



# How to Align Organizational Culture with Agile Frameworks

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**Organizational culture** can be defined as a set of values, behaviors, and beliefs that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization. Agile frameworks can have a powerful and productive influence on organizational culture when aligned.

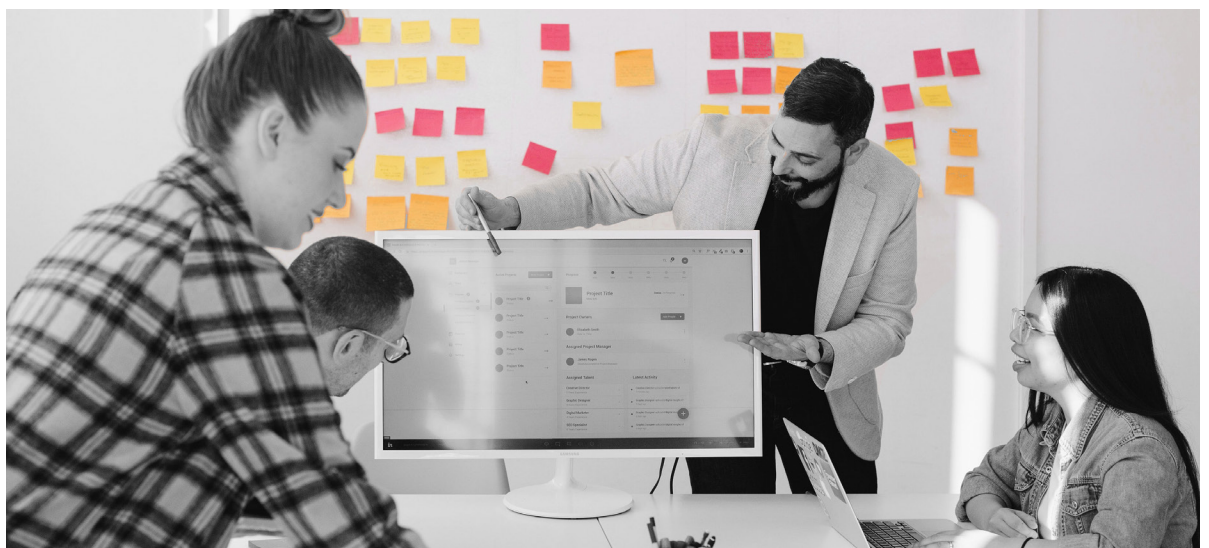
## Culture Matters

*"You can have all the right strategies in the world; if you don't have the right culture, you're dead." - Patrick Whitesell*

We often talk in platitudes about good corporate culture, and express healthy corporate cultures in terms of places that are enjoyable to work, something that is nice to have if it doesn't interfere with the bottom line. What this thinking fails to recognize is the competitive advantage of a healthy culture.

A vivid example of this is Southwest Airlines. Most believe Southwest's competitive advantage is the result of its low cost structure, point-to-point service, and the use of one aircraft type—the Boeing 737. You may remember most major airlines tried to match the Southwest model by setting up their own low cost divisions, Delta Song, United Shuttle, and Air Canada Tango. All failed, leading Southwest founder Herb Kelleher to remark in Jodi Hoffer Gittel's [\*The Southwest Way\*](#), "They can match our costs, but they can't match our culture."

Culture is a powerful competitive advantage and a healthy corporate culture is one that can delight the customer and get things done.



## Culture Follows Our Ways of Working

Culture is a direct consequence of an organization's strategy, management style, employees, products, markets, and ways of working. In other words, culture is something leadership can shape.

In his article, "[How to Change a Culture: Lessons from NUMMI](#)," John Shook discusses New Universal Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI), the first joint venture between Toyota and GM as Toyota started exploring manufacturing in the North American market. NUMMI was established at GM's Fremont, Calif. plant where Teslas are manufactured today. The Fremont plant was the worst plant in GM's portfolio. Labor management relationships were disastrous with high absenteeism. Product quality was low and workers were even known to sabotage products.

With the introduction of the Toyota Production System, workers were given control of their jobs. Grievances and absenteeism plummeted. Quality dramatically improved. The culture changed. The practices of the Toyota Production System changed the way of working which led to a culture shift.

## Can Company Culture and Agile Frameworks Align?

>> *But first, why should we even consider adopting an agile framework?*

A period of frenzied growth is turning into a mass extinction event for those companies that do not learn how to connect business operations to software delivery. Those who master digital business models and software at scale will thrive. Many more, unfortunately, will not. Adopting Lean-Agile ways of working is, in part, providing the winners in this digital age. The losers will be those organizations that still rely on managerial frameworks and ways of working from the 20th Century.

The next question is whether it's possible to align certain organizational culture types with specific Agile frameworks. This paper will offer guidance on how to choose the best-suited Agile framework based on existing culture, and how to maximize that alignment between your organizational culture and the Agile framework you choose to adopt.

Moreover, an organization's culture will have an undeniable impact on employee satisfaction, productivity, job retention, staff turnover, and the organization's overall success. There is no point undergoing a business transformation initiative if the culture is not part of that transformation as culture will only hold the transformation back.

When adopting a new way of working, looking to instill Agile principles and methodologies into an organization, or considering what Agile framework is the best fit, existing culture should play a key role in the decision.

In his book, *The Reengineering Alternative*, William Schneider defines culture as, "How we do things around here in order to succeed."

He describes four distinct culture types:

- ① **Control Culture** - focuses on getting and keeping control
- ② **Competence Culture** - emphasizes being the best
- ③ **Cultivation Culture** - fosters learning and growing with a sense of purpose
- ④ **Collaboration Culture** - focuses on working together

When trying to evolve organizations to make them more agile and responsive, the following are useful questions to ask:

- >> What is the predominant culture in the company?
- >> Does that predominant culture support or hinder the changes being introduced?
- >> What elements of the culture need to be changed to achieve success?

Why consider culture when adopting Agile? Because Agile goes beyond just tools and practices. It includes a mindset, a set of different behaviors, and it acts as a catalyst for cultural change.

Organizations need to be prepared for cultural change, and able to steer it, to keep the best traditions of the current culture, and use Agile to create a new, better culture that will enable future success.

## Agile Methods and Approaches

Scrum dominates the market in terms of adoption. In the 2021 [15th State of Agile Report](#), 83% respondents claim to follow Scrum (66%) or a Scrum hybrid (17%) approach. Next, in terms of adoption, is a Kanban approach at 15% (Kanban or hybrid), then Extreme Programming (XP), and XP hybrid at 7%.

What you will notice is that the hybrid approaches are often a combination of [Scrum](#), [XP](#), and [Kanban](#).

To align these approaches with the culture of the organization, let's begin by explaining the unique cultures of Scrum, Kanban, XP, and how well they might fit with the current organizational culture.

## Agile Adoption Strategies at the Team Level

### Control Culture

If your company is characterized predominantly by a Control culture, begin with a Kanban approach.

#### 1. Start With What You Do Now

[The Kanban Method](#) does not change your process. It is based on the concept that the current process always evolves. There is no sweeping, engineered change to a new process definition or style of working.

#### 2. Agree to Pursue Incremental, Evolutionary Change

The organization (or team) must agree to pursue an evolutionary, fact-based approach to improvement.

#### 3. Respect the Current Process, Roles, Responsibilities and Job Titles

It is likely that some of the status quo works acceptably and is worth preserving. By agreeing to respect current roles, responsibilities and job titles, we eliminate initial fears.

Mapping the principles and core practices of the Kanban Method to the Schneider model, they are largely aligned with the Control culture, as none of them possess an immediate threat to the status quo.

## Competence Culture

If your company is characterized predominantly by a Competence culture, concentrate on software craftsmanship and lead with technical practices promoted by XP. These would include merciless refactoring, Test Driven Development (TDD), Acceptance Test Driven Development (ATDD), continuous integration, continuous delivery, clean code, etc.

Software craftsmanship implies that the developers will be the best software developers possible.

## Cultivation and Collaboration Cultures

For Cultivation and Collaboration cultures, we recommend leading with [Agile values and principles](#) and a Scrum approach. This does not mean that Kanban and XP are not Agile, but Scrum is the best bet for these cultures.

The awareness of the dominant organizational culture—based on the Schneider model—can be used as a guide to determine which approach would be most appropriate for building on the dominant existing organizational culture:

- **Control** – Lead with a Kanban approach
- **Competence** – Lead with a software craftsmanship approach
- **Cultivation and Collaboration** – Lead with Agile values and principles and Scrum

This is only a guide and should not be used without the consideration of the more detailed organizational context. More importantly, this is not to say Kanban couldn't be used in a Cultivation and Collaboration culture. However, Scrum is less likely to succeed in a Control culture. What is interesting is that most organizations display a Control culture, and yet most want to start with Scrum.

An important aspect to mention is that you normally need to go much deeper than looking just at the methodology as it stands. By studying the existing culture in-depth, a combination of Agile tools and techniques that will sufficiently fit with the current context can be successfully adopted. At the same time, they will be the right catalyst for further change to get to the new cultural destination.



## An Alternative Segmentation of Culture Types: Value-Driven Cultures

Another way to look at existing organizational culture was outlined by Frederic Laloux in [\*Reinventing Organizations\*](#):

1. **Impulsive Culture** – Power and dominance, chiefdoms, illegal organizations
2. **Traditional Culture** – Follows authority, consistent processes, stability, hierarchy
3. **Results-Driven Culture** – Success-orientation, accountability, meritocracy
4. **People-Driven Culture** – Community-based, empowerment, value-driven
5. **Purpose-Driven Culture** – Autonomy, authenticity, adaptation

This has offered the opportunity to map Laloux alternative culture types against the Schneider Model, in order to see how much concordance can be established.

- 'Traditional' maps to **Control**
- 'Results-Driven' aligns with **Competence**
- 'People-Driven' aligns with **Collaboration**
- 'Purpose-Driven' aligns with **Cultivation**
- As it stands, there is no alignment available for the Impulsive value-based culture.

These basic frameworks are fine for working with individual teams, but what about when we need to scale up for a larger organization? Just as there is a choice of Agile frameworks available at the team level, there are various scaling frameworks available. The same questions of cultural compatibility will apply here and need to be considered carefully.

According to the [15th Annual State of Agile Report](#), the most prevalent scaling approaches are:

- Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe®) - 37%
- Scrum at Scale®/Scrum of Scrums - 9%
- Enterprise Scrum - 6%
- Spotify Model - 5%
- Disciplined Agile Delivery (DAD) - 3%
- Large Scale Scrum (LeSS) - 3%
- Nexus - 3%

To clarify some of the above concepts:

- ‘Scrum of Scrums’ is a type of meeting, not an approach.
- [Disciplined Agile](#) is more of a meta-framework. By understanding your goals, it points you in the most appropriate direction, which could be one of the team or scaling approaches.
- [Spotify Model](#) describes an engineering culture that never presented itself as a methodology or a framework as there is no formal definition beyond the original article in 2012. That said, the naming convention used in the Spotify Model has gained traction in the industry.

So let's focus on the main frameworks in this arena; specifically, we'll focus on the elements that they have in common like the underlying principles and the fact that the scaling element is built on a fractal model of Scrum.

- [SAFe®](#) for Lean Enterprises is a knowledge base of proven, integrated principles, practices, and competencies for achieving business agility using Lean, Agile, and DevOps. Most people will be familiar with the Big Picture that has evolved from Version 1 back in 2011 to Version 5 released in 2020.
- [LeSS](#) is a scaled-up version of one-team Scrum, and it maintains many of the same practices and ideas.



Dr. Jeff Sutherland and Ken Schwaber, the authors of the [Scrum Guide](#), have created two separate scaling frameworks based on extending a single Scrum team:

1. [Scrum@Scale](#)® (created by Sutherland) helps an organization to focus multiple networks of Scrum Teams on prioritized goals. It aims to achieve this by setting up a structure which naturally extends the way a single Scrum Team functions across a network and whose managerial function exists within a minimum viable bureaucracy.
2. [Nexus](#) (created by Schwaber) is a framework for developing and sustaining scaled product delivery initiatives. It builds upon Scrum, extending it only where absolutely necessary to minimize and manage dependencies between multiple Scrum Teams while promoting empiricism and the Scrum Values.

While LeSS, Scrum@Scale, and Nexus all build on a scaled-up version of Scrum, SAFe® extends Team agility with Scrum and XP practices. In addition, teams will use Kanban to facilitate the flow of value by visualizing workflow.

Having had a very brief look at some of the scaling approaches, let's now move on to the cultural fit.



## Agile Adoption Strategies at Scale—The Cultural Fit

If your company is **Traditional** or **Results-Driven**, lead with a SAFe® approach. Remember that *Traditional* and *Results-Driven* can be mapped against *Control* and *Competence*.

In SAFe® v5, Scrum is generally the framework of choice for managing the work at the team level but teams can use Scrum, Kanban (with some additional rules), or a hybrid, depending on their needs.

Furthermore, one of the Core Values of SAFe® is ‘built-in quality,’ as illustrated by the maxim “You can’t scale crappy code.” SAFe® therefore relies heavily on the XP technical practices at the Team Level.

However Kanban systems are used at the Portfolio, Large Solution, and Essential levels of SAFe®.

We have already seen how the combination of Kanban and software craftsmanship will align with Control and Competence (Traditional and Results-Driven).

In addition, the SAFe® Big Picture has a *perceived* level of hierarchy which speaks to the Traditional culture in terms of Team, Program, Large Solution and Portfolio. This will resonate with internal management as an adoption approach (“I can still see my place in the structure,” though these roles will also certainly change). Also, SAFe® does provide guidance on objective-based metrics at all levels, which will also certainly resonate with the Results-Driven culture.

If your company is **Purpose-Driven**, it may be best to consider a LeSS approach. Remember that Purpose-Driven maps to Cultivation.

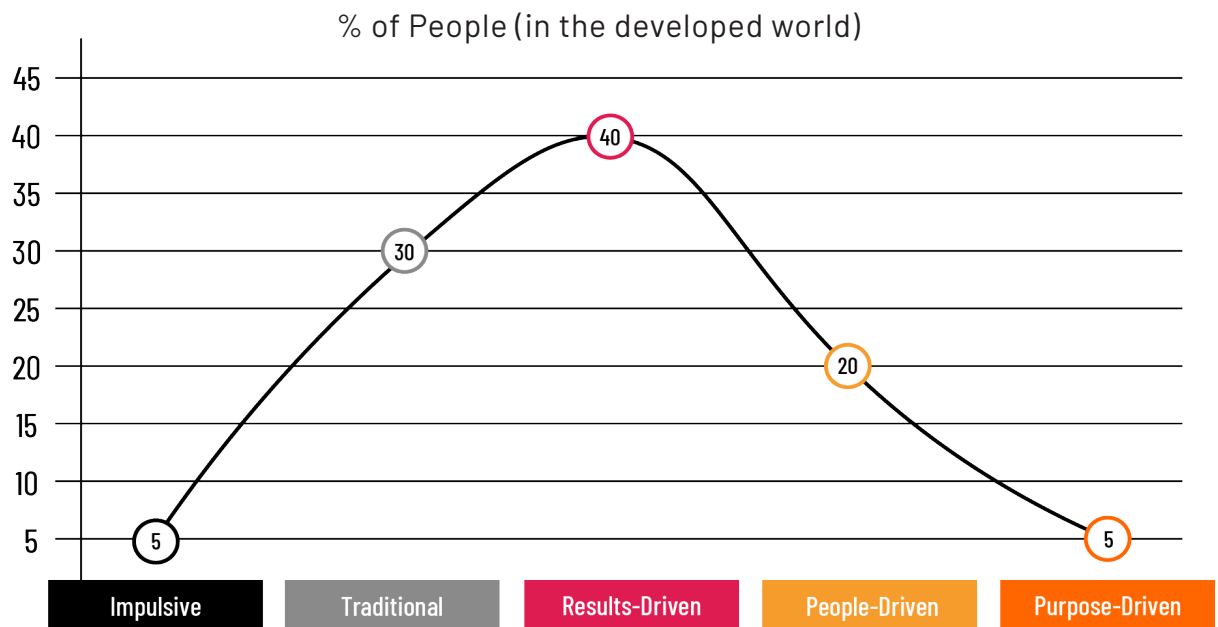
The flat structure of Purpose-Driven organizations prefers expanding the existing autonomous teams’ responsibilities to creating a more complex organization with specialized groups. This is well aligned with the LeSS organization, which is very flat with just a Head of Product Group to support the teams. Of course, at the heart of LeSS is Scrum, which aligns with Cultivation (Purpose-Driven), as mentioned earlier.

What happens if the company is **People-Driven**? SAFe® could extend to this, using Scrum at the team level. The same is true for LeSS. Additionally, it could be the sweet spot for Scrum@Scale and Nexus, which is the exoskeleton of scaled Scrum development.

Here is a quick recap of which Agile adoption strategy organizations should use, based on its culture:

- **Traditional / Results-Driven** – lead with SAFe®
- **People-Driven** – could be the sweet spot for Scrum@Scale and Nexus, or SAFe® could bleed right and LeSS bleed left
- **Purpose-Driven** – lead with LeSS

How are these attitudes distributed (roughly) as a percentage of people in the developed world?



**Impulsive Culture** – 5%

**Traditional Culture** – 30%

**Results-Driven Culture** – 40%

**People-Driven Culture** – 20%

**Purpose-Driven Culture** – 5%

This could explain why the latest State of Agile Report shows 37% of respondents are using SAFe® and only 3% LeSS because very few organizations are truly 'Purpose-Driven' as an existing culture.

## Conclusion & Health Warning for Your Culture

These recommendations are general, and will need to be adapted to your own organization's context, inspecting what works and what doesn't. Of utmost importance is regular reflection on the way the team or the system is performing, and a focus on continuous improvement.

In the Schneider model, no culture type is considered better than another—depending on the type of work, one type of culture may be a better fit. It is not a 'war' between the different approaches, but rather, it's about providing the best possible chance of success with the right approach for the organization and its environment.

Cultural change is easily avoided—it's hard, and often involves a range of skills and experience not found in the business. Also, culture isn't static. By its very nature, it always evolves. The question is: should it be left to fate, or actively cultivated? Far better to go forward with eyes open, and make conscious positive choices.

If you need help in finding the right Agile approach, aligning it to your existing organizational culture, making sure that you have the desired culture within your organization, or scaling your Agile practice in alignment with your culture, Cprime offers a range of solutions.

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## About the Author

With his strategic C-suite-oriented approach to IT leadership—and his infectious energy—**Darren Wilmschurst** has successfully delivered multi-million pound business transformations for e-commerce sites, ERP implementations, outsourcing and offshoring, including multiple Agile transformations.

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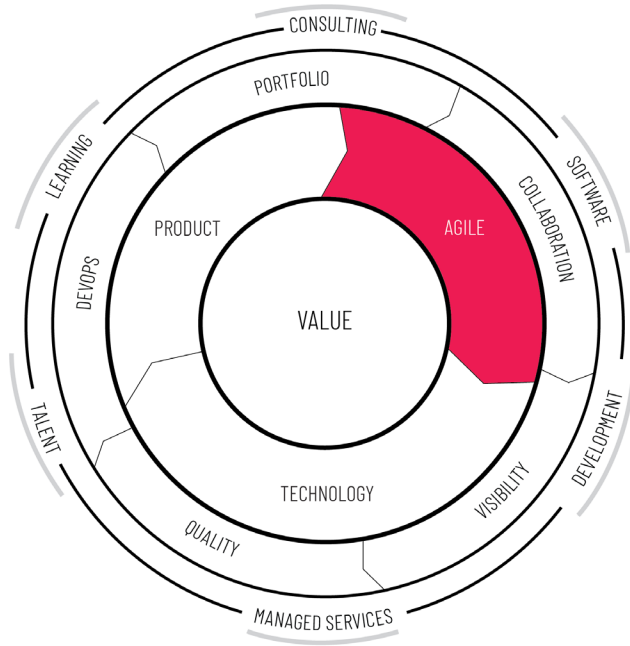
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