

## TechWell Insights

# Don't Ask for Permission or Forgiveness—Use an Agile Alternative

By Steve Berczuk (/users/steve-berczuk) - December 26, 2019

As much as automation and routine can streamline your work, all projects that have more than a trivial degree of complexity will have situations where someone needs to identify and implement a solution relatively quickly. A team's culture can determine how well problems get resolved, as well as how these attempts at solution move the culture forward.

In an ideal situation, you have an idea that you know will work—with no possibility of negative consequences—and simply solve the problem quickly, knowing that your team and your management will support your decision. However, many situations are not like that.

In some cases, decisions take a long time to happen, often because of an organizational dynamic that favors centralized authority and slow decision making. While that dynamic can be the right thing in some contexts, allowing the team to have more freedom frequently allows for better results.

Some teams try to get around bottlenecks by taking a “better to ask forgiveness than permission” approach. This sounds expedient—and may sometimes be necessary—but it's a short-term solution. It doesn't provide a path to changing the organizational dynamic, and it can lead to wrong decisions in cases where wider input is advisable.

Another way is to take an “I intend to” approach. Rather than asking for permission or forgiveness after the fact, describe the situation and your plan of action without specifically asking for authorization. This gives a decision-maker the opportunity to intercede if they have strong reasons to, and it gives you more freedom to take action.

An “I intend to” culture might seem like chaos to some who prefer more control, but the team members making these decisions are best placed to evaluate issues, and they're ultimately responsible for success. When management can express a vision clearly, such a culture lets teams innovate without management being a bottleneck. It is also a technique described in the book *Turn the Ship Around* (<http://blog.berczuk.com/2016/01/turn-ship-around-agile-lessons-from.html>), which is about improving performance on a US Navy submarine, an environment where discipline is essential.

In a healthy organizational culture, an “I intend to” approach reflects the reality that managers don't always have all the details necessary to make the correct tactical decisions, so they need to trust the people on their team. Likewise, it reflects that team members understand may be missing context.

In less functional organizations, this approach also can be a bridge between an “inaction by permission” culture and one where team members are respected for what they bring to the team.



When there's a decision that must be made, don't ask for forgiveness or permission. If you have any control over the team dynamic, try to enable a culture of intention, where people can express their plans and move forward. You will still have the ability to guide and provide context and insights. And even if there are small mistakes, they will often lead to improved performance later on.

**Tags:**

agile (/keywords/agile), people management (/keywords/people-management), teams (/keywords/teams), culture (/other-keywords/culture)

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