Agile Governance
with Allan Kelly

On the 3rd February 2021, Allan Kelly joined me on an edition of 'On The Spot' to discuss the tricky topic of *agile governance.* You can see the original broadcast here. If you'd rather read an edited transcript of our discussion you'll find that below.

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Allan Kelly
Agile guide, author & speaker

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Adrian Reed: Well, hello, and welcome to this LinkedIn live episode of "On The Spot", the second ever episode that I've done. It's all a bit experimental, the format is 15 minutes: a quick coffee-break sized riff over a topic that will be of interest to people in the change, project or product communities. I'm really pleased to say that today I'm joined by Allan Kelly, I'm sure many people watching will know of Allan and his work as both an agile guide, but also as an author with a fantastic blog, who has written far too many books for me to to to name, but particular highlights for me are Project Myopia, Continuous Digital and of course, your newest book Success with OKRs, which is next on my reading list.

Allan Kelly: A couple more days and it'll actually be finished!

Adrian Reed: Today we're discussing the tricky topic of agile governance. It's interesting, isn't it? You get organisations that move to agile ways of delivery in their product and project space, but they have governance approaches which seem to conflict with that. So the first question I have for you Allan, is what is agile governance?

Allan Kelly: Agile governance well.... agile itself is difficult enough to define, but I think we all know it when we see it, even if we can't define it. My problem is, I don't really know governance when I see it. I have for several years been trying to work out what governance is. I even went out and bought a BCS book on governance. Wow. Well, I opened it in anticipation and I looked at the definition of governance. I've never really succeeded in finding it, a short, crisp, concise definition of what governance is. So I always feel a bit like a fraud when it comes to governance, because I don't know what governance is as I've never really studied it. But I know it's about making sure you're doing the right thing, that you're not wasting money, that you're not breaking the law, that you are conforming to what the organisation expects.

And here's an example (a very nebulous one): years ago I did a spot of work with the BBC, and there's a bunch of people who are very concerned about whether the work that was being done fell within the remit of the BBC charter.   So organisations differ but fundamentally, it's about asking "are we getting what we want?" and "is the money we are spending giving us a useful return on investment? Are we moving or progressing?" The problem I have with it is so often when you delve into it, it starts look like meta-project management. And it's about "how are we doing against the plan and against the Gantt chart; against our budget and all the rest of it?" Well, hang on, it comes to agile, we don't necessarily use that model. You may, and that might be the right criteria, but you may be using a different model. Agile teams are much more around delivering sooner, bringing deliveries forward. So we need a governance model that recognises that we can measure progress, we can track whether we're doing the right thing or not, not by reference to some proxies, but by reference to the actual work itself. What have you delivered for me lately? And that's the fundamental question for me.

Adrian Reed: It's interesting, when I think about governance, and I think I've drawn similar conclusions to you, Allan, in that I've learned when someone says the word governance to ask the question, "what do you mean by governance?" Because I've observed that different people attribute different meanings to it. Often I observe it to be a set of procedures that need to be followed in order to get stuff done. So governance becomes the "guardrails" that make sure the right stuff is done, that money isn't squandered, in a public sector environment that everything's good value, and so on. And so I suppose that leads me to ask: what challenges do you see teams facing in an agile environment? You've already alluded to one, which is that if we are truly embracing the fact that we might have a whole bunch of unknowns, and we're going to experiment, then that's a very different model. So what other sorts of challenges do you see?

Allan Kelly: So I group the challenges into two general ones: big ones and little ones, as it were. Firstly the idea of diseconomies of scale: software development generally, and agile particularly works better when you're doing lots of small things, and a lot of governance doesn't really have a handle on that, it can be quite heavyweight, process governance can be looking for big things. What you want with an agile team is a constant stream of small deliverables, small progress. And then at the other end there are the big questions, such as "how much is it going to cost?" and "when is it going to be done?" Those big questions that typically get posed at the beginning, but get re-posed as you go along. And a lot of agile is, if we're being utterly honest here, we don't know, we don't know where we're gonna be finished. We don't know how much it's gonna cost.

Adrian Reed: Yeah, and to bring in a couple of comments which have been submitted, Dominic gave an interesting, quite useful definition of governance: "the process of managing and improving for the benefit of all stakeholders". That's, that's a really nice, succinct definition. So thank you for that Dominic. Nurudeen makes the excellent point: "isn't governance also about decision making?". I agree with that, as well.

And I think springboarding from that, relating back to what you have said Allan, it's about this decision making but accepting uncertainty, or in an agile environment, it's accepting that there are things we don't know. And, you know, we've probably all worked on waterfall projects, where it's only really been the illusion of certainty anyway. Because there are going to be change requests. In reality there's a spectrum, isn't there? So with those sorts of things in mind, have you seen any ways of overcoming those challenges? A typical one being that people want to know how long it's going to take and how much it's going to cost before they even know what value the customer is trying to realise? How can teams overcome those challenges?

Allan Kelly: So before I answer that, just to add to the point about decision making, because that is a really good point. Agile distributes decision making and pushes it further down the organisation. Teams that are doing the work and the individuals who are doing the work typically have more authority, and they have more decisions to make. People talk about self-organising teams, self-managing teams, I prefer to talk more generally about distributing and devolving authority, it's about getting the decision making to the right point. Now, in a governance setting, governance pushes decisions up. And we're trying to push them down, trying to get a mechanism where they meet up. One of the challenges you see is where you got this friction where the top feels they are making decisions, but the bottom is trying to make decisions too.

Adrian Reed: That's really interesting, Allan, because people at the "bottom" are often closest to the customer and closest to the product. The people at the "top" are often more aligned to the direction of the organisation's strategic imperatives and the so called "bigger picture thinking". So maybe this is about connecting those two views together. Isn't that the kind of thing that appears in management literature and is referred to as a "strategy execution disconnect"?

Allan Kelly: It's that and, as is so often the case with agile, agile makes your problems more obvious. It doesn't actually make them worse, but it makes them more obvious. What you find if you've got a top level group of decision makers who believe they're still in control, and you've got a bottom level group of people who also now believe they've got control, there's going to be a frictional tension there. That might rip you apart if you don't resolve it. Essentially, the point you got there, which fits in with your question a moment ago (how the teams deal with it). A couple of ways: One, I think that old adage of getting customers and decision makers involved early, get them involved regularly. So rather than having a governance session every six months, every year, why not have it every quarter or every month? It's a question of how much trust the governance people have in the team, how happy are they to go for a longer period, I'd actually be okay in the early stages for governance people to want to review things every month until the trust is built up.

Setting clear goals and objectives (or the the higher-ups making it clear what they are after). Also, I want them to be really hard and mean with the team. I want the team to actually demonstrate stuff, which is working, preferably delivered, if not at least deliverable. And I don't want the team say, "Oh, we we almost got it, but we've just some bugs to clear up, we've almost got it but we've built something that will pay off in six months time." I want to get hard on the team. You're an agile team, you're delivering regularly, regularly working software. I want the governance people to hold them to account on that.

Adrian Reed: One thing I know we've talked about in the past is the idea of "a licence to explore" and a "Dragon's Den" review, is that something you're able to briefly explain?

Allan Kelly: Yes. This fits in with some of reasons I've been writing the OKRs book, because OKRs are a mechanism you could use in this setting to communicate objectives and how you're going to go and meet them. But I always imagine a governance or portfolio session being a bit like Dragon's Den, you probably have the product owner, they probably have an assistant or two with them, they kind of walk in, and the dragons in this case are the portfolio board or the governance board. I'd like to see that the product owner and other team representatives say, "Hey, this is what we have to offer you this month, this is what we've got here. We've got a load more ideas. Because we can show you this, we are demonstrating you a) something that's valuable and b) we're demonstrating we're able to deliver, we have the capability to deliver. And so here's a bunch of ideas we've got for the next three months. If you the dragons, the governance board will invest in us, we promise to work damn hard to realise as many of those ideas as possible"

Adrian Reed: And it's then firmly pinned to the product owners back. So there's that accountability. I should I should explain for anyone in North America: It's "Shark Tank", Dragon's Den is known as "Shark Tank" in America. An interesting comment from Kirk there about the Carver model, that's not one I'm familiar with. So that's one I'm gonna go and Google immediately after this. And Victoria, asks whether governance is a shared responsibility or driven by a particular role, which is a really interesting thought. And I think governance folks would probably say it's everyone's responsibility, but it's perhaps the accountability that lies with a role.

Allan Kelly: Yeah, and that's going to depend on what roles you have on a team, not every team has every role. I could imagine if you've got a team that does have a project manager or delivery managers that they take on the responsibility. I can imagine if nobody else is stepping forward, then it is going to fall to the product owner. But since I don't exactly know who's on the team....

Adrian Reed: You can use the great get out for every scenario: "It Depends!". We're almost at the end of our our 15 minute coffee break session. So what would you say is your biggest tip or takeaway for someone who's working in an agile context is perhaps experiencing that friction that you described. What would you recommend they do?

Allan Kelly: You know, the old adage nothing succeeds like success. So be able to actually deliver something, it almost doesn't matter what it is or how small it is. Just have something to say look, this is actually in production, this is actually production quality. We want to be judged by what we can put into production in a period of time that is coming up. Not promises, not progress against some theoretical chart. Not costs spent or anything else. Just make it really, really concrete really real.

Adrian Reed: Credibility through delivery and credibility through delivery of some realised value. Allan, thanks so much. I think this will be the start of a conversation about about these sorts of topics. I'm absolutely certain people will want to stay in touch. I know you've got your fantastic blog at allankelly.net. How else can people connect with you, Allan?

Allan Kelly: I'm on LinkedIn, if you Google, Allan Kelly, you usually find the right one.

Adrian Reed: Fantastic. Well, Allan, I'm sure we'll be having many more conversations about these sorts of topics in the coming months and years. Thanks for taking the time and speak to you again soon.

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