Strengthen Approach

• As I’m telling a story

Judiciousness
1.
2.
3.
Investigation
1.
2.
3.
Aspiration
1.
2.
3.
### Story 1:

**Aspiration/Investigation/Judiciousness**

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<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>1 week?</td>
<td>40 items?</td>
<td><strong>R</strong> Sensible</td>
<td>Hopeful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 – achieved</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>25 items</td>
<td>Pleased</td>
<td>Confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>25 items?</td>
<td><strong>R</strong> Confident</td>
<td>Trusting</td>
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- **Sustainable pace? = resilient innovation?**
- **Aspire:** 2 weeks, 20 items, no legacy?
- Try new things? Learning a lot!
- We can predict! We get better
• Shout out!
• What changes did you see between the two scenarios?
A simple approach change...

Continuous improvement?

Consistent DISCOVERY
IF WE HAVE TIME.....
Remember your reasons for CI?

- Example:
  - People are gaming management
  - Quality is dropping
  - Can’t deliver what we promised
  - No predictability / consistency
  - Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)
  - Product is degrading (legacy code hell)
Activity: Apply the technique

Judgement
1.
2.
3.
Assumption
1.
2.
3.
Expectation
1.
2.
3.

Judiciousness
1.
2.
3.
Investigation
1.
2.
3.
Aspiration
1.
2.
3.
Choose an issue you have...

• Example:
  – People are gaming management
  – Quality is dropping
  – Can’t deliver what we promised
  – No predictability / consistency
  – Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)
  – Product is degrading (legacy code hell)

• Build a scenario – apply classification – change it to the model
Activity

Judgement
1.
2.
3.
Assumption
1.
2.
3.
Expectation
1.
2.
3.

Judiciousness
1.
2.
3.
Investigation
1.
2.
3.
Aspiration
1.
2.
3.
• Shout out!
ON REFLECTION
Reflections...

• Discuss and write the top 3 things you learned from today

• How would you apply this in the ‘real world’?

• Why this wont apply in the ‘real world’!

• CHALLENGE: Can you identify the weaknesses of Agile implementations using this model?
Thankyou!

Identify the weaknesses

Strengthen your approach

Expectation – Aspiration
Judgement – Judiciousness
Assumption – Investigation

@kkirk