How shifting to an Agile mindset helped this customer support company accelerate time to market
Client Profile
Our client, a cloud-based customer support startup, provides various robust products to help their customers connect, communicate and collaborate. Headquartered in the US, the company also operates in India and 3 other geographies.

Major Obstacles
» Resistance to changing the current ways of working
» Aligning towards collective ownership of code
» Reservations about change
» Too many meetings
» Obtaining middle management buy-in

Engagement Type
Agile Transformation

The Challenge
Help the client identify and improve their market differentiators as well as improve their speed, agility, cost-effectiveness, and responsiveness without sacrificing their essence in the process.

The Goal
» Improve feature delivery velocity and predictability
» Move product management towards strategic roadmap and consistent transparent prioritization criteria
» Encourage active participation from engineering teams in designing solutions, decision making, and software craftsmanship
» Enhance visibility into customer impact while maintaining a fun, engaging work environment
» Build a culture of cross-team collaboration and a mechanism for impediment escalation while preserving the heart and mind of existing team setup
» Build internal capability to self-sustain

What the Client Got
» Guided the individual transformation of 230+ members to an Agile mindset
» Coached 27 cross-functional teams
» Implemented one common tool across the organization, increasing transparency and visibility
» Defined a simpler prioritization process focusing on value
» Improved collaboration and communication within and across squads and tribes
» Improved the predictability of product velocity
» Improved alignment to product vision and roadmap
» Improved technical practices, including CI, Unit tests, functional automation
» Revised performance appraisal process to align with Agile mindset
Abstract

In the highly competitive startup space, providing product and services quickly and efficiently while being both flexible and adaptable to change is critical for new businesses. This challenge is even more difficult as the organization grows. To differentiate themselves and to catch up to and supersede competitors, our client needed to improve their speed, agility, cost-effectiveness, and responsiveness. However, they didn’t want to sacrifice their essence or business differentiators in the process. With guidance from SolutionsIQ, our client was able to streamline processes impeding value release, improve collaboration and communication across delivery groups, stabilize product delivery velocity, all while improving advanced technical practices, such as Continuous Integration, unit tests, and functional automation, which would greatly decrease released defects over time. In the end, the client was able to release better quality products, driven by an Agile mindset and an obsession with customer delight.

Introduction

In the highly competitive startup space, providing product and services quickly and efficiently while being both flexible and adaptable to change is critical for new businesses. This challenge is even more difficult as the organization grows. To compete and differentiate themselves in the competitive and fast-paced business environment, our client needed to improve their speed, agility, cost-effectiveness, and responsiveness beyond what was already being seen in the market landscape. Our client needed a process that could support the transformation from traditional product and service delivery, business and IT operations to Agile while maintaining the client’s essence and foundation to help them catch up to the market, and even transcend the competitors. They needed to transform into a high-velocity organization, which demands wide-ranging change across people, processes, and technology in any organization. Much of the organizational impediments were related, directly or indirectly, to the accelerated growth the client had been experiencing over the last few years. The client began as a small nimble team with intimate knowledge of customer needs but was now dealing with severe growing pains.
From Startup to Upstart

When the client began their journey, team members sat together and collaborated on the entire delivery process. The person who coded knew how the product was sold, the product manager communicated the problems he was trying to solve for the customers with the teams, and teams had a good understanding and alignment in terms of what customers wanted and what the team was doing to deliver value to customers. There was strong communication and collaboration between the business, sales, developers and the customer because the company was still small. Then the client went rapidly from being a small yet successful startup to a large organization. And like many fast-growing organizations, the engineers grew distant from the market. This led to difficulty in understanding customer requirements, creating a gap between consumer expectations and value delivery. The company grew but the processes could not grow fast enough to keep up with the pace. The client started rolling out products once a year. While it was not hurting the business, it was not sustainable from a business stance.

With the delay in time to market and responding to customer requests, our client soon realized they needed to standardize processes and practices to help teams deliver products faster. The client decided to adopt Agile practices without altering the organization’s existing core values. Besides empowering all team members to own and improve the product delivery cycle, the goal of the transformation would also be to create an environment where teams could respond to changing business needs and customer requests quickly.

To achieve this vision, the client engaged with SolutionsIQ to initiate an organizational change program which would include forming, training and coaching Agile teams while also working with the business to improve software delivery planning, execution, and release. We guided the client through Agile transformation, setting them on a path to business agility.
Establishing a Vision and Strategy

SolutionsIQ began with a detailed assessment across the client organization to look for “pain and pleasure” areas. This gave our coaches and consultants an insight and good understanding of the client’s people, practices, process, and challenges. We interviewed about 30 groups/functions over a period of 3 days in an effort to learn as much about our client as possible, especially cultural, procedural and business drivers that could help or hinder their transformation.

Our coaches and consultants observed the following key concern areas:

» Lack of transparency and empowerment at the team level due to insufficient delegation by middle management
» Not all are aligned on systemic process impediments
» No culture of learning and sharing at team and organization level
» Lack of shared understanding of Agile
» Lack of Lean Startup mindset
» Various tools used across organizations

Following the assessment, a leadership workshop was organized to take leadership through a systematic introduction to the Agile mindset, its significance and adopting the same to manage change and inspire teams to build better products by exhibiting Agile values and principles. The workshop also served as the foundation to collaborate with the leadership to roll out an organization-wide transformation roadmap for the bigger picture and to help set priorities for achieving transformation.

“The first step in Agile transformation is a change in mindset and that is SolutionsIQ’s unique selling proposition.”

- quote from the client
Learning and Launching

With the challenges identified and the transformation roadmap in place, it was now time to take the first step: guiding teams through systematic learning and coaching methods focused on the delivery of customer value using an Agile mindset. The coaching started with two pilot teams from two different business groups. In this journey, we focused on defining the Definition of Done (DoD), release dependencies, need for automation and environment challenges. We also carried out product roadmapping and release planning activities with these pilot teams.

Our coaches applied an incremental approach to coaching the teams called coaching waves. Each coaching wave typically included 3-4 teams. The approximate duration of each coaching wave was 3-4 sprints based on the progress and maturity of the teams. The learnings from initial coaching waves helped overcome the challenges in the subsequent coaching waves.

While the initial effort was towards learning and training at the team level to build a common understanding of the what and why of the change, we next engaged the client in several different coaching activities to help crystallize learning into new productive habits and perspectives.

**Team Coaching** focused on building team spirit within and across teams and business groups and to unlock high-performance in teams. Team coaching also helped foster an inspect-and-adapt mindset with a focus on continuous improvement.

**One-On-One Coaching** helped individuals with different roles, skills, personalities, and views to tap into their own personal strengths, learn from their colleagues and develop a new Agile perspective. In particular, these coaching sessions addressed resistance to change, fear
of failure and conflicts around the responsibilities and ownership of the code.

Another part of SolutionsIQ’s approach was to help Product Owners develop a better understanding of customers on one hand and delivery teams on the other hand. To accomplish this we offered hands-on user story workshops paired with specialized coaching. Finally, our facilitation workshops and servant-leadership workshops helped squad leads build an Agile leadership mindset.

Transforming at Scale

To successfully scale Agile throughout the organization, you need much more than a process. It begins with connecting with management and other stakeholders and empowering all the teams. We opted to use the Spotify model by building and connecting cross-functional teams that could scale agility across the client’s organization. The client and our coaches collaborated in forming Squads and Tribes. While a Squad is a self-organizing team that sits together and decides their own way of working, a Tribe is a collection of squads that work in related areas. The Spotify model helped squads and tribes to blend roles and set teams on a common path toward becoming more cross-functional and self-sustained. This phase included one-on-one coaching, retrospectives to identify areas of improvements for the team- and program-level retrospectives, which involved the leadership for effective planning of the program execution. After a few sprints squads could identify their velocity, which helped the client set expectations.

Transparency and continuous feedback are important for sustaining change. Retrospectives, surveys, and other communication forums served as channels to collect feedback and improve the transformation journey. These practices also enabled the employees to openly share feedback and escalate issues so these could be addressed.
As a part of the plan to scale and sustain change, our coaches and consultants focused on preparing the client’s internal coaches and Squad Leads to enable a smooth transition.

Guilds (sometimes called Communities of Learning), an organizational program primarily targeting Product Owners and Squad Leads, were established to share learnings and insights with each other. This initiative also helped during scaling as the Product Owners who were already contributing to the organization’s transformation efforts helped answer questions of those who were next in the scaling process. The client also invested in training and growing the Agile community through certifications, content creation, learning opportunities, etc.

**GAME CHANGER:**

**Leadership Engagement**

The Agile way of working encourages an open, inclusive and self-organized work environment that brings together people from all levels of the organization and various value streams who have a stake in the end solution. Client employees were initially skeptical of adapting to this new way of working. To overcome this, it was imperative to motivate everyone around the need for and the impact that arises from regular collaboration and communication.

» As the first step towards enabling this change, we collaborated with client leadership to develop programs that worked towards a common goal, to instill in everyone confidence in the change initiative and to align employees and leadership.

» Because organizations only change if leaders change with them, leadership was motivated to get involved in every stage of the product cycle. They consistently took feedback from individuals and teams, which leaned to the overall feeling of oneness across the company. The intent was also to build on one another’s ideas and recognize that the best ideas do not always come from the top. Instead, we encouraged participants to be open-minded without passing immediate judgment.

» Leadership also facilitated program retrospectives regularly to experience the transformation and hence inspect and adapt the plan in pursuit of continuous improvement. Together with HR, they also worked towards aligning certain key policies in order to achieve transformation goals.
Outcomes

Teaming up with SolutionsIQ, in just ten months, our client was able to unlock much of the power of Agile across the enterprise. Results from the overall effort were visible and quick.

Not only did the client adapt to the Agile mindset but they were also able to build their internal capability to self-sustain. This has also enabled the product line team of 230+ people to improve feature delivery velocity and predictability. The client built a culture of cross-team collaboration and a mechanism for impediment escalation while respecting and preserving the heart and soul of the organization. The client also encouraged active involvement and participation from the engineering teams in designing solutions, decision making, and software craftsmanship.

Our coaches successfully implemented a common collaboration tool to have complete visibility and transparency across all team activities. Consequently, leadership could view and track the progress of the teamwork and see the impact of each decision impacting the overall work.

As a result of the transformation effort, our client was able to deliver product increments continuously. On average, value was delivered to customers every two weeks. The transformation effort also improved technical practices – for example, CI, unit testing, functional automation – and the performance appraisal process to align with an Agile mindset.

Key Learnings

» Leadership participation and engagement throughout the transformation journey was highly impactful.

» A collaborative effort at distinct levels of the organization played a significant role in Agile transformation.

» An inspect-and-adapt mindset and feedback-driven approach are strong components of a successful transformation program.
What Our Clients Had to Say...

“The DNA of SolutionsIQ coaches is that they relate to the team. They are perceptive, not prescriptive.”

“We chose SolutionsIQ because of the flexible approach that they demonstrated.”

“The first step in Agile transformation is a change in mindset and that is SolutionsIQ’s unique selling proposition.”
Big Wins

» Guided the individual transformation of 230+ members to an Agile mindset and coached 27 cross-functional teams
» Implemented one common tool across the organization, increasing transparency and visibility
» Improved the predictability of product velocity and alignment to product vision and roadmap
» Improved technical practices, including CI, Unit tests, functional automation

Want to be the next success story?

Contact us now to learn more about how SolutionsIQ can guide your Agile transformation!

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