

Principles, prince2ples, everywhere... Part I

Many Agile professionals in the field are wary to use terms like project management or even dare to consider possible benefits of Prince2 compared to the Agile way of working. On the other side the project management professionals, like the APMG [1] with AgilePM or Prince2 Agile from Axelos [2], are really hooking into the Agile way of working. Their approaching is, of course, from the management perspective. It is interesting to observe as to whether any shared values can be found. What better way to start investigating than the foundation of both worlds - their principles.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary a principle is:

"A basic idea or rule that explains or controls how something happens or works."

In this diptych I will elaborate on the principles of one, perceived from the viewpoint of the other. In one corner stands Prince2, an acronym for PProjects IN Controlled Environment, described as a de facto process-based method for effective project management. The first version came out in 1989, followed by a few updates later on. At the moment it has seven core Prince2 principles. In the opposite corner we have the Agile Manifesto, containing 12 Agile Principles. The Manifesto and its principles emerged in 2001. As Prince2 saw the light in 1989, it is only fair to start with these principles.

1. Continued business justification

The Business Case is the most important document, and is updated at every Stage of the project to ensure that the project is still viable. Early termination can occur if this ceases to be the case.

In Agile terms no project artifact can be more important than working software. However, the ongoing justification of the business case should relate to the value delivered. This idea is at the core of the functioning of the Backlog and the priorities the Product Owner provides. Each sprint these can be redefined. In Scrum there is no official notion of a business case, just shifts in priority, followed by new stories to be picked up. These stories are driven by the value they generate for the business; that is as close to a business case as you might get.

2. Manage by exception

Regular meetings, especially the dreaded "weekly team meetings" are considered inefficient and unnecessary. Instead, work packages are assigned by Team Managers to Team Members including deliverables with time and quality tolerances. If work progresses smoothly then the workers have no need to interfere with the Team Manager's time. Only if something deviated from the plan is communication and management required from them.

By far this is the principle Agilists get most agitated by. What do you mean, personal communication inefficient and unnecessary? A long story short, in Agile the approach is the opposite - by a mere 180 degrees.

3. Learn from experience

Each project maintains a Lessons Log and projects should continually refer to their own and to previous and concurrent projects' Lessons Logs to avoid reinventing wheels.

Good, learn from your own experiences and those of others. Within Scrum we are accustomed to looking back and forward each sprint in order to improve ourselves. In that way, we can hardly disagree with the third principle. Learning in Agile teams, however, is a team matter and is effectuated more hands on. All team members actively participate and the stage is set in each retrospective for so called "full disclosure". In contrast of the Prince2 way where the project leader is responsible for keeping the logs, these may even be unknown by the team. The learned lessons log resembles the good intention of a paper tiger. From the Agile perspective it is not helpful enough and the distance to the team and everyday work is just too large. So the principle is good, the effectuation in practice is far less.

4. Defined roles and responsibilities

Roles are separated from individuals, who may take on multiple roles or share a role. By naming and defining roles in the Prince2 standard it becomes clear exactly who has what responsibility and decision making powers, avoiding arguments.

Roles and responsibilities are important for organizing groups of people who work together. In Prince2 the defined roles are those of all people involved except the actual team members. The two methods overlay on the roles of Team Manager and Project Manager on one hand versus Scrum Master and Product Owner on the other. It might be interesting to see how these roles are mixed and mingled; or even further, how all roles from both worlds may be complementary to one another. They both have a different approach, Prince2 provides the maximum configuration whereas Scrum describes the pure basics. But I ought to stay focused on the underlying principles here. In my opinion it is clear the principle of clear roles and responsibilities is shared, they just describe roles from a different angle.

5. Manage by stages

The project is planned and controlled on a stage by stage basis. This includes updating the Business Case, risks, overall plan, and detailed next-stage plan after each stage in the light of new evidence.

Stages as such are not a known concept within Scrum. What we do use is the notion of small iteration with focus on a subset of the entire scope. And that is exactly what stages are intended for as well. The project scope is not managed as a whole but is divided into concrete smaller portions. As with Scrum, the idea of a smaller scope, and thus with fewer risks or pitfalls, leads to a better manageable period of time.

Sprints are the rhythm and 'stages' of Scrum. You could argue the planning session of a new sprint resembles the ad-hoc making of a next-stage plan. The Backlog, output of the retrospective and input from all team members is used; these reflect the business case, new evidence and all kinds of logs. The exact way to manage stages is different, for one we tend to minimize the production of voluminous documents. Another difference is the length of a stage. Of course this depends on the type of project, but a stage of two weeks is not all that common. Back to the principle at hand, again the form differs, yet they both appreciate the value of the principle.

6. Focus on products

Each work package is defined by one or more deliverable products, preferably with tolerances to time, cost, scope and quality quantified in advance.

Why would Prince2 keep such a focus on products? It does help if a team knows up front what the requirements are for the software they are going to work on. The better these work packages are described, the better a team can make estimations and do programming on them. That sounds familiar. In Scrum we focus on concrete finished user stories at the end of a sprint, measured against the definition of Done. In that way the factors scope, cost and quality are taken into account. The teams' direct influence on the stories, mini work packages, in Scrum is much larger. Still, we can conclude this principle is valued in Scrum.

7. Tailoring

Prince2 should not be applied blindly in a dogmatic, bureaucratic form. Rather it is defined to be a method in need of tailoring to specific projects.

Tailoring enables teams and projects to adjust the processes, documents and other parts to fit their needs. Prince2 has a variety of means to manage projects of any size. A dogmatic attitude is the arch enemy of an Agile project. In Agile we use the motto "Scrum the Scrum". That is the exact same. So the two methods can embrace each other without a fight on this principle.

Halfway conclusion

We have reviewed the 7 principles that form the basis of a Prince2. Short to say is that 6 out of 7 principles are well rewarded in Scrum and only one principle presents a direct conflict. Is this a surprise? No, it is not. Scrum and Agile don't have a monopoly on good principles. Besides that Prince2, has been designed on years of project experiences and has evolved over the years. But to say the least, Prince2 was never as successfully as Scrum is today. Before judging the rate of success based on principles, we will have to discuss the Agile principles from the Prince2 perspective. That subject is covered in the next part of this Blog. One cliff hanger though, the team and persons are much more centered in Scr...

Contributions & References

- [1] AgilePM: <http://www.apmg-international.com/en/qualifications/agile-pm/agile-pm.aspx>
- [2] Prince2 Agile: <https://www.axelos.com/best-practice-solutions/prince2/prince2-agile>
- [3] Definition Principle: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/principle>
- [4] Prince2: <https://www.prince2.com>
- [5] Prince2: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRINCE2>
- [6] Agile Manifesto: <http://www.agilemanifesto.org>
- [7] ScrumGuides: <http://scrumguides.org/>