

## (Net-)Mapping Your Way to Action

I am quite fortunate to have a friend like Siraj Sirrajuddin; he and I founded the Agile Influencers of DC (AID) a couple of months after the 2010 US Agile Coach Camp. For simple explanation, AID is an Agile experience sharing group that utilizes an open space like discussion forum around a central theme. But he also invited me to join him at the local DC Society for Organizational Learning. This has more to do with Systems Thinking and organizational culture than your typical Agile discussion. At my first meeting, Eva Schiffer ran us through an exercise of Net-Mapping (see <http://netmap.wordpress.com/about/>).

### A Summary of the Net-Map Technique

To briefly explain, a Net-Map allows you to diagram (and thus understand) the relationships, formal and informal, between people. You pick a subject, goal, or question and use it as the context for mapping the relationships between people. During this exercise or game, you also identify where in these folks reside in terms of the following:

- Categories that matter in the context (e.g. management, technical, etc.)
- Political clout (again in terms of the particular context at hand)
- And where they reside as far as being in your camp or not.

Conceptually this exercise is not difficult, but it is a bit time consuming as you are exploring in detail the relationships and power structures in the network of people that impact the particular issue that you are using as the context.

So why am I telling you this dear Agilistas? Because often we have to understand who we need to influence to ensure an Agile transition goes successfully or perhaps we need to take the next step in improvement and it is beyond the control of the team at hand and thus we need to assess and gain approval from others.

This powerful technique can save you a lot of time and agony... And believe it or not, understanding this network can not only identify who to focus on, but also how to access them. In my first use of this exercise with a colleague, we identified 8 steps to take and a serious issue if we didn't take those steps. Without this, we could have stepped onto a political mine. I'm now going to tell you what we did as a case study of this technique and hopefully this will help you understand why it should be in your tool box.

### The Issue Context

My colleague and I both work for the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Pesticide Programs (OPP); one of the extremely important functions of this office is to analyze proposed pesticide labels and approve them. There are environmental and health effects concerns with pesticides, which

encompasses herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, anti-microbial cleansers, repellents, rodenticides, and biological pesticides; these concerns must be analyzed in the context of the pesticide usage, which is contained on the label. We currently get proposed labels in as a document (usually PDF) and have to extract the important data elements about the pesticide and its use to analyze it. This is tedious and involves contractors examining the label and then typing the data in. If you didn't catch it, the registrant types the data into a label and then OPP has to analyze discrete data within the label and the OPP contractors have to rekey this discrete data. The label has to be constructed to follow rules contained in the Label Review Manual as well as some statutory requirements. Often incoming labels are missing the proper application of the rules and this makes negotiations with our registrants protracted. Wouldn't it be nice if the pesticide registrant could type in discrete data elements following a turbo tax-like interview process and spit out a controlled label that meets the rules?

My colleague and I identified some software that could do this, built a prototype with the company, and showed it to a few folks, tweaked it some more, and then built a brief to start taking it up the chain. As we completed this, our organization started a strategic visioning/planning process and this software fits in nicely with it. A stakeholder/customer happened to be in his cube a few weeks back and asked whatever happened to the structured labeling project (an earlier incarnation to hand build what we now had a commercial product to do). So he showed our prototype to her. She got very excited and next thing we know is we were invited to brief her Division Director. We knew this would eliminate his contractors doing data entry, increase the quality of the data, and save his Division a lot of money. Something nagged us though as it was not being initiated when we wanted it to go forward. So we asked ourselves, "what will this Division Director do once he sees the brief/demo?" Our answer was that he is likely to take it to the front office for immediate funding. While we want this to happen, we felt uneasy with the message going forward without informing other Divisions. We decided that creating a Net-Map based on this likely scenario would help us understand the repercussions and what we should do.

### Our Net-Mapping

We started by listing ourselves and then the requesting Divisions' Director and immediate supporting management; then we followed down the chain into other folks within this Division that would probably weigh in on the decision. We then added in the OPP executive management, the folks to which they would take a funding recommendation. We then mapped our own management and finally we started mapping other external folks, mostly folks we could call upon for support, but also other external Division Directors that would be impacted with any implementation. These other Divisions are the ones responsible for the actual Pesticide Registration, while the requesting Division was one of the Science Divisions that would benefit from better data quality and cost savings. Each person was represented with a pawn and we used different colored pawns to represent different groups (e.g. the executive managers were dark blue).

Next we determined the political influence each person could have on the outcome of the decision, we stacked beige disks to represent this power, with 5 being the most any individual would have and of

course it was possible to have zero. We then used a red or green disk whether they were inclined for or against the potential solution. For our own immediate manager, we gave him one of each color as he is one that seems to flip-flop on some of his ideas. At this point, we have the players, their political clout as it applies to the decision at hand, and how they would feel about a potential solution initially.

While I am not naming names in the above paragraphs, it is important to use actual names to represent each pawn; only a person can carry political clout. A position may have an initial clout (e.g. the president), but as a person works in that position their clout will change and it will also vary tremendously based on the context of the issue being examined.

Now it is time to understand the network, for us we started by drawing out the formal organizational lines, but then added casual (friends) and customer relationships. Each type of these lines had a different color and it got busy in a quick. I would recommend not trying to do any more than 3 types of connections. Where we knew there was a connection, but not a strong one (perhaps it went through someone else we hadn't identified), we used dotted lines. With this knowledge, we could now explore our potential outcome and what repercussions it could have using the knowledge of the network. Additionally, we could identify what we could do to mitigate or eliminate the potential repercussion.

So what did we come up with..? Well, if we took the potential that this Science Division Director we were briefing would request that we get funded for this idea that is better than sliced bread, we recognized this would be going forward without the Registration Divisions' Directors knowledge, in particular one of the most influential one politically. This could halt the potential project from going forward regardless of how good or bad it was. Thus we identified our #1 goal, get this Division Director informed of the potential solution prior to this briefing; their ultimate opinion on it didn't matter; they just shouldn't be blind-sided as it would spur an irrational response.

### Sounds Simple

Not exactly, you just don't get onto a Division Director's schedule in a hurry; our current Science Division Director's scheduled brief was 2 weeks away. We looked at our network diagram and identified a path to briefing the key Registration Division Director and that created several actions to make that happen. We also realized our own management was not well informed on the origins of this meeting, which could put them a bit on edge.

In order to further determine how to approach folks, we decided to characterize folks into what types of skeptics they might be; we used the skeptic definitions from "Driving Technical Change" by Terrence Ryan; this is a wonderful book and helps you understand the strategies and techniques to use to approach different kinds of skeptics.

By examining our network and categorizing the folks into the types of skeptics, we developed 8 concrete actions for us to take; everything from getting scheduled to determining who to approach first, to determining how to tweak our brief for each audience.

## The End Result

We got onto that key Registration Division's calendar within a week to include all of the Branch Chiefs a week before the Science Division Director's scheduled brief; we utilized our customer connection with an influential player in that Division to help set that up. Looking at the skeptics allowed us to focus the brief on their concerns. The Registration Director didn't come away sold about the proposed solution, but saw value for the proposed software for a smaller scale need that they had. We avoided what certainly would have been a likely automatic disapproval and turned it into an informational understanding of the software and solving a different problem. While we still have a way to go, we certainly won't meet full resistance; we'll just have to work to move it more slowly into the target usage of pesticide labels.

## But Wait, There's more!

I have used this great technique twice more since this a few weeks back; once to help the person I am mentoring understand their network of people to help her determine who to work more closely with to help her career and second time within our branch to help us understand ways to improve our customer service. In both instances, the insight gained from this technique has been powerful, for the last one, we came up with 15 actions and ended up having to dot-vote on them to prioritize them.

## Learn from the Master!

If you would like to learn more about this exercise/game, Eva is going to have a session in the games for Personal Mastery track on the Agile Coach Camp's Games Day, 23 September, 2011 in Columbus Ohio. See <http://agilecoachcamp.us> for more information and to register.