# Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

# Julien Pollack – Let's get flexible

**Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Julien Pollack's talk, Let's Get Flexible. Enjoy the talk.**

**[Applause].**

So, thank you very much for joining me here. I would like to be talking to you about how we can increase flexibility and adaptability in our workplaces. Now, there's a lot of discussion around agile. Agile is everywhere. And, part of the purpose of what I want to talk about is how we cut through a lot of the jargon which is attached to agile.

But, I'd like to start with a story. I'd like to start with what I was doing a couple of weeks ago. So, I've got two kids. They're three and they're six. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, I am going to a lot of birthday parties at the moment. Well, we're close to one of my son's parents, our son's friend's parents. So, let's call his friend John. Let's Jack and Jill and their daughter, Judy. Well, Judy had a birthday in the park, and John liked the idea of having a birthday in the park. So, Jack and Jill promised.

This was their first mistake [laughter]. So, a couple of weeks go by and we're getting closer to the birthday, and I'm looking at the weather reports and I say to John, have you thought of a backup plan? And John says, no, Julian, don't worry about it. John and Judy and Jane, they all want a birthday outside. It's going to be fine. So, we get closer to the day. We get to the day before and the weather report is not looking good. And, I'm sure you can see where this is going. This is going towards us standing under umbrellas, buffeted in the rain with wrapping paper dripping off presents, with Judy trying to light the candles on a wet cake while John is crying in a corner. So, they got a, let's say, a suboptimal result here. And, where they went wrong is they committed themselves too early.

So, as I said before, there's a lot of jargon associated with agile. A lot of agile edge gets packaged up in methodologies. There's scrum, there's XP, there's safe. There's a whole lot more, and these things get packaged as products. And with these products comes a lot of special naming, special terms, and the purpose of this talk is to cut through all of that. I want to cut through all of that and talk about the very simple things which can be applied in any workplace and can be applied very, very simply.

So, for the purpose of this talk is to let you walk away with simple ideas that can be applied to all projects, or all kinds of work or all organisations. Now, we're talking about methodology, and I really like methodology. Methodology is one of the things I like to write about, and I find it fascinating, because we tend to dismiss it. We might do certification in it, but then it's done and we don't think about it much more. It might be part of our organisational process and we need to fill out the forms and we don't really want to talk about it. But, methodology structures what we can see, and also what's hidden from us. So, it allows us to see and focus on things, but it also takes things away from what we're paying attention to, and this is very significant in our workplace.

Now, the purpose of this talk is not to teach you about agile. This is not a beginner's course in agile. It's not me trying to give you all of agile in a 30-minute spin, because there's no hope

that I can achieve that. But, I can talk about the parts of agile which actually relate to agility or flexibility or responsiveness to change. Now, agile methods do a whole bunch of other stuff as well. I'm not really going to talk about that. I just want to talk about the parts that relate to responsiveness, to change, and flexibility. And there are two parts to this. The first part relates to planning and it relates to psychological commitment. And, the second part relates to the rate of information distribution in the system. So, let's start with the first of these. So, psychological commitment. What do you do when you're given a project? What is the natural thing that you do at the start of a project? You're given a piece of work. It's a little unstructured. You've got a team. And, natural tendency is to start planning.

And, if you've done any sort of project management training, any certification, if you know the project management field, you've probably come across the Project Management Institute and PMBOK. PMBOK is 90% of our planning. So, we are trained to plan. So, we sit down and we start planning things. We bring together a team and that gives us a good idea, but there are consequences to that. There are consequences to planning, and that is largely the state of psychological commitment. So, what is it? Psychological commitment is a very natural state for all of us. It's also called things like anchoring. It's called lock in. But, it's a natural human tendency and it's incredibly useful. It's useful because our lives are busy. And, the basic idea behind commitment is that you invest attention in making a decision once. You don't do it every single time you're faced with a choice. You invest time in making the decision once, and then we work from the premise that what we decided on previously will carry us forward into the future. Now, I'm sure you can already see where the problem in this is, that the future doesn't always stay the same as the past. But, we do this because we just don't have the time to reassess every single decision and make awaited judgement again. We need to rely on this as a basic heuristic for how we live our lives. So, t's fundamental to decision-making. It is also incredibly important in our identity.

So, psychological commitment influences our behaviour because we want to naturally take action, which aligns with our image of our self, and also other's image of us. So, if people all see us as a particular kind of person, we are actually likely to behave in accordance with their expectations. So, the basic premise behind psychological commitment is that once you have started taking action in a particular direction, you are more likely to continue in that direction. It's almost like inertia. It is very much like an inertia. It's like the supertanker of thoughts starts heading off in one direction and it – the faster it goes, the harder it is to change direction, and this is – this is very basic to who we are as human beings. We are habitual creatures, and it saves us a lot of time. It makes things easier. But, it influences our decision-making and our behaviour in profound ways. There is a huge body of research which shows the influence of this. I'll give you some examples. Let's imagine you're at the horse races. Let's imagine you're putting a bet on a horse. Now, there's been research which shows that your estimation of the success of that horse considerably changes based on whether you've put the bet on or not. Your estimation of the likelihood of that horse winning goes up dramatically after you put a bet on. What we're actually doing is we're filtering out information that leads us to expect something different. We've taken the commitment, we've made a step in a direction, and then we want to believe that the world will align with our expectations. Some people refer to this as optimism bias.

There's been – I'll give you another example how this can actually affect, not just your decisions, but it can be used to affect the decisions of others around you. Some people refer to this as manipulation. I'd rather think of it as influence, because it happens constantly, and it's not always something that we're thinking about. And, it's not evil, it just goes on. So, there's one very interesting study which looked at how commitment can be controlled. So, imagine a situation where a researcher is walking up to a door and, in their hand, they have a picture. They have a picture of a house, and in front of the house is a giant billboard. And, on the billboard in bold letters it says drive safely. Now, this billboard is so big that it mostly

obscures the house behind sitting it, and it's sitting whack-bang [phonetic] in the front lawn. And, the researchers walked up to houses and they said, knocked on the door and people answered, and they said, would you mind us putting this drive safely billboard in your front lawn? How do you think people responded? It's a big billboard. It's a big, ugly billboard, and most people said no. Eighty-three percent of people said no. But, then the researchers changed the situation very slightly, and it made a huge difference. First, what they did is they went up the house, and instead of going first with a picture of the billboard they said, we have this sticker. It's only 10 centimetres by 10 centimetres and it says please drive safely in my street. Would you mind putting that in your front window, because this is a very important community issue. And, not too surprisingly, most people said yes to that. It's unobtrusive, it's low cost, it's a community issue that most people aren't really going to say no to.

And when this becomes interesting is when they came back two weeks later and they repeated exactly what they did before with the picture of the billboard obscuring the house. They asked the same question. And, in this case, not only was the reception much stronger, 76% of people who said yes to the sticker, now said yes to this whopping, great, ugly billboard. Can you imagine that? That's 76% of people are suddenly agreeing to have a huge thing in their front lawn, which is probably obscuring natural life, it changes the appearance of their home. Now, what's happened here is these people have taken a step. They've been asked to take a small, subtle step in a direction. And then, once they've taken a step, they're now seeing themselves differently. They're seeing themselves as people who support driver safety, who are willing to make outward statements in support of driver safety. Where this becomes slightly strange is the third iteration of this. In the third iteration they came up with a different sticker. This sticker, again a small sticker, unobtrusive, said please keep a tidy town. Again, a nice, simple message that most people won't disagree with. But, then the researchers, two weeks later, came back and again asked, would you like this drive safely billboard in your front lawn? Now, this is interesting, because there's a change in message. It's no longer about driver safety and driver safety. They've gone from tidy town to driver safety. In this case, 50% of the people are still saying yes to the driver safety billboard.

Now, I find this one really interesting, because what they've got is a very different personal conceptualisation of who they are. Their personal image has changed in a different way. They're seeing themselves more generally as someone who is willing to take a public statement about civic issues. Now, this is important for you to think about. Who here has signed a petition at some point? I know I certainly have. I've been approached by people who are supporting worthy causes. Let's imagine you're approached by someone from Greenpeace who was asking you to sign a save the whales petition. They're not even asking for your e-mail address or your postal address. You think it's harmless. But, you are now more likely to, say, give money.

Let's say the Australian Conservation Foundation call you up a couple of weeks later, because of that previous action you're now more likely to give money to them if you associate those two things in your mind. So, this is where things become tricky. This is not a simple equation. It's about what you —how you associate these concepts. But, if you are asked to take a future action about an associated cause, you're more likely to step in that direction.

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The last example I'll give you is one I particularly like at the moment, it's possibly because I'm reading a bit of Sherlock Holmes and because it's done by Moriarty, the researcher was Moriarty. And, this research is set at the beach, just also making me think I need to structure more of my research projects so they take place at the beach. So, this is a lesson for me. Imagine a situation where the beach is relatively busy. It's a relatively busy day, busy enough that someone can put down their towel next to you about a metre and a half away and it's

not creepy. It's not a deserted beach where, you know, you're the only person there and they come and put the towel down next to you and it's like, what are you doing there? So, in the first situation someone walked up. The person on the beach, they put their towel down a metre and a half away. And, this research was done a few years ago. They're listening to a radio, but imagine it's a phone. They're listening to a radio and, after a few minutes, they turn the radio off. They leave the radio quite obviously on the towel and then they go for a walk down the beach. There's a second researcher involved. This researcher is pretending to be a thief. So, the thief comes along. They pick up the radio and they make a dash down the beach. They do this 20 times. And, in those 20 times, the thief was challenged four times, challenged to the level of people shouting out, hey, stop, thief, that level. Then they changed the situation. They tried it again. They were, again, trying to control for the influence of commitment. But, this was a very subtle commitment. This was influencing the other person's perception of themselves, not in any warranted or requested way. They have exactly the same situation. They put the towel down. They listen to the radio. But, here's where things change. They turn the radio off. They look across to the other person and say, watch my things, just three words, watch my things. They don't even wait for a response. There's no signed agreement, just watch my things. Then they get up and they walk down the beach. What do you think happened? Nineteen out of 20 times suddenly the thief is challenged. In a handful of cases the thief is challenged to the degree where the person gets up off their towel and chases them [laughter] down the beach. In one of these times, the person was physically trying to pull the radio off this thief. So, they are putting themselves in harms way for a stranger's property who they have never spoken to.

Commitment is very powerful in influencing our behaviour. Now, think about how this works in the workplace. Commitment is more powerful the more action we take, and commitment is more powerful the more public this action is. So, if you're at work and you quietly come up with some goals to yourself, now there's a little bit of commitment. Or, if your boss e-mails you your goals for the next period, there's a little bit more commitment. If you instead write down your goals of what you're going to achieve in the next quarter or the next year, there's more commitment still. If you write down your goals, and you agree them with your boss, more commitment still. And, if they're up on the wall publicly visible to everyone, that's a lot of commitment.

This is how performance goals can be used very effectively. But, what happens in a project environment? Imagine you're given a project, and it's a little bit ambiguous. You're working with a team who haven't really done this piece of work before and you start planning. And you go through stages of forming, norming, you get to storming. There are arguments. There are fights. You come to some resolution that you're all happy with. And then someone finds out that there are resource constraints, or someone goes off and climbs the corporate hierarchy to secure the resources you need. Now, they come back victorious with the extra team member that you didn't have before. And then, as a team, you publicly stake your position in the ground of saying we, as a group, are going to achieve these goals. What have you done? You have made a massive psychological commitment to achieve that there, not something slightly different, that there.

Now, this is where agile does something really interesting. One of the principles that are common to a lot of the majority of agile approaches is pushing planning back, pushing as much planning away from the start. Now, don't let anyone tell you that agile is plan free group of approaches. It's not, by any stretch of the imagination. But, planning is pushed back as far as possible. So, a basic principle is that if you don't have to plan it in detail now, don't. It's quite simple. A lot of things you need to have a rough idea about. You need to have a general idea of where you're going and why. But, you — for a lot of aspects, you don't need to plan in massive detail. And, this is great, because it stops this feeling of psychological commitment from building up. It leaves you open to open to possibilities. And, what happens

when you've got the psychological commitment? You've got your plan. You're starting to go ahead. Things are looking good. Maybe you're a month in, but you get a couple of minor warning signals. But, don't worry, we can handle that. That's nothing really unexpected and we're still within tolerance. A little bit more time goes along. You're starting to get, you know, a few yellows on your traffic light perhaps. But, don't worry, we can bring that back, and you've got a plan for how you're going to bring in more stuff to bring it home at the end. A little bit more time comes along, and one of the things which you thought was, yeah, pretty bedded down, but you all acknowledged was a bit ambiguous, turns out to be radically different to what you thought. And then, more time goes on and you realise you're actually in quite a bit of trouble.

Psychological commitment blinds you to these early warning signs. It makes it much harder for you, as an individual, and also as a team, because collectively you've bought into it, to actually change direction. So, that's the first part that I want to talk about, that's psychological commitment. The second part, about how we can simply increase our flexibility, agility, responsiveness to change, is about the rate at which information spreads around our network. So, I'd like you, for a moment, to picture your project team, your organisational unit, your division, as a network. Imagine each person is a node on the network, and the links between the people maybe they are representative of the rate of information transfer, and you can see at different points in the project something will happen, and people will start talking. You can see information moving around. So, our projects can be thought of as networks of information transfer. Now, where are the major points where we review things? Now, each node in this network is like a sensor. One person might have a great view of what the client is doing. They know if their requirements are changing. One person might be really interested in the technical journals, and they might see new opportunities coming up, which could change how you're implementing. One person might be really connected to senior management, and they can see resource opportunities or constraints coming up. Each of these people are nodes on the network, and they see flags, dangers, opportunities, which are occurring in the environment.

Now, what you need to do as a group is you bring this information together. You socialise it. We generally, in a standard project meeting, work out whether it impacts and how it impacts different people. And then, together, we formulate some sort of response about whether it matters, whether we need to change a small section of the project, whether we need to change as a whole. Now, a standard pattern is you have a monthly meeting. You have a monthly project review meeting. That's our standard pattern of interaction. And, sometimes that works really well. Maybe you've seen a danger signal, and the project review meeting, your monthly meeting is tomorrow, at which point you can spread the information out amongst the project network. You can get some formal agreement on change of direction, and then you all go out and implement. That's the best case, but it often doesn't work out that way. Maybe instead you've just had your project meeting, your monthly meeting. So, you've got to wait about a month until your next meeting. Maybe everyone can make —maybe you have the right people to make a decision in the room, maybe you don't. Maybe it has to be escalated to the steering committee, and maybe they don't meet for another month. Maybe the steering committee is good and they can make the decision then and there, maybe they're not. Maybe you haven't given them the right information they need, and they go back to you and say, we've got a request for more information. Sorry, we can't quite make a decision now. Send us information for the next steering committee. Maybe they get that information and they send it to you straight away and you can act on it. But, maybe, it's a major problem and you need to socialise it in your next project monthly meeting. What are we looking at? Worse case maybe four months. I mean, it very rarely gets that bad, but you're getting the picture, that these things can blow out very quickly when you are not getting a fast response. And, what do we want if we're talking about project or organisational agility?

What we're looking for is responsiveness to change. We're looking at the ability for the project, as a network, as a system, to take some sort of coordinated action. Now, if it takes you four months to go from warning signal to what on Earth are we going to do about it, you've got some problems, because the world has probably moved on again, in which case you are always behind the times. This is a simple thing where, again, agile approaches tend to do things a little differently. The basic tendency in most agile approaches is that you have a daily meeting. You get everyone together daily. It doesn't have to be a long meeting, but you get everyone together and you socialise things. And, if anything important comes up, you can talk about it straight away. But, generally your daily meetings are restricted to planning the day's activities, but you're socialising regularly and formally. And then, you have a fortnightly large project review meeting where you review what happened in the previous iteration. You look at where you currently are and you plan for the next iteration. And, if you're doing it well, you might also be having a good view — look at long-term planning. Are there any activities that we really need to think about in the longer term? You can't do everything in two-week iterations. But, we've got a much faster cycle. And, the general tendency is to also ensure that you have the decision-makers in the room. So, we've gone from worst-case four-month turnaround to a standard of a two-week cycle. So, this is much, much faster and much more responsive. So, we're getting a much faster reaction from, oh, I stuck my hand in the fire to, oh, I should probably remove it now. Now, these things both sound like great things. There's this avoidance of psychological commitment and this faster responsiveness. They sound good, don't they? But, they're not. They are not good, and they are not bad. They are only good or bad in response to the particular situation that you're in, because these things they come at a cost. So, what are the costs? If you are reducing the amount of planning that you're doing, then you're losing a whole bunch of other really good stuff.

I mean, what's the point of planning? What's the point of detailed planning? It does wonderful things. A detailed plan gives people a lot of confidence that you know where you're going and why. A detailed plan gives you the opportunity to find efficiencies. Now, imagine, you've bid on something, you've won the contract, but you've got a tiny little margin, so small that you really wonder whether it's worthwhile doing the work. Well, detailed planning lets you find where you can find those extra efficiencies to actually make some money out it. Detailed planning actually gives you the opportunity to socialise. It gives you the opportunity to work with contractors on a much longer basis. So, to order long lead time items so you have them exactly when you need them. Let's look at information distribution. There is a cost associated with meeting very frequently. Has anyone been in a bad meeting? Don't bother putting —you can put your hands up if you want, but I'm sure everyone has been in a bad meeting. Thank you for the two hands at the back. Meetings do not always work well. They are also time-consuming. The time you're spending meeting could be spent doing something else. It could be spent designing, it could be spent building the thing, coding, meeting with the client, whatever you need to be doing, whatever else adds value. So, the more time you're meeting with your team, the less time you're doing other good stuff.

So, the lesson here is that you need to choose. There are times when your project goes through periods of change, in which case ramp up your meeting cycle. There are times when you're in a project where you know that it's fundamentally uncertain, work out which parts you don't have to plan in detail. You might want to plan some parts in detail, but leave other parts vague because you know you don't know. So, I wanted you to walk away with three points here. If you want to increase adaptability and flexibility, it's quite simple. It really is quite simple. Push back planning and avoid psychological commitment. The second point is ramp up the rate of information distribution within your network, so the system can respond quickly. And, the third point is, make a conscious choice about when you use these things. They're neither good nor bad, they are appropriate for some situations and not others. So, I'll ask you to not be like Jack, Judy, John and Jane, or Jill or Jennifer. Choose these things carefully. Don't be left standing out in the rain. Thank you.

**[ Applause ]**

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