

Personal Agility: How To Do More That Matters

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Chapter 1 - Why Personal Agility?

"It's your life. You get to decide what matters."

-- Peter Stevens

Do you have too much to do and not enough time? Are you overwhelmed with everything on your plate? Most people to whom we talk answer, "Yes." They feel like they are on a never ending treadmill. The better they get at getting things done, the more stuff they have to do. Does this sound like you? If so, Personal Agility can help you regain control of your life, get more things done, have confidence that you're getting the right things done, feel better about yourself, and allow you to focus on what really matters.

Peter was confronted with exactly this problem: "I thought I was looking for a better way to manage my time, but I was really looking for a better way to manage my life". After trying other solutions that didn't seem to last, I thought I needed to try something different. After 6 months of sharing my ideas and learning from others how they master the challenge, I had a framework that worked. After just one week of doing Personal Agility with my wife, she told me, "we have finished things that have been on the back burner for months!" After 2 months she said, "I feel like we have become a team." -- Peter Stevens

Maria found this to be a powerful approach as well "When I first stopped to think about the question, "What Really Matters?" I was floored by the impact of this simple question. I began to look at everything that was going on in my life from a different perspective. It was an impactful moment to begin visualizing the essential themes of my life, and to see which aspects needed more enough attention for me to fill in some gaps." -- Maria Matarelli

Both Maria Matarelli and Peter Stevens are Certified Scrum Trainers who teach teams and organizations how to work together effectively. Our goal is to share our experiences and what we've learned as we apply the Personal Agility framework to our own lives and guide others through this powerful journey.

At its simplest level, Personal Agility helps you get things done. As a simple framework, it helps you get the right things done and focus on doing the most important thing first.

Because it is based on powerful questions, Personal Agility is a coaching framework that helps you build a shared understanding with yourself, your husband or wife, colleagues, customers, suppliers... even with your staff or manager. If you and your partner agree on what really matters, your decisions will be much better aligned with each other.

More deeply, Personal Agility is like a GPS navigator for your life: It connects who you are with what you do and who you are becoming. You can understand the forces in your life and where they will take you. It gives you a tool to apply course corrections, so you get where you want to go and become the person who you want to become.

And most importantly, Personal Agility helps you recognize your accomplishments and feel good about yourself. No one is scolding you for what you didn't get done, didn't do right, or didn't do as you planned. Personal Agility helps you to see and celebrate your accomplishments, so others can do the same! Personal Agility is your friend to help you do what you need to accomplish.

1.1 - What is the challenge?

*"We all have the same amount of time.
The problem is having too much to do."*

-- Ron Jeffries

What did you do last week? What did you really get done? Do you feel good about what you did or do you feel behind? Will your boss, husband, wife or customer be happy with you? Was last week in harmony with who you want to be? Did it take you a step closer to being that person who you want to be?

What difference can Personal Agility make in your life? Let's look at the difference it has made in our lives.

Peter: "My work is quite demanding. I like what I do, I get a lot of satisfaction, and I always have many ideas that I could implement. I am pretty good at implementing things, but... I procrastinate a lot and I am not good at saying, 'Enough!' or 'no' to new things that pop up. As time went on, I kept finding that I had more and more things to do.

I tried to compensate by working longer and getting better at getting things done. I set reminders. I had to do lists. I did Desktop Kanban - I had a string of post-its all around my notebook! I tried to manage my time -- but man, do my estimates suck! I feel like I tried a lot of stuff but I was still working 60 hours a week or more. My big initiatives were still not having the success I'd hoped for, and the work just seemed endless.

Even little things for the family took forever to get accomplished. Both my kids' bicycles were out of service for months. I kind of sort of knew I had to get them fixed, but there was never time, and I'd forgotten about them. My kids had given up hope, so they didn't tell me either.

When I looked to the future, all I saw was more of the same. I was exhausted, and figured there had to be a better way.

Today, the difference is, I am on course to do what I consider truly important. Already during the first week of doing Personal Agility, I got my kids' bicycles fixed. Now I am able to plan long term, make time for the things I need to do, and say no to things that don't matter. My suppliers and I understand each other better. When I have achieved my goals for the day, I can stop working! I can make space for the things that are important, and I am responsive and effective in the eyes of people around me."

Personal Agility can help you refocus on what is really important, visualize where you have been spending your time, and see if the two align.

Maria: "I've accomplished several things in my lifetime that I'm proud of: becoming an international speaker in my twenties, transitioning from working in a cubicle to traveling the world. I enjoy training and speaking on techniques that help businesses be more efficient and bringing inspiration and hope to people on what they are able to achieve. The problem is that while on this quest for freedom and independence, working hard became a way of life.

Pushing forward became the norm and it pushed me out of balance. On this quest, I realized that I developed some unhealthy habits. I sacrificed my health to build an international consulting business. You may have heard the phrase, "If you don't have your health, then you don't have anything!" But I didn't realize exactly how true that statement is. The price isn't worth it if you're not around to enjoy the benefits. Working unsustainably comes at a cost. Many of us accept this as the norm and limit ourselves from truly enjoying life.

When I was in Porto, Portugal speaking at the first Scrum Day Portugal conference, Peter and I began talking about how he had been applying Personal Agility to his life and some of the benefits he had seen. I thought it sounded neat, but it wasn't until I began going through the framework when I saw Peter the following week in Munich, Germany that I really started to understand the power of Personal Agility.

You may have heard the term "Agile" and thought about how you could apply these concepts to your life, however what sets Personal Agility apart from these general applications are the powerful questions. When Peter asked me, "What really matters?" I was instantly pulled out of the busy reality many of us have come to know and live by and time stood still. It was like a scene out of the movie, "Inception". It was the most meaningful conversation that I had experienced in longer than I could remember.

This question echoed through me and as I began to fill in the framework in my notebook, I began to see the patterns that had emerged in my life over the last few years in a new way. It was a way that I could clearly visualize that allowed me to make conscious decisions for the better."

The "Busy" Epidemic

Today, everyone seems to be "busy". We all have things to do. There is a lot happening around us. All. The. Time. There's this "busy-ness," an epidemic of always being busy. But it's not just that. In any given day, distractions arise, shifting our focus. Every time you look at a web page, there are distractions. Every time a notification blinks or beeps on your smartphone, there is a distract. Every time the phone rings, that could change your day entirely.

Some people are so busy, they don't even remember what they did last week. When you ask yourself what you did last week, does the answer just roll off your tongue? How can you set a course and achieve something of importance, if you are too busy to think about what you are doing and why?

More importantly, if you don't know what you did, how can you know whether you are on course to delivering to your customer on time, writing your thesis, getting a good annual review or achieving whatever else is important to you? How do you know that you are doing things that matter?

The challenge of getting things done

Why is it difficult to get things done? So many things conspire against us, it's a wonder we get anything done at all! Between the demands of family, colleagues, kids, cellphones, meetings, the latest change initiative and whatever else, it can be really hard to focus on something enough to get it done.

There are so many reasons why it is hard to get things done. How many of these stories look familiar to you?

- "You're working on something. Then comes the interruption. You deal with it. Now go back to what you were working on before. 'Uh... What was I working on?' It takes almost as long to get back on track as it does to handle the interruption."
- "Once I have thought through the problem, it looks easy. So I think it will go fast. But it always turns out to take much longer than I thought *and promised*. So I fail to satisfy my customers' expectations."
- "My boss can come in and completely change my priorities, invalidating my hard work on what I was originally working on."
- "I don't actually know what I am supposed to do. There is so much on my plate. I have three managers, and each one of them gives me tons of work, but no one can tell me where to start or why. They aren't on the same page!"
- "What I need to do is coming from many sources. Which one do I have to listen to?"
- "I say 'yes' to too many things. Which means I overcommit and only later discover I can't deliver."

Getting things done requires focus: you finish one thing before you move on to the next. Doing the right thing requires reflection: why are you doing what you are doing? A good answer is a convincing answer! Being seen as effective requires knowing what you've accomplished and alignment with others who are interested in the result.

1.2 - What are you afraid of?

"People are afraid and don't know what they are afraid of."

-- John Styffe

Who you are is a reflection of what you do. If you go to church every week, people will call you a churchgoer. If you donate money to good causes, people will call you a philanthropist. If you engage in any number of harmful activities, people will call you a criminal. Other people's view of you is often based on your actions.

What are you if you make promises to friends, family, colleagues or customers that you cannot keep?

Inconsistent? Unreliable? A disappointment? Not trustworthy?

You could lose your job. You could lose your customer. People may stop turning to you for help. You could lose your spouse. Your kids could lose interest in you. Where would that leave you? Questioning your life. Wishing you had done things different. Sad. Uncertain. Scared?

"I have to satisfy every demand from my boss. The closer you get to the C-level, the less they care about your problems. They just want the numbers. If I say 'no', I'll lose my chance at a promotion and maybe my job. So I say 'yes', and do what I have to do to make it happen."

Sound familiar?

"I wish my company would pay more attention to me and my ideas, but they have put me in a box and want me to stay there. Right now, I have to take care of my kids and pay the bills, so I do what I am told."

Being good at getting the right things done is good for your reputation. Ensuring that you get the right things done requires alignment between you and those around you. (In business, these people are called "stakeholders.")

How do you know you are working on the right thing? How does your boss know that you are working toward the right goal? Somewhere between too much and too little communication, there is a sweet spot where you both know that you are on the same page and you are getting things done that will make him or her look good.

Getting out of a bad situation requires devoting some of your time toward making the situation better. If you are in a storm, and your boat is in danger of capsizing, you need to do two things: 1) Do your best to prevent the boat from sinking. 2) Set a course to get out of the storm and into to a safe harbor. If you

don't set a course out of the storm, how will you get to the harbor? How often do you feel like you're just trying to keep the boat from sinking - bailing water only to feel like you're not making any progress?

1.3 - What else are you afraid of?

"You have to commit to the mountain."

-- Maximilian Stevens, (explaining how downhill skiers go fast)

Taking decisions entails risk. Sometimes we are just as afraid of success as we are of failure. "If I pick this cherry, I might not be able to eat that cherry. That one might be sweeter." This is the fear of missing out. Others are constantly hedging the bets. "I need real options to make decisions." This is the fear of commitment. How do you know when to exercise the option?

Other decisions are difficult because not everyone will agree with your decisions. "If I say 'no', people might think badly of me and I might lose their friendship." "My family demands too much from me, but I don't have the heart to say no."

Most alternative frameworks that we have come in contact with make you feel guilty for one reason or another. Many people are pessimistic. They don't believe in themselves so they give up before they really start. You're not doing the framework right. You didn't get everything done that you promised. If you say "no" it could be relationship-threatening.

The key to making decisions is the question "why?" Why should I chose A over B, or perhaps the other way around? Without an underlying reason, there is no reason to pick one over the other, and there might not even be reason for deciding at all!

We call these underlying reasons "what really matters". If you understand what really matters, then you can make decisions with confidence. If you and your partner or stakeholder agree on what really matters, then you are more likely to agree on the decisions that are made.

Every time you check off something as done, that's like scoring points in your favorite game. Every time you make a decision about what you want to do, you are empowering yourself to do more.

1.4 - Who should use "Personal Agility"?

"This is your life. You only get one. Live it to it's fullest."

-- Maria Matarelli

Maybe we should start by identifying who should not use Personal Agility. If you are happy with your current situation and where you are going, or if you feel you have everything under control, you probably won't feel much need to apply Personal Agility to your life.

However, if you ever feel overwhelmed with too many things on your plate, this may be an answer that can help you slow down and focus. If you have any distant goals that you have wanted to achieve, but you don't feel that you are getting closer to achieving them each day, this may help you not give up on hope. Do you think about these goals as distant aspirations that would be nice to have, but don't really see the path to how you'll get there? Do you say or think things like "that would be nice, someday..." or "if only.."

If you want to accomplish these goals and if you want to feel good about what you do every day, you may need to make some changes in how you operate from day-to-day. You may need to step back and reflect on what you are doing to see if your actions fit into the bigger picture of what you want for your life.

Personal Agility can also help you create better alignment with the important people in your life. It can help you focus and achieve your goals and make sense of your life. If any of these challenges and fears resonate with you, then Personal Agility can help you overcome your fears and meet your challenges so that you can get things done, achieve your goals and help you feel better while taking back control of your life and your direction.

1.5 - Why do we call it "Personal Agility"?

*"We are uncovering better ways of doing what we do,
by doing it, and helping others to do the same."*

-- Inspired by the Manifesto for Agile Software Development

When Peter started looking for a better way to organize his life, he drew on the values, principles, and practices of the Agile movement. Unlike "Getting things Done", which (unless we are mistaken) is mostly about managing tasks, or the various flavors of Kanban, which are about managing the flow of work items, Personal Agility is about finding the deeper meaning behind what you do. The focus is more on people to improve relationships and alignment. The primary goal is for you to be and become the person you want to be. Everything else is icing on top!

The heart of Personal Agility consists of 6 Powerful Questions, which you should ask yourself on a regular basis.

1. What really matters?
2. What did you accomplish last week?
3. What could you do this week?
4. Of all those things, what's important and what's urgent?
5. And of all those things which are important and urgent, which ones do you want to get done this week?
6. If you are stuck, who can help?

These questions represent the start of some pretty meaningful conversations. Might you ask other questions as you go throughout your week? Absolutely!

The rest of Personal Agility consists of tools and practices to help you ensure that you are answering the questions regularly, enabling you to focus on doing the right things, and helping you see the bigger picture to ensure that you are moving in the right direction. If you have been working with Scrum, Kanban, Extreme Programming, or some other Agile Framework, the tools and techniques will be familiar to you. If not, they are easy to learn!

This is your life. The priorities you set are your priorities. The tools you use are your tools. Personal Agility doesn't tell you what to do. It doesn't tell you what priorities to set or which tools to use. That's up to you. If you ever feel like your life is unmanageable or you don't feel like you are accomplishing what you want to accomplish, start with asking powerful questions. This is the first step to get back in the driver's seat!

One more thought: this book is a starting place! The framework has been in use by a growing number of people for several months. Our favorite feedback has been, "This really works!" Of course your situation is different than our situation, so your solution might be different too. After you've gotten started, feel free to experiment and see what works for you! We'd really like to hear your experiences in the community discussion group "Applying Personal Agility" on www.MyPersonalAgility.org.

Background - How Are We Creating this Book?

We have found that Personal Agility is a powerful framework that you can use to transform your life for the better. We want to share this practice with others and get feedback as well as hear what could be most helpful for people to apply this approach. The worst thing that can happen to an idea is to hear “it’s nice but...” So let’s get the “yes-but’s” out in the open and address them as quickly as possible! We welcome your feedback throughout our iterative publishing approach.

We decided to write this book together for several reasons. First, the topic and the solution resonated deeply with both of us. It was clear that with Personal Agility, we can help a lot of people transform their lives for the better. Second, we believe that we are stronger as a team than as individuals. By combining our skills, we will have a better book, reach more people, and better enable them to transform their lives for the better.

We are releasing each chapter of this book as it becomes available. Each chapter is potentially shippable. We believe in what we have written and are excited to share it with you.

As an early reader, you can download it, read it, and try it out. And you can comment on it! Tell us what works and what doesn’t. What is easy to understand and what’s not? What is missing and what shouldn’t be there in the first place? Through your experience, we will all have a better framework.

You can download and discuss the current version at www.mypersonalagility.org (registration required).

We are thankful in advance!

-- Peter & Maria