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Author Karen Spencer – “A to XP: The Agile ABC Book”

Posted by: [David Scott](#)

Today we're privileged to be with Karen Favazza Spencer, author of the Agile primer ***A to XP: The Agile ABC Book*** (ISBN: 978-0-9883358-0-6), available at [Agile Kindergarten](#). Karen's book is not only used here in North America (where I sit), but also in Europe, India and Australia.

Good afternoon, Karen. What, in your view, is “Agile”?

A: Hi Dave. Agile is the marriage of scientific empiricism and social psychology. It is an umbrella term for several project and product management frameworks. Agile works well when the work to be done is complex and the methods necessary to accomplish the work are not yet fully understood.

Agile “chunks” functionality so that small bits of business value are delivered to the customer on a schedule; typically a one-to-four week schedule. This schedule provides the customer and technical team with ready opportunity to validate the product, and incorporate change, based on timely feedback, as well as experience. This process allows the business to better forecast the time required to complete complex features based on their ongoing experience.

Shared ownership, transparency and small cross-functional teams are a few of the cultural underpinnings of the Agile frameworks, such as Scrum, Lean and eXtreme Programming. Consequently, knowing how to collaboratively make decisions, and how to deal with interpersonal conflict constructively, are foundational skills in an Agile shop.

What inspired you to write this book?

A: Well, when talking with different teams, both co-located and distributed, in different companies, I asked “What books have you read on Agile?” A dozen or more team members all gave me the same answer: “None.” When asked why, they justified this with “I’ve got one on the shelf but haven’t gotten around to reading it yet,” or, “we don’t have to read about Agile because we’re doing it,” or, “I don’t know which one to read,

there are so many.” I decided that what was needed was an obvious entry point – something engaging and easy to use.

I see; then what is your book’s main argument?

A: *A to XP* is basically a job aid. Like any ABC book, it’s an introduction to literacy. What I’ve done is arranged about 100 Agile concepts around 26 themes, so that things hang together. For example, I talk about pairing and swarming behaviors in context with Continuous Improvement and Emergent Design, all under the theme of Planning, accompanied by an illustration that shows the iterative nature of the framework.

And who is your target audience?

A: Everyone using or interested in using Agile practices. Agilists such as Scrum Masters, Product Owners, Coaches or Teams, Business stakeholders, and C-level or other management.

What is unique and original about your book, and your thinking?

A: That’s the question! It is unique. It would have been easier to write 10 pages on each of the 26 themes, which would have resulted in a traditional book. But I wanted something that could be read in 30 minutes, and skimmed in 5. I wanted something that could serve as a quick and handy “cheat-sheet.” I wanted each of the themes to be absorbable at a glance. So I decided to use three methods of communication – 1) a simple illustration of the concept, 2) a heading like a proverb that was pithy and memorable, and 3) a rational paragraph or two that would provide more substance. What I tried to do was to access the metaphorical mind – our right brain, or narrative mind as Steve Denning calls it. I pair this with branded formatting: Unique illustrations, memorable hooks, and the rational argument to support each concept. In this way, readers actually LEARN the concept. In other words, I wanted to walk the Agile talk by providing just enough information, in easy to understand chunks, so that the concepts on each page would be DONE when you turned the page.

How specifically can your book help an organization; an individual?

A: Having a common glossary of terms, or shared understanding of concepts, is central to smooth operations. We all *think* we think the same, but often discover we don’t – at inopportune times. *The Agile ABC Book* gives everyone a common-understanding from which to start. What’s more, the *How to Use this Book* section provides a workshop format for teams to practice Agile meetings, where they can further explore their mutual interpretation of any one of the 100 concepts. This guides them toward creating their own Action Plan for improvement.

How does it help specific IT areas or individuals? And conversely, what are the perils in not following a proper Agile agenda, or a poor one?

A: Management might be interested in the cultural implications of doing work in an Agile way, yet may not really understand what stresses it will bring to bear on their typical operational structure. The themes *Why, Team, Quality and Greatness* all speak to that cultural mindshift. Other themes such as *Whiteboards, Scrum and Information Radiators* communicate more behavioral information.

What happens in some Agile adoptions is that very superficial and often modified, or incomplete, frameworks are put in place, that subsequently fail to deliver on the Agile promise of high productivity. Agile simply doesn't work if you pick and choose. It would be as if you chose which bits to use when assembling a piece of furniture; it might end up looking good, but functionally it would be unsound. It pains many Agile coaches and Agile consultants when the enterprise sets itself up for difficulties with this à la carte mentality. I provide a cohesive model of proper Agile that outlines the transformation agenda – a balanced diet, so-to-speak.

What does following your book's principles mean beyond IT – that is; to business and related successes?

A: Glad you ask that, Dave, because although Agile in general, and Scrum & XP in particular, are closely associated with IT, Agile also speaks to the business mind. A CFO or a business manager can use *A to XP* as a primer in preparation for conversations with the technical folks.

One of the reasons the short proverbs and images work so well with the Agile concepts is that all of us, business people and engineers alike, have a basic understanding of these principles from life experience. Let's face it; people tend to overcomplicate things. Granted, the technology we are using and the products we want to create can be complicated, but execution should be incremental, output should be cohesive and business value should be clear. Everything has to fit together in a way that is flexible and sustainable. Agile provides a conceptual language that does that.

What Agile is about at its core is GOOD DECISION MAKING PRACTICES – and my book speaks to this. It's about seeing the forest *and* the trees... the greater picture, the long-range implications, along with the pragmatic step-by-step work that needs to be done. It's about aligning strategy with tactics... but it's about more... it's about Value Driven Leadership and Respect for the Individual.

Well thank you Karen, for “being” here with us today – is there a nice summary you’d like to wrap with?

A: I’d like to say that if you’d like a “Cliff Notes” version of Agile, if you want something that you can actually use, even on-the-fly, to spark meaningful conversations with your colleagues, if you need help in your Agile Adoption or Agile Transformation so that you make better collaborative decisions, then get multiple copies of *A to XP* and use them to develop your, and your organization’s, literacy. This is a book that is meant to be used.

Thank you Karen: Today’s guest has been Karen Spencer, author of *A to XP: The Agile ABC Book* (ISBN: 978-0-9883358-0-6) available at [Agile Kindergarten](#).