

The Operating Model for AI Fluency

*How APOM enables AI fluency to
drive value*

Overview

Most organizations mistakenly treat AI fluency as a training problem, but it is actually a property of the organization's operating model. Individual fluency (Level 2) often creates a capability gap, failing to translate into collective team capability and risking skill erosion. To overcome this and ensure fluency spreads, the operating model must evolve to one based on principles from the Agile Product Operating Model (APOM). This requires:

- Hiring for mindset (adaptability), not current skills.
- Making talent development structurally separate from delivery pressure.
- Calibrating incentives to value outcomes to counteract the 'artifact effect'.
- Designing adaptability into the operating model itself to account for shifting AI engagement modes.

AI Fluency Journey Map

Protecting deliberate skill formation is a leadership obligation, as the human judgment developed through execution work is vital for governance and oversight in an AI-accelerated environment. Success depends on establishing an operating model in which AI is an integrated, governable team member.

Most organizations are treating AI fluency as a training problem. Get people in training courses. Share prompt tips in Slack. Celebrate the practitioners who've figured out how to use the tools well.

That instinct isn't wrong. But it's incomplete. The gap between what it gets right and what it misses is where most of the real risk and most of the real opportunity actually live.

The AI Fluency Journey Map describes three levels of fluency and four modes of AI engagement. It is deliberately framed as a diagnostic for practitioners and teams. But there is a deeper claim embedded in it, one that becomes visible when you hold the Journey Map alongside the Agile Product Operating Model (APOM): **AI fluency is not a property of individuals. It is a property of the organization and operating models.** And organizations that treat it as the former while neglecting the latter will find themselves with pockets of impressive individual capability yet still unable to move.

The three fluency levels are as follows:

Level 1 - Beginner - Safe, intentional, contextually aware AI use - for everyone on the team

Level 2 - Practitioner - Deliberate, iterative, outcome-focused AI use - where real craft begins and complacency becomes the primary risk

Level 3 - Advanced - Workflow architect, team coach, operating model contributor - shaping how the team works

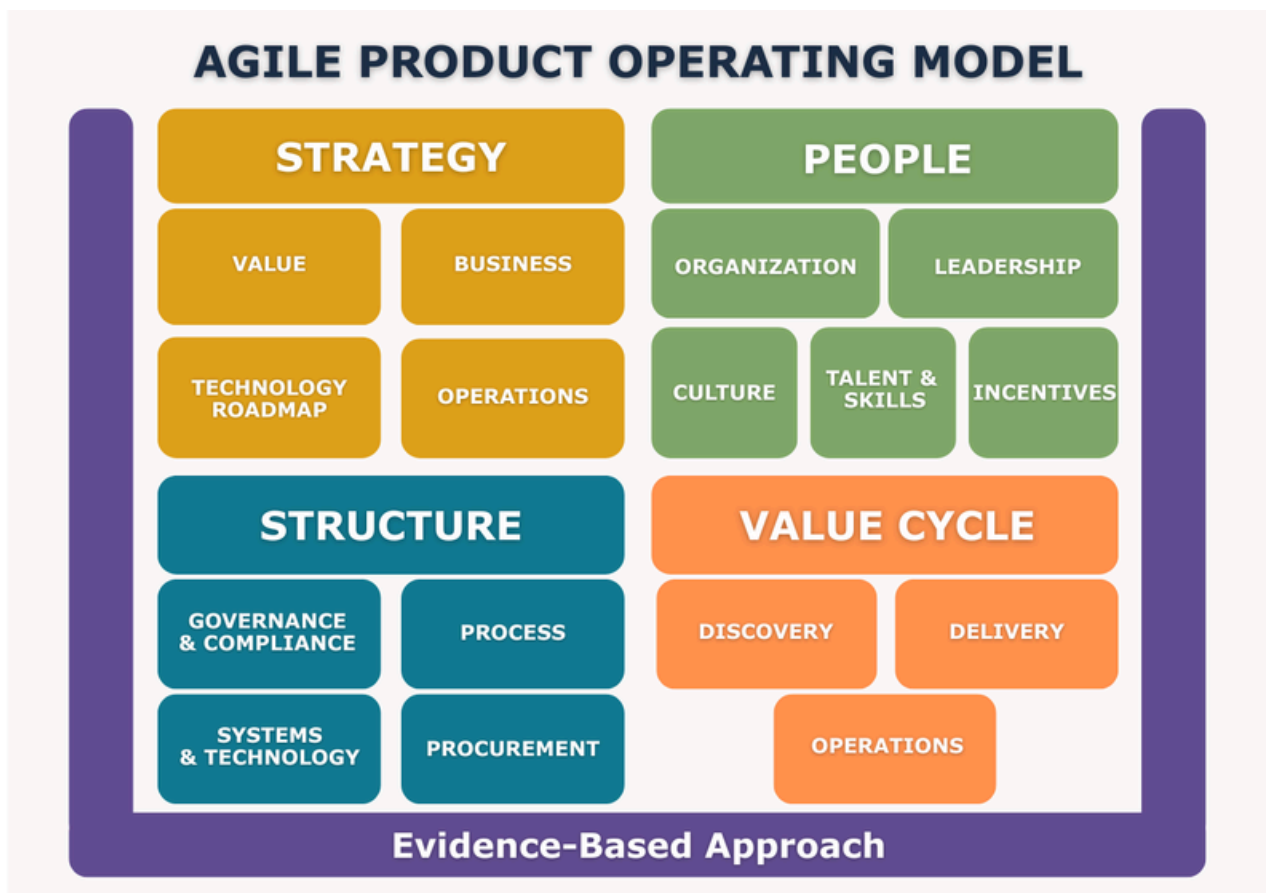
The Gap That Training Doesn't Close

The Journey Map identifies a transition that most organizations underestimate: ***the move from Level 2 (Practitioner) to Level 3 (Advanced) fluency.***

Let's recap what it means to be at Level 2. At Level 2, individuals have become genuinely capable; they chain prompts, interrogate AI reasoning, and produce better outputs than they did before. The productivity gains on certain task types are real and exciting. For example, Product Owners quickly build a compelling vision document and, more importantly, update it just as quickly when they receive feedback.

Level 2, however, is where a specific failure mode takes hold. Individual fluency is not team capability. The person who has figured out how to use AI well is not, by virtue of that alone, raising their team's AI capability. They're often doing the opposite, quietly carrying a workload that the team doesn't know how to share, building prompt frameworks that live in their own files, noticing event friction but not knowing how to surface it. The organization sees output and calls it success. The underlying capability gap compounds invisibly. Here is an example of the problem. Let's go back to the Product Owner creating amazing Vision documents. The Vision document is excellent, describing the product in great detail from many perspectives, but its length and breadth make it very hard for the team to consume. Also, because it looks so good and complete, the team does not want to question it. The Vision looks fantastic; it is more complete than ever before, but it does not fit into the process. There is no time to review it, no time to provide feedback, and it was not written for a particular event or set of stakeholders. Of course, all of these problems can be fixed, but that requires a look at more than fluency and training on AI tools, but at how their use aligns with the operating model. Level 3 of the fluency model describes this intersection as both workflow architecture and a contribution to the operating model.

What APOM Says About This



The model deliberately separates talent management from work management, not as an organizational nicety, but because conflating them prevents the organization from building skills outside the context of work. When skills development is left to the team's own momentum, it follows the path of least resistance: individuals develop in isolation, expertise concentrates rather than spreads, and the team's capability becomes dependent on specific people rather than embedded in how the team works.

The alternative to APOM is a skills-based community structure: a deliberate separation of the mechanisms for developing capability from those for delivering value. Career progression tied to mastery and mentorship, not individual output. The most effective organizations, APOM argues, are those in which developing others is understood as a core responsibility rather than an optional contribution.

Read against that backdrop, the AI fluency challenge snaps into focus. The question is not "do we have people who are good at AI?" The question is: **does our operating model create the conditions for AI fluency to spread, compound, and become collective?**

Most current operating models answer that question with silence.

Four APOM Principles That Determine Whether Fluency Spreads

1. Hire for mindset, not current skills.

APOM is explicit that adaptability and a culture of curiosity matter more than existing technical skills in knowledge work. AI fluency is not a fixed credential; it is a disposition toward learning, iteration, and empirical judgment. Organizations that hire for that disposition will build teams that navigate the engagement spectrum as it shifts. Organizations that hire for current AI-tool proficiency will find their edge eroding with every model update.

2. Make talent development structurally separate from delivery.

If the only place AI fluency gets developed is on the job, under delivery pressure, it will develop unevenly and incompletely. The Journey Map's Level 2 practitioner gets better because they're doing the work. The rest of the team doesn't, because the pressure of delivery leaves no room for it. APOM's skills community model creates the structural separation that allows deliberate capability development to happen alongside, not instead of, delivery.

3. Calibrate incentives to the behaviors the operating model actually needs.

The Journey Map identifies a specific Level 2 risk: ***the artifact effect***. When AI produces polished outputs, practitioners invest more effort in directing it and less in scrutinizing the results. This isn't a character flaw; it is a rational response to visible productivity metrics. If teams are measured on velocity and output volume, they will optimize for both. AI will accelerate that optimization. The hidden costs, reduced comprehension, skill erosion, and technical debt will accumulate below the surface. APOM's insistence on making all incentives transparent and aligning them with value outcomes rather than output metrics is the structural antidote to exactly this dynamic.

4. Design adaptability into the operating model itself.

One of the Journey Map's most important observations is that the engagement mode changes what good looks like. The same fluency level means something different in a team building with AI (Product Development with AI), versus a team building AI-powered products (Product Development of AI), versus a team generating products through specification (Product Development through AI), versus a team governing AI as an autonomous entity (Product Development to AI). Many teams are shifting modes, often without fully realizing it. An operating model that can only respond to the mode it was designed for will lag in the transition. APOM's principle of building for agility, treating environmental volatility as the default condition, not the exception, is exactly the design posture that the AI engagement spectrum demands.

The Deepest Intersection: Skill Formation as Governance

There is one thread that runs through both frameworks and deserves a clear name, because it is the one most at risk of being dismissed as a soft concern.

AI use can be subtractive. Anthropic's own research found that participants who used AI assistance for coding tasks improved their short-term output but understood the code less well afterward. The execution work that AI takes over is often exactly where junior practitioners used to build judgment. As teams move along the engagement spectrum toward Product Development through AI and Product Development to AI, the governance and oversight functions that become critical depend on human judgment developed precisely through the kind of work AI is now doing. Imagine a world where you have never written code, but now you are reviewing code!

This is not an argument against AI adoption. It is an argument for designing deliberately around it. Designing your fluency journey and your operating model, considering how building judgment, creating context, and documenting choices can support the system over time.

APOM frames all management as change management. Effective leaders drive continuous organizational evolution, focusing equally on the value cycle and on improving the operating environment that sustains it. Protecting deliberate skill formation in an AI-accelerated environment is not a reactive measure. It is a leadership obligation, an active design choice about what kind of team capability the organization is building toward, not just what output it can generate today.

What This Means in Practice

The organizations that will navigate the AI transition well are not those with the most sophisticated AI users. They are those in which the operating model has been redesigned to treat AI fluency as a collective, structural capability rather than an individual one.

That means:

Governance and Definitions of Done (DoD) that reflect the engagement mode. In PD with AI, the DoD includes human review at consequential handoffs. In PD of AI, evaluation benchmarks assess model behavior. In PD through AI, specification quality becomes a first-class criterion. The operating model must articulate these differences explicitly.

Event design that preserves inspect-and-adapt loops. Sprint Reviews that focus on value delivery, not AI-generated volume. Retrospectives that inspect the AI process and the team process together. Planning that accounts for specification complexity, not just build complexity. These are not tweaks to Scrum; they are the application of Scrum's empirical principles to the conditions AI creates.

Skills communities with an explicit mandate for AI fluency. Not a Slack channel. A structural commitment to spreading capability, sharing prompt frameworks, and creating the deliberate practice conditions that delivery pressure alone cannot provide.

A workforce transition plan that treats skill erosion as a strategic risk. Research has found that foundational skills underpin up to 80% of the wage premium associated with specialist expertise. As AI takes over execution work, the organizations that have invested in developing that depth will have it when governance, oversight, and judgment demand it. The organizations that haven't will discover the gap at exactly the moment it is most costly.

The Question Worth Asking

The AI Fluency Journey Map gives teams a diagnostic for where they are. APOM provides organizations with a framework for designing the conditions in which fluency grows, in pursuit of organizational rather than individual value.

The question they share is the one that matters most right now: not "are our people using AI?", but "is our operating model designed for a world where AI is a team member, a delivery mode, and increasingly, an entity that requires governance?"

Most organizations are not there yet. Getting there is the work.

References

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Dave West is the CEO at Scrum.org. He is a frequent keynote at major industry conferences and is a widely published author of articles and research reports. He co-authors two books, *The Nexus Framework For Scaling Scrum* and *Head First Object-Oriented Analysis and Design*. He led the development of the Rational Unified Process (RUP) for IBM/Rational. After IBM/Rational, West returned to consulting and managed Ivar Jacobson Consulting for North America. Then as VP research director Forrester Research, where he ran the software development and delivery practice. Before joining Scrum.org, he was Chief Product Officer at Tasktop, responsible for product management, engineering, and architecture. As a member of the company's executive management team was also instrumental in growing Tasktop from a services business into a VC-backed product business with a team of almost 100.

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Scrum.org, the Home of Scrum, was founded by Scrum co-creator Ken Schwaber as a mission-based organization to help people and teams solve complex problems. We do this by enabling people to apply Professional Scrum through training courses, certifications and ongoing learning all based on a common competency model.