

# The Blind Leading the Blind

by Jennitta Andrea

“That was an excellent presentation,” Anna said. “I finally understand the big picture of how each role contributes synergistically on an agile project.”

“Yeah, I could really sink my teeth into all of those development practices,” Devon said as he sunk his teeth into another chocolate donut.

Mandy, the project manager, was thoughtful as she sipped her tea. “I can’t help feeling that this agile stuff is no different from what I’ve always done. Someone’s just packaging it and giving it a special name.” After another sip she said, “On the other hand, I’ve been hearing great things about John’s agile project, so I’ll go along with you two on this. I think we should give it a try on our new project.”

At the project kickoff, Anna walked the team through the high-level business case and sketched out the core business processes. “It’s important for you to remain anchored in these concepts, because it will feel like we’re building a patchwork quilt with this iterative, story-driven approach.”

Devon jumped in. “Anna isn’t going to write all of the requirements specs up front for us anymore. Instead, she’ll outline the stories we need to work on for every iteration. We’ll collaborate closely with her and Tess to capture the details as functional tests, and then we’ll use test-driven development to create the code. At the end of the iteration we will demo the finished work.” Then, breaking into a grin, he said, “And the best part is that we can celebrate with jelly beans for each completed story.”

“As a tester, I’m excited to be a real contributor to the team from the beginning,” Tess said. “And I’m going to jump in right now and make my first contribution. Devon just inspired me to name the team mascot—let me introduce Jelly-Elly.” Tess plucked a small stuffed elephant off the toy shelf.

As the meeting came to a close,

Mandy reminded everyone about the team golf tournament two months away, which coincided with the targeted release of milestone one. “Great job. We’ve got an overall vision for our first milestone and a good plan for our first iteration. I like this lightweight approach already. See you all in two weeks.”

“Er, don’t you mean ‘See you tomorrow’ for the daily stand-up meeting?” Tess asked.

Mandy stood up to leave the meeting room. “I don’t think we need to take all of this agile stuff literally and try everything all at once. Let’s see how the first iteration goes and take it from there.”

As the iterations progressed, the morning line at the local coffee shop became an impromptu opportunity for members of the team to vent.

“Argh, I need an extra strong dose of caffeine this morning,” Tess said. “Mandy still hasn’t approved our request for new testing tools. She insists the ones we’ve used all these years are good enough. Test-first development is going a lot slower because we’re using test-last-style tools.”

Anna agreed. “I need a hefty kick-start this morning, too. Since we went agile, I’ve been spending most of my time running between floors to talk with the developers. I often have to undo assumptions they made while they were waiting for me to show up. I’ve stopped counting the number of times I’ve asked Mandy to get the team located in one place.”

“I know Mandy has asked you to continue writing use cases like before,” Devon said cautiously, “but they don’t make much sense to the developers.



GETTY IMAGES

They’re too patchy given the story-driven approach we’re taking. Don’t take this the wrong way, Anna, but I think they are a waste of everyone’s precious time.”

Tess added, “Because of the extra documentation you’re writing, you haven’t had time to work with me on the functional tests. We’re really falling behind.”

“Make that a double,” Anna sighed.

One morning Mandy wandered by the coffee shop, and the team offered to buy her a tea latte. “Thanks, I could use something different this morning. I’m worried that milestone one is just around the corner and we’re still missing some important features. I’m disappointed that this agile approach hasn’t improved things for us.” She realized she was coming down pretty hard and added, “We still have the golf tournament to look forward to next week. I know you’ve all been working hard, maybe this outing will be just the thing to get us back on track.”

“It’s funny you say that, Mandy, because that’s exactly what I was just thinking,” Devon said as he flashed a sly grin to the others.

The weather couldn’t have been more

## STORY LINES

- **The adoption of a new software development process affects each of the team roles differently. Disappointing results are often experienced if the unique needs of each role are ignored.**
- **A significant or uncomfortable change may be blocked by the phrase “That’s how we’ve always done things.” What they may really be saying is “I don’t want to change. I want to continue to do things the old way.”**
- **If the team is having trouble recognizing significant process problems, engaging in a relevant simulation exercise may provide powerful insight and open up the opportunity for objective discussion.**
- **Teams that regularly practice retrospectives are able to successfully fine-tune their processes.**

perfect for the golf tournament. Tess, Mandy, and Devon drove out early to get in some practice before the game.

“Mandy, I hope you won’t be too frustrated golfing with us newbies today,” Tess said as she hoisted her mismatched set of borrowed clubs out of the trunk. Mandy had been a successful golf pro in her not-so-distant past.

“Don’t worry,” Mandy said. “I’m happy just to be outside having fun with my team today.”

“Well, I brought Jelly-Elly with me as a good luck charm just in case,” laughed Devon.

At the driving range, Devon asked Mandy what he should do to straighten his slice. Mandy suggested a subtle change of grip. Looking at his new hand position, Devon said, “It doesn’t really feel any different from what I’ve always done. I think you’ve just given it another name.” He went back to his original position and continued to slice as before.

Tess motioned Mandy over to the practice putting green. “I could use a bit of help with chipping onto the green.”

Mandy showed her how to stand and swing, and told her she should use a pitching wedge rather than her putter. “Thanks, Mandy, the swing feels much better. I don’t think I need to take all of your suggestions literally and try everything all at once, so I’ll keep using this club. If it’s good enough for putting, it should be good enough for chipping.”

Anna had just arrived and waved Mandy back over to the driving range.

As she walked back to the driving range, Mandy was annoyed that her expert advice was being ignored. Then suddenly she clued in to what they were really up to. She recognized her own words and the team’s problems with adopting agile practices; she could see how the outcomes on the golf course paralleled that of the project. Mandy spent eighteen holes contemplating the past two months of the project. At the Nineteenth Hole she addressed the team.

“I realize why we came short of our target for this milestone,” Mandy said, picking up Jelly-Elly. “It’s been like the story of the ‘Blind Men and the Elephant.’ I’ve only been looking at things from my own perspective as project manager. I’ve been blind to the unique changes needed by each of your different roles to introduce this process change successfully.”

Mandy then passed Jelly-Elly around the group, asking each team member to explain what he needed to do differently to transition successfully to this new approach. She committed to supporting them going forward—starting with a daily team stand-up meeting scheduled for the next day. **{end}**

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