

Who is agile in India

YvesHanouille, Sunish Chabba and
Tushar Somaiya

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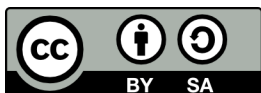
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This version was published on 2016-05-20



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To all reviewers & language police

This book is currently a “Work in Progress”. We expect 30 Agilists from India to be featured in this book. The current number is at 4. The next updates would be quite frequent in keeping up with the spirit of lean publishing and your critical reviews/feedback is definitely going to matter to the subsequent versions of this book.

We look forward to your comments & suggestions, please email them to sunish.chabba@gmail.com¹.

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Why the 'Who is agile in India' book?

After the resounding success of the book '[Who is agile](http://leanpub.com/whoisagile)'², an idea of scaling the book by creating local country versions came in the minds of Yves and team. This book, [Who is agile in India](http://leanpub.com/whoisagileinindia)³, is a part of this [Community project](http://leanpub.com/whoisagile)⁴ with other local country books also in the offing.

This book is a collection of interviews with passionate Indian agilists who answer a set of questions that is going to give numerous insights to the readers of this book. Whether you're a novice or an Agile Guru, this book is going to help you learn a bit about the people behind the names & get their perspective on Agile.

Have fun reading their answers.

Sunish Chabba, Tushar Somaiya & Yves Hanouille

²<http://leanpub.com/whoisagile>

³<http://leanpub.com/whoisagileinindia>

⁴<http://leanpub.com/whoisagile>

Who is Tathagat Varma?



Tathagat

Tell us a little bit about yourself?

I started out as a Computer Scientist with Defense research (DRDO) in 1991, and after leaving DRDO in 1995, worked with some leading global product players, including Yahoo!, McAfee, Huawei, Philips and Siemens, before realizing that my calling was far away from the cubicles, meeting rooms and status reports! Since 2014, I now work as a freelance consultant and coach, and offer high-end services in strategy, agility, innovation and leadership. I worked for seven years to “build” this market and rigorously test my business model, and it has been a great learning experience.

Last one year has been fun, I survived the first one year as an entrepreneur...yay! I got chance to work with several Fortune100

and high-profile clients. I got my book on “Agile Product Development” out, and have been able to validate my initial hypothesis around the need for a high-end interdisciplinary coaching, consulting and change management. I mentored dozens of startups and entrepreneurs with Google Launchpad, NUMA Bengaluru, First100Sales, Deshpande Foundation, IIM Udaipur and IIK Kharagpur, among others. I continued my track record of ~30 talks and presentation every year this year too. And I am working on my next book...

...And I can't wait for 2016 to get started :)

What is something people usually don't know about you but has influenced you in who you are?

I grew up hating all forms of power and politics. I can't tolerate unbridled abuse of power, whatever shape or form it might be. When I joined my Masters in Computer Science back in 1989, I objected to my seniors ragging us, and even fought with my classmates when they were doing the same to our juniors, having already forgotten what they had undergone just a year back! When I joined Defense, I was just 21 years old, and perfectly entitled to the romantic ideas of workplace. So, for example, when I saw there were separate toilets for officers and staff, I was shocked. I only believed in what was right and fair, and didn't factor-in the rank of the senior whom I was invariably taking head-on - and I am glad I did what I did!

In 1993, I got chance to volunteer with 13th Indian Scientific Expedition to Antarctica and spent 16 icy months at the Indian permanent station “Maitri”, and I was exposed to a community living where everyone was basically rankless and equal. Everyone did their own dishes, and by turn, they also cleaned common areas like toilets for the entire station. My value system of being in a no-hierarchy, self-organizing teams with high trust and respect for individuals got a solid boost during those 16 months. You can say that I am spoiled forever, and not just at work but also in personal

life.

Later when I moved out of Defense, I found the industry in mid-90s was rather immature. We were still subservient to the “white bosses”. It literally used to be an “expat” assignment with the Indian techies and managers simply playing second fiddle to the bosses from the HQ who would take Friday afternoon off for their Golf sessions while the teams slogged over weekends, and so on. When I compare it now, I think it has mostly died down in our industry, but I am sure we could do more :)

These experiences have shaped my thinking immensely, and I am eternally thankful to them for making me a better person. I gradually moved away from the traditional thinking of leadership and power. When I became Country Head in 2004, I told my exec admin that I don’t really need her because I am capable of fetching my own coffee and collecting my own printouts. I asked her to help the entire team and not focus on being my admin assistant alone. In 2007, I walked away from the traditional notion of a leader to an “IC” (i.e., Individual Contributor). For the next seven years, I held important leadership roles in three different organizations at GM/VP level with no one reporting into me, and I have never felt this “powerful” before. I think professionals who pride on building an empire of “resources” are misfits in today’s time and age. As for me, I feel real power is the power to connect with anyone, irrespective of what they do or who they are.

What is your biggest challenge and why is it a good thing for you?

It might sound a bit pompous, but my biggest challenge at the moment is to stay as a solo business. I have established my business model on certain key hypotheses, and if I “grow” my business, I will end up diluting them. On the other hand, there are great professional assignments that would challenge my cognitive and coaching skills, not to mention the additional business they would create. However, if I need to stay true to my own mission and vision,

I need to manage this challenge for the next couple of years. We'll see if I succeed or fail :)

What drives you?

The desire to learn more, explore the unknown, experiment with ideas and hopefully create something of value. Monotony bores me, and compliance suffocates me. I believe in lifelong learning, and I am particularly blessed to be part of software industry which places such high premium on learning. I also think that our education system robs us of learning from adjoining and complementary subjects. For example, I think we all should be taught subjects like sociology, anthropology, organisation behaviour, design, behavioural economics, and so on...merely learning computer science hasn't been enough for me at least.

What is your biggest achievement

At the moment, my book "Agile Product Development" that came out in Nov 2015. It took me close to a year of disciplined effort, getting up 4am most days and working on the book. Of course, I know what are its improvement areas, but then, first book is always special. In case you happen to flip through it, let me know what can I improve in it.

What do you think makes a great team?

In my view, the most important ingredient for a great team is the mutual trust and respect among its members, despite varying levels of skills, competencies or experience. When there is unconditional trust and respect, only then each of the team member rises to the occasion and chips in to build a solid team chemistry. In fact, titles and hierarchy only help divide the team on some arbitrary measures of individual capability, whereas a team must learn to leverage its team members individual strengths.

What is the essence of Agile?

I consider agile as a philosophy, mindset and culture rather than method, process or tools. Agile world actually codifies a lot of

good ideas about building great teams and solving problems more effectively from last fifty-plus years, but sadly most people are not prepared to change themselves. Instead, they go cherry-picking the “best practices” and want to get trained (even “certified”) in the latest agile process. What they don’t realize is that agile process is not something you can buy or start with! Rather, an agile process is what you create when you apply common sense to problem solving, and each team, based on its growing maturity will create its own agile process. Further, if your agile process looks the same even after just three months, it means you are not agile enough.

What is the last book you have read?

The Starfish and the Spider is a great book that goes deep into what makes high-performing teams sustain. The authors give the analogy of Spider as a centralized organization that dies off when the head is crushed, but Starfish as a decentralized organization where if you cut off a limb of the starfish, it regrows. I think it is a great metaphor, and since it is so close to my heart on the subject of empowerment and decentralization, I can’t stop reading it yet again. Just a teaser - you want to know why Spanish were not able to conquer the Apache Indians for over two hundred years, just read the book.

If you were going to have a dinner party with anyone alive or deceased - which three people would you invite and why?

herlock Holmes - I know Sherlock Holmes is fictitious, but for this question, I think that is the same as deceased category. I would love to learn his problem solving mindset.

Leonardo da Vinci - He knew so much and he contributed so much to arts and sciences, I don’t think anyone comes closest to him in his influence even today!

Chanakya - easily the top strategist of all times! He not only understood politics and power, he also understood people very well.

What question do you think I should also ask and what is your answer?

My question would be - What part of agile do most people don't get?

My answer would be: The common sense part! Most people expect agile to be like this brain transplant that will make them 10x productive overnight without having to do anything hard. I often meet execs expecting to deliver a 12-month functionality in three months using "agile". I meet leaders who want to mandate a standard "agile process" across the organization so that teams will be "more agile". I meet managers who "want" their teams to self-organize. I meet CIOs who believe buying the latest tool will make their teams agile. I often meet HR leaders who have no context to what agile is all about, and they are still blissfully furthering the traditional ways of performance management, reporting and career progression. I still continue to meet developers who believe in waterfall school of software engineering, and I still continue to meet test engineers who believe in end-of-the-cycle testing as the way to build a quality software. Sadly, all that means that the long tail of industrial-era waterfall will continue to haunt us for many more decades :(

Whom else do you think we should ask these questions in India?

Naresh Jain