How PMOs Can Help Middle Managers Avoid 3 Cultural Pitfalls During Agile Transformation

Published 17 November 2020 - ID G00739223 - 5 min read

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Most progressive organizations are seeking a methodology transition from waterfall to agile; however, navigating through this requires a significant cultural shift. Learn how PMO leaders can help middle managers avoid three common pitfalls, while navigating the adoption of an agile culture.

According to a recent Gartner survey, 87% of organizations are using some form of agile methodology to increase flexibility and speed. However, truly traversing from waterfall to Agile isn't just about switching the methodology. It is more than merely implementing new processes, and acquiring new tools and skills. It requires a significant shift in culture across the organization.

PMO leaders can help the organizations accelerate the benefits of agile adoption by enabling a shift in middle managers’ (i.e., product line managers, business unit heads, portfolio managers, and/or group product managers) mindset toward a culture that supports agile implementation. Why just middle managers, you might ask. Three key reasons for this are:

1. Middle managers are the linchpin between the executive’s vision for agile and the team’s ability to execute agile.

2. Agile transformation is felt most palpably by them as they are often ignored or underemphasized in an organization’s agile adoption, change management or training efforts.

3. They are required to make a significant shift of moving away from traditional responsibilities of heavy compliance and governance processes.

In the same survey, more than 56% of participants confessed that the top challenge to transition to a culture that supports agile is shifting middle management mindsets. Although enterprise leadership and delivery teams are often ready to get on the agile bandwagon with some support, middle managers are forgotten or not supported enough and hence face the most challenges in adopting agile.

Thus, to drive a successful cultural change, PMO leaders must help middle management overcome the following three pitfalls:
Pitfall No. 1: Traditional “command-and-control” mindset

Pitfall No. 2: Siloed work and uncoordinated delivery workflows

Pitfall No. 3: Risk-averse mindset

Here's how PMOs can help middle managers avoid these pitfalls.

Solution No. 1: Encourage middle management to adopt a servant leadership mindset

Most middle managers struggle to let go of waterfall-related governance deliverables and processes, hampering delivery team speed and autonomy. PMOs must help them become more comfortable with the idea of “letting go” by taking small steps to build their trust, while avoiding cultural shock. PMOs can facilitate this shift by incrementally building two-way trust between middle managers and delivery teams. In the process, PMOs enable middle managers to adopt a servant leadership mindset, where they guide, motivate and enable delivery team autonomy.

A side effect of agile adoption is the confusion regarding the new roles and responsibilities, particularly for middle managers. Thus, PMOs must also help IT, business and HR leaders to define the roles and responsibilities of a servant leader, then ensure that the new servant leaders have visibility and clarity into what is expected of them and feel supported.

Solution No. 2: Encourage collaborative behaviors beyond coaching and tool implementation

Delivery teams are not necessarily accustomed to a fast-paced environment that needs high collaboration. Moreover, middle managers are forced to support them remotely due to recent disruptions, often leading to uncoordinated delivery of work.

To truly deliver the value of agile, middle managers and delivery teams need to constantly keep in mind the overall enterprise strategy, as well as dependencies with other teams. PMOs can support this by providing a better understanding of enterprise goals and supporting mechanisms that allow middle management to find gaps between their execution plans and the overarching strategies and teams to adjust their execution in the moment.

Furthermore, as agile adoption increases in an organization, delivery teams often discover challenges in managing handoffs with other functional partners when delivering new solutions. This leads to delays in delivery, which are often unfairly accounted to delivery team productivity, causing a greater trust rift between them and middle managers. PMOs must encourage middle managers to take an enterprise approach to monitor initiative health across the agile portfolio and respond to performance risks, instead of tracking in silos. Having visibility into solution delivery through common metrics provides middle managers with a foundation to identify and resolve project risks and influence team members toward accelerated delivery.
Solution No. 3: Establish a culture of experimentation

To achieve desired business outcomes, it is vital that middle managers not only adopt, but also promote, a culture of experimentation for delivery teams. PMO leaders need to work with leadership to create an environment of psychological safety that drives experimentation. This can only be driven if failure is destigmatized in middle management. Organizations should reframe failure primarily as a "pivot" that is an opportunity to increase learning and development.

Organizations often promote creativity through classroom training; however, this is often good for targeted problem solving and seldom has the long-lasting desired effects on creative thinking for individuals outside the workshops. PMOs should view this as an opportunity to encourage creative thinking among middle management. They must bring in techniques such as design thinking through continuous coaching and create mechanisms to enable a culture that helps middle management experiment effectively.

Conclusion

Organizations can truly accelerate the benefits of agile by adopting the appropriate cultural and addressing behavioral changes. PMO leaders and their teams can play an important role by helping middle managers adopt a servant leadership mindset, increase collaboration and be open to experimentation to enable the behaviors necessary for agile success.

1Based on Gartner's Agile in the Enterprise Survey conducted online from 3 June through 25 June 2019 with 130 Gartner Research Circle Members

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