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# Governance of Distributed Agile Projects: 5 Steps to Ensure Early Success

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In the April 2001 issue of Agile Record, I wrote an article entitled 'Top 10 indications that you moved up from offshore staff augmentation into Agile software development'. One among the indications discussed in that article was the existence of 'Collaborative Governance'. Collaborative Governance nurtures participation from all distributed sites and facilitates efficient reviews, issue resolution and decision making. Also, it ensures perpetual support and encouragement from senior leaders across sites in conducting governance reviews at regular intervals. Hence, collaborative governance is essential to ensure consistent results and continuous improvements in distributed Agile projects.

In general, governance means a mechanism that includes a group of people (or committees, or departments, etc.) who make up a body for the purpose of administering something and to make the best decisions in a timely manner. In case of software projects executed at a single location, it has been general practice to implement a governance mechanism at three levels, namely project level, program level and organizational level. In case of projects executed across multiple geographic locations and time zones with employees of the project sponsor organization, external vendors and independent contractors, the complexity of governance increases manifold. Hence it is absolutely essential to form a governance team that comprises of representatives from onsite as well as offshore and works together as a single body at global level in order to run distributed projects successfully. Governance has been one of the key success factors in distributed projects, and it is going to provide the necessary foundation and support in future as well. Here are the five steps to ensure early success in the governance of distributed Agile projects.

## 1. Identify Key Roles & Team Structures

Many times, practitioners tend to embrace Agile principles and recommend a self-directed team of offshore engineers that can work with an onsite manager or Scrum Master. Very small teams of 1 or 2 engineers that do monotonous work, such as bug fixing or maintenance of end-of-life non-critical products, may be able

to function with a remote project manager. However, in all other cases, you will need to structure the team in such a way that it gets adequate local leadership and managerial support to deliver the best. If you follow Scrum, you will need a local Scrum Master for every project. Otherwise, you may need a lead or a manager to support your local team to deliver the desired behavior.

It is the responsibility of the local governance team to identify key roles such as Scrum Master and provide adequate focus in defining the right team structure. If this step is taken care of, the rest of the responsibilities related to the induction of team members can be delegated to the Scrum Master. Unless the local governance team enacts this step, the utility of the remaining four steps remains futile.

## 2. Establish Shared Vision & Facilitate Contextual Norming

Establishing a shared vision on the current project or portfolio of projects across governance team members is absolutely essential. This has to be a collaborative exercise supported by the executive sponsor. This helps the senior leadership at each location understand the vision and sensitize team members with the right context and shared vision. Without this, virtual team members tend to restrict themselves to transactional engineering activities without relating their work to the overall business needs of project sponsors.

Sensitizing team members at each location on the shared vision of the project is known as "contextual norming". At MindTree, all our project managers and senior leaders attend a session on contextual norming. This session helps us understand the importance of establishing shared vision and facilitating contextual norming sessions for our project teams. Contextual norming helps team members see the big picture and understand project goals.



Above all, this step binds the local and distributed governance teams together. It enables them govern the project with shared vision. Also, it provides local governance teams in sensitizing their teams on the project context.

### 3. Define and Agree on Success Parameters

Even though every project needs well-defined milestones and goals, it is very critical to define success parameters at governance level. This helps distributed Agile governance teams understand project success in terms of a common set of parameters. Without this step, governance teams tend to focus on transactional issues and miss the big picture.

While it is imperative to have a long-term view of the future, it is equally important to focus on early success. One way to accomplish this is to define success parameters beyond tested code. To make this happen, distributed Agile governance teams must have strong, visible commitment to the success of projects. Having a one-year roadmap and identifying milestones or events that can be measured against success every quarter is a way to ensure early success and mitigate risks.

### 4. Conduct Reviews and Track Action Items

Periodic steering committee reviews are essential to understand and improve the performance of distributed Agile projects. Having a collective decision on specific, measurable action items that are realistic and time bound at the end of each review and systematically tracking them to closure ensures positive reinforcement in governance. During initial stages it is required to have these reviews every month, and as soon as the first few early successes happen, the frequency of these reviews can be once in two months or once in a quarter.

Conducting steering committee reviews on need basis or during exceptional situations may appear to be a best practice that saves the efforts of governance team members. However, the results of such an approach are fatal as governance teams do not have an opportunity to have reviews at regular intervals to appreciate progress and ensure positive reinforcement. Rather, they tend to meet based on exceptions to analyze project issues or failures and eventually cultivate negative reinforcement. Hence periodic steering committee reviews add immense value.

### 5. Understand and Welcome Iteration Progression

During the initial stages of distributed Agile projects, the progress of iterations is very significant, and it happens in the form of issues resolution, continuous improvement, formulation or revision of policies among distributed teams, etc., The best way to start the first iteration is by including user stories that are simple to implement and not necessarily critical to business. This will enable the teams accomplish the goals of the first iteration. Also, performing iteration-end process reviews along with retrospectives during the first 4 to 6 iterations provide immense benefits in ensuring positive progressions and hence early success.

From a governance perspective, there has to be a common understanding among governance team members that iterations

do progress and that it is very idealistic to expect perfect results during the first few iterations. This will help them welcome or embrace iteration progression and avoid negative perceptions that lead to red alerts or escalations. This is because aiming for instantaneous results is nothing but an unrealistic expectation in distributed Agile projects.

Lack of focus on ensuring early success can lead to severe issues, misunderstandings and lack of confidence in the project delivery model, whereas consistent focus on ensuring early success in distributed Agile projects introduces positive reinforcement in project teams, motivates team members and boosts performance. Also this lays the foundation for successful governance throughout the engagement.

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