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Agile Community of Practice for Organizational Maturity
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Author: Mr. Rahul Sudame
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ABSTRACT

As many enterprises move towards Agile adoption, it becomes important to develop an ecosystem which works on strengthening Agile environment and supports organizational Agile maturity. Agile Community of Practice (COP) is one such initiative, which can strongly contribute in organization’s Agile Transformation movement. The paper would present need of Agile COP and would present practical experiences of the author of setting Agile COP and the benefits achieved through it.

We developed Agile COP in our organization as a platform to share Agile knowledge and experience amongst various team members and as a mechanism to ensure standardized application of Agile practices across various projects. We developed it as a forum which is now used by various team members to raise their queries, views and concerns.

An organization has different ways to develop and structure an Agile forum; it can be a participatory Community of Practice or directive Centre of Excellence. The paper would elaborate on different options, pros and cons of different options and applicability of these structures based on type of the organization.

The paper would present various activities & events conducted by Agile COP, facilitated by the author in his organization and it would present how to encourage participation by team members in COP events. It would present a model for measuring value delivered through COP activities. The paper would provide inputs on how successful Agile COP can contribute in building Agile SMEs & Thought leaders and support transformation of the enterprise towards a true Agile organization.

INTRODUCTION

Mani (Program Manager of a large organization) has been observing for last few weeks that his ScrumMaster Jayanthi is coming up lot of interesting ideas to implement Agile in better ways. Jayanthi has been providing lot of suggestions regarding Templates for Scrum execution, Tools to be used and assessing team’s effectiveness in implementing Agile. Mani asked Jayanthi about the source of so many ideas and Jayanthi’s response was, “Sir, I am attending Agile COP sessions regularly which are giving me lot of new ideas to be tried out in our project”. If you also start Agile COP in your organization, you are also bound to get lot of innovative ideas like Jayanthi received, from your peers and subject matter experts within you organization.

Since Agile has emerged as a prominent project management methodology in last few years, many organizations (services based, product based, start-up etc.) have started adopting Agile. In some cases the
adoption of Agile is taken up as a structured initiative with defined roadmap and significant support from the senior management team. But in vast majority of the cases, it evolves based on team members understanding or interpretation of Agile and the way various project managers implement Agile in their respective projects. This can lead to completely different implementation of Agile in various projects of the same organization and can also lead to ineffective or fractured implementation. Precisely for this reason, organizations should consider developing a platform like Agile Community of Practice to ensure correct implementation of Agile across the board. This platform can ensure right understanding and implementation of Agile across the enterprise.

**WHAT IS AGILE COP?**

Agile Community of Practice (referred as COP) is a platform that can support organization’s Agile adoption journey. It is a community where people from various groups and projects can come together to understand various concepts in Agile; share their implementation experiences and challenges with each other.

![Figure 1: Objectives of Agile COP](image-url)

Figure 1: Objectives of Agile COP
Agile COP is typically an informal forum, where team members would voluntarily come forward and organize various experience sharing sessions. It works on meetup like concept, where people can choose to attend the sessions that interest them. Participation in COP activities could be voluntary instead of mandated by the organization. It would be more successful if it operates on concept like OpenSpace Agility \[1\] which recommends ‘inviting’ the team members to practice Agile instead of ‘forcing’ them.

### STRUCTURE OF COP

Agile Forum can be implemented and structured in different ways; it can be a formal Center of Excellence (COE) or an informal & participative Community of Practice (COP).

### CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

It is observed that many multi-national services-based organizations in India have implemented Agile Center of Excellence. COE typically would have a defined structure, COE Head, designated COE team and defined budget. COE might have some specific targets as well, like ‘Agile methodology should be used by 50% of the projects by end of the year’. Senior management or executives would typically designate a senior process expert as COE head and he would define a core team with representatives from different locations of the organization. COE would define Agile standards which need to be followed across the organization in consistent manner. COE would typically have the authority to make certain decisions regarding process model to be followed, tools / templates to be used and can also define assessment or audit mechanism to verify implementation against the defined standards. COE typically would be based on a thought that ‘Excellence comes from applying the same behaviors and practices across teams’. COE Core Team would define its charter, activities planned and events calendar and would encourage entire organization to participate in COE events. COE events could be less in numbers but would typically have large audience, since it would cater to a large section of the organization.

![Figure 2: Structure of Agile Centre of Excellence (COE)](image-url)
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Community of Practice is a group of people with similar interests who come together to share their experiences with each other and learn from each other. COP is a platform for sharing experiences, views, best practices and lessons learned with peers in the organization. It works on meetup like concept, where the employees of the organization can choose to attend any of the COP events that are of interest to them. COP works on ‘Influencing without authority’ concept, where the COP may not have formal authority to dictate the processes, tools, methodologies to be followed in the organization, but at the same time COP can encourage various team members to adopt right Agile practices. COP typically would be based on a thought that ‘People talk to one another and learn from each other’. COP may not have a formal budget or target, but in can work on intangible objectives like creating an Agile mind-set within the organization. COP can have multiple focus groups like a sub-group specifically focused on Process aspects another sub-group focusing on various Tools and integration of these tools to support Agile adoption movement. People having interest in specific area would typically attend the events organized by respective focus groups and the events would be open to anyone interested.

Figure 3: Structure of Agile Community of Practice (COP)

An organization can choose to establish COE or COP based on various parameters like the type of the organization (Services, Product based) or Size of the organization (Large multinational, Mid-sized, Startup) etc. Large multinational organizations with significant employee base might prefer COE considering control, coordination and other logistical aspects, whereas mid-sized or startup organizations might prefer COP since it would provide the required flexibility and would have limited requirements (for resources, budget, infrastructure etc). Irrespective of whether an organization chooses to initiate a COP or COE, it should ensure that this forum works on participative / adaptive model (which is a core Agile value) rather than directive model. A forum like this would be successful and would be able to make an impact in the organization only if team members feel the value provided by it and feel encouraged to participate in it.
OUR STORY OF COP INITIATION

Our organization started journey of Agile transformation with objective of improving the customer response
time, reduction in cycle time and improving the overall quality of various applications. Considering the large
employee base organization felt need of having a forum which would help in penetrating key Agile values across
the entire organization. After multiple rounds of discussions about the structure of this forum, we choose to
implement Agile Community of Practice. Senior management team provided significant support in establishing
COP and all the support functions in the organization also contributed in making COP events successful. The COP
initiation started with forming a core group, which consisted of Agile coaches, Team members and Delivery
managers passionate about Agile.

This core team defined COP charter and discussed it with management team. After finalizing COP charter
(depicted in figure 4) formal COP launch was conducted to create a buzz in the organization and to create a
branding about COP offerings. Various volunteers came forward to facilitate COP events in respective locations
and started contributing to organizational knowledgebase. COP core team continuously monitors the participation
in COP events and assess the value provided COP to the organization.

Figure 4: COP Charter
COP INITIATIVES

The Agile COP formed by us handled multiple initiatives like developing a strong knowledge management platform, conducting events to build Agile awareness and many fun-filled events.

COP Portal

We developed COP portal as a centralized platform where we published COP and team members posted their queries, experiences and other knowledge content. COP portal has multiple sections for Discussions, Blogs / Wiki, Newsletter, ‘Ask the community’ section, Announcements etc. It also encourages all the team members to share their project case studies / best practices / lessons learnt / guidelines etc. with their peers.

Standards Repository

COP team defined certain standards to support consistent application of Agile across the entire organization. This included guidelines to conduct various Scrum ceremonies, guidelines on choosing sprint length, recommended length for Epic / Story / Task etc. It also provided guidelines for Definition of Ready (DoR), Definition of Done (DoD), Branching strategy, how to ensure Compliance (e.g. CMMI) or which metrics can be used in Agile environment etc.
Templates

COP team created different reusable templates which can be used by different team members for common activities like Agile training template as part of new team member’s onboarding plan, Sprint planning template, User Story template, NFR template etc. COP also encouraged all the team members to share any new templates created by them on COP portal, so that it can be used by other teams.

Figure 6: Definition of Done (DoD) Grid

Figure 7: Sprint Planning Template
Trainings

COP conducted multiple Agile awareness sessions during initial Agile adoption phase. COP worked with training department to ensure that all the team members in the engineering team are trained on Agile in the defined period. These sessions were recorded and made available on COP portal, which is now used in new team member’s onboarding plan. COP also conducted multiple Brownbag sessions to cover different aspects of Agile and conducted specific sessions like New trends in Agile, Evolution of Agile, Agile Scaling, DevOps etc. We also conducted some hands-on sessions for topics like Automation, Behavior Driven Development etc. COP also provided recommendations to management about which Certifications should be supported by the organization.

Tools Stack

One of the major initiatives of Agile COP was to define the tools stack required for consistent Agile adoption across various project teams. This helped in standardizing the tools for various phases like Agile requirements management & tracking, Automation, DevOps etc. COP also formed a sub-team to specifically focus on integration of different tools to achieved higher traceability for the user stories. COP Tools team also developed Virtual Machine template containing all the required tools (including Continuous Integration, Continuous Deployment tools) to onboard any new project on Agile.
Book Club

During the initial phases on Agile adoption, COP started a book club, where team members came prepared with their understanding of different chapters of the identified Agile related book and presented it with the team. It followed with brainstorming amongst the team members. These sessions and brainstorming really help the team members to understand different views from each other and strengthen their understanding.

COP Events

COP conducted regular sessions to ensure that team members continue to build their understanding of various aspects of Agile methodology. COP also conducted many special events like Personal Kanban Day (for team members to understand Kanban concepts), Agile week, COE Conference, Collaboration Jam, Innovation Competitions, Johari Window, Debate, and Demos. COP also conducted some fun-filled events like Agile Quiz / crossword, Collaboration Jam, Automation competitions etc. COP encouraged team members to share their ideas / thoughts with each other as well as invited external speakers to learn from their subject matter expertise. COP also launched Agile COP Newsletter and launched Email campaign to propagate common Agile understanding across the organization.

Figure 10: COP Special Events
COP also conducted Agile innovation games to foster collaboration across various team members and to encourage ideation process across the organization.

Figure 11: Agile Innovation Games

**Agile Assessment Models**

Since one of the objectives of COP was to ensure standardization of Agile adoption and correct implementation of Agile, COP team was asked to develop models to evaluate how various teams are practicing Agile on the ground and provide any recommendations for improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Team size**        | • 5 – Team size of 7 to 9  
                          • 3 – Team size less than 7  
                          • 2 – Team with 10 to 15 members  
                          • 1 – More than 15 members     | 2      |
| **Team Composition** | • 5 - Completely cross functional  
                          • 3 - Cross functional with dependency on other teams  
                          • 0 - Not Cross functional     | 2      |
Business Value Stream Coverage

- 5 - Team covers the entire business value stream
- 1 - Less than 50% of the value stream
- 0 - Less than 10% of the business value stream

Table 1: Agile Readiness Assessment Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Group</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Applicability</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Maturity Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Release Management Effectiveness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sprint Management Effectiveness</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Backlog Management</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Product Delivery</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance Effectiveness</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration &amp; Self-organization</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement, Retrospection &amp; Improvements</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer focus</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agile Maturity Index

4.12

Table 2: Agile Maturity Index
Best Agile Team Award

COP developed ‘Best Scrum Implementation Award’ so that the team members feel appreciated and encouraged for effective implementation of Agile. This created a healthy competition amongst teams to implement Agile in proper way and also built an environment of appreciation and recognition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teams</th>
<th>Standup effectiveness</th>
<th>Demo effectiveness</th>
<th>Sprint planning effectiveness</th>
<th>Retro effectiveness</th>
<th>Process improvements</th>
<th>Scrum Master process handling</th>
<th>Story completion/ Number of story points burnt in the month</th>
<th>DoD following/Acceptance Testing</th>
<th>Burn down/ Velocity metrics / Work updates</th>
<th>Total (Out of 100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team2</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>Team3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team4</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>61</td>
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<td>Team5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>Team6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13: Best Scrum Implementation Assessment Model

KEEPING COP VIBRANT

One of the important aspects for a forum like Agile COP is to ensure that it remains vibrant and continues to be relevant for its intended audience. Many dedicated and conscious efforts are required to ensure that the COP remains active and continues to provide value to the organization. One of the lessons we learnt for our COP was to have a mechanism and group which will continuously monitor effectiveness of COP and take corrective actions as required. Some of the options we tried were providing credit points to team members for their contributions to COP portal and appreciating team members with maximum contributions / posts per month. We also appreciated Best articles (with maximum views and likes). We encouraged various Thought Leaders in the organization to post their Blogs / White papers on the portal to ensure richness of knowledge content. We also built a team of SMEs who regularly visited COP portal and responded any queries on the specific areas and conducted focus group session.
MEASURING COP OUTCOME

Apart from keeping COP active, one more aspect is to continuously review the outcome delivered by the COP and to ensure that COP is delivering the intended results. We defined tangible (like COP event count, Attendance, Count of Knowledge Articles) as well as intangible parameters to define the value generated by the COP. We also started monitoring Incremental Value Realization through COP activities and how COP is contributing to Competency Development in Agile. This update is presented to the senior management team through fortnightly report and any course corrections are taken up accordingly.

CONCLUSION

An organization on its journey towards Agile Transformation will have to build a mechanism which would support this movement and would take up various initiatives to ensure that team members understand and implement Agile consistently across various projects. Agile Community of Practice (or Centre of Excellence) can work as a platform to strongly support Agile adoption journey of the organization. Agile COP can evolve as a forum which will ensure that the team members are following Agile in-line with Agile values and principles and can even assess implementation of different teams to ensure that the teams are not getting trapped in Scrum-but. Our Agile COP has become a major platform for various team members to come together, share their experiences, queries and case studies with each other. One of the important aspects of COP is to build a mechanism to ensure that the COP remains active & vibrant, which would encourage the team members to participate in it regularly. With strong support from senior management and other support teams, COP can provide significant value to the organization. Successful implementation of Agile COP is bound to provide wonderful results as experienced by ScrumMaster Jayanthi 😊

REFERENCES

