Agile option – a story from Cinderland

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Explanatory introduction:

Initially, I've started from a Romanian title < "Scrum"-ul poate deveni scrum?> (Eng. Can "Scrum" become cinder?), wanting to make the title funny by playing with homonymous words, and trying to highlight the organizational challenges when something new is coming, like Agile method "Scrum". Being difficult to address this issue in the space required, I've made the decision to tell a simple story about the arguments necessary to highlight the differences between Agile and traditional management.

The love story

Cinderella, a young and enthusiastic engineer, started her career for some years in software development, and she was trying to embrace and practice the new Agile methods, like Scrum.

Some rumors have appeared in the company that she is like a rebel, and she is not team member, having a chaotic approach, ignore some management directives, but she is very smart and efficient in doing the hard work, obtaining working software that customers and end users appreciate much (here we can say that software developing teams are collectively represented by Cinderella).

The Prince Charming, a smart and politically correct manager, with a fresh MBA diploma on his desk, worked in the same company with Cinderella, but on higher level of management, making operational plans and trying to motivate people to work faster, better and cheaper! Exactly like our customers want us to do !

Prince Charming, noticing Cinderella's efficiency in getting the work done, has fallen in love with Cinderella, and nothing appeared to him as before, deciding that she and her Scrum method are "the chosen".

Prince Charming started to convince the Board of Directors to implement Scrum, as operational process. They were immediately seduced by the Agile ideas of increased productivity, lower costs, satisfied customers and happy employees. What else would you ask for a good and profitable business? (here we can say that all top and middle managers are collectively represented by Prince Charming)

Blinded by this first sight love, Prince Charming instantly asked Cinderella to marry him, promising her that he will not be anymore that control freak, all her wishes will become true, you know, everything a man can promise to a women when he wants to marry him.

Cinderella, very honored that the rich Prince Charming is courting her and, moreover, he is now listening to her, after long time of command and control way of working, finally, overwhelmed by emotions and hopes, she said "yes". Fireworks in the sky, everybody was celebrating and the wedding was just like in the movies!

Prince Charming announced everybody in the company that everything will be changed from now on, in order to become an Agile organization, just like Cinderella is saying, under her close and direct supervision.

The marriage's challenges

After returning from the honey moon, Cinderella started very happy to work on the proposed changes, but Prince Charming started to become anxious, looking on how these proposed changes are affecting the good old traditional way of working, especially how he loses the power and control over the people, just because Cinderella said that only her team will decide who and how and when will do the work, while the customer will decide only on what to do next. Moreover, Cinderella was very determined to not allow any management or customer intervention on the team during the Sprint period of 30 days.

Being a trained manager, recently he proudly called himself inspirational leader after attending abroad a leadership course, Prince Charming started to debate with Cinderella about the changes. He explained her that the new things are just like the old things, but in other forms.

He explained her that a detailed and approved plan is required in advance to assure predictability and visibility, and they need to have a control mechanism of the work and people. In her turn, Cinderella explained him that they need to let the team to self-organize, and the first work should be the most valuable one for the customer, and then invite the customer to see if they like the result and ask them for what's next thing (requirement) to do and how they change the deliverable already done.

At this point, they started to argue. As you may know: what would be the marriages without this argues and reconciliations…probably, not that funny!!

Fact is that Prince Charming, like every normal husband, after discussing with his experienced peers, started to make a plan to convince Cinderella to accept "small" amendments to her basic working principles. Smiling, Prince Charming has thought that if she accepts one after another small correctives, he will get her to his managerial plan and restore the traditional order ... of course, accepting from her some changes that are not affecting the big picture and power … just not to frustrate her and to show her that he is an open minded leader.

Cinderella, like every normal wife, after consulting with her mother (lessons learned data base), concluded that it's better to let him making all these decisions to feel important to him and for his peers, but she will continue to suggest him what should be done in a form that will allow him to rediscover them and take ownership and decisions on them.

With these strategies, Cinderella and Prince Charming would eventually happily live married, but every time the real life is stronger than a story!

Like in every other marriage, a child transforms the initial parents' mindset, and both were trying to focus on this new important project, so other priorities were at hand. So, Cinderella and Prince Charming had a boy and they were very happy to take care of him and play with him. For a time, old fights and argues were forgotten. They named the boy Prince Cinder, after another long debate, where Cinderella insisted to call him Cindy and Prince Charming insisted to call him Princy. A combination of the concepts reached an agreement for both parties, so Prince Cinder it was.

While Prince Cinder was growing up (of course, ten times faster than the others), his parents were trying to educate him in different ways, like traditional command-control by his father and Agile principles by his mother. As Prince Cinder finished the University, he started his career as a project manager for a software development project, and he wanted to apply for a certification (here we can say that project managers are collectively represented by Prince Cinder). Question at hand was: should he apply for Scrum Master, as advised by his mother, or for PMP, as advised by his father.

The big confrontation

Unhappiness and tension were the words describing the atmosphere in the family, at that time.

In one hand, Cinderella was very unhappy about how he started to copy his father's bad habits (control freak patterns). Several times, she was thinking very seriously to divorce by this monster of controlling and reporting everything, to protect her son.

In the other hand, Prince Charming was very unhappy too about how his son was doing things, just like her mother is telling him how to do, and several times advised his son to do what a MAN has to do.

In another hand (don't worry, in a story it's possible) Prince Cinder was very unhappy too, seeing how his parents struggle between them to impose him a way of doing his job.

Starting to have a project manager mindset, he was determined to clarify these issues and to make a final decision to bring peace in the family. So, he invited his parents on his place to have a dinner together and he spoiled them with fancy foods and rare wines. While they were enjoying the coffee, Prince Cinder said:

- My dear parents, I want to discuss with you the basic arguments for each part, in order to decide what would be the best approach for my career. Please try to be concise and rational, and forget that you two are married – even though he was afraid that they will start again to argue and pop up emotional facts from the past.

- Son! – loudly started first Prince Charming, while he was standing up from his chair and taking a monumental position – *I will briefly state my **thesis**. Traditional project management discipline has been born from thousands of years of human experience, basically is a set of practices applicable to a large majority of projects, and upon them exist a large consensus about their value and utility.*

- Ya, right! said his mother. *That traditional value and utility can produce success... barely a third from the total software development projects!! That's why an **antithesis** has been born, called Agile revolution!!*

- Please ignore what your mother just said! A French mining engineer, named Henri Fayol, defined the basic management principles, since the end of nineteenth century. Fayol management type, called command-control type, has been and still is successful as a management approach for a large number of organizational contexts!

- Okay, I admit that Agile concepts are not that well defined and explained, simply because it was a new idea ... just compare 11 years of Agile patterns with 110 years old of Fayol command-control patterns. Fayol is too old!!

*- Darling, can you please just let me finish the idea? Where was I? Ah ... Son, everything should be known upfront - approved project plan - with a small margin of errors (addressed through risk management processes). Everything should be defined in terms of processes, tools and techniques, deliverables, competencies required. Everything is crystal clear and logically determined, having the cyclic order of planning – execution - control. This is the beauty of scientific management! ...*while making a long circle with his hand in the air.

- Cindy dear, is very nice what your father is telling you, but! ... Agile Manifesto has been issued just after a bunch of developers noticed and experienced that the command-control principles have serious drawbacks when projects deal with high order of complexity, tacit requirements, unknown business value requirements, and fixed terms contracts, rigid customers. That's why those Fayol concepts produce 70% failures in software projects!

- Enough it's enough! I can't continue this discussion with your mother harassing me ...an entire life you've told me: Agile, Agile, Agile!! Son, take my professional and experienced advice: Take the PMP certification, the most valuable recognition!

- Oh, my darling, please take your pills, you look so nervous and exhausted! ..said Cinderella. While she was turning back and smiling to her son, with a low voice she said: *just like your traditional theory!!*

- Cindy dear! continued her mother... *Agile is about flexibility, iterations, anticipation when dealing with project risks, incremental delivery of business value-based requirements while taking your customer and end users as partners, adaptation to the business context, different competencies for the team that should self-organize its work, and, most important, consider the MEN as the single company value that requires full attention and care!!*

*- But we take care of people, too! Son, I say it again: **Take the PMP certification!*** said promptly his father.

*- Cindy dear, if you want to be successful, take only one way: **Do Agile! Be a Scrum Master!*** concluded his mother.

-- Mother, don't you think that my colleagues will make bad jokes on me ... Prince Cinder is a Scrum Master! said smiling Prince Cinder, just to breakdown the tension between them, and both parents started to laugh.

- Yes ! .. that's my son! said his father.

- Now, can you please both listen for my opinion? said Prince Cinder.

*- You both have strong arguments! However, following the basic evolution pattern, after thesis and antithesis, it should follow **the synthesis***! said Prince Cinder very satisfied that has remembered the remark of a smart teacher he had, and will impress his parents.

After a short silence, he continued:

- *This means that is possible to make them live together in a combined form. Still, there are some questions, like:*

- *Can we make reconciliation between full detailed upfront planning with the incremental planning?*

- *Can we make reconciliation between fully executed assigned activities with self-organization team and iteratively executed activities?*

- *Can we make reconciliation between controlled deliverables with inspection, peer review and unfinished, but working, deliverables?*

- *Can we mix what apparently can not be mixed?* raising up his voice very high and then made a pause.

The Prince Cinder, just remembered Obama's speech and said loudly and proudly: ***Yes, we can!***

Then, he kept some silence again. Suddenly, with a loud voice, he said:

- *So, concluding, I will take the Agile PMP certification!!*

Smiling, the parents look to each other, look admiringly to him again, thinking for their own:

- *Wow, what a smart son we have and what a good project manager he will be! Of course, we will never change our minds!*

At that moment, Prince Cinder started to think why he held that speech, even he liked it very much. May be because, like every other child, he didn't want to see his parents arguing on what he is supposed to do. He copied a lot from his father behavioral patterns, thinking he will be an executive as well, while the most important things he is doing in the way his mother told him to do them. In his projects, he is really doing incremental planning and iterative execution while showing to the managers the master project plans and finished deliverables. So, both parties are happy!

The story morale
Is Prince Cinder actually smarter than his parents or he is just fooling around, to make happy both parties?
May be he knows very well that, in a family, staying a family (running company business) is the most critical thing, and everything is centered on it, despite of the debates on which principles we should apply, how useful or enjoyable things should be.
With this final morale, now our story is finished, and all three of them happily lived, like every normal family, meaning that they fully agree in front of the others, while each of them is doing only what fits his/her basic principles and mindset …and, only internally, they will continue to argue on whatever topic at hand.

Final word
Thank you reader for your time, and I just hope you have enjoyed the story and you have found some useful thoughts for your work and life, because you have to find for yourself the right answer for your projects.
I will gladly share with you any Agile experience, discussions and training on these methods, considering that I am an Agile apostle from 2005, after having an important course with Ken Schwaber.
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