EP294_Greg Smith

Lisa Nichols 00:03
Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes. But each year in the United States, about 6000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra.

My name is Lisa Nichols and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners and as the mother to Ally. Ally has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone, she meets. Through these two important roles is CEO and mother to Ally, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world.

While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities and in themselves. If you'd liked this episode today, please go to Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen and leave us a five-star rating.

Lisa Nichols 01:35
I'm delighted to have Greg Smith on this Something Extra Podcast today. Greg is an enterprise Agile coach, trainer, speaker and author. So, Greg Smith, welcome to the Something Extra Podcast. I am so delighted to have you as my guest today. I cannot wait to introduce you to our listeners. Thank you for making the time to be on the show.

Greg Smith 01:56
Thanks for making time for me. It's a pleasure.

Lisa Nichols 01:58
Well, we're gonna have a lot of fun. We got a lot to talk about. Now, Greg, you are unique. You are a unique guy, because we all are, right? But you're very unique in terms of my podcast guests. You are the first technology partners colleague that I've ever had on the podcast.

Greg Smith 02:15
All right. I'm gonna lead the way, it sounds like.

Lisa Nichols 02:18
You're gonna be the trailblazer here. So, we began working together, I think on various projects starting in about 2020. And don't let this go to your head, Greg. Okay, promise me that your head won't get any bigger here, but you know, you're really incredible. I mean, our technology partners team loves you, our clients love you. So, we're just so blessed to have you as part of the technology partners team. And like I said, I cannot wait to introduce you to our listeners. So, but we've got a lot to talk about. Before we get into all that. Tell me a little bit about growing up. I know that you went to school in Kentucky or university in Kentucky, but you live in Seattle now. So, tell me, where did you actually grow up? Did you grow up in Kentucky?

Greg Smith 03:02
Sort of. My folks were from Jackson County, Kentucky, which I think still to this day has a population of about 2000 people. And after they got married, they decided to move to Ohio. I was actually born just outside of Cincinnati. And when I was 10 years old, they decided they were tired of Ohio and they wanted to come back home. So, they, my dad decided he wanted to stop working in manufacturing. And he bought a mom-and-pop grocery store out in like a tiny little city, London, Kentucky. And I basically grew up in a grocery store in London, Kentucky from the age of 10 on.

Lisa Nichols 03:45
Oh, my goodness. Well, that's no wonder I like you so much. You know, because I'm a fellow Kentuckian and to you know, Greg and I both were raised in Paducah, Kentucky went to school at Murray State. So, no wonder I like you so much, Greg. So, let me ask you, go ahead.

Greg Smith 04:04
When we first started this morning, I'm like, I'm feeling a little like home. I'm picking up some of that accent and I'm back home. So, it feels good.

Lisa Nichols 04:13
I know. I know. It's the bluegrass state, right? It was an amazing place to grow up. And I remember talking about accents. Greg, I remember when my Greg and I first moved to St. Louis 40 years ago, people would ask me all the time I would be out we'd be out to dinner or what not. And people would say where are you from? You are not from here. And so even when people really notice my accent today, I said you should if you think I have an accent now you should have heard me 40 years ago. Isn't that the truth?

Greg Smith 04:49
I still get a little I get big when I say guitar and a few other words people are like where are you from?

Lisa Nichols 04:55
I know. I know. But now you're on the West because so let me ask you A little bit and you just kind of gave me a little clue because your dad was working in manufacturing. But what did you like to do as a little boy?

Greg Smith 05:08
Oh, like everybody else. I think, get on my Schwinn bicycle, put some playing cards in the spokes and go cruising down the street. Like in Ohio, when I was growing up younger, they had a King Quick grocery store. So, go get an ice or a slushy at the grocery store, play wiffle ball all day. That was like that was like typical summer we weren't in school. So wiffle ball, bicycles, all that kind of fun stuff that kids did.

Lisa Nichols 05:35
All the good stuff, right? Oh, the good ways of growing up. Well, I know that you are a super hard worker. You've got an impeccable work ethic, Greg. So, you know, Where, where did you pick that up, from your parents from a coach from a teacher? I mean, I'm sure your parents were super hard workers.

Greg Smith 05:56
You know, it's funny, Lisa, in my family. I'm probably labeled as a slacker. You know, because I take vacations, I do kind of normal things. And all my family, my brother, my dad, all my nephews and nieces, they're like workaholics. Like they're like 60 hour a week people. So, if I come across as having good work ethic, from where I come from, supposedly I'm below the standard. So, it's definitely in my hometown, it's is it's Kentucky culture. It is, it is earn your money kind of thing. So, I think that's a huge part of is probably just how I was raised with my, my family in that local culture.

Lisa Nichols 06:35
Really strong values, I'm sure. Good, strong values. And, Paducah is not as small as the, the city that you grew up in. But I always said it's it was a smaller city, maybe 45,000 at its peak, right? And always said that, really, I could not get away with anything. My mom knew everyone. And if I said, hey, I'm going to Sara's house. And I didn't show up, she would know it because she knew everybody, right? It's really special, special culture. So, I know you went on to Eastern Kentucky to get this degree in Lean manufacturing, industrial automation and computer electronics. And I was going to ask you who or what inspired you to pursue that degree? But I bet you watched your dad. That would be my guest.

Greg Smith 07:24
You know, it's funny, Lisa. So, the Agile stuff I do today, one of the synonyms for agile mindset would be thinking like an entrepreneur, like if every investment decision you make was your own money. And so, watching my dad's like, go through recessions and keep his little small store going and constantly making decisions on whether to invest or whether to kind of lay low for now, that definitely helped. And it definitely had huge influence. And I went off to Eastern Kentucky and was going to go after a business degree. And my very first class was at 6:30am. And it was on complex economic theory, supply and demand. And I hated it. And when and my roommate was taking this Lean manufacturing stuff, and I'm like, what's that about? And he started explaining it to me, I'm like, that sounds a lot better than business. So, I changed major after my first semester, mainly because of my roommate, but then that

entrepreneurship printer kind of way I was raised with my dad is a great fit with Lean, because lean has that same mindset.

Lisa Nichols 08:39
Yes. Wow. Well, I'm grateful that I think it worked out well for you, Greg. We're gonna talk about that. You started with, I think, RR Donnelley and you were designing supporting automated made approach and more in the software or more than the hardware and then you pivoted to software development. So, what was the precipice for that pivot to get into more software development?

Greg Smith 09:04
So, RR Donnelley, I came out at Eastern Kentucky University and I knew you know, Kanban, Work in Progress, all have the kind of Lean Toyota Production System ways. And I went to work for RR Donnelley and a printing plants in Danville, Kentucky. And another really small town, and their manufacturing and their lean processes were great. And after three years, I became kind of bored. And they asked me to go out to Los Angeles to rule out a system that created custom magazines on the fly. So, like if you subscribe to Time, People, Sports Illustrated the system I helped implement in the Los Angeles plant with like, say, Here comes Lisa's book, and it will pull your demographics and it will say okay, she doesn't smoke. So, hold the smoking ad. She's got a family but give her the station wagon ad so as your magazine is being created, it's totally customized and tailored to you. And I had to learn software on top of my manufacturing systems knowledge to start working with that. And then they transferred me to Seattle. And I was getting more into business systems. And the internet started exploding. And next thing I know, I'm just in the middle of doing software development projects, and I've kind of left manufacturing behind.

Lisa Nichols 10:21
You know, I'm thinking as you're talking there, Greg, it was like analytics before analytics was, you know, really. I mean, they are customizing, right? For the individual, which is cool.

Greg Smith 10:34
On the fly, like 150 magazines are minute going by, and you could see like, Lisa's go by, and you could see the machines adjust which pages are going in and as it's flying by you so.

Lisa Nichols 10:45
Incredible. That is that is really fascinating. Well, Matt, you know, in, I guess in 2001, and you started specializing in Agile software development, and you were trained by Jim Highsmith. And for our listeners that may not know, Jim Highsmith is kind of a big deal, right? Greg? I mean, he was one of the 17 original signatories of the Agile Manifesto, which is really the founding document for Agile software development. How did that come about? How did you come about were you, were trained by him? And did he really was he? Did he more or less act like a mentor to you?

Greg Smith 11:28
So, when I went from manufacturing into software development, amazingly, the Lean process in manufacturing was much more efficient and effective. Ability to adapt better than the software, we were following a waterfall process in my first software company and internet startup in Seattle. And we were not delivering like we would get halfway through the design process and the client would change their mind. So, we go back to analysis, design, planning, and then go to execution. And every time before we could get through that waterfall cycle, the client would change their mind and the project we'll get killed. So, the person in charge of all application development had Jim Highsmith come in and train us. And he taught us Agile. And I'm glad he did, because I was about to leave and go back to manufacturing, because I'm like, Finally, somebody's applying common sense process to software development. And Jim came in taught us use agile project management, philosophy and process. And in the workshop, he even told us, my principles are universal, like these principles should work almost in any company, any organization, but how you implement them with your specific practices, probably needs to be tailored. So as soon as he trained us, that's the first thing we did is like, okay, we did his case study, we understand how to do it. Let's customize it to fit our work mix and our constraints. And so, Jim was incredible. I learned a ton from him. And then four years later, I went to the Seattle Times and work with the Internet Group. And we had Jim come in again. And same thing we tailored it to, to news and to a newspaper. And I learned like after the second go around, I'm like, I'm in love with this. I'm in love with Agile. So, he So, Jim, to your point, Lisa, like I've met a lot of the people who, who started the Agile Manifesto and participated in in Utah in creating it. Jim's project management background versus being a software developer is a much better fit with my mindset because I like to think about overarching system. And Jim always taught holistic a system wide approach don't just be myopic, and think Scrum team, and then don't worry about the rest of the ecosystem around that he always thought holistic, you know, like, like Deming did so to this day. I love Jim he he's like, incredible.

Lisa Nichols 13:53
Do you still stay in touch?

Greg Smith 13:55
I follow him. He's semi-retired. I follow his podcasts and things like that and kind of leave him alone. But he's, he's out there I can see, and having a good time still, like speaking at conferences every now and then.

Lisa Nichols 14:06
That's awesome. Well, Greg, and I know that this you're not you. You're not going to like this attention on you. I know you're not but I feel like I should read to our listeners. You know, for our listeners, Greg is really a big deal too. I'm gonna read some of the testimonials that I have about Greg and I'm just gonna read a few of them here. You were doing a workshop I believe for T Mobile. And you know, this person says "a 360 Look at agile for the T Mobile pm community was tremendous. We learned a great deal in just two hours with Greg." Here's another one, "Greg's natural abilities as a Coach and Trainer made the materials come alive. His presentation was one of the best attended." That's incredible. This is when you were doing some things for StubHub. This person says, "he's a great communicator did a good job tailoring training modules and workshops to different audiences such as the agile teams and managers. Since we have scaled agile to about 90% of our teams and continue to grow our maturity level as we test and learn, I'm recommend Greg to any company who is interested in Agile adoption and training." Here's another one, "Greg is one of the most enabling knowledgeable, Agile coaches and trainers I've ever had the privilege to work with." This was a different company that you had done some work for. "Attendees felt left, they left empowered, they sang the praises as they reviewed, reflected implemented, the techniques that were demonstrated the workshop. Greg has an ability to illustrate examples from a variety of different fields." Here's one more, "Greg brings along his colorful, extremely infectious personality." And going back to, Greg, why I said, our Technology Partners team just loves you. And so, to our clients, you do have an infectious personality, "that allows you to quickly and easily associate with any and all levels of the corporation. I would welcome, welcome any opportunity to work with Greg again." And that's just a few of the testimonials out of many. So, I know Greg, you've helped numerous fortune 500 organizations, many of them iconic Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, StubHub, as we said, Fannie Mae, First Data state of Washington, Halliburton, and the list goes on and on and on. How many Agile transformations do you believe you have done to date, Greg?

Greg Smith 16:36
Oh, it's over 100. I could probably pull my hard drive here and give you an exact number, but it's over 100.

Lisa Nichols 16:41
I'm sure every one of them were your favorite. But do you have any? They were all your favorite, right? But do you have any anecdotal stories of a particular one or two, where you just saw a tremendous transformation in that organization where I talk a lot more about Agile and why it's beneficial to an organization. But do you have any examples like that, that just come off the top of your head that you can tell our listeners about?

Greg Smith 17:12
Sure. Sure. You mentioned StubHub. StubHub was a great engagement. And probably like the best engagements I get involved in is where it's not like I don't mind being requested or driven by like the Scrum or Agile team. But if it's driven by leadership, it usually goes better. And their leadership wanted to meet first, they actually wanted to talk about what do we do to enable these teams? What, what do we do we do from a strategy perspective. So, we had this great foundation with leaders. And then we went to middle management next and said, so when you work with these teams, here's what you need to do. And then then we finally got down to the teams. And they were kind of tailored because each team was a little unique. So, that's like one of my favorite engagements because they did take the Deming mentality, that Agile wasn't just teams that it should be for best results, a mentality and mindset across the whole board. And they bought into that. So, that, that was beautiful. The engagement was really fun, too, because we started with eight teams. And then back then StubHub kept purchasing companies actually purchased, I think, ticket technology, they're in St. Louis. And I am I came to train them. And so, every time I thought the engagement was over, they do another acquisition, say, Go train the new teams that we just brought in. So, it was fun. And actually.

Lisa Nichols 18:34
They were all in.

Greg Smith 18:34
And a lot of their Scrum Masters and agile coaches to this day, we're still really close friends each other at the conferences, keep in touch.

Lisa Nichols 18:42
That's awesome. That is awesome. Well, we're gonna, I'm gonna ask you one more question. And then we are going to take a quick little break. But let me ask you this. So, we may have listeners out there, Greg, they are really not familiar with Agile, can you provide an overview of Agile? And how does it different for waterfall? And you've already talked a little bit about waterfall but give our listeners that are not familiar with what is an overview and what is Agile when we were talking about it and how is it Disher?

Greg Smith 19:15
Let's see. You know a lot of people right away I just want to say they think Agile is for software projects only. And Agile tools roots go back to like 1949 and Edwards Deming starting to use the methods with Toyota to help them recover after World War II. So, a lot of this stuff goes back to manufacturing doesn't even tie into software. And software is a much better fit though, because it's so much easier to modify than it is to like change your manufacturing line setup. But an example I would give is like if you were to go to, let's just say Ford Motors website and you ordered a new Mustang. Hang with these, these beautiful Mustangs that just came out for 2024. You'd go on their website, you set color, you'd say whether you want leather seats, if you want the Bose system upgrade. If you want fog lights, if you want the six-cylinder engine or the eight, you'd go through and pick about 40 attributes of that car, and you'd order it and then you know, two months later, Ford would deliver it to your door. And if the if there was a defect with the car, obviously like a cutting a seat or something Ford would say, we'll, we'll come back by and we'll fix it, whatever. But if you ordered that Ford Mustang, and you ordered it with leather seats, and you live in Florida, and you go out for your first drive, and you're slipping and sliding your seat, because you're sweating so much, you're like, wow, I wish I would have got the cloth seats instead. Well, you can call up Ford but Ford is gonna say no, you bought the car, contracts over. Let's say, when you did get it there was there was a defect like there was like some kind of hole like the radio knob is loose, whatever, when you tried to adjust the radio, Ford will fix it, but you may have to ship it back, or it's going to take a while till it gets fixed. So, an Agile approach would be, we still go to Ford's website, we still spec those 40 things we want. But then we fly into Louisville or wherever they're making this this Mustang, and we ride shotgun with it. And like when it's going down the line, and maybe they just paint the rear, the rear panel and you're like, oh, wow, that that's not the red I thought it was they say okay, you would then pick a different color. And they'd like to change color because they haven't had a huge investment yet. And then let's say they do put the seats in and you hop in and like the leather doesn't feel good. And like you're like, I wish I could do cloth, their like I haven't bolted them in yet, so let's do, the cloth ones are here, we'll bolt those in. And then it goes on down the line, they put the radio in, and you listen to the standard. And you're like, that sounds kind of tinny, I want to go with the Bose. So, they put the Bose in, put the subwoofer in the trunk. So, you ride with the car or the order the whole way. And you can make adjustments the whole way. So, before they ship it to you, the odds of getting something you're not going to like are really low. And not only from a spec perspective, do you get what you ultimately need to because you got a chance to test drive it all along the way. But if there was some kind of quality issue, you're right there with them inspecting it. So, if the stereo knobs loose, you can catch it when you get into play with the stereo. Or if you see like something wrong with the paint before it ships, you can say that needs to be fixed. So, we try to catch everything up front. And then the odds of delivering the wrong thing are really low. So, that's probably like one super high-level example I give you what Agile is in practice.

Lisa Nichols 22:39
That is a, an amazing metaphor. I love that. I will not forget that. And, I mean, it just that makes so much sense. So, we're gonna we're there's a lot more we need to talk about Greg, but we do need to take a quick break. And we'll be right back on the Something Extra Podcast with Greg Smith.

Lisa Nichols 23:28
So, welcome back everyone to the Something Extra Podcast with my friend and colleague, Greg Smith. So, Greg, that was an incredible explanation of Agile, thank you so much. And I think even if someone is never heard that term before, they're going to understand that but you've already kind of talked a little bit about this. Because you can you can change on the fly, you're going to be able to hopefully get what you want at the end. But tell me some of the other benefits of Agile software development methodology over waterfall or one of the other project management methodologies.

Greg Smith 24:06

Oh sure. Let's see. Let's, let's go back to the Mustang example. Just, just for a second. A lot of folks these days, use the term minimum viable product, or MVP. And when Ford was building that Mustang, let's just say like we ordered it, you know, back in March. We could have said I've got a road trip, like the summer in June. And they might say well, it's not going to be totally done till September. And I would ask them well, can you give me a version that's good enough to drive like by June. So, maybe it's doesn't have the heavy stereo isn't upgraded yet or whatever? Can you give me a light version? So, one of the great benefits with Agile is you can often spec like the lowest release level or lowest spec level of your request and take that live and start using it and start getting return on your investment. while it's being finished, so a lot of times people will do a software project and after like eight months, it's good enough to release. It's not a robust product. But we can maybe put a fire out because customers are complaining, or we can beat a competitor to market. So, it may not be a perfect product, but we can get it out there to keep our space and not lose like market share, and then come back and make it more robust, more usable later. So, that's a huge benefit of Agile. Another one is, like Edwards Deming, you know, tied to Lean but really has huge correlation to Agile too any often talked about delivering the highest quality product in the shortest amount of time, with the lowest possible cost. And if you're catching bugs, defects, things the client didn't want upstream, the cost of modification is so much cheaper if you catch it on the spec, or if you catch it when you're just starting versus a complete product. So, a lot of people love Agile, because they see their costs go down and their margins go up. So that's one of the great benefits. At the team level. If we use a classic waterfall project, nobody really celebrates until the Mustang gets into somebody's garage. But with the Agile process, you know, like every two weeks or so we'll reach some kind of milestone to celebrate and get feedback from the customer. And it kind of energizes the team. So, they get frequent reward system, and especially on a longer project, maybe a one-year project, every few weeks getting feedback, you're doing the right thing and getting complimented and that's what we want is really good for the team morale and keeping enthusiasm up. I often tell people, I love Agile, but I gotta say enthusiasm probably 50% of it. So, if I had a team that was using Agile, but they weren't enthusiastic about the project and another team using waterfall and they weren't using ASIC, there's a decent chance the waterfall team might do a better job. So, that we got some far and Agile, getting that constant feedback is kind of huge. There's a mental part of this too, it's not just process.

Lisa Nichols 27:08

Makes total sense, makes total sense. And that feedback. I mean, as long as it's, well maybe even if it's not good feedback, it's good. At least you know where you need to go, right? You need what you, you know, then what you need to adjust. I love that. Well so, Greg, I'm gonna do this, because some of our listeners, you know, may not be familiar, but I'm gonna list just a few roles that we talk about. And then can you layman's terms, explain what each of those mean, just in a very short. So, like if, if someone hears the term or role product manager? What would that mean in layman's terms.

Greg Smith 27:51

So, in most agile teams, you will usually use the term product owner. And it's not necessarily a job title, but it's a role. And it is somebody's guiding us somebody is doing a roadmap and kind of telling us which direction to take the product. So, they're, they're always kind of running in front of the team saying what we should do next. And, and if we're doing like commercial software, this product owner is a proxy for all the end users. So, they go out and do market research. They bring in focus groups, they do usability testing, they're constantly trying to stay in touch with the target market or target customer and represent them back to the team. So, like if you know, we're doing Microsoft doing office, we can't have 100 million users come in and give us feedback. But that product owner can be going out and serving all those people and trying to represent them accurately back to the development team. So, what's interesting, Lisa, is I told orgs, even if they're going to stay with the waterfall process, you still have to have a good product owner, somebody's going to tell us which direction to go. You can have committees and steering committees, but, but at the end of the day, it's good to have like, like one person that kind of really represents the end user. So, we don't get paralyzed with multiple thoughts on which direction to go.

Lisa Nichols 29:07

What if somebody talks about a program manager, Greg? how would you explain that in layman's terms?

Greg Smith 29:10

So, programs usually in Agile-to-Agile space is usually more than one team. So, an analogy I might make is, if we went to Microsoft, there might be a team that's just in charge of Microsoft Word. A team in charge of Excel, team in charge of PowerPoint. But there's probably a program manager in charge of the Office program and everything that falls into the umbrella and making sure all those disparate apps all work well together and give a consistent user experience. So, programs usually like that next level kind of up. A lot of times like it kind of works with the portfolio of all the stuff going on in an organization, but it's usually bigger than just like one product line. It's usually multiple.

Lisa Nichols 30:00
That makes sense too, so, our listeners may have heard the term Scrum Master.

Greg Smith 30:05
So, as I mentioned, Agile has got its roots in manufacturing. In 1993, a couple of Americans came up with the using Scrum for software. And they came up with the first Scrum guide. And they started really putting out kind of a more structured definition around the Scrum Master. And in most org Scrum Master isn't a title, it usually is like a project manager, like from an HR title perspective. But they are supposed to be your internal agile expert. And they should have a system perspective on agile, how it should work for requirements, how it should work for design, how it should work for development, how it should work for DevOps and production support, and then be able to coach everybody on creating a nice, unified Agile system that works well. So, they kind of bounced around that whole workflow, looking where there's bottlenecks or misunderstanding and trying to optimize the whole, as they say, in Lean, so they're always trying to optimize the whole system. And if they're really good at their job, they work themselves out of it, they pass enough knowledge to the team, that they get sent to another team to go help them get started. So, their long-term goal is to work themselves out of a job.

Lisa Nichols 31:19
I love that. I love that. Are there any other roles? I'm not sure, that are really instrumental in the Agile process, Greg? That I've missed that that you feel like we need to touch on?

Greg Smith 31:32
No, I think, you know, I think that's pretty much it from a rule's perspective. And just kind of touching back on what we said before. Leadership does need to be involved and be removing impediments for these teams. So, whatever your leadership titles are, they it's great to actually have an Agile executive sponsor, because some of the bottlenecks do go to that level. And we need somebody with power to remove those for the team. So, so, that's probably just the last thing I would say is you do need an Agile sponsor at the senior level.

Lisa Nichols 32:03
I'm so glad that you mentioned that, because that sometimes can be the death, right? If you don't have that executive sponsorship. So, tell me this, what are some of the biggest misconceptions that you're seeing with Agile today?

Greg Smith 32:15
Oh, so it kind of mentioned, in America, we all think Agile equals software. So, it's not software, it's it can be used. And I really can't think of anything that I've not been able to apply it to the house I'm sitting in, which is probably what everybody thinks of as waterfalls when you build a house, but I only lived a mile away. And as it was being built, like after the foundation was up every day, my wife and, and my daughter and my dog, and I would come up here, and we'd inspect and we'd find something and before they went too far and putting the wrong brick on or before they went too far and framing the window with the wrong type of window, we would catch it and give them feedback. So first, first misconception is its software only. Maybe a second, not maybe, but for sure, a second misconception is right before I came to you, I was on, on a call with a client. And they were talking about rolling out Agile across all their teams, and how they wanted it standardized. And there's a lot of value in that, especially people bounce around teams, like what we call a user story on one team is the same as another. But that's not really an agile goal, the goal is for the team to be effective. And if we can try to make things as consistent as we can, so people can rotate around. What we what we want to be consistent on is there's like 12 principles, all the teams should be adhering to those. But then the practices to support those principles could be dramatically different. Like, like one recent engagement I had, they asked me to help the infrastructure team, the production support team, and the application or the data warehouse team use Agile, and application versus data warehouse, very different production support infrastructure, very different than app. So, we follow the principles, but the practice is that we are user stories look, were slightly different to support the work mix and the uniqueness of it. So, I think that's something people miss a lot is. Yes, definitely, we're gonna support the principles universally across every team. But the practices have to be tailored to be effective to the situation. It's not just cookie cutter, make everybody do the same thing, even if it doesn't add value. That's sort of why Agile came around as people became so focused on process instead of value deliver.

Lisa Nichols 34:41
That's good. That's good. Well, let me ask you this, Greg, what can companies, are there a few things that companies can do today to become a little more Agile? Short of hiring you?

Greg Smith 34:54
So, we do assessments for companies, and we do, even we'll do an assessment, if we're going to do just Scrum training, like, we'll get to know the team first. And when we get done looking at a company, if they're trying to roll that Agile, or if they're already rolling it out, we'll create an improvement backlog. And in the improvement backlog, at the very top will be these things are high value, if we change them, like they'll have a lot of impact to the org. And then we'll cross reference that to the level of like resistance we think we'll have or the level of work to implement it. So, a lot of times the very top of that improvement list is high value, low resistance, and then maybe high value, medium resistance, and then high value high resistance. So, to your point, starting with the kind of classic ones that I see, it's usually not too hard to implement some kind of process like a daily huddle or stand up. Even if you're not doing all the other Agile practices, you can have a daily sync to your team. And that'll bring transparency into your work. So, you can definitely do things like that you can actually start doing stand ups immediately. If you are doing Scrum already. Another kind of easy thing to do is to see are we delivering consistently. And could it be our sprint length is like maybe too short. So, you can look at your sprint structure. And you can start seeing quickly if it's really not correct, and you need to either shorten it or lengthen it to fit the model. Another one, you know, like I mentioned, product ownership isn't just an Agile thing. I find we can do that without doing any changes to the process. We can say somebody, start looking at the strategic initiatives that this works going after and start listing the initiatives we need to do and create a roadmap and start leading the team. So, so, to me, that's another one of the kind of low hanging fruit ones, establishing a product ownership mentality in an org.

Lisa Nichols 36:59
Oh, my goodness, Greg, we need a lot more time with you. Cuz you're just a wealth of information. I want to ask you this, you wrote a book. It's called Becoming Agile in an imperfect world. I love the title of that. Let me ask you, what inspired you to write the book, and then tell us a little bit about the book. And I think you have a very unique spin. And then it's not just theory, you really explain agile through a variety of different case studies, real world case studies. And I love it. It's not just the theory behind it, but you're talking about different things that you've done. And these case studies. What inspired you to write the book, Greg? Or who? It could be a who too.

Greg Smith 37:44
So, there was a bank called Washington Mutual. I'm not sure if you've heard the Washington Mutual or not. And, and early in my career, they had just failed an audit from KPMG. And like, it basically said, you know, publicly traded, so their controls were not very good. And, you know, around the days of Sarbanes Oxley, just kicking off. So, I was actually asked to come in, because after two years, they had become so process and checklist oriented, that they weren't delivering anything, their check boxes look great. Everything was in governance and compliance, but they were delivering solutions that when they got done, nobody wanted so, so, they had so much waste going on. So, they're like, okay, we went too far. So can you come in and start teaching our teams how to use Agile. So, they started me with the intranet team. And I thought my role would expand to like the other 70 software development teams coaching them, but the other ones were reticent and kind of conservative, and I got limited to like only coaching this 30-person team. And Washington Mutual is stable, I liked the income. But on a right brain perspective, I was dying, like, I am not using what I could do. So, I went to Bellevue College, just outside of Redmond, Washington, approached them about their continuing education sector they had and said, I'd like to start teaching real people who were in the field Agile. And as I started teaching the T mobile's the warehouses, the Boeing and Microsoft employees who would come to my workshop that I would do at night away from my day job. All we came across was constraints. Well, this is why I'm not a good fit for Agile. And in my workshops, we will work through that and start saying, well how could we still meet the goal of the principle without having a perfect org structure like maybe we can't name somebody product owner or maybe you know our Sprints can't have to go at least a month, which you're not supposed to go a month or something crazy. And so, in the workshops, we started tailoring, and I'm like, Man, this is gold mine, I'm seeing so much stuff and when I go to Agile conferences, people don't talk about tailoring it and customizing it to the situation. And that's definitely what led to the book that the real world working with, with these large businesses in the Seattle area, and seeing them all, like walk away from agile just because of these constraints. And they could still use it, they just they just somebody had brainwashed them, they'd have a perfect environment to implement it.

Lisa Nichols 40:12
Which is probably never going to happen. Nobody has a perfect environment, right?

Greg Smith 40:20
It is a critical mass, there is a point where you've got so many things going on may not be the right time to move to Agile. But that's incredibly rare. I mean, that that would be a pretty dysfunctional org, if like, there's just no value to be had from starting to implement Agile principles.

Lisa Nichols 40:35
That's so good, Greg, so good. Well, I want to pivot just for a minute here and talk a little bit about leadership. So, you, I'm sure you have your own leadership style. And I don't want to put words in your mouth, Greg, but I look at you, you're very collaborative, you're certainly not an autocratic leader. I would describe me more as a servant leader. You're very inspiring. And you have to be influential. Because when you're getting all these teams on the same page, Greg, you have to have some influence there. But what would you say about your leadership style? What have I missed?

Greg Smith 41:10
Oh, I would definitely say I'm a situational leader. So, I don't have a default latch, I guess, I guess I do have a default starting point. I'm quiet at the start. I observe and then determine is this is this group or team missing total leadership? And I need to be like, take myself up to that kind of alpha level and start leading, or are they doing pretty good, and I can lay low and just help as needed? Are they somewhere in between, and I need to kind of situationally kind of be assertive and coaching them. So, I'm definitely situational. Like, like, like, if there's strong leadership there when I walked in, I just do my role. But if it's missing, I'll do it. I won't say, you know, I'm like I'm but by default, I'm an introvert. But I won't say I'm an introvert, and I can't lead. I'm like, No, there's a fire here. I've got to do the right thing and lead. And I might go home drained that night, because I am an introvert. But I will I will do the right thing for the org. So, so definitely, I would say situational.

Lisa Nichols 42:11
I love it. Well, you've worked for a lot of great leaders, you've worked for a lot of great organizations. What do you think are the traits that are really evident in those top-notch leaders?

Greg Smith 42:22
Oh, let's see. Definitely, humble. And I know that that's kind of strange, because leaders usually have pretty healthy egos. And there's nothing wrong with that, like, you know, there's, there's ego versus arrogance. But like being humble, like saying, I still need to learn, saying I could be wrong. I think that's sort of a critical element in getting a team to trust you. I think, I love leaders, like, you know, these people, I love leaders who are really focused on developing their team members. I'm not sure what's going on with culture the last like five or 10 years. But I definitely can say like, I've got a high sample rate. And it seems like managers, in my in my opinion, have gotten lazy. Somebody's got a performance issue, in the old days, we'd work on it. Now. They're like, let's fire him, like everybody I talked to like, they're just not performing. I don't think they get it. And I'm like, have you coached them, you're like, have you determined like, what they're missing? I rarely see people coach and like the best leaders still today. It might be old school, but I see them trying to develop people for the good, or for the good of the team. And then like we're always trying to get back to like, I remember coming up and in my agile career, so many people there was like key moments out of the goodness of their heart. There was nothing in it for them, they helped me. So, those are the traits I look for. I think to like, like I'm sure you see this Lisa, I can actually kind of tell if somebody is a good leader because I hear people talking about their teams more than I hear them talking about the leader. That that's how I kind of recognize that they're not they don't need to be in the limelight they're focused on their team getting results and at the company all hands once a quarter you hear their team members come up and get awards and recognition you don't hear them because they micromanage took over and got their name in front of everybody like a really good leader kind of is behind the scenes.

Lisa Nichols 44:23
Right. I often hear it described as the upside-down pyramid Greg, really, that you know, instead of the leader being at the top, you know, I mean, it was really just kind of a different way of thinking and I know that, that's the kind of leader you are you're, you're really about your team and making sure your team is successful. If you were adding team members, what are those traits that you look for?

Greg Smith 44:53
Definitely, look for curious people, love people who are hungry still want to learn because you know, I I've been doing what I do forever. I learned something yesterday, I learn something every day so that that hunger to learn is huge in the Agile space, not to say it's not important in other places, but like the soft skills are a big deal on how to interact professionally. How do I manage conflict or prevent conflict from habit happening in the first place. But still, I look for people that are courageous. And if we're in something that's kind of serious, that even if it has some conflict, conflict aspect to it, they will speak up. And you'll actually you know, these people, we get meetings with people, and you can see they're passionate and they want to resolve it. But it's not personal. So, people can have a passionate conversation without attorney personal or disrespectful. Those are some of the attributes I love in folks.

Lisa Nichols 45:53
That's good. That's good. Well, I'm gonna do a quick lightning round with you here and then we'll talk about something extra. But Greg, how do you how do you personally unwind what do you what do you do to fill up your bucket, after you've poured out so much of yourself?

Greg Smith 46:13
Gosh, I love photography. I love sports, you name a sport. I either want to be added or I've got it running on TV. And I mean, the whole spectrum NBA, WNBA I was watching Rafa Nadal, his first, first round at the French Open the other day, so I love sports, love to golf, terrible golfer but love it. My daughter reads 200 books a year. And she puts pressure on me to join her. So, part of my stuff now too, is reading. So, I have to read like, I don't know, I'm maybe doing 20 books a year. So, reading.

Lisa Nichols 46:49
Wow. Amazing. She read 200 books a year, Greg? That's incredible.

Greg Smith 46:54
She loves it. She's a speed reader. She was like when she was three. I remember I had like a little ABC book with her. And she like threw it on my hand and like, like, like, I don't grab the classic and started reading The Great Gatsby or something. It was she's just gifted with language. And she speaks three languages. She's just she's just crazy.

Lisa Nichols 47:13
it's amazing. I love it. What do you have a morning routine?

Greg Smith 47:17
Oh, every day. Work your morning, you're like, I've been doing Agile, I used to do a lot of public agile workshops and seminars like especially early in the morning. And I definitely found I have much clearer thought if I've worked out first. So, if I'm on the road, and I'm presenting at 7am 4am, I'm in some gym, probably or I'm out in the road running, I've got a workout first. And it's good. It clears my mind. I plan my day. It does, I don't know that I'm getting endorphins. I'm getting something though. Even during, as we were going through the pandemic, I just found it so therapeutic in the middle of a run or something that stress would release and kind of come off. So, so, definitely has to start with, with a workout every day.

Lisa Nichols 48:03
More oxygen to the brain.

Greg Smith 48:05
It's more than them thinking it is actually just physically you're getting more oxygen. So yeah.

Lisa Nichols 48:10
You're getting more oxygen. So that's good. That's a great word for our listeners will tell me this. How do you best learn? I mean, you besides reading your 200 books a year or whatever you are reading right now with your daughter? I mean, do you do you go to conferences? I mean, how do you because obviously technology is what is here today may not be here tomorrow. I don't know what the, the shelf life is now a tool but how do you keep up on everything? What do you personally do?

Greg Smith 48:42
Sure. So, I do go to conferences. I would even say since my career started probably 80% of the methods I teach. I learned at conferences, so conferences are great for cutting edge. The Agile Alliance conference is coming up in Grapevine, Texas in July, I'll be there and see some of the latest stuff going on. You know, it's funny kind of going back to how do you relax question. My daughter reads nonfiction so she's always passing me nonfiction books, but I actually read a lot I should say she reads fiction. And I read a lot. I read a lot of nonfiction. So, I'm always like, if we go into Barnes and Noble or some bookstore, I immediately go look what the latest Agile books or the latest, latest leadership books are. I find that very therapeutic still to be studying what I do for a living it's may sound crazy, but I don't like when the day is over want to run from Agile. I got lucky I actually picked up I got to pick up passion and make a living from it. So, I actually I love learning reading books. And there's, there's actually amazingly, I see a lot of good, Agile content on YouTube these days. LinkedIn learning has a ton of content. And then a lot of the Agile engagements we do across the path of other Agile coaches, Scrum Masters trainers. And we have like our own community and we talk a lot. You know, we talk about assessment processes, all kinds of things. So, I learned a lot from my peers. And we constantly shared I don't, for some reason we're not competitive. Like we all like, just feel like when we're happy, Agile coaching group and we all share a lot of, like best practices.

Lisa Nichols 50:21
You all want to help one another. I love that. Well, they It is I, Greg, I will tell you one word that I would use to describe you. You are passionate. I mean, you can definitely tell that you love what you do. And, and I do too. And so, I like fiction, but as you can see behind me, I've got all kinds. I'm constantly reading leadership books, and I find it like you, I find that very therapeutic, because I just I want to get better, right? And I love that about you, too. Let me ask you this, this is called something extra. What do you believe? Is this something extra that every leader needs?

Greg Smith 50:59
I think most leaders I meet are programmed to lead in their default style. And kind of going back to our earlier conversation, I think secret sauce is being situational, like going in to see. Now a lot of us have seen that Situational Leadership quadrant, you know, level 1-2-3-4 employees or level 1-2-3-4 teams. And I think every leader should learn how that works and learn when to hold somebody's hand, when to do light coaching, when to do heavy coaching, when to start letting them go and actually helping them with their career and giving them some of your work. So, I think the situational leadership mindset is, I don't I don't see it a lot out there these days. I usually see people have a default style, and they're not looking at the situation, they're just like, organization, you must adhere to how I manage, versus how can I be most effective in this situation.

Lisa Nichols 51:56
Right. That is so good. I love that. Because what's really important about that, Greg is everyone is different. You, you may have a team member that really just needs a little bit of hand holding. And then someone else that just gets it and goes and it's all about really developing the people, though, to go back to what you'd said earlier. Well, Greg, this has been so much fun. Literally, I could talk to you for 10 hours, but we're not gonna do that to our listeners. But I hope that we have given them some things to hang their hat on today and some things to think about and maybe a little bit of a paradigm shift in their thinking and, and we'll, we'll make sure that they know how to reach you. So, Greg, thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Greg Smith 52:42
Oh, thank you, Lisa.

Announcer 52:43
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