

Sensing Agile in an ‘Agile’ Way: A Definition That Helps Practice

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‘**Agile Project Management**’ is now used as shorthand for almost everything from everyday tasks to organization-wide transformation. The problem is that the label has expanded faster than a clear understanding has been established. One particular challenge occurs when pursuing scaled Agile across levels: project agility (how a specific project adapts) and enterprise agility (how the wider organization adapts at scale).

In practice, organizations often adopt Agile rituals without changing their underlying project governance. Teams hold daily stand-ups and work in sprints, however projects are still planned with fixed scope, controlled through variance management, and measured against original baselines. This creates confusion about what genuine Agile implementation requires and how to assess whether it is working.

Our recent study published in the [Project Management Journal \(Dong, Dacre, Baxter et al., 2024\)](#) addresses this confusion through a systematic review of academic literature. We found that despite a rapid rise in publications over the past decade and widespread organizational adoption, there is not a consistent understanding of Agile Project Management. Most discussions remain implicitly anchored in software development contexts, limiting their applicability to the broader range of projects where Agile is now being deployed.

Without a clear definition of what Agile Project Management actually is, organizations face predictable risks. Two patterns emerge repeatedly. First, **Agile as theatre**, where rituals and terminology are performed but decision rights, governance, coordination, and performance measures remain unchanged. Second, **Agile as software-engineer thinking**, where assumptions from software development are applied to non-software projects without adapting for different sources of uncertainty, regulatory environments, or institutional constraints.

A workable definition

Synthesizing 80 studies selected from 426 academic journal articles since 2001 (following the Agile Manifesto) and informed by practitioner publications and an expert consultation panel, we proposed a definition aimed at resolving the mismatch between project management’s heritage focus on predetermined objectives and Agile’s emphasis on learning and change.

Agile Project Management is a flexible approach that includes discovering the aim and delivering the project. It embodies the organizational capability to adapt to changes as they arise.

(Dong, Dacre, Baxter et al., 2024:678)

Two key phrases to take home:

- **Discovering the aim**, meaning the end-state can and often legitimately evolve as project progresses and learning accumulates, rather than treating change as a deviation to be controlled or worried.
- **Organizational capability**, emphasizing that Agile is not merely a toolkit (or method) at team level, but a set of principles that require changes to structures, culture, contracts, and governance to maintain implementation fidelity.

Implications: Agile Project Management is different

Building on established contrasts between traditional projects and Agile Software Development, our definition positions Agile Project Management as a distinct form of project organizing. It is neither a sub-category of traditional project management nor simply another word for organizational agility, but an essentially different approach to managing project work. In practical terms, a sense of true Agile is where project agility is “made real” – It is a management approach that enables adaptation within the project, while aligned with and supported by enterprise-level conditions.

At a higher level, Agile Project Management operates on different assumptions. Projects are not linear processes, but adaptive endeavors achieved through responsive collaboration under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. Implementation must be context-oriented, tailored to specific organizational and project settings rather than applied as a universal prescription.

For those leading (or auditing) an Agile shift: At a project level: are we discovering the aim and adapting delivery? At the enterprise level: can we redirect resources without losing coherence? More specifically, four evidence-informed strategic moves follow:

1. **Redefine what ‘success’ means early.** If your project's aim can evolve, success cannot mean just “meeting the original plan.”
2. **Expect benefits, but don’t assume them.** Reported gains (learning, trust, customer collaboration, quality) are contingent on management effort and coordination; outcomes can be positive, null, or negative.
3. **Develop governance as part of the change.** Embracing Agile beyond a single team demands supportive shifts in project monitoring, and even organizational design.
4. **Walk your talk, in good faith.** Many organizations adopt Agile values without labeling it. There is still a lack of robust tools and frameworks to assess how Agile a team or organization truly is.

Conclusion

Agile Project Management becomes far more actionable when we stop treating it as a fashionable label or ceremonial add-on to the old project management routines and instead recognize it as a distinct approach. One that manages both delivery and learning about the evolving aims, enabled by an organization built to adapt. That clarity helps project leaders develop governance, measures, and behaviors in a real Agile sense, rather than at a cosmetic or rhetorical level. Project agility is achieved through Agile practices; while enterprise agility is the broader capacity required that allows those practices to scale and stick.

This Project Management Journal (PMJ) for Practice article is based on one of the most-read PMJ papers in the past 12 months. For further information, please [visit the PMJ open access article](#) or contact the authors Dr. Hao Dong (H.Dong@soton.ac.uk) or Dr. Nicholas Dacre (Nicholas.Dacre@southampton.ac.uk).