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Trust as the Key to Agility

The automotive industry is in need of agile methods. And although we have all been aware of the reasons why this is the case for quite some time, we still need to act on what we know. But as it turns out, overcoming inertia in this matter will require nothing less than the large-scale introduction of a new leadership culture. A change of consciousness is already making itself felt. While in the beginning this was a matter of a few agile teams in basic research and development with uncertain futures, several hundred developers are at work today in agile, cross-discipline teams. Support has come in the form of clear expressions of commitment on the part almost all OEMs and tier-1 enterprises.

Conferences such as the 3rd Agile in Automotive Conference in Stuttgart provide a basis for gauging the urgency of implementation and the willingness to follow through. For instance, 200 participants at the conference, which was held in November 2017, discussed the best approaches to managing large agile projects while maintaining the accustomed quality and continuing to adhere to strict automobile standards such as Automotive Spice and ISO 26262. And if a consensus was reached, it was that any approach will have to be systematic and include the deployment of digital tools, which also explains the frequent use of terms such as Continuous Integration (CI), Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) and cross-functional development teams. Indeed, automobile manufacturers and their suppliers must be able to work together in the context of agile projects. And this is also where the biggest challenges lie.

What impressed me most in a number of discussions was the frequent affirmation of old-school values such as trust. A responsible and disciplined development team cannot work with a sufficient degree of agility unless it has the trust of the management and unless trust prevails among its members. Control is good, but trust is better. Take care of the human factors. Today's developers want to be taken seriously and work as equal partners. The notion of creative freedom is emphasized. Agile development therefore requires a management that outlines goals to be reached or problems to be solved, and then lets its developers find the best solutions on their own. Decisions are then made within the team whenever possible, and not escalated for daily approval and revision. In fact, agile methods are especially helpful precisely when it is not yet entirely clear what the product is supposed to look like or how it is to function.

Given that we can no longer circumvent agility, how are we to complete a smooth transformation from the traditional V-model of development to an agile, flexible and dynamic model of development? Not with hierarchical structures and old management methods. In fact, if we take a cue from the participants at the conference in Stuttgart, we arrive at the bracing conclusion that agility won't work in many enterprises until a few members of their executive boards opt for retirement. In any case, the University of Stuttgart's "Agile Development Methods for Automotive Systems" program promises to make a contribution to the necessary talent pool.