

Interview with Mike Palladino

Interview by :Frank Turley

Job Title: Head, Agile Methods Center of Excellence for Bristol-Myers Squibb

Introduction from Mike

I work for BMS at the Princeton, New Jersey, USA location. In addition to working for BMS, I am an Adjunct Professor at Villanova University, teaching various Project Management classes. I am also the Executive Vice President & Past President of the PMI Delaware Valley Chapter. Our chapter supports 3500 members in Southeastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, and parts of Maryland.

Q1: What does your job title mean (“Head, Agile Methods Center of Excellence”)?

I have the responsibility of implementing Agile globally throughout the corporation. I also own the Agile definitions used throughout the company and provide Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches. My organisation helps Agile teams form properly to increase their probability for success. We also teach people how to approach problems differently, and to form high performing teams.

Q2: What did you do before this job?

Prior to Bristol-Myers Squibb, I worked at AmerisourceBergen. The Pennsylvania-based company is currently listed as #11 on the Fortune 500 list of largest American companies. I worked on one of our corporation’s top 10 projects, implementing an eCommerce solution that allows pharmacies and hospitals to purchase pharmaceutical products. The solutions were implemented using nine Scrum teams, consisting of about 200 people located at seven sites in five different time zones.

Q3: Are you an agile organisation? - Why / Why not?

Bristol-Myers Squibb is at the beginning of an Agile transformation. All pharmaceutical companies face challenges with progressing compounds through the drug discovery process sooner. Once a compound is identified as a possible candidate, it can take 12-17 years to release a compound into the market place. The complexity is enormous, and the process is very waterfall in nature. By adopting Agile thinking and being more flexible in responding to change, compounds can be developed faster and delivered to customers sooner, which can potentially have a profound positive impact on their lives.

Q4: What is Agile? (your company understanding)

Agile has several meanings. To some, Agile only describes people working in Scrum teams. When done properly, teams begin forming into high performing units. Decisions are made in near real-time as team members have daily access to each other and with the primary system users. Building scrum teams can accelerate software development but is only a part of an overall Agile transformation. Teams may develop software faster, but new bottlenecks are formed as development is accelerated. Bottlenecks start to appear in testing the code and moving the code through the environments.

Agile also means incorporating automated testing and automated data setup techniques. This allows faster, more consistent testing throughout the environments. Agile also means incorporating an

automated DevOps environment. DevOps allows developers to quickly and automatically move code through the various test environments.

Another way to accelerate software development is to ensure customers can directly contribute to defining what is being developed. By incorporating Design Thinking and User Experience (UX), the team has a strong understanding of customers' demands. Therefore, the final software is closer to what customers will actually want to use.

As an organisation begins adopting Agile as a whole, funding models move from project-based funding to product or value stream-based funding. This change simplifies the overhead of starting up projects as the goal is to have a development/enhancement/support team continually in place. The team can then focus on continually improving themselves and their team's processes. When an organisation incorporates all these aspects, the combination can dramatically accelerate software development.

Q5: How did you get to do this job? (what was your path?)

I have been a director at other companies. As I noticed Agile beginning to become more popular, I decided to learn as much as I could. I purposely looked for positions that allowed me to work on Agile projects. I eventually became a coach, then worked on a very large Agile program. This gave me the skills needed for my current position.

The Scrum Master position can appear to be very similar to the Project Manager's. In fact, a Scrum Master requires different instincts and behaviors from a Project Manager. A Scrum Master is a facilitator and coach, not the team leader. A Scrum Master must encourage team members to take ownership themselves and not rely on the Scrum Master to "lead" the project and tell everyone what to do. This insures the team is focused and committed to success.

Q6: What do you think of all the choices of scaled scrum?

I have worked with DAD, Less, Nexus and SAFe. I find SAFe to have the most comprehensive supporting documentation. There are excellent descriptions written for all roles in the organisation, and people can read the free material at any time. I find the other scaled scrum frameworks are written in the language of scrum team members. Those who are new to Agile may have a harder time understanding these scaled approaches.

Although I like SAFe, it does have its own challenges, too. I find many of the classes spend too much time selling SAFe instead of teaching teams how to implement SAFe. Adults learn faster by seeing examples and processes being demonstrated. In my experience, it is harder to learn from SAFe's more theoretical based material.

Q7: How does portfolio management work (get information from projects)?

There is one key belief that affects the reporting relationship. Do you believe that the fastest way to develop a solution is using an Agile team? If yes, then there is minimal value in leadership telling an Agile team to work faster or provide a solution by a specific date. Since the team is working as fast as possible; the team will begin to predict when a solution will be ready. This is a major change in the relationship between business customers and the development team. The team can provide a high-level estimate at the beginning of the work but must be allowed to adjust the delivery date as work progresses. Firm delivery dates emerge during the development process, instead of being selected before the team begins development.

Q8: What training do new Project Managers and Scrum Masters receive if they join your organisation?

New Project Managers and Scrum Masters are paired with existing people to help them learn the organisational processes. New employees and contractors can also take on-line training classes to learn the existing processes.

Project Managers who want to become Scrum Masters need to pair up with a Scrum Master to observe and participate on Agile teams. There is a mistaken belief that a Project Manager can take a 2-day Scrum Master class and be ready to work as a Scrum Master. Project Managers need to learn how to change from leading a team to coaching, mentoring and facilitating the team. For many Project Managers, this transition is harder than they expect. Not every Project Manager can become an effective Scrum Master.

Q9: Do you support junior scrum masters?

At the beginning of an Agile transformation, experienced Scrum Masters are critical in helping a team learn the various ceremonies and processes. A Scrum Master is a mini-coach for the rest of the team. Once teams are established and running, then others can be taught how to be a Scrum Master. New people need to observe experienced Scrum Masters and Coaches to help them become successful Scrum Masters.

