93. Heretical Agile

with Leila Rao

Announcer: From the Washington DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View®, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles.

Kendall Lott: Happy winter, PMs. And I hope you're ready for a stream of Elevating the Conversation episodes here on the PM Point of View®. It is I, your digital nomad host coming to you from Portland, Oregon. And as always with me, his majestic self, the master of Lean, the authority of Agile, the pundit of portfolios. Co-host Mike Hannan. Mike, how are ya?

Mike Hannan: Uh oh, I don't know even what to say. I feel like I'm blushing now.

Kendall Lott: I can see you. Our listeners can't. You are indeed blushing all the way across that shiny pad of yours. If you haven't met Mike, you should. You'll recognize him; he'll be the one blushing. So Mike, [what've you] been up to recently that we need to care about? Anything?

Mike Hannan: Yeah, I've been pondering all sorts of ways in which we might drive greater harmony across a complex human-based system and basically just be nicer to each other, and I think we're gonna hit some of that today, more in our normal work and project context, of course, not just kumbaya circles or whatever.

Kendall Lott: And that wasn't a political statement about a complex organization, like, you know, things founded on the federal Constitution and things...

Mike Hannan: Correct, although, although it's... Of course, that's part of it, right?

Kendall Lott: It might be applicable. I come from the political science background; it's all about that in the end, anyways. That and a little religion thrown in, right? Well, I think you're spot on, we are gonna cover that today. And listeners, we do have a set-up for you here because today's episode is gonna be called, "The Agile Heresy," because that's where we're coming from with a couple of Agilistas here, counting Mike. And I will stand by and avoid being road kill if I can on our road to understanding harmony and some of what has gone on. Gone on wrong, gone on right, in the world of Agile. This is not your regular Agile podcast though. So, here's why.

Recently, I was appreciating Mike the other day when he said that these episodes that we're doing in Elevating the Conversation are really a chance for the two of us to have a guest on and kind of the hot seat and to basically probe something unique, something that stands apart. And learn and to get everyone to learn, right? So what I want listeners to do is tell your colleagues about this podcast specifically if they wanna ponder PM things that are not basically just training in some technique or general leadership or motivational discussions because your chapters and your symposium that you go to can give you those things, and I recommend you do that. But here at PM Point of View®, we wanna consider how all this really works and where we get it wrong sometimes.

So you'll love today as Mike and I have an expert Agilista who's often called—she notes—an Agile heretic. 20 plus years in the Lean and Agile transformation world, working in change management now. Leila Rao. Leila, welcome.

Leila Rao: I'm so glad to be here.

Mike Hannan: I'm already curious, Leila, how you would reconcile that contradiction between being an Agilista and a heretic at the same time.

Leila Rao: You know, Agile should be all about heretic. If you're in the Agile space and you're not a heretic, I'm gonna say you're not doing Agile all that right.

Kendall Lott: Uh oh, uh oh. Challenge.

Leila Rao: Because you know, think about where Agile started from, right? It was supposed to be revolutionary, it was supposed to be changing the paradigm and the mindset. And I've had people say, "This is so counterintuitive." At some point in last 20 years, I feel like we have the Agile community have lost that.

Kendall Lott: Well, so you just went to my first question, so thanks for asking it for me. I have a question. I don't really wanna go over your bio, but I do wanna know this before we fully dig in here. Based on what you do now or how you've arrived professionally, why do you like it? Why do you like what you're applying?

Leila Rao: Because I get to make people's working life a little bit better.

Kendall Lott: Tell us a little bit around what you do.

Leila Rao: So my work right now is organizational change consultant, which basically means looking into [an] organization and saying, "What are you trying to do here, how are you doing it? Is it working for you, and if not, how could we do it better?" And a lot of it comes down to really basic things, like—how do we figure out what is the biggest priority, and how do we figure out, how do I get you what you need and I can get what I need and we can deliver value to each other and the customer?

Kendall Lott: Why do you like it?

Leila Rao (04:26): Because when I do it well, you can see when people get it, it's [an] a-ha moment. That's it? It's that simple? And all the... Most people I know, they really care about their work and they're passionate about it, so when you show them there's a way to deliver the value of their work that is simpler, easier and more fulfilling, it's the best high I can think of. When you see people get it and they apply it, magic happens. And that's why I love my job.

Kendall Lott: So consultants, you may get to get the high, and if you're not the consultant and one doing the work, you may get to be the person who gets that a-ha moment, and that's always a good feeling, and your work improves. So we say the words, we get the certs in Agile, etcetera, and I've heard from my own government manager clients that they see too much Agile theater, they call it. So it looks like Agile, dresses like Agile. I see the set, it's all dressed like Agile, but the implication is that they're sold on Agile but not really on how it's getting executed. Like, "Oh, I love the idea and what's happening here."

So I'm not even sure I'm sold, that's 'cause I don't know so much, that's why I get to just host the podcast. But I wanna ask each of you, give you a chance to each have a little voice on this. What gets your goat about how Agile and PM and management theory in general, perhaps, gets used, gets

discussed, right? It's all right out there within the development world that we fully understood and we've propounded all these great theories—Agile, Lean, theory of constraints, all that stuff. But my God, woman, Leila what's gone wrong? You're first.

Leila Rao: I'm first? Okay, so what's gone is we've [forgotten] why we got into this. The whole point of Lean and Agile for me is to make things better, and somehow we got so lost in the certification and the theater and the Agile and all of it all that we forgot the point of Agile is to make people's work lives better and deliver better services and better products. And we've got so many other things getting in that fundamental truth that we all say we believe in, but don't necessarily act like we do.

Kendall Lott: I don't remember Agile being focused on making people's work life better, other than you should have ultimately produced better goods and services, so I'm missing a gap there, talk to me.

Mike Hannan: Let me jump in, sorry. Probably the largest motivator of the Agile movement from the early days was, "Hey, we're being set up to be the fall guys for when this traditional project management practice doesn't work. We better do a better job to protect ourselves, 'cause if we don't protect ourselves, we'll never deliver anything of value to anyone else."

Leila Rao: And then it also depends on which Agile spectrum thing you came from, because when I came into it, it was very much about Agile for human rights and all of that stuff. So Mike coming from a very different space than I came in, I'm not sure I would have loved the "we're rescuing project management" type of thing, but when I came in, it was very much about let's go back to the people. Let's not let the technology get in the way of the people. It's the humanity of Agile. It's Agile for people, it's all of those things—that's what drew me in.

Mike Hannan: Yeah, one of my favorite Agilists who also was sort of a cross-over traditional PM dude, Jesse Fewell, who's been on your podcast here, Kendall, in the past. He was one of the committee members, like the core authoring group that did the PMBOK 7th edition. And one of his big things was, "I don't wanna hear about whether we have efficient resources or any of this stuff. We're human beings, and we are attracted to the opportunity to deliver as a member of a team something that engineers a better world, so let's not forget about that sort of aspirational purpose in all of this. Because if all you're doing is putting human beings into a spreadsheet and trying to look at their efficiency metrics or whatever, you've completely missed it."

Leila Rao: And the intent is there, Kendall. Even that goes from core principles, courage and openness—that's people. It's about valuing and caring for people. It's allowing people to be their best. And somehow we've just, the words and the foundation elements are there, they just got overwritten by all the other stuff that happened in the last 20 years.

Mike Hannan: Yeah, and oh by the way, a lot of consulting firms make a lot of money by making it really complicated.

Leila Rao (08:33): Yes, and Mike hit the nail on the head. People are incentivized to forget about the human elements of Agile and focus on the stuff that makes money, which is certifications and frameworks and big bang pictures that can look like they can solve the world's problems, but they don't.

Kendall Lott: Best line I ever saw on a poster I think was consulting—it was a definitions poster—it said, "Consulting: if you can't solve the problem, there's always money to be made in extending it." So don't watch what the other hand is doing.

Okay, so we're talking in some vagaries there I had really not picked up before. So listeners, if you're like me, take a note. Agile, there's an aspirational purpose about it in that it is about people or it certainly assumes that people are really key to how we are doing work, and so we need to consider how people interact.

So with that though, why are we seeing it go awry? So we've forgotten about, we forgot about the people. But it's still a method. Doesn't other forms of project management or development involve people? It does. So what's gone awry here? Let's talk more about the problem, 'cause otherwise I'm gonna go out and get this cert, baby.

Mike Hannan: Can I start? I like to say, well, I learn a lot all the time. I'm still learning. I'm sure there's a lot more about Agile I'll continue to learn and other methods, etcetera, but everything I've learned so far is not something Agile actually or any of the Agile methods under the Agile umbrella have actually innovated. It's like, I like to think that Agile, the Agile movement has reminded us of things we should have never forgotten.

Leila Rao: And I will totally agree with Mike. Agile did not create empowerment and openness and trust and courage and all these things. They were all there. This was a way of accomplishing or living up to all those values, and for me, Agile was never the what; it was the *how*. This is how we make all of those human truths viable in the workplace. This is how we make a workplace that works for people where they have the courage to say things that need to be said, where they can talk to each other and perfect each other. That was always the point for me.

Kendall Lott: So it's a how bounded in design by the values and you're supposed to bring some of these common values to it, which is that people are not resources in that sense, we shouldn't think of them that way. Head count is equal to dollars. Some sort of change there. But why does that matter? So how does that play out? Let's keep talking about it here.

Leila Rao: Because when we don't value our people, they can't be at their best. And when people are at their best, that's when we get innovation and value and great customer service and all of those things that make money. We live in a capitalist world, great. But ultimately, it's people that are going to move the needle. And when we try to take humanness out of any business process, we are setting ourselves up for failure.

Mike Hannan (11:20): A story that's very close to me to kinda showcase this. My wife is a school teacher, and she's always been a top performer, probably an overly heightened sense of responsibility in general, always trying to jump in and do the extra thing because it might help the kids and the school, overall performance and make teachers lives easier, etcetera, etcetera. But then in the pandemic, her principal kind of forgot about this "it's all about the people" thing, and started to treat his people like resources because they were resource constrained. Right, a lot of people left the... They couldn't even get enough bus drivers. I think most school systems are still wrestling with that, teachers are sometimes immunocompromised and can't come back to the classroom, which is pretty much typical at this point in early December 2021.

And so for some of the neediest kids that have been through the toughest challenges during all the learning from home, they had really fallen backwards from their psychological needs and their human needs, and so they needed something. And my wife was more than happy to try and do something to help them, but what her principal did basically lost all boatload of loyalty with her and basically said, "You gotta go back in the classroom and we're starting it next week," and it was I guess March of 2021. And she was like, "Well, I'm more than happy to do that, but my vaccination isn't scheduled for a couple of weeks after that. Is there anything you can do to help me get that accelerated?" And he just sort of said, "No. And I don't care. And you're gonna do it anyway. And I hope, I'm sure it'll all be fine."

So that went from like now she's a canary in the coal mine essentially, right. She's an expendable resource or she felt like she was treated like an expendable resource. And I think she struggles mightily now every day to get herself back to the motivation level she had when she felt like a valued human being.

Leila Rao (13:20): We know that people do their best when they feel heard and valued. It's fundamental human nature, but most of our business processes have drained that. Let's take diversity, equity, inclusion, for example, because that's the new buzzword. Okay, we know that companies that value DEI, put it into practice, have more diverse members and leaders, outperform companies that don't. This is not a new thing; the data's been out for about 20 years.

Why do we not react to it? We say we're data-driven, but we don't put ourselves where we choose the data that lends itself to easy solutions. We do not act on the data that says to actually get the best value long-term, invest in your people. Speaking of Agile heresies, we talked about delighting the customer. For the average company, what is your life span for a customer? Two years, three years, five. It's not gonna be that long. What is the life span of your employee relationship? It's gonna be a whole lot longer almost always.

Mike Hannan: If you're high performing.

Leila Rao (14:17): If you're high performing. But if you want to delight your customer, the absolute best way: delight your workers first. They will then continue to delight your customers, whoever they happen to be at that given moment. But no, we keep chasing the moving target, not the thing that is the constant, our workers.

Kendall Lott: Yeah, the customers are definitely... You're fighting against them becoming expendable, right, i.e. you don't want them to be used up with your product or service and move on. If you're trying to run a business, you're trying to solve problems that matter, and that keep mattering to them, whatever that is it in a meaningful way. So we're fighting against that, but then we're also... We have employees that we've trained and taught and learn to grow and mature that we wanna keep, and then we're stuck on the other side, letting that decay.

Mike Hannan: Yeah that's a brilliant insight, Kendall, I gotta say. If you don't want your customers to be expendable, don't treat your employees as expendable.

Leila Rao: I love that. I'm totally sold on it. I totally get that companies want long-term customer because that's the value. A loyal customer is worth their value over a lifetime, great. But in almost

every case, the longer term relationship is the workers, not employees, right? So why do we not invest in the longer-term relationship? Because I think the research is there, but also just personal experience, when your people feel valued, they are going to go the extra mile or whatever it is to make your customers happy. They'll know how because it can be a little bit hard to figure out what each customer needs and wants from a strategic point of view. But if your employees, your workers, your people feel valued, they're the ones with the most direct customer relationship. They will know and be able to deliver what is the value to that customer.

Kendall Lott (16:04): So you may have hit a specific link in there that I see as problematic to it, so I wanna put it up as a challenge. I think that's true to the extent, instead of just the magic of happy employee makes for better customer delivery, and then you... But then there's that gap, there's that moment where the neuron has to jump, which is... And then we trust that customers like that. I think it would be helpful if I had customers... If we had customers, if teams had customers that said, I value how I get this service or product *because* of that relationship of it was so happily delivered to me, because of they don't have to agree to your company's value system per se maybe—"I've signed off on your internal constitution."

But I think if we could have as consumers as clients, as customers, in some way of providing more direct feedback and care about the product we're getting, and then we tie it to Agile, or at least thinking in Scrum. That means the voice of the customer is in the room beyond just the requirements of the specific design. It needs to be something about how that entire system is working with the customer, and they need to stay engaged with it, when you have the voice of the customer and the product owner in the room, for example. Right, let's take it to tax. I'm wondering if we need to be educating our customers better.

Leila Rao: I think we're kind of already there, or at least the good companies are there. I think in terms of Disney or Zappos or whoever, they really do understand the customer experience translates with their people. Good customer service. Marriott has been doing this for a couple of decades, so this is not particularly true with Agile, and I think we are trying to get there a little bit with Net Promoter Score and things like that. It might not be directly in the individual work, the customer, but we're seeing customer experience, it usually is a relationship at some level, could we do a better job of highlighting that and conveying that value to customers? I don't disagree.

Mike Hannan (17:48): Hey, can I share another little personal anecdote that ties right into that? I never would have made the parallel had I not heard you guys just articulate it the way you did. My wife and I Airbnb our second home in Utah when we're not using it. And we're fortunate to have one of my sons as the property manager here in Salt Lake, so that's cool. And we thought, he's young, he's got some professional experience, but he's still trying to get his college degree and work in mostly restaurant and retail type jobs and stuff like that. So now he's a property manager and I gotta train them a bit on that, and I got to support him. And oh by the way, when my wife and I aren't actually physically here, and he's got to actually be the point person that engages with a potentially angry guest or something like that, like we gotta set them up for success with all that. And I stupidly—well maybe not stupidly, it's only obvious to me in hindsight that it was stupid—but...

Kendall Lott: Oh, that's all the complex problems, right?

Mike Hannan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. My dad always told us, everything is easy once. You know it,

right. Simplicity was always there. We just hadn't seen it. Well, the thing was, Hey, you're on point, you're the accountable person, you will support you, we'll be in the background, you take the lead and you do all the guest interactions, you set up the access codes, you run interference if there's a plumbing issue or whatever, you bring by donuts, to make the guest feel special and cared for or whatever. And it's all on you, man, and we'll just get the five-star ratings as proof that it's working, and if we don't get the five-star ratings, then obviously we need to change something. So we've got mostly five stars, but then we learned something along the way, this whole single point of accountability thing or single throat to choke, let's ensure clear accountability, let's not confuse the poor young man. Right, it wasn't working nearly as well as when we all just decided to jump in and work as a team. And so we have a guest that might be maybe somebody in my demographic asking about recommendations for hiking or something. Well, I probably know more of what that guy will want then my son would, and maybe more than my wife would, so why don't I just take it?

If it's the best night life scene, well, I'm sure my son knows more about that than my wife or I would... Right, if it's the best whiskey bar, I probably know more about that. My son can't afford whiskey bars.

Kendall Lott: You don't pay him enough to Airbnb this stuff.

Mike Hannan: Just the punch line is we started getting more consistent five-star reviews, and all of the little sub-categories were also across the board five star and then the reviews, the verbiage in the reviews themselves said, "Wow can't thank the team enough. The team did this great job to support us. We always felt cared for by the team." And occasionally they might even call us out by name, right, like "thanks to Mike and Pablo" and whatever, but just this notion of like... I always thought they'd be confused by having a whole bunch of different people chiming in and offering them suggestions and advice.

Kendall Lott: I know that customers want an answer. They want an answer, not a who.

Mike Hannan: That's right. And then one that's tailored to their unique desires. Like that drives value for them.

Kendall Lott: Go ahead, Leila.

Leila Rao (21:17): What you described is optimizing the whole experience rather than any one individual part of it. So it goes back to you maybe no one person can optimize the whole experience, you do need to have multiple people involved 'cause that we can all play to our strengths, keeping in mind the objective is a happy guest experience.

Kendall Lott: I love something that you've highlighted in this for us to take away structurally, I think 'cause they leave our poor listeners thinking, "Oh, well, this is like a family fair, you're having a discussion here as a allows incinerate. Let's talk about this a little bit. Mike, I'm gonna suggest to you that from an organizational perspective, you have some inherent advantages with that, which doesn't take away from the lesson, takes away from the design for somebody in the future. I'll make some assumptions here.

Your team has immediate trust because I think trust is generally viewed in the motivational literature is so important to all teams and organizations, there's some level of trust by being part of

the family had chosen to do this. An outcome of that trust and in tandem, when the trust is you likely have faster or at least richer over the amount—ergo more efficient—communications, when that is something that would have to be established for any team, the coordination and communication is important internally, I think. So I think those are some things that it doesn't mean what you're saying is wrong. It means I think teams have to wrestle with that, well what happens when it's not my son and my spouse, right.

Mike Hannan (22:42): And oh by the way, I don't know that family businesses make it easier on us, right. Well, but here's the thing, plenty of trust but there's also this, hey, why did my dad take the lead on that interaction? I thought it was my job. Doesn't he trust me? Right, that was a genuine fear I had, if we started...

Kendall Lott: And that's the problem working with children too. You don't wanna do that to them or you don't wanna hear that comment back to you. Right, the point is, is I think you have to build that at some level.

Leila, something you said that I really thought was really super cool tied to what Mike said was he said we thought the client, the customers wanted a single point, and I chimed in they want an answer. You said we need to think Agile's about the customer, right? But it's not about what we think the customer wants, or the actual Airbnb per se, is optimizing the experience. You asked us to stretch our mind about what it means to serve the customer/what does the customer really want. You're using the word "optimize," so we need to push in on that a little bit. But that's a classic case to me—it's not that Agile was wrong and we missed it, it's that we need to think what does it mean? So, optimize, talk to me about that. What are you feeling on that?

Leila Rao: To me, optimizing is really about asking the why, not just what are we doing, are we checking off the list. It's why are we doing this? What's the deeper need behind everything, and that goes back to, in Mike's example, the customer wants a good experience, like everything about this should be natural, easy flowing. I don't think anyone comes in saying, "Well, I'm gonna make sure they have a good whisky recommendation," because that's not the mental checklist, but if we can think about having a good experience, then whatever comes up, somebody is empowered to opt in.

Now, in a very different structure, if you had a team who did have whiskey expertise, "Oh, that's not my [...] it's theirs, let me stay out of it." So your example of family, I think, is double-edged, right? One is, yeah, established history of trust and you know each other, but also goes back into their thinking as a whole, again optimizing the whole as opposed to "this is my role, this is their role."

Hopefully, when you have a trusted relationship, family or otherwise, the shift focuses from being very aware of each other and not stepping on toes to hold on, this is not stepping on toes, we're all here for the time purpose: this customer experience. So optimizing the whole—and that's more of a Lean concept than an Agile—really asks everyone to look at what is the bigger purpose that we're here for. What does this connect to and what role can we play in that?

Kendall Lott (25:20): So that came out of an experience very specific to what you were talking about there, Mike, but let's take it back to where I have experienced the problem set, which maybe you're gonna tell me is because that's not an interesting conversation and it's only rarely happening. But again, working with the government, I have heard actually both consultants and government

managers say something along the fact that it's Agile theater. What's happened is we have a lot of... Well, we have a lot of process, but whether or not we have a lot of process, there's a lot of activity, and it looks like Agile and it walks like annual, but you can't actually say it's a duck.

Mike Hannan: So I can share a story. And it's just for comic relief sake. You and I actually had this customer. He had some kind of PMO project portfolio leadership role in the IT space, and he helped launch an Agile transformation. And he got a bunch of qualified firms that had good Agile coaches, genuinely good Agile coaches and good mix of commercial and government experience, okay. So far, so good, right? But they made the common mistake of saying, "Well, it's gonna be an 18-month transformation, and here's the 18-month plan, and in month 17 and a half we'll all be transformed."

Kendall Lott: Oh listeners, you gotta see Leila's face. She's like, "The word 18 months is like a whole new industry. How who would we do a transformation in 18 months?" But there you go. They have 18 months—ready, set, go. Mike, continue.

Mike Hannan: So anyway, so he's basically, we're something like 12 months in, and he's at some annual conference and he's gonna have some keynote address to give us the state of the IT portfolio. And he said, "I stand here before you, not with much pride, to declare that we now after one year of effort have officially achieved Agile buzzword compliance."

Half the room was just frozen like they couldn't believe he did it. The other half was just laughing hysterically like, like we all are now, right. His point was, "I need help beyond the Agile mechanics," right?

Leila Rao: Why are we focused on the mechanics? You said a group of Agile coaches. If you're just doing mechanics, get a Scrum book, and you're off and running. The whole point of coaches is that we go beyond the mechanics and translate the mechanics into fit for purpose for that client. And Kendall, the 18-month thing, I laughed because I work in government primarily, and I do Agile transformation with my clients in three to six months. Because we don't care about the framework or Agile buzzword compliance. What we're looking for in three to six month window is: can we increase in visibility here, can we identify what priorities are and deliver on those? It's a very specific ask. So my first question would be for both parties in this, did you define outcomes for Agile transformation? And not based on Agile buzzwords, but your actual organization... Did we ever have the conversation that says, "Okay, you are now fully Agile. What does that mean?"

Kendall Lott: Yeah, can you give example of that or at least one that's an edit enough... Not for attribution. What does it mean to be able to say, I know what this looks like at the end? What does an organization face when they say this?

Leila Rao: Okay, real example: customer who shall not be named, government leader, basically said, "I need to know what the heck my people are doing. How my people are doing. Everybody's so busy. But I can't tell you what they're doing is so busy, I wanna figure out what it is, so I can tell them to stop doing stuff that's not adding value to me, and I wanna be able to go tell my boss, CEO and our customers, what stuff we actually did, what value we delivered. Right now, I don't have that. Can we get that?" I said, "Sure."

Three to six months later, we have that. We're literally able to say in real time, "Here is the work

being delivered and for every piece of work, there was a value proposition. Who's the customer for this? What can they do differently with this service or product improvement that they could not do before? To me, that's not rocket science. That's good Agile.

Kendall Lott: Why is that Agile? How you got there or that outcome?

Leila Rao: Both. It is very much the voice the customer delivering value to them, it's doing an enteric way, it's surfacing assumptions as validating as we go along rather than the big unveil at the very end. My customer used the analogy, "It's the assembly line, not the showroom." It's let's look at the work being done, let's fix it as it's being done. Our customers can have windows into the assembly line. let's do this iteratively in... That's the heart of Agile, but iteratively doesn't mean a whole lot if it's a very small group all talking to each other. We have to make it visible so everybody can see so that we can get better with feedback early and often.

Kendall Lott (29:54): Must make it visible. I had a comment, and Mike I'll let you jump in on this. we talked about it before I cycle back, and a government client who said, I'm liking the speed that we talk about in Agile, I see it and I get to sit in it, or a... My members of my team as a GS-15 gets to sit in. He said, "But here's my problem, Kendall. Is that apparently what set of sprints and minimally viable product means is that I never get anything actually delivered. It's always almost the right thing, and then it has to be redone again, he said, So I'm getting a lot of cycles about not quite there.

Mike Hannan: And so that's why Leila and I love being a heretic here, right? And of course, we think we're staying true to the original spirit and not just of Agile, but of, I call it, any *how might we* approach any challenge that can be addressed with questions that start with how might we... Right, and so it's not just how can we be more Agile. It's how can we achieve... How could we close the aspirational gap that we see in our organization if we generally aspire to thrive at a higher level, and we find ourselves not yet at that higher level, how might we attain that higher level? And we don't have to be Scrum experts or Scrum masters or anything like that to have that conversation. We don't have to have any training, we don't... We just have to be human beings with a unified purpose and a genuine desire to achieve it together.

Leila Rao: And Mike, in your case, taking Mike's example, did we ask—why is the customer only getting, you know what, close enough? [Is it the] feedback looks too early? Are we not incorporating it? Are we being unrealistic? They're giving us very clear feedback. If we're doing Agile, that feedback should improve how we're doing Agile.

Mike Hannan (31:37): Yeah, and in your exact example, Kendall, it is a license to just keep iterating and never arrive at any valuable destination, if it's not framed as something of a *how might we* achieve this, this thing that's actually really valuable. And by the way, I've seen teams say, "You know what, I think if we iterate less, we'll get to the objective sooner."

Leila Rao: Totally worth trying. The point of Agile is not to reap sprints. That was never the point. That's one way to deliver what customers want. If that way is not working, find a different mechanism.

Mike Hannan: And that's what I love about it, is to say, I hear by empower you all... Not that you need me to in Perry all, but I hear by empower you all to challenge all the conventional wisdom,

even if it's conventional Agile wisdom. Page 72 of the Scrum guide that says you must do sprints in the first place or whatever... Right, like you are free to experiment with any approach you think might actually close that aspirational gap.

Leila Rao: Real example from last year. I walk into a client engagement and they had been doing Agile for a while, no one really liked it, it was the compliance thing. Like, this doesn't work for us. Their complaint was the daily stand-up; it wasn't working for them. And I said, "Okay, why?" This is my second day on the job. And they said, "We don't actually work with each other, we both, we all work with other people.

And I'm like, "Great, in that case, you don't need to have a daily stand-up because the point of a daily stand-up is if your work all crosses paths, impacts each other, coordinate together. If your work does not do that, then don't have a daily stand-up." They looked at me like first, I was insane, second, oh my God, we didn't know we could do that. That is the point of coaching, of Agility, of any...

Mike Hannan: Since when do you need permission?

Leila Rao: Because in their world, Agile coach makes those decisions.

Kendall Lott: One thing too, we have to get into the incentives within an organization, my suggestion is all this, and this is a lead probably to put it in for today's podcast, but it all sits inside of a context. My observation of a lot of large organizations, typically, to the extent they become large or will even go with complex, is that actually having the meetings themselves is the statement of activity, and activity is the statement of value.

So I am needed in these meetings, I am in these meetings, I am busy—we can even line it up with people's personality traits, like being able to show if you're busy, for some people that's inherently valuable, sometimes that's... For me, for example—so there's actually an underlying reason they don't challenge the need for all of that because that's actually how validation happens. That's evidence of status. That's evidence of need. We all wanna be needed... you know how I know I'm needed... I've got three meetings scheduled right now, so that's how you know... So I think that there's a larger context that somehow this needs to fit within, and I'm wondering how does an organization best... Let's just go there. How does an organization best prepare itself for the impact of approaching things in an Agile way, focus on the complexity of things, trying to get to inherent simplicity and optimizing the outcome they need? How do they prepare for that?

Leila Rao: Okay, first is partnership. You cannot delegate your Agile transformation to somebody else. Your leaders have to be active partners in the process because presumably they know what is the valuable outcomes that they need to be there. The warning sign I often hear, "Yeah, my teams are doing Agile." I'm like, oh, that's a failed Agile transformation, if your teams are doing it because you should also be doing Agile.

Mike Hannan (35:01): So I wanna share a story on that, Leila. Can I butt in real quick? They said that when Deming came back from Japan after having helped influence the total production system and some of the Lean craze in the '80s, GM and other US manufacturers decided they wanted the same thing here. And I forget which US manufacturer invited Deming to come speak. And the CEO himself was there, and it was an all-hands meeting.

I don't know if it was telecast all over the world or what, but it was this big new launch of this great transformation, how we're gonna be more Lean or whatever. And so the CEO himself kicked it off, introduced Deming, talked about all the great things Deming had done, and what a great, great thinker and thought leader he is, and then said, "Okay, I'll now turn it over to Mr. Deming." And he walked off the stage. And Mr. Deming followed him off the stage. And the CEO turned around and said, "What are you doing?" He goes, "Well, if it's not important enough for you to stay then it's certainly not important enough for me to say."

Leila Rao: Okay, I really hope it's a true story, but... Totally, yes. When you hear an Agile leader talk about Agile is something somebody else does, that is a big red flag that are missed point[s]. And I think a lot of people, consultants and internal coaches, sometimes confuse access for value. "Oh, I must be really important because people are willing to meet with me, because I am in a meeting with important people." The point of access is to use it as the lever to deliver value; access itself is not the value proposition.

Kendall Lott: I have a story now as well for all of our people that ties to that—my second year in the government and learning how these things work, I had nothing intelligent to say. I was an observer and a minutes taker. I observed a meeting in an IT organization connected to the business side. It was like in essence the CIO, they didn't have them in the organization I was in, but the high IT person engaging, and there was a whole bunch of people around the table arguing a major issue or discussing how they were gonna tackle it, and why isn't this group getting on board, etcetera, etcetera.

At that point anyway, the SES-er got up, excused herself and left, and someone said, "Okay, good, we all got to be here, so now we get to tackle the real problem." To which, her number two said, "Oh no, you don't understand. Your problem just walked out the door." Right? In other words, she's the one that has... Not that she was a problem person. She was saying she's the one that owns the problem, and y'all have spent so much time not using her and not keeping her engaged, she just walked out the door.

That was like the end of that budget cycle for that whole project... Right, and I'll never forget going, "Oh, that's power." But someone said, "No, that's engagement." I talked to my mentor later, she's like, "No, you have to engage people with things of value when you have that chance." Access is about getting to the value proposition. I like that point of view very well, very much so. I wanna dig in here a little bit, Leila, when I was looking at your book or your proto book... Should I call it a proto book or is it a full-blown book?

Leila Rao (38:05): It's a full-blown book. It's just the e-book version. The printed version is to follow whenever…

Kendall Lott: We'll talk about that in a minute. So I was looking in there, digging down inside of Agile... One of the things that you framed up when I was asking about key principles you cared about, and I think Mike even got to a little bit of reaction around it, you said, "Well, I can use concepts of agility for us to think more broadly about teams." and you talked about four things that we recognize that we know the least when we start, and the goal of working with these teams, we get so excited about the product owners and the role—tell me all the answers, tell me what you need is—go broad before deep, and the cadence and time boxing matters in this process, and then all of

it's wrapped in a reality of human behavior.

And listeners, I want you to keep your thoughts on that because our next podcast is gonna be another one on neuroscience and the issues around, it's all about human behavior. So holding that out, you have those big four pieces, can you tell us just a little bit about why you care about those... They all sound lovely. I love apple pie, but why do you care about those particular pieces of apple pie.

Leila Rao: So when I'm doing any kind of Agile work with clients, I tell them, "If you forget everything else I said, just remember these four things." Because that is how we do a transformation that meets the intent of what might cause *how might we*. For reality, when we're starting anything, just recognize that we know the least. That's just a fundamental truth.

So whatever your planning, build that in. Start small. Start lightweight. But the going broad for going deep means think about end-to-end value. That goes back to your customers thing about I'm not getting something I really need. What is the thing they really need? Can you go hit starting point, end point in a very lightweight way rather than trying to nail a perfect version of any small slice? Because most often for customers, it is a broad value proposition.

Kendall Lott: Is that a timing issue? About knowing when to do… Mike and I've been to a conference, it was really effective at this, but I'm always wondering how to know the time as a facilitator. When have I heard enough breadth because we don't know a lot yet sometimes, or there's a lot that is known, but we as a group, don't have it all yet, 'cause I hadn't pulled that out everyone, to now is the time to down slice.

I know my clients always say, "I want a brainstorming session." The senior clients, always want a brainstorming session and about after all the introductions and the general framing. About pretty seriously 12 minutes into the real work, they're like, "Why are we doing this? I need an answer. You're not getting me to an answer." I'm like, "We're still at the getting everything out of people's heads. Don't worry, I'll get you there." How do you know that timing? What is a sense of that breadth versus depth and cut over as a coach?

Leila Rao: When everyone's engaged. If you're going for the breath, everyone is contributing and engaged because they see themselves on that journey when just a few people are talking that's when you're losing the breath, you're more likely switching to the dot, so when you're keeping the conversation focus on everybody has had a part to play, that means you're more than likely hitting the end-to-end value proposition.

Kendall Lott (41:02): So when in the end, there's not much more to say that may be the trigger that it's time to go ahead and go deep?

Leila Rao: Not that… That never happens, people always have stuff they wanna say. But it's more that what you see reflected in the process has everybody's fingerprints on it. There's something in there that everybody contributed to. That to me is a pretty good sign that you're hitting the right breadth. Mike?

Mike Hannan: Yeah, I love it all. And there's actually that term *breadth first*, which I learned from one of the original XP guys before they coined the term Agile, right. It's actually the same dude that

came up with XSCALE, Kendall, if you're familiar with XSCALE. Peter Merel, brilliant guy. But I think Leila tied it together in a way that helped me learn something that even though I kinda got the core principles of why we wanna go broad then deep as a sort of technical matter, I didn't kinda lost sight of the human side that Leila focused in directly saying, "You'll know when everyone's engaged that you've gone broad enough." That's beautiful. And that's so simple.

Kendall Lott: Yeah. Carry on, Leila, with cadence, time boxing, and this issue is all about human behavior.

Leila Rao (42:11): Cadence is very much… They're the Agile heart of it. So I think that's where I shifted really from Lean into Agile because when we're doing anything new, it's being done on top of an already full plate for most people. So time boxing is really, really important. More often than not, the change initiative is my job, but for everybody else, it's added on top of full job, so just being very aware of that. And when you're asking people to do something new or explore uncharted waters, cadence gives them a sense of familiarity. "Okay, every Wednesday, I will have this chance to ask questions. Every morning, I can do this."

That provides a bit of a psychological safety that I think people do welcome because a lot of the Agile approaches come across as very risky because it's changing the way we did things. And providing these little bit of psychological safety moments—and people can call them guardrails, whatever—to me, that's valuable. Even if it's not used as such, it reassures people that we're not going totally off the rails. That there is a purpose to this method, and there is a method to this madness, however you want to phrase it. That's what cadence and time boxing do for me.

And the last one is my absolute favorite, it's everything that we're trying to do has to deal with the sometimes inconvenient reality of people and systems. Because whatever we design, whatever we create, it has to work in the real world, which is systems and people. So you can have the best ideas and the best theory. If it does not work in the system, change your theory to fit the system. Change whatever you're putting in place to make it work for the people, because that's how it becomes sustainable, and that's how you can do Agile transformations faster. If you're trying to shove everybody into your Agile frame box, it takes 18 months. If you're adapting your frame to meet people and what they need to get through their work day, three, six months is enough to make it work. And when we do it, that earns people's trust and confidence in not just you, but in the work process. So the next generation, they're willing to open up more, they're willing to add more. People have to get value from any change initiative very quickly. They have to see improvement very quickly because that is how we earn the invitation to keep on asking for more.

Kendall Lott (44:38): We make our sales by talking about how we will approach it and what the outcome is, and not about enough those specifics, which means I don't know how many of the clients are asking for the specifics of outcomes happening. I'm not sure. But I think one of the things that is missing is how do we know if what we're producing in this new approach that's not so new anymore, but in this thorough approach, how do we know if it's actually being used? And that's back where I am an organizational effectiveness is: use, adoption and uptake. Did it provide the value? Does it provide any value? Does it have the impact we wanted? And I don't know how much the development of a product or service what... But somebody should we're back to our accounting department versus our value department, Mike... But I'm wondering about this idea that it sits within a system. To me that's both that context question I had as well as does it matter that we perform the work.

Leila Rao: I would say, yes, we own it and we should know. So I mostly work in her agency is a large corporation, even in those environments, before we start a work are really asking, who is using this? Who is this for? A lot of the time that you were not. So one of the first things for doing with the Agile way of working is being very clear on the value proposition. If we have a backlog, why are we prioritizing it this way? What does the customer see? Can we move up things that they see?

There's always a balance that means in building out the runway and getting planes taking off and landing. We've gotta find that balance. Something has to reach somebody and be usable, otherwise, honestly let's hit pause until that happens. Why do we keep racing without knowing that it's reaching the…

Mike Hannan: It always has to be closing some sort of aspirational gap that's meaningful enough to enough people that we can get some early momentum and build on it. And so I've had people say, "Well, how should I write up my Agile position descriptions? And what sort of skills and certifications should my people look for now, now that we're all trying to be Agile?" And I said, "Again, you're starting with the solution. What's the problem?" Maybe we should call ourselves business improvement experts or aspirational gap closing experts or whatever.

Leila Rao: Or problem solvers.

Mike Hannan: Problem solvers. Because I've had a lot of people, especially far outside of the IT world that they've not really been exposed to Agile and how it's grown up in the early days, like in the '90s in the software world. And they've said, I don't actually take on need agility—like lowercase *a*, right—I don't really need to pivot 15 times every quarter with all my products or whatever, I just need to get my stuff to market faster, I just need speed and better flow. Okay, well, let's all become flow experts done, right? But even that is a solution, that's a solution. What's the problem? Well, delivering a higher cadence of value delivery, we need that in order to thrive a, Okay, well, why don't we become value delivery cadence, improvement experts.

And again, so freeing ourselves even from the Agile terminology itself, as solution-oriented, when we really have to stay, in my view, laser focused on the problem, and I think project managers get this wrong all the time, right, They'll say, "Well, it's this project about? Well, it's to put in place an accounts receivable system, no, it's to help us manage our cash flow better so we don't have to take a hit on our credit line and pale interest on that. Oh. Okay, so it is a cash flow improvement project. Yes, that's what we're after.

Leila Rao (48:06): There are so many work efforts I've seen that get started because somebody wanted some bright, new shiny thing. The VP or somebody signed off on it.

Mike Hannan: And it's always a bright, new shiny solution. To solve what...

Leila Rao: And that's always the first question for me. So Kendall referenced the book that I wrote because people did not believe that I could do Agile transformations in three, six months, I can't be... Oh, that's not possible. And I'm doing it like, what else are you on? And Fran, part of the reason why it works is, the first thing we do is say, Where do you want to go? Why? What does this look like? Because Agile is not the answer or the problem. It holds up a mirror.

What is it the thing... Where do you wanna go? Do you know... Do you know where you are now? Because it's good to know you wanna be there, but if you are over here, if you're gonna go to London, whether you're starting out from Liverpool or New York or San Francisco matters a lot. It's a different type of journey, you have to know that. Once you know where you're going, where you're starting, then what is your actual capacity for this?

Again, the whole human reality, any organization has six million other things you're trying to do, how much capacity do your people have for this journey, are you allowing them time to make this journey? It's not gonna happen. It's this very much reality check, then we can actually start doing... And by the way, the doing part is the Agile part, but you can to get there until you've had all of these working sessions or somebody has to know this and own this. And my biggest illusion as an adult coach was when I started, I thought, "Oh, business value. Somebody knows what that is, I can help deliver it... Yeah, no, Bissau is not something out there that we can just grab and deliver, it has to be discovered in the agile web, iterative customer involvement, all of those things, we have to discover it and then deliver it.

Kendall Lott (49:55): Yeah, I like that idea about discovery in there, I also think this time so much to your idea, and I'm back to the organizational side that all of this has to fit within a system, and that's what rewards or doesn't reward people's behavior. And so we have to see what problem we're solving, and then the method doesn't matter as long as we're focused on how people are caught up in the behavior side of it. So I think there needs to be... There needs to be a cookbook on setting up the organization we own by cookbook in the opportunity to mix ingredients to find what the kind of dinner you actually need served. But the point being that the organization has to be ready or has to be willing to be able to engage in these problem-solving techniques. That was one thought I had.

But Mike, you just gave me a big learning here that is really interesting to me. There's a famous snarky comment, and you kinda started leading there, particularly as I see government executives of generally government executives actually is an executive issue. You know, they go to a conference, they're trying to stay informed, they are talking to peers, they do read the papers, white papers, etcetera, there are high-end consulting firms, they didn't give them direction, so there's the new shiny thing. We're gonna all be fill in the blank, and then it's funny coming in where I do below that lay up later, and she's like, Oh, the boss saw something new and shiny, so we're gonna go play this game for a while.

We've always assumed... I have always assumed it's whoever sold the last shiny thing hits of one problem, but it's not really true, and now there's this new truth that we're searching, your comment makes me think about something, actually, the problem isn't the new shiny things; in fact, they could all be effective tools for closing a gap, solving a problem. The problem is we never focused on what we... The problems that we're really solving and we don't keep it that way, so you know what it... Be any of these methods. Possibly, as long as we're first asking, what are we really trying to solve, so we don't really have to laugh at the people that did information engineering or business process re-engineering or theory of constraints modeling or Lean, because they were all right. Possibly.

Mike Hannan: Yeah, last as long as the solution fit the mindset, which is the biggest thing that has to change at the mutational context. Right. Is there an aspirational gap that we actually all think we should close so that we can thrive together, and if that means we have to go after a big... What did

Jim Collins call it? The big hairy audacious goal. Right, well then so be it. Let's go forward undaunted and try for it. And oh by the way, I might be able to achieve it. Like this analogy of going to London. Well, I already know that the best way to go from New York to London is to catch the fastest jet plane I can. Just walking in a two-week sprint in the direction of London is not gonna iterate my way to London, right? I don't need to iterate on this one, alright. This is a pretty defined solution set to that particular problem and just get out of my way and let me go do it.

Leila Rao (52:50): And iterate does not necessarily mean that you're complicated. Iterate just simply means track every hour and flight and call to iteration. Iteration gets the most misused thing whatsoever because it's not about creating more work. It's what is the shortest way to get to destination, and can we provide some windows in there so we can make sure we're going the right way. That's all it is. If you're on a plane, the pilot knows that, right? Somebody knows that. But if you don't know that, you're in trouble, and I think all of this goes back into […] because everything is writer in all this.

All of the previous organizational change, cultural improvement, all of those. I like operating the fact that they all have value, there was a reason that started those things, presumably there's some value they got out of them. What value did the organization get? And, are any of those things still true? Don't reinvent for the sake of reinvention. Lean talks a lot about respecting the organization and just changing what is no longer working for the current context. So that's kind of where I come from.

Mike Hannan: I had a fantastic, brilliant client once who put everything in Marie Kondo terms— the author that talks about simplifying and decluttering your life. And the way she put it was, "Hey, we need to completely re-factor our entire code base, and it was a bank in this case, and it was like, Well, it's gonna take years, it's gonna cost a gazillion dollars, but a... And she goes, "Yeah, but so much of that code no longer sparks any joy." It's a Marie Kondo quote, right.

Leila Rao: That's fundamentally organizational change, right. If it's working for you, keep doing it. If it's not working for you, stop doing it and try to figure out what else could work.

Kendall Lott (54:43): So I'm gonna need to bring this to close. Let me give you what I'm hearing, and here are some of the key thoughts—although I don't know how operational they're gonna be for our PMs here. But I'm hearing breadth first, recognizing when we begin to engage in problem solving, I don't have... Is in the right order? By the way, inherent simplicity seek the inherent simplicity, observe the inherent support. All of this gets back to starting with what is actually the problem that is needed, what is the thing that is not currently... And I see problem is the thing that is currently not true, that needs to be made true, the thing that needs to be changed. We work from there. So Brett, observe the inherent simplicity, be clear in that value proposition.

It *is* about people, there is no way that we don't make the process or the thing we're trying to produce, not about people. It is always about the people. So that is a requirement to bring people along and to treat people as people in this process, as valued members of engagement, expect them to do that, invite them to do that. Listen to them to do that, that it can't be absent, the people.

That takes it to the context of the organization, this idea that, like you just said about the respect the organization... I think that's a great one. It sits within something, we have to have the organization be effective in that, and then you give the connection to me, Leila, that I got is whatever the shiny

thing is that seeks the truth of change that is happening presumably in an agile way, and often cases, whatever that machinery is grinding inside this organization, the shell of the organization that we like, you gotta have Windows on, it is about the visibility, because there is a need to see that something is happening. There is a need to have course correction. There is a need for ongoing— and we said it earlier—engagement. So this idea of visibility is so important, and I know that I tend towards opaque windows when I'm concerned and I'm not sure what's happening in the plane, and that's as the guy sitting in it. Sometimes as a leader, you're also like, Man, I don't even wanna look... So there's a requirement for the executive not to leave the room.

Mike Hannan: Yeah, and that's like you hope that even though you're hiding, sticking your head in the sand, so to speak, on that plane, you hope the pilot isn't.

Leila Rao: Exactly. Somebody has to be…

Kendall Lott: Leila, take us out with this. I need one last comment from each of you. What is the big takeaway people need to have as they approach change? And I gotta tell you, Leila, I had never really associated Agile as a technique coming from the IT world, in my world to organizational change. That's why I actually wanted to engage with you. I know enough to be dangerous, but organizational change, like, how does that work? So I appreciate you drawing that connection for us and opening the door on that, but one last word from either one of you, what's a big takeaway PMs need to be thinking about here as they're told you're on an Agile team?

Leila Rao (57:24): So I would go with trading the illusion of certainty for the certainty of transparency. Transparency is the starting point for everything.

Mike Hannan: I will just leave everyone with you are here by empowered to challenge everything. Like I tell people, it's not the Scrum law, it's the Scrum guide. You don't have to obey it. If you don't wanna do sprints, don't do sprints. If you don't wanna call it a Scrum master, don't call it a Scrum master. If you think less iteration will get you to your goal faster than try, less iteration, challenge, challenge everything, and it's actually a whole lot more fun, especially if you're a rebel, like us heretics here.

Kendall Lott: Yeah, yeah. Do you guys have challenged all this and brought it out so there you go, heritages, listening in on the podcast or would be heretics, got some here takes... You can contact here, Mike and Leila. So we're gonna leave it there for now. And thanks for joining us, Leila. Your book is "Compass for Agility," and I really liked it because it helps give some components for somebody who might be a user as a consultant or as a client to be able to pick and choose the levels of complexity and how much visibility and how much engagement and how big is the problem? I like some flexibility built into it, so I have rigor book and I invite others to find out how they can get it, so with that law, can they get to...

0:58:43.4 S2: Sorry, how can they get to your book or to follow anything that you're writing or reach out to you...

Leila Rao (58:48): Sure, so the book is available on my website and on Lean pub dot com, or honestly, just sent me an email and I will get it back to you because I'm not a far ahead of my marketing as it should be.

Kendall Lott: Yeah. What's your website real quick? We'll put it in the notes.

Leila Rao: I elected dot com, and it is one... So agile extended dot com.

Kendall Lott: Excellent. Agile extended dot com. Thanks, so you can get to me or Mike, I always ask my kid to do it, and the answer is LinkedIn, get to both of us on LinkedIn. You can also reach out on to our own website, M Powered Strategies dot com, that's the letter M Powered Strategies dot com. That's where a lot of these are. All of these podcasts are also hosted and posted starting in 2020. Well, actually, so Mike, any other news about anybody being able to reach out to you? You're gonna publish anywhere soon? Doing anything?

Mike Hannan: I've got my next book cooking in my brain. I think I'll have to get started on it at some point soon here...

Kendall Lott: Right. Remind me of your first book, 'cause it plays into this, this is where you tie it all together. The name of the book was?

Mike Hannan: "The CIO's Guide to Breakthrough Project Portfolio Performance."

Kendall Lott: There we go. I told you you were the master of portfolio, the punditry of the portfolio. So there you have it. Starting in 2020, my peeps, you can reach out to me at PMIWDC where I'll be kicking off next year as the Chief Operating Officer of that chapter. So those would be involved with PMI, and I guess that'll be a couple year commitment there, so perhaps I will catch you at something at a chapter level, so with that... And for the first time in a long while, we have an episode that I would flag as "technical project management," because we were trying to address how some of that could be changed.

PMs, if you've listened to this through the whole podcast, you may submit a PDU claim for one PDU in PMI's online system, CCRS. So anyway, when you go down there, look for online or digital media and make sure you manually enter the code, provider code 4634. You'll see M Powered Strategies pop up. You should manually enter the name of the episode, "PMPOV0093 Agile Heresy." So, tell your friends to listen in, share this episode or other episodes as well. It's real easy, you hit the share button, you send it to them, then they have to open it and download it, there you go. And offer us, reach out to us and offer some topics to elevate the conversation. And in the meantime, keep it in scope and go get it done.

Announcer: This has been a Final Milestone Production sponsored by M Powered Strategies.