

# The Heart of Agile

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**Abstract.** Agile has become overly decorated. The remedy is simple: Collaborate, Deliver, Reflect, Improve. These four imperatives, already sufficient, expand to cover the complexities of modern development.

## Introduction

It has become apparent to several authors of the Manifesto for Agile Software Development [1] that agile practice has become decorated to the point of contradicting its roots (see, for example, “Stop Practicing and Start Growing”, in this issue [2]). This article describes my approach to getting agile back on track and at the same time moving it forward into 2016.

We recover the simplicity and power of agile by recognizing that it can be expressed in four words:

- Collaborate
- Deliver
- Reflect
- Improve

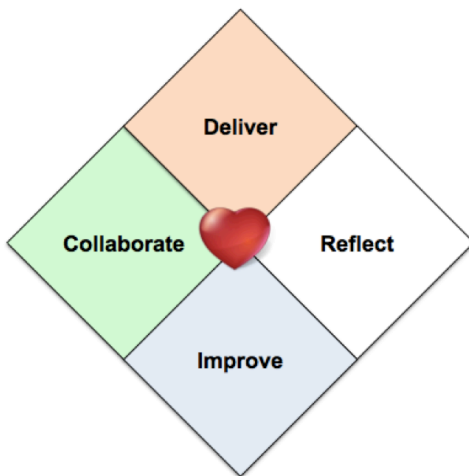


Figure 1. *The heart of agile.*

These four words are sufficient, simple, and still support the complexities of modern agile development. For those reasons, I call them the “Kokoro”, or Heart of Agile.

## Kokoro Simplifies

In rebuilding agile from its center, I wanted to honor a minor tradition of looking at Japanese words for skills development. In 1999, my attention had been drawn to the concepts of Shu, Ha, and Ri (守破離), which have roots back to 14<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Noh theater [3,4].

“Shu” (守) roughly translates to ‘follow’. It captures the stage of learning in which the novice learns by copying a master or a recipe. In general knowledge acquisition terms, Shu is the starting stage, “Learn one technique.”

“Ha” (破) roughly translates to ‘detach’. It captures the next stage of learning, in which the person, whether running into the boundaries of the technique or just out of curiosity, learns

different tools and techniques. Ha can be thought of as the learning stage, “Collect techniques”.

“Ri” (離) roughly translates to ‘leave’. It captures the stage of practice in which the person operates by whole-body response to ever-changing situations, doing something different every time. Ri-level people generally cannot say how they decide on a technique at the moment, because it is so ingrained and immediate. In general knowledge acquisition terms, Ri corresponds to “Invent and blend techniques”.

In looking for what could come after Ri, I noticed that advanced masters advocate a return to essence and radical simplicity (think of Mr. Miyagi saying “Wax on, wax off” in *Karate Kid* [5]). The Japanese “Kokoro” (心), “essence” or “heart”, is used in the writings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century samurai master Miyamoto Musashi to refer to the essence or heart of the samurai. In other words, kokoro (心) is perfect for our needs: the radically simplified essence of a skill area. Kokoro represents the teaching stage of the advanced practitioner. It is characterized by the advice “Just learn the basics.”

Figure 1 captures the Shu-Ha-Ri-Kokoro progression. It shows how practice starts off simple (Shu, learn one technique), grows more complicated as one learns more techniques (Ha, collect), becomes indescribably complicated at the Ri level (invent and blend), and finally takes on a simple form when given by the advanced teacher.

You can probably find examples in your own life of a kokoro-level teacher telling you, “Just master the basics”. That is what we are seeking for agile development.

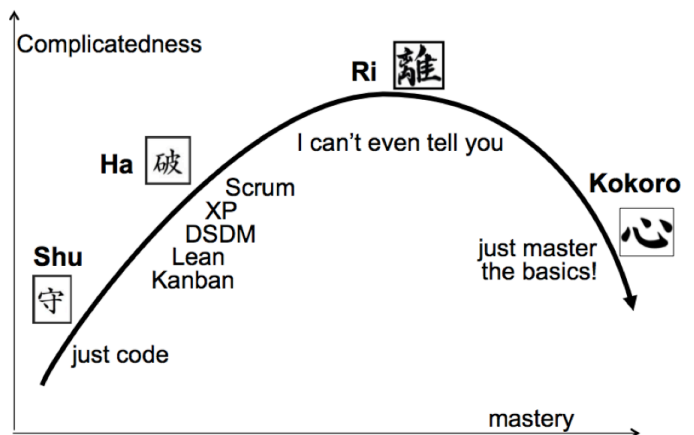


Figure 1. *The Shu-Ha-Ri-Kokoro progression.*

The kokoro, or heart of agile is to collaborate, deliver, reflect, and improve, nothing more. I express the heart of agile with the diamond shown in Figure 1.

The nice thing about the four words is that they don’t need much explanation or teaching. With the exception of “Reflect”,

which is done all too little, they are understood by most people. You know if you're doing them or not.

## The Heart Expands

Although the four verbs already say most of what you need to do, each also admits of a deeper, more subtle execution. There is a beginner version of each, there are competing techniques to improve each. The Shu-Ha-Ri concept of skill progression applies to each of the four, and to each of the sub-categories under them.

Let us look at an expansion to see how we get to modern agile development. Figures 3 and 4 show two levels of expansion. Other expansions are possible, as we will see.

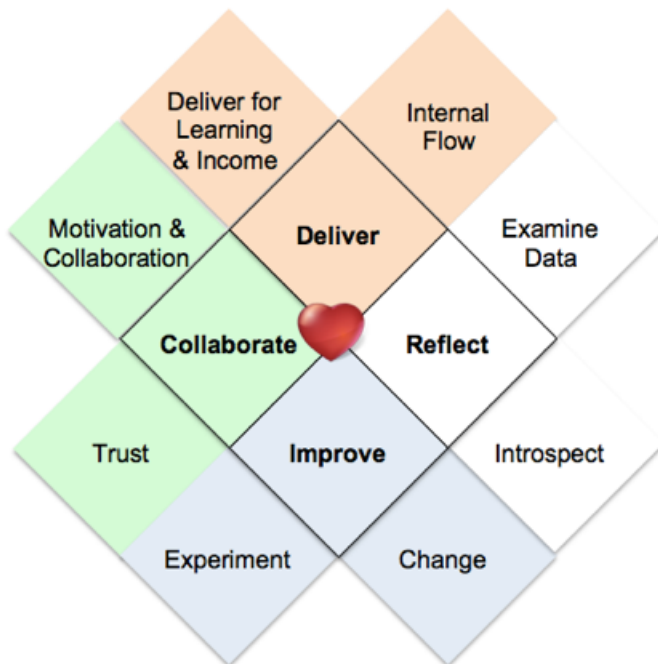


Figure 3. A first-level expansion of the heart of agile.

### Collaborate

To collaborate, we want to improve trust, motivation, and then the act of collaboration itself. These are shown in the first-level expansion of Figure 3.

As you might imagine, trust is an enormous topic. A quick search on Amazon turns up over 91,000 book titles on trust. There are survey instruments, improvement programs, institutes and consultancies. Motivation is similarly rich, breaking into intrinsic and external motivation, including power, rewards, and politics (see Figure 4). In other words, “Collaborate”, while directly understandable, supports a deep expansion.

To illustrate the Shu-level expansion of the heart of agile, I highlight just one way to improve collaboration. Figure 4 shows a fragment of a card set [6] being used in organizations and fields from facilitation training to town management. They are taken from the CrossTalk article, “Increasing Collaboration by the Minute”[7]. They provide one technique to sensitize people to what helps and hinders collaboration.

### Deliver

Delivery has internal and external aspects. In the internal portion we find incremental development, lean manufacturing, queue management, bottlenecks, work-in-progress limits, kanban, and technology and social processes in the delivery pipeline. In the external portion we find the issues of delivery-for-learning versus delivery-for-revenue.

Delivering incrementally, early and often, is well understood [8]. Less understood is the idea of delivering just to learn: to learn what market niche a product should address, with what features [9], and also learn how to work together, learn what design assumptions were incorrect, and how long the effort will take [10].

### Reflect and Improve

Reflect and Improve are usually intertwined. The reason to separate them is that reflection is so rarely done well. I wish to highlight the need to explicitly stop and examine what is happening, before jumping to improvement initiatives.

Reflection breaks into two parts: gathering subjective, emotional information, usually about the team and the process, and objective information from data analytics, about the product and its reception by users and buyers.

Inside the “Improve” arena, modern practitioners are studying what is called Solutions Focus coaching [11] to incorporate techniques at the state of the art in psychotherapy and family coaching, compatible with agile development.

## Agile at Scale

Current agile scaling methods work from structure: set up scrums of scrums, backlogs of backlogs, multiple levels of product owners, kanban boards at a high level, or similar. Having the heart of agile in hand, we see that this changes structure, but not yet attitude or behavior.

The heart of agile addresses attitudes and behaviors directly.

No matter the size of the organization, if you improve collaboration across the organization, you should move the organization forward, and similarly for improving delivery. Improving reflection and improvement are ways to accelerate the first two.

In other words, rather than relabeling the job titles of workers or introducing new responsibilities, ask everyone:

- Independent of anything else going on, how will you increase collaboration?
- Accounting for everything else going on, how will you increase trial and actual deliveries to consumers?
- How will you get people to pause and reflect on what's happening to and around them?
- What experiments will your people do at different levels in the organization to make a small improvement?

People can't hide behind vocabulary or job title shuffles to answer these questions. There is nothing but attitude and behavior to work on, which is what we want.

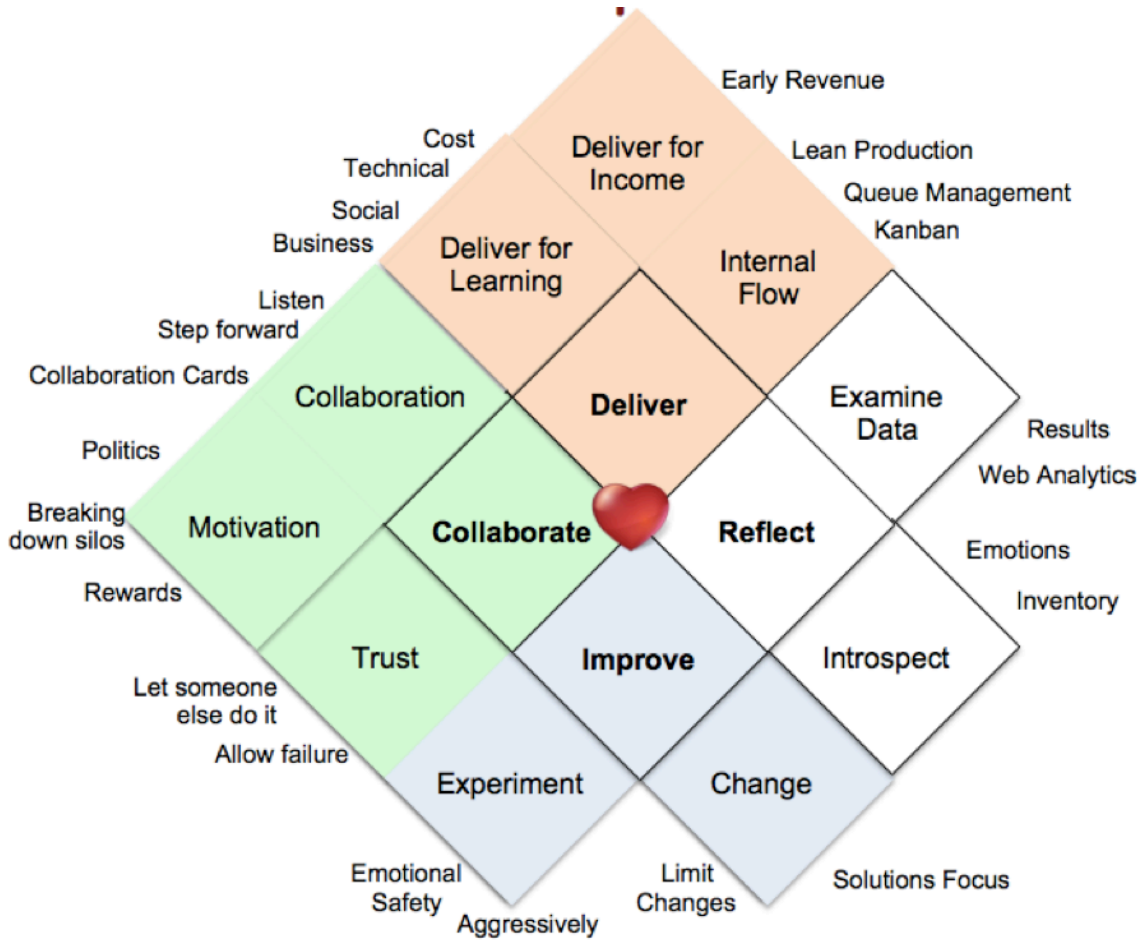


Figure 4. A second level expansion of the heart of agile.

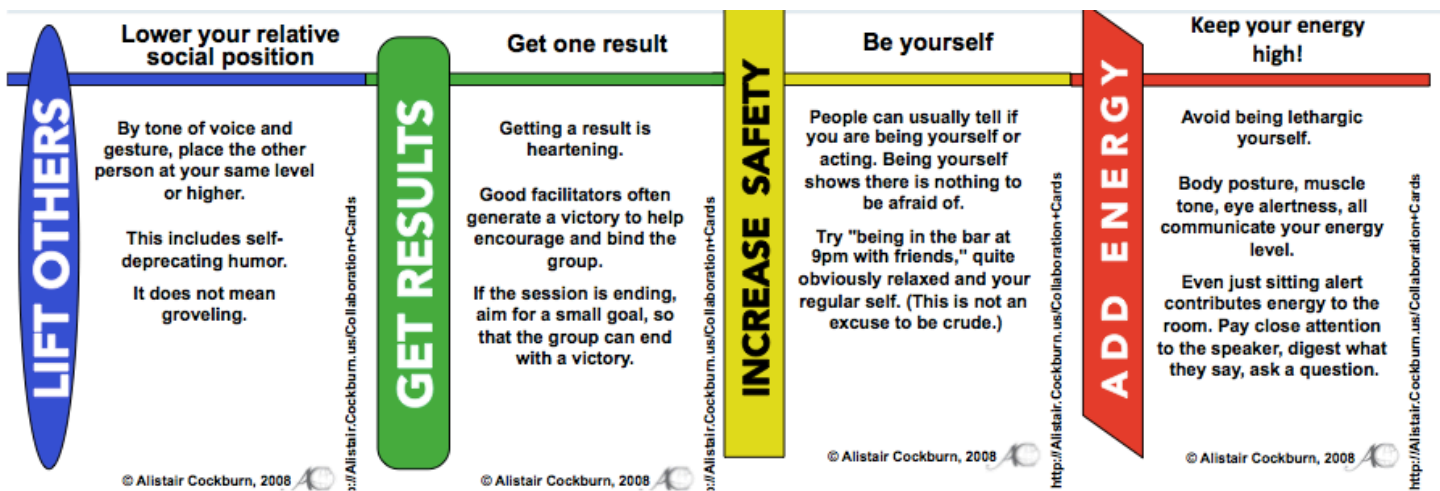


Figure 5. A Shu-level tool for improving collaboration

## Getting Started

How would you get started on a program to implement the Heart of Agile approach in your company?

1. Ask everyone to list all the people they collaborate with to get their work to a customer or client. For each person their name, ask them to label how good the collaboration is now, and what they might do to improve it. This gives each person something to do on their own, and produces a social graph, revealing where to start.
  2. Examine the size of the increments being developed and the time needed to release each. Train both business and development on how to make those slices finer. Solicit ideas to streamline the delivery pipeline. Learn to deliver for learning, not just for revenue.
  3. Stop and reflect. Let people say what social and technology changes might improve their work. Examine product usage analytics to divine what is really happening on the user side. Run an experiment every month.
  4. Publish a newsletter showing all the things going on, what people are doing, what they start doing. Make visible how much is happening, so both workers and executives see that the organization is moving.
8. Denne, M, Cleland-Huang, J., *Software By Numbers*, Prentice-Hall, 2003.
  9. Ries, E., *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*, Crown Business, 2011
  10. Cockburn, A., "Disciplined Learning: The Successor to Risk Management", CrossTalk, July-Aug 2014, pp. 15-18, online at <http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/702523/25136916/1404242669373/201407-Cockburn.pdf?token=hkVdzBUOlepDbyggvqTqly0cmHA%3D>.
  11. Iveson, C., George, E., Ratner, H., *Brief Coaching: A Solution Focused Approach*, Routledge, 2012.

## Summary

The heart of agile doesn't remove the complexity of daily life, it only acts a reminder to clear them away for a moment, and focus on the basics.

- Collaborate
- Deliver
- Reflect
- Improve

These four words, the kokoro, essence, or heart of agile development, are simple, sufficient, and expand into useable advice at the forefront of the modern agile development.

## References

1. <http://agilemanifesto.org>
2. Hunt, A. "Stop Practicing and Start Growing", CrossTalk, this issue, 2016.
3. ShuHaRi, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shuhari>.
4. Shu Ha Ri, <http://alistair.cockburn.us/Shu+Ha+Ri>.
5. Karate Kid, "wax on, wax off" scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fULNUR0rvEc>.
6. <http://alistair.cockburn.us/Collaboration+Cards>.
7. Cockburn, A., "Increasing Collaboration by the Minute", CrossTalk, Jan-Feb 2016, pp. 4-7, online at <http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/702523/26767147/1451886700677/201601-Cockburn.pdf?token=oTGZ9syVsnh4d%2BtW8ggVolCgIEM%3D>