From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams

Collaborate to Deliver

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Practical **ink**

Introduction

Distributed agile teams have a bad reputation: too often, they have problems starting and finishing the work. The managers don't know why. The team members don't know why. People wonder, "Why can't this team just get on with the work?" In the meantime, the team struggles to work as fast and as hard as they can.

For years, if you wanted guidance about how to be a geographically distributed agile or lean team, the answer was, "Don't do that."

"Stop being distributed" or "Don't use agile" is not useful advice. That would require sweeping changes in people's expertise, location, and the organization's ability to deliver products. That would result in disruption of work or possibly loss of valuable team members and product sales.

Distributed work is not the same as collocated work. But the agile principles can be adapted and applied to distributed teams. That's what this book is about.

We wrote this book for three audiences. First, for distributed and dispersed team members, so they can see how they might create communication channels and agile practices that work.

Second, we address those who facilitate and serve distributed teams. We've seen a variety of possible team "leaders." These servant leaders might be coaches, agile project managers, or Scrum Masters. Sometimes, these servant leaders are technical leaders or technical managers. Whatever their title, they facilitate and serve the distributed team.

Our third audience is the managers, executives, and organizational coaches/facilitators who want to take advantage of global talent *and* agile approaches for frequent delivery of value to customers.

These organizational leaders create the environment—the culture for collaboration—in which the teams then work and evolve.

We assume that all of these people—team members, team leaders, and organizational leaders—want everyone on the distributed or dispersed team to work to the best of their capability. However, too often, distributed and dispersed work frustrates everyone. That's because too many teams retain their collocated mindset for their distributed or dispersed teams.

We've seen three necessary mindset changes for successful distributed agile teams. The first mindset change is the agile mindset of encouraging and managing for change. When the team encourages experimentation for *everything*, the team manages how and when it decides to change.

The second mindset change when moving to distributed agile teams is the emphasis on communication and collaboration. When the team creates communication and collaboration norms for *everyone*, the team can eliminate many of their impediments to delivering value.

The third mindset is to use agile principles—not common practices—to create a distributed agile team. When teams use principles to create *their* practices, they adapt their agile approach to fit their context.

With this mindset of experimentation, communication and collaboration, and using principles over practices, distributed agile teams can succeed. Without that mindset, teams work too "slowly" and everyone—from the team members to the executives—becomes frustrated.

That's when people say, "Agile doesn't work for distributed or dispersed teams. It doesn't work for us."

You can create high-functioning, high-performance geographically distributed agile teams. Your teams might change—you may decide that the current team makeup doesn't fit anyone's needs. You might

decide to recreate teams with more hours of overlap. But, you can succeed with geographically distributed agile teams.

Agile and lean approaches will make your problems transparent. Because they do, you may decide that agile geographically distributed teams reveal other problems in your organization. With this transparency, you can make better decisions.

We assume you, our readers, are somewhat familiar with many of the agile terms and practices. We are not going to explain them all in this book. Instead, we offer references to other books you might want to read to gain deeper understanding. We *will* explain how distributed agile teams may adapt specific practices to be successful.

As you read the book, you might notice we use words such as, "We have found…" That phrasing refers to our combined 55+ years of experience with distributed and dispersed teams. We have worked in distributed and dispersed teams in various roles: developer, tester, project manager, program manager, manager, consultant, coach, and workshop leader. Your experience might be different from ours.

Let's start.