

Giving the Customer What They Want...

One of the concerns that is sometimes expressed about Agile approaches is that they are 'too customer-driven', implying that customers are not always the best people to define the direction of a product or a change. So is 'the customer always right', and is it good Agile practice to 'give the customer what they want'?



Customer focus over self interest

Describing what it takes for a business to be Agile, the Agile Business Consortium advises 'The key to Business Agility is the inspirational leadership of collaborative, autonomous teams, committed to delighting their customers.'

This sets 'delighted customers' as the ultimate goal and the outcome that will make a business successful. So what does it take to create a delighted customer? Perhaps not simply giving the customer 'what they want'. Most project managers can come up with countless examples of less-than-delighted customers, who've been given precisely what they asked for. This isn't what Agile advocates, nor does this perspective genuinely put the customer first.

Nowhere in the eight principles of Agile Project Management (AgilePM®) does it say 'give the customer what they want'. This is both a misunderstanding and an over-simplification of what AgilePM is all about. Look at the principles carefully. The word 'customer' isn't specifically used – although it's clear that each principle does promote the customer's best interests:

Eight Principles of Agile Project Management (AgilePM®)

1. Focus on the business need

It's easy to be carried away by the flow of new options and possibilities. Resources can quickly become distracted towards outcomes that exceed or diverge from the original goal. AgilePM constantly brings teams and customers back to what the business needs most, at that time.

2. Deliver on time

Business value for the customer is time dependent. Running late is not an option. Reduced time to market, and effective change are often critical to stay competitive.

3. Collaborate

Customers cannot be expected to know all the answers; but combine specialist expertise with practical business knowledge, and a powerful collaboration emerges.

4. Never compromise quality

Low quality solutions risk damaging business reputation – fast. Agile professionals don't take risks with the customer's brand.

5. Build incrementally from firm foundations

Agreeing a robust outline plan up front, based on high level requirements, creates the 'firm foundation' for staged releases of products and business change. This ensures early and ongoing delivery of benefit to the business.

6. Develop iteratively

Showing the customer their emerging vision step by step, may result in their changing detail and direction, as they become more aware of the implications of their strategy. This continual feedback ensures that the growing solution stays aligned to the customer's expectations and current needs.

7. Communicate continuously and clearly

Agile communication places less importance on documents, and focusses more on the verbal and visual communications. These range from face-to-face conversations, through demonstrations of the solution as it grows, to building in feedback based on the conversation and demonstrations.

8. Demonstrate control

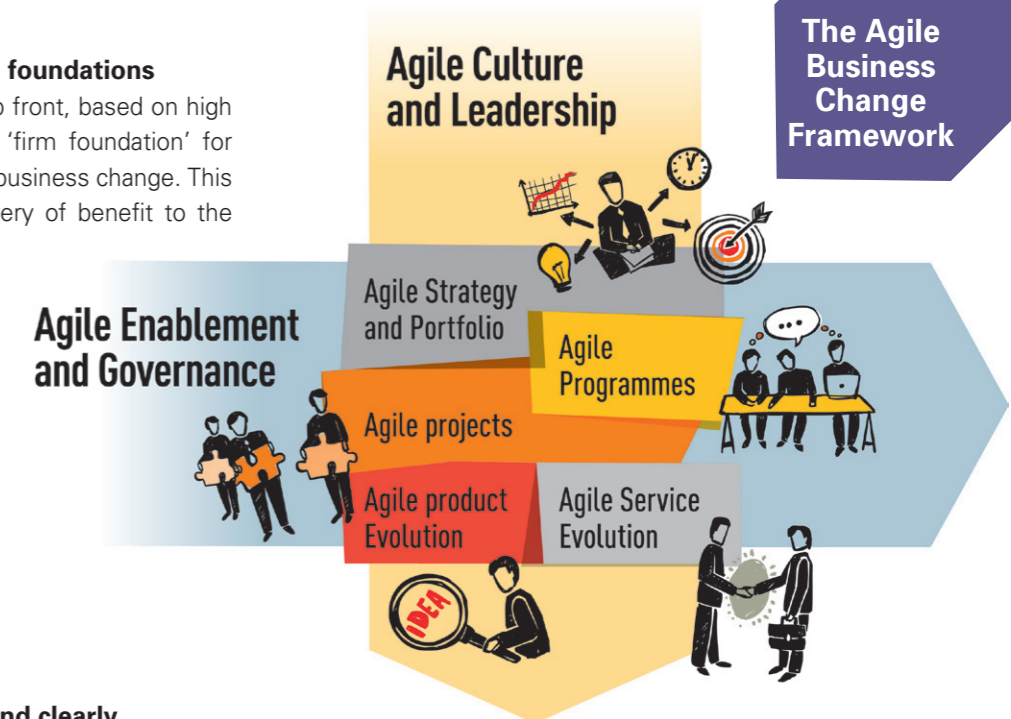
In Agile projects the customer is actively represented as an integral part of the team, and has control over how their solution will be delivered. This shared ownership of planning combines with the transparency of progress, so that everyone involved can see if the project is under control, and shares responsibility for this.

Giving the customer what they want?

Agile principles don't promise to give the customer everything that they initially ask for, but it's clear that the principles of AgilePM draw out the detail of where the best value for the customer lies. The old adage of 'the customer is always right' points us in the right direction by putting the interests of the customer first, but it should not always be taken literally. It is focusing on customer value throughout the project that leads to business success, rather than giving customers exactly what they say they want at the start. When Agile practitioners talk about being 'customer-driven', they mean putting the customer at the very heart of what they do.

They do this by developing iteratively, to give customers a chance to see how what they thought they wanted looks in practice. Focusing on the business need means being prepared to explore where the real (maybe hidden?) value and the customer's critical priorities really lie. By collaborating with the customer, and communicating continuously and clearly, Agile practices have the power to encourage new thinking and evolve innovative solutions.

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It is people and not processes that are the core of Agile, because it's people, not processes, that innovate – and people that keep a business competitive. The Agile Business Consortium's new Agile Business Change Framework recognises this by keeping customer value at its heart, and providing a framework of structure and governance around clear, customer-centric goals.

In the old world of unquestioning 'command and control', it may have been an option to aim for delivering everything the customer initially wanted. The new world of Agile protects the customer's best interests by giving them full representation within an empowered and collaborative team.

By involving the right people at the right time, and collaborating effectively, the customer will indeed be delighted – but not necessarily because they've been given what they thought they wanted. Putting the customer's interests first may not equate to giving the customer what they want but it should, at least, always mean giving them what they need.

About the Agile Business Consortium

Founded in 1995, the Agile Business Consortium is a not-for-profit membership organisation that aims to provide global leadership in promoting, supporting and enabling the adoption of Agile at all levels. It offers guidance to businesses, government organisations and charities through an accredited range of Agile frameworks, products and services and an international network of partners.

Consolidating and extending the scope of the existing guidance, the Agile Business Change Framework is launching throughout this year. This resource has been created from the coordinated work of experienced Agile practitioners across a broad spectrum of disciplines and sectors.

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