

Is the customer always right?

Description

One of the concerns that is sometimes expressed about [Agile approaches](#) is that they are “too customer-driven”, implying that customers are not always the best people to define the direction of a product or a change. So is the customer always right, and is it good Agile practice to give the customer what they want?

Customer focus over self interest

The Agile Business Consortium advises “The key to Business Agility is the inspirational leadership of collaboratively autonomous teams, committed to delighting their customers.”

What does it take to create a delighted customer? Perhaps not simply giving the customer what they want. Most project managers can come up with countless examples of less-than-delighted customers, who’ve been given precisely what they asked for. This isn’t what Agile advocates, nor does this perspective genuinely put the customer first.

Nowhere in the eight principles of the Agile Project Framework does it say “give the customer what they want”. This is a misunderstanding and an over-simplification of what Agile is all about. The word “customer” isn’t specifically used in the principles although it’s clear that each principle protects the customer’s best interests:

Eight Principles of the Agile Project Framework

1. Focus on the business need
2. Deliver on time
3. Collaborate
4. Never compromise quality
5. Build incrementally from firm foundations
6. Develop iteratively
7. Communicate continuously and clearly
8. Demonstrate control

People not processes are at the heart of Agile, because it’s people, not processes, that innovate and people that keep a business competitive.

They do this by developing iteratively, to give customers a chance to see how “what they thought they wanted” looks in practice. Focusing on the business need means being prepared to explore where the real (maybe hidden?) value for the customer really lies. By collaborating with the customer, and communicating continuously and clearly, Agile practices have the power to encourage new thinking and evolve innovative solutions.

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Putting the customer's interests first does not necessarily equate to giving the customer exactly what they want, but it should give them what they need. One of the key messages of Agile Project Management is to avoid compromising any of the eight principles. Do this and it's clear that by involving the right people at the right time, and collaborating effectively, the customer will indeed be delighted.

Category

1. Project

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