

PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW¹



Book Title: ***Beyond Agile, Before AI: Build What's Worth Amplifying***

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1. Introduction — Why This Book, Why Now

I came to *Beyond Agile, Before AI* from an unusual position for a reviewer. Dhanesh Kumar and I worked alongside each other as Agile coaches for several years, and I also contributed a foreword to this book. This means that many of the situations he describes were familiar to me before I encountered them on these pages. I have seen organizations with Agile roles, ceremonies, and operating models still struggle with slow decisions, unclear ownership, competing priorities, and layers of approval. I have also seen how differently the same organizations can operate when circumstances become urgent enough to push those structures aside.

That experience is why Kumar's central argument resonates with me: "Organizations do not become effective because they become Agile. They become Agile because they become effective." The distinction is important. *Beyond Agile, Before AI* is not another argument about which Agile practices work best or how organizations should implement them more faithfully. Kumar is interested in what has to exist underneath them: clarity, trust, psychological safety, leadership alignment, decision authority, and the ability of people to act when reality no longer matches the process. His own experience comes from more than a decade of working with transformations that often already had the frameworks in place but were still struggling with these more fundamental conditions.

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The title captures the particular moment in which the book is written. We have enough experience with enterprise Agile to know that adopting a framework does not necessarily produce an agile organization. Now AI is entering many of those same organizations. It does not arrive on a blank page. It enters organizations that already have particular ways of making decisions, distributing authority, responding to bad news, and trusting (or not trusting) the people closest to the work. Kumar's argument is that AI will amplify these existing conditions rather than compensate for them.

This is what makes *Beyond Agile, Before AI* more comprehensive than a book about either Agile or AI alone. As the argument develops, Agile gradually becomes less the subject of the book and more the evidence for it. The experience of the Agile era provides the lesson; AI raises the stakes for whether organizations have actually learned it.

2. From Frameworks to Organizational Conditions

One of the most useful choices Kumar makes is to start before the framework. Organizations often approach transformation by asking which methodology, operating model, or set of practices they should adopt. Kumar reverses the sequence. The first question is what is actually preventing people from doing their work, making decisions, and delivering value. Only then does it make sense to ask which framework or practice might address that problem. His three-question sequencing test makes this very concrete:

- What specifically is broken today?
- Who is affected, and how?
- What would visibly change for those people if it were fixed?

This sounds like common sense, and that is partly the point. Kumar describes Agile itself as “structured common sense.” A framework is not the objective; it is something an organization selects and adapts to solve a problem.

The harder questions come first:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- What matters most?
- Where are we going?

And is the work people are doing actually aligned with those priorities? When these questions are unresolved, adding another framework can add structure without removing the friction that made the organization slow in the first place.

The organizational conditions Kumar develops through the book are also not independent items on a checklist. Trust, psychological safety, autonomy, and decision velocity form a particularly important chain. Trust sits at the beginning. Without it, people are less willing

to raise problems early, question assumptions, or say openly that something is going wrong. Organizations compensate by adding controls, reporting, approvals, and escalation. Those additional loops reduce autonomy and slow decisions, often creating precisely the friction that transformation was supposed to remove.

There are environments where work can function with relatively little trust. A contractor hired for six months to deliver a clearly defined outcome from A to B can operate through explicit scope, rules, responsibilities, and contractual controls. The same can be true of a vendor engaged for a limited and well-specified piece of work. An enterprise is different. People are not simply executing a bounded transaction and leaving. They depend on one another over time, work through uncertainty, discover problems that were not specified in advance, and make decisions whose consequences cross organizational boundaries. In that environment, trust is not an optional cultural quality. As Kumar puts it, “Trust is not a leadership trait. It is infrastructure.”

Seen this way, organizational speed is not simply a matter of asking people to move faster. It comes from reducing the waste and friction between information and action. Psychological safety allows information to surface; trust allows it to be taken seriously; autonomy allows people closer to the problem to act; clear decision rights prevent every decision from entering an approval queue. The organization becomes more agile not because everyone performs the framework correctly, but because fewer things stand between recognizing what needs to happen and being able to do it.

3. Leadership, Governance, and the Problem of Execution

Organizations often diagnose execution problems at the level where they become visible: the team. A deadline is missed, a dependency is unresolved, or work is moving too slowly, so attention turns to delivery. *Beyond Agile, Before AI* repeatedly asks the reader to look further upstream. Kumar writes about “failure that looks like poor execution but traces back to poor alignment.” This is a valuable distinction because a team can execute well and still struggle when the organization sends it conflicting signals about what it is supposed to execute.

In practice, strategy does not simply travel from leadership to teams. Every organizational layer interprets it. Managers bring their own understanding of what matters, stakeholders have their own objectives, and leaders inevitably have their own ambitions. By the time this reaches a team, there may be several managers, several stakeholders, and several leaders, each communicating a slightly different version of what matters most. Kumar captures this through the Alignment Cascade: misalignment at the top does not disappear as strategy moves through the organization; it grows. This is why I agree with one of the stronger statements in the book: “leadership alignment is not a prerequisite for transformation — it is the transformation itself.”

Prioritization is where this becomes very practical. *Priority* once had the useful property of being singular. Today organizations routinely speak about five, ten, or twenty priorities at once. But telling a team that everything matters does not resolve the decision it has to make on Tuesday morning. Should we clean the code or deploy? Do we follow what our manager has asked for, what the stakeholder needs, or the commitments we have made to a vendor? If I tell an Uber driver that I need to go to London and Paris, the obvious question is: **where do you need to go now?** Organizational priorities require the same answer. Choosing what matters now also means making clear what can wait.

This is where Kumar's treatment of governance connects naturally with leadership alignment. Good governance is not simply more control. Its value comes from clarity and transparency: clear decision rights, accountability, thresholds, escalation paths, and access to the information required to decide. Kumar argues that "good governance, counterintuitively, is what makes decisions fast rather than slow," because these questions do not then have to be renegotiated every time a decision appears.

Without that clarity, organizational friction accumulates quickly. People spend increasing amounts of time reconciling instructions rather than acting on them. When priorities keep changing and different leaders give different directions, people spend increasing amounts of time deciding what to follow, what to postpone, and what can safely be left undone. Execution slows before the actual work even begins.



Photo: Author and Reviewer

4. Why AI Changes the Stakes

The transition from Agile to AI is where the argument of the book becomes particularly interesting. Agile has always had an uncomfortable side effect: it exposes what organizations would sometimes prefer to keep hidden. Dependencies become visible. Bottlenecks become visible. Conflicting priorities become visible. A retrospective can surface the same unresolved problem sprint after sprint. Agile, in this sense, pulls things out from under the carpet, but it does not do the cleaning. It is very good at revealing dysfunction quickly; what happens after that still depends on the organization.

AI changes this dynamic because it adds scale and speed. Kumar describes AI as both “an extraordinary amplifier of human capability” and, when introduced carelessly, “an extraordinary accelerator of human dysfunction.” The second half of that statement is particularly important. If priorities conflict, information is incomplete, processes are opaque, or decision rights are unclear, AI inherits that environment. What changes is how quickly and how widely its consequences can spread.

There is another complication. AI works with what it is given. If an organization presents an existing process as the process, an AI system has no independent organizational history that tells it which parts exist for good reasons and which are simply accumulated bureaucracy. If information is incomplete, its analysis is necessarily based on an incomplete representation of reality. If the process itself is opaque, adding AI does not automatically make it transparent. The danger is not only that the resulting answer may be poor, but that it may still be delivered with enough confidence and coherence to look actionable. In a weak organizational environment, AI can therefore make it easier to scale an assumption before anyone has stopped to question it.

This makes Kumar’s shift from the knowledge worker to the “judgment worker” especially relevant. His argument is that as AI makes knowledge increasingly accessible, judgment becomes the scarcer human capability. The distinction can be surprisingly simple. Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Judgment is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad. The first depends on having the correct information. The second requires context, purpose, and an understanding of what outcome we are actually trying to produce.

That distinction also brings the book back to its earlier organizational questions. Better AI cannot decide what an organization values unless those values have been made clear. It cannot resolve competing priorities simply because several leaders have each labelled their objective a priority. And it cannot compensate for missing information that people did not feel safe enough to report in the first place. The organizational conditions Kumar develops before reaching AI are therefore not made obsolete by the technology. They become more consequential.

5. From Argument to Practice

One of the things I appreciate most about *Beyond Agile, Before AI* is that Kumar does not stop when the argument has been made. Almost every chapter ends with “What you can do this week.” This may seem like a small editorial choice, but it reflects an important principle. The purpose of a management book is not only to make the reader think or recognize a familiar problem. If something resonates, the next question is: what can I change?

Large transformation plans can make that question harder rather than easier. The scale of the proposed change can become intimidating before the first action is taken. Kumar consistently moves in the opposite direction. Start with something small enough to do on Monday. Observe what changes. Then take the next step. His final advice follows exactly this logic: identify one decision that is stuck, ask one team what they are not saying, find one place where AI is already doing judgment work, or clarify one decision right. “Pragmatic agility spreads through proof, not through mandate.”

The same principle explains the number of practical models in the book. The Participation Spectrum, Conditions Diagnostic, Decision Rights Matrix, Alignment Cascade, AI Readiness Assessment, and other tools are not a sequence that every organization is expected to implement from beginning to end. I see them more as a craftsperson’s toolbox. A good craftsperson does not arrive at work and use every tool in the box in order. One problem requires one tool; an hour later another may be needed; tomorrow the work may start somewhere else entirely. The value of the toolbox is having the right instrument available when the problem calls for it.

The three-question sequencing test discussed earlier is a good example. On paper, its questions look basic. Try answering them precisely in a real organization. “We need greater agility,” “communication needs to improve,” or “we need to modernize” no longer qualify as answers.

The test forces a broad transformation problem into something specific enough to work on. Having worked alongside Kumar as an Agile coach, I recognize this practical instinct in the book. That does not mean his daily work followed a checklist or that every situation was diagnosed by moving systematically through the models presented here. The book does something that practice itself cannot: it takes patterns accumulated across different situations and lays them out so that someone else can see and use them. Kumar explains in the Preface that he began writing because he found himself “giving the same advice in different rooms, in different industries, to people who each believed they were solving a unique problem.” *Beyond Agile, Before AI* turns that accumulated experience into a toolbox without suggesting that every problem requires every tool.

6. Who This Book Is For

Perhaps surprisingly, I would recommend *Beyond Agile, Before AI* first to executives and senior leaders, including those at the VP level. They do not need to become experts in Agile frameworks, and this book does not ask them to. What they do need is a way to understand what transformation actually depends on. Kumar keeps bringing the discussion back to a relatively small set of questions: Are priorities clear? Is leadership aligned? Can people surface problems safely? Is decision authority understood? Where is friction slowing the movement from information to action? These are leadership questions before they become delivery questions.

For coaches, transformation leads, project and program professionals, and other leaders working closer to execution, the value is somewhat different. They can use the book as the toolbox described earlier: identify where the organization is hurting most and select the diagnostic, question, or model that fits that problem. There is no need to use everything at once.

This gives the book an unusual range. A senior executive can read it to understand what matters in transformation and what conditions leadership needs to create. A coach or leader can return to it when trying to work out what to do about a specific problem on Monday morning.

7. Conclusion — Beyond Agile, Before AI

By the end of *Beyond Agile, Before AI*, Agile is no longer really the subject of the book. It has become evidence for a larger argument about organizational effectiveness. More than two decades of Agile transformation have shown how much can be changed on the surface while the conditions underneath remain remarkably persistent. Organizations can change roles, processes, terminology, and operating models, but none of these automatically creates the conditions that allow people to respond effectively when circumstances change.

This is why Kumar's description of Agile as "structured common sense" works particularly well. Stripped of the industry that grew around it, agility comes back to some fairly fundamental questions about how people work together:

- Do we know what we are trying to achieve?
- Can we talk openly about what is getting in the way?
- Can the people with the relevant information make or influence the decisions that follow?
- And when reality changes, can the organization change with it?

AI does not replace those questions. It makes the answers more consequential. Kumar's Amplification Lens is a fitting way to close the argument: AI can amplify human capability, but it can also accelerate existing dysfunction. An organization with unclear priorities can produce and process more information without becoming clearer about what matters. An organization with poor information flows can analyze incomplete information faster.

The experience of the Agile era therefore provides the lesson; AI raises the stakes for whether organizations have actually learned it. Perhaps that is the most useful way to read the title *Beyond Agile, Before AI*. The space between the two is not waiting for another framework. It is where organizations have to do the harder work of becoming effective enough to use whatever comes next well.

About the Author



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Aina Aliieva (Alive) is an experienced Agile Coach and a Business Consultant with 20 years of experience in different industries, from hospitality and tourism to banking and engineering, a Founder & CEO at Bee Agile and a CEO & VP of Marketing at The PMO Strategy and Execution Hub.

Her work focuses on complex organizational environments where decision-making, execution, and alignment intersect. She operates at the intersection of AI, cybersecurity, decision-making, and organizational systems, advising senior leaders on how decisions are formed, shaped, and governed in complex environments.

Aina is a keynote speaker on Agile, Project Management, AI, cybersecurity, negotiation, and organizational decision-making. She was a guest instructor at NASA in 2022 and 2023, delivering sessions on conflict resolution, negotiation, and facilitation techniques.

She serves as a judge for the PMI PMO of the Year Awards and MBA case competitions, contributing to the evaluation of strategic, organizational, and execution excellence across diverse industries.

Her book, *It Starts with YOU. 40 Letters to My Younger Self on How to Get Going in Your Career*, reached #1 in the job-hunting category on Amazon and is featured in the Forbes Councils Executive Library. She also led *The Evolution of the PMO: Rise of the Chief Project Officer*, a global collaborative project that brought together 40 authors across six continents. In addition, she contributed to several professional publications, including *Mastering Solution Delivery*, *Green PMO*, and *Agile Coaching and Transformation*. She contributes to professional publications, including *PM World Journal*, and publishes ongoing research and field observations through her Substack, *AI-El Fieldnotes*. She has delivered invited sessions for PMI chapters globally.

Aina was a Finalist in the Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year category in 2021 by the Canadian SME National Business Award.

She is currently pursuing a private pilot license, volunteers at cultural and community events, including golf and Formula 1 events, and has traveled to more than 65 countries.

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