

From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams

Collaborate to Deliver



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Practical ink

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2. Focus on Principles to Support Your Distributed Agile Teams

Successful distributed agile teams control their context.

When teams can't control their context, they cannot easily deliver. They have too many delays. They don't communicate or collaborate well.

Instead of specific practices, consider these principles to create your team's context, your system of work. These principles make it possible for teams to use agile approaches.

1. Establish acceptable hours of overlap.
2. Create transparency at all levels.
3. Create a culture of continuous improvement with experiments.
4. Practice pervasive communication at all levels.
5. Assume good intention.
6. Create a project rhythm.
7. Create a culture of resilience.
8. Default to collaborative work.

When the organization's culture and the teams align with these principles, they create and refine a workable distributed agile culture. Misalignment with these principles can lead to misalignment with the goals of the business, the work of the teams, and can even be destructive to personal lives.

Let's start with the most important principle for a successful distributed agile team, that of hours of overlap.

2.1 Establish Acceptable Hours of Overlap

Teams can't effectively collaborate or communicate when they don't share enough working hours.

We have found that teams with less than four hours overlap have trouble adhering to any of the agile principles, never mind producing a quality product in a reasonable amount of time.

However, when teams have at minimum a half-day of overlap, they tend to find ways to work in flow as teams, not just as individuals. When teams find a way to work in team flow, they finish better work faster.

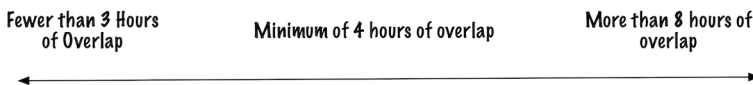


Figure 2.1: Hours of Overlap Principle

Most teams don't improve with more than 8 hours of overlap. This occurs when team members have trouble stopping work. When people don't stop working, they tend to burn out. They make mistakes. They are not at their best.

Conversely, when team members have fewer than three hours of overlap, they start work too early, stay too late, or otherwise interrupt their lives for work. We know of people who regularly wake up at 3am for a conference call, return to sleep, wake up at 6am for their day, and have another call at 10pm. We consider this behavior insane. These people have the same problems as people who work too much: they burn out, make mistakes, and are not at their best.

Too few hours of overlap give distributed agile teams a bad name.

Every team has its own acceptable hours of overlap. Maybe your team needs six hours of overlap to produce a high quality product. We recommend you default to at least four hours of overlap. Consider creating new teams with as many hours of overlap as possible. If you are having difficulties with the other principles in this book, return to this principle first.

We'll talk about some options and ideas for when your team has few or no hours of overlap in *Avoid Chaos with Insufficient Hours of Overlap*. However, most teams with zero hours of overlap cannot use an agile approach. See *When Agile Approaches Are Not Right for You*.

2.2 Create Transparency at All Levels

Transparency invites collaboration and creates meaning.

You might not be able to share everything, such as financial information. However, consider how much transparency you can create for the organization's strategy, the project portfolio, the why behind the products, the work that everyone does.

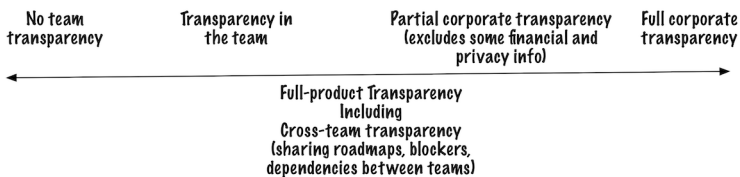


Figure 2.2: Create Transparency Principle

If we focus on the business of the team, product development, the sweet spot is “Full product transparency.” If we focus on business agility—the ability of the organization to be fully agile—the sweet spot is full corporate transparency. This book is about product development in distributed teams, which is why “Full product