



Case Study: Camp Agile

For several years, we've worked with a local outdoor and wilderness education provider to investigate whether Agile methods would work outside of software development. The answer, evidently, is yes!

Last month, a camp director, came over to tell me about the way he ran a outdoor camp for high school students using Agile practices. As he told it,

“We got to the campgrounds on Sunday after a long drive. It was raining. We had an Umiak (i.e., Native Alaskan skin-covered boat that can hold 20 people) to build and a rotation schedule of activities for the campers. Everyone huddled in their tents all Sunday afternoon and evening. None of the activities got off the ground. By Monday, I felt miserable. We were missing both the kids' and the staff's expectations for the kind of freedom and accountability we want for our camps.”

Then the camp director had an idea. On Tuesday morning, he held a retrospective with the 22 campers and 8 staff members. They looked at how things had gone up until that point, and what they wanted to happen next. The campers came up with a backlog of action items for the next day. Tony asked the opinions of the action leaders to discover what they needed - number of people, equipment, supplies - for each activity. When the action item backlog was completed, the campers signed up for various activities - which included tasks like staying dry, gathering mussels and other wild food, cooking meals, cleaning up, help with farm chores, slaughtering and butchering a sheep, tanning the sheepskin and making tallow candles, and much more.

Oh, and building the whale boat.

From that moment on, each day of the camp started with signing up for the day's activities and tasks. The day continued with three stand-up (short, face-to-face) meetings spaced throughout and a retrospective at the the close of day. During the stand-up meetings, campers identified obstacles and impediments, as well as transferring excitement for the activities they'd completed to other campers. At the end of each retrospective, they groomed their backlog for the next day.

After two days, the campers took over the stand-up meetings and retrospectives. The first camper-led retrospective was a bit rocky, and, as they gained respect for the process, the very next retrospective was, as the director says, “Smoking Hot!” As were all the rest. And, the campers noticed how their empowered action at camp might fit for their student meetings at school.

The camp director thinks that it was important that they had the same place to meet in each day, an old barn, so the meetings could happen out of the rain. The company has incorporated a number of Agile practices in its own business administration. This was the first application of these practices in their programs. We suspect it won't be the last.

--Diana Larsen