

# Agile Mix-ins

Innovative prescriptions for Success  
with Scaled Agile Frameworks



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with Scaled Agile Frameworks

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This version was published on 2025-06-12



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# Introduction

## What are Mix-ins?

Mix-ins are agile tools, processes, or practices that we can use to mix and match with standard scaled agile frameworks.

Mix-ins provide the following Benefits:

1. *Mix-ins provide flexible solutions.* Agile isn't "one size fits all." Mix-ins can be used to provide alternatives that framework designers never considered. So mix and match to find your best fit!
2. *Mix-ins help enable growth, evolution, and exploration.* If your framework is starting to feel a bit stale, agile mix-ins introduce small changes that can bring fresh energy to otherwise stagnant processes. All of the scaling frameworks were intended to support growth and innovation - mix-ins can help make that happen.
3. *Mix-ins enable you to incorporate the state of the art.* The current state of agile practice keeps moving forward at a dizzying pace. Incorporating mix-ins will help you keep from being left behind.

That sounds pretty cool, but are Mix-ins really necessary?

I love frameworks. A framework, strictly speaking, is really just a collection or aggregation of tools, processes and practices that work well together. Some great examples of frameworks are Scrum, SAFe, LeSS, Disciplined Agile Development, and others. All are basically a network of highly effective practices that complement and support each other curiously well.

Sometimes when you look closely at those frameworks you will find that there are multiple practices that can be used in the same place. I'm thinking of the myriad different ways that we can facilitate planning meetings for example. So you have a choice, you can use the stock practice as proscribed in the framework, or you can use a custom variety of your own. It's kind of like customizing your dad's old Buick by turning it into a hot rod.

We all know that frameworks also have gaps. Again, any close inspection of frameworks will reveal those gaps in the recommended processes and practices. Not everything is spelled out, that's why they call it a framework to begin with (there are bits that are intentionally left blank). It's supposed to be a skeleton upon which you hang your organization's processes. The processes that are already described are what many might call essential, but they are by no means all of the processes that you can have. You can certainly add more and you can certainly innovate in the way that those additional processes are integrated or combined within the framework.

Frameworks are intended to serve as the foundation or soil upon which the seeds of innovation can take root and grow. Most agile frameworks are all based on the underlying assumption that this is the starting point from which you will evolve. Over time you will either hang more processes on that skeleton or you will change the skeleton itself to better suite your business and technology domain.

Mix-ins are the tools that we use to achieve this framework evolution. Mix-ins provide alternatives to stock practices that may grow stale over time. Mix-ins help us to fill in the gaps in the process that were never anticipated when the framework was created. And finally, mix-ins serve as the seeds of innovation that we plant in our frameworks in the hope of developing exciting new ways of working.

Essentially this book can be thought of as a catalog of different innovative practices that you can use. However, there's more to

it than just providing a catalog. Modifying frameworks can be a tricky business. Do it well and great things happen. Do it poorly and you can jeopardize the integrity of the entire framework. So the other key element that this book provides is guidance for how to introduce mix-ins and the trade-offs to be aware of when doing so.

# Why Mix-ins?

*“Some say that I should settle down, go slower and not push so hard, so quickly for such transformational change. To them, I say that you misunderstand the size of the problems we face, the strength of the status quo and the urgency of the people’s desire for change.”*

- Eliot Spitzer

## The Challenge

According to the latest VersionOne State of Agile survey 2018, the most prevalent scaled agile framework in use today is SAFe. Note that I didn't say it was the most popular framework. I'm not sure that most people love SAFe, but I can say that most people use it. Why don't people love it? Well, I'm sure there are lots of good reasons:

1. The framework is very prescriptive, often specifying “best practices” without much discussion of alternatives
2. The framework is overly dense, incorporating nearly every agile practice ever invented
3. The framework is designed as a first step for large organizations on their agile journey, but often it is also the last step
4. Implementations tend to be cookie cutter and not make allowance or provide guidance for change

I'm sure there are many more very good critiques of SAFe. It's not my purpose to condemn the framework, but rather to highlight some weaknesses that I believe can be easily addressed. My goal

is to consider how we can make SAFe, and frankly, many other scaling frameworks, better. They all suffer from these issues, to some greater or lesser degree.

So how can we accomplish that? What can we do to improve this very full, relatively rigid, and somewhat context-free framework? My answer is fairly simple: swap in practices and processes that complement the framework and may provide a better “fit” for our transformation customers. Essentially, I’m arguing for the application of a little creativity. All of the frameworks have a planning process. But there are a lot of ways to do planning. We can vary the estimation practices like story points, WSJF, or #noestimates. We can vary how we prepare for the planning event by using extensive top down review, bottom up conversation, or LeanUX related practices.

The truth is, that we have a whole constellation of different practices that we can swap out within our scaling frameworks depending on the need. This gives us incredible flexibility to help our customers find the “right fit” for where they are at in the moment. This has some important consequences:

1. For engagements that begin with a very prescriptive bent (which often makes sense when teams are learning something new, think shu-ha-ri), using mix-ins is a great way to begin down the path of experimentation and continuous improvement
2. We even have the discretion, once we have learned how the framework works, to try our hand at de-scaling - that is, to remove processes that seem too heavyweight
3. Mix-ins give us the creative potential to continue to evolve our scaling frameworks far beyond what their creators may have originally envisioned
4. Using mix-ins during a transformation rollout can help us to avoid the cookie cutter implementation phenomenon

All of the practices that I propose as mix-ins are novel and innovative. Most have proven their value on their own in the agile community. It is the recombination of these ideas with scaled agile Frameworks like SAFe that I find so interesting. It feels like something very new. It's an exciting challenge, are you up for it?

# **Mix-in Structure**

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# Evaluating Mix-ins

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## **Implementation**

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