The Fifth Principle

A handbook for leaders to give motivated people the environment, support and trust to get the job done

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Matthew Philip

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About the Cover

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Introduction

Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.

-from the Principles behind the [Agile Manifesto][1]

I once was hanging out with a software-delivery team in their team area and noticed one woman who had built a makeshift standing desk by cobbling together a batch of books and other supports. The mishmash of monitor and keyboard caused her to contort her body unnaturally, not to mention pose a potential crash risk!

"Is that setup comfortable for you?" I asked.
"Well, not really," she admitted.
"You know, we have equipment to help with that," I smiled.
"Oh, yes, I know," she somewhat sheepishly replied. "But it's just that, well, those Varidesk extenders don't really work for me. I really like having a full table for writing and spreading out mockups."
(The Varidesks were our "corporate standard" for standing desks. The company very helpfully offered them to any employees who wanted to have the option to stand.)
I was planning to go to the nearby IKEA for some personal shopping after work, so I told my colleague, "How about if I check around to see what other options we might have?"
"Sure!" she graciously replied. "Only if it's not too much trouble."
"Trouble?!" I smiled. "Do you remember what the Agile Manifesto says about how to build projects?"
"No, tell me!"
"It says to build projects around motivated individuals, and to give them the environment and support they need. As a leader here, not only is it no trouble for me to do this, it's my happy duty. In fact, it gives me pleasure as a leader to serve you like this."

My colleague thanked me again and said bye with a slight air of disbelief. I began to wonder what kind of work environments she had experienced in her career.

I set off for IKEA and found a simple crank-handle adjustable desk that seemed to fit the need, and it was even less than the cost of the Varidesk, so I packed it up and brought it to the office the next morning for her.

My colleague and her teammates were grateful for the addition to their team space. It was a small example of how I interpret the fifth principle of the manifesto. As a leader in the organization, I had given this team the environment and support they needed and was going to trust them to get the job done!

Just one problem: My boss hated it. In fact, he fired me for it.

Citing that I didn't have the autonomy to change the setup and the possible harmful "ripple effects" through the organization of what I did for one team, he dismissed the simple act as unproductive and troublesome.

That episode was but one of many points of disagreement – or lack of alignment – on the role of leaders in a modern work environment. My boss frequently boasted that ours was "an agile organization" but clearly didn't interpret that the same way I did. And I've worked with many other leaders who sincerely desired to do right by their employees but simply didn't know how to exercise agile thinking in their daily work.

So this handbook is meant, in part, to expand upon and help clarify the agile manifesto, particularly how its fifth principle applies to modern knowledge-work environments and to give leaders at all levels of modern digital organizations a handbook for creating and stewarding those environments.

An agile coach friend recently asked "If you had to recommend one book/resource for "role of a manager in Agile" what would you recommend?" Now we in the agile community have a wealth of amazing books to choose from. And I've read quite a few of them. But I didn't have a ready answer for my friend.

The role of "manager" in agile is itself a slippery and poorly understood role to begin with. Does that mean scrum master? A traditional development manager? Coach? Tech lead? In my experience, it can mean any of those. So I wanted something that I could give to anyone in that role to have pragmatic guidance, something to help leaders realize in concrete ways the principles of the agile manifesto, and in particular the fifth principle.

[1]: https://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html

Why The Fifth Principle?

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Part 1: Getting Started

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Part 2: The Environment Inside the Team

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Autonomy-Support and Autonomy-support meetings

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How to Conduct an Autonomy-Support Meeting

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Part 3: The Environment Around the Team

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