

Sprint Inter(e)view



ALISTAIR COCKBURN

ABOUT Dr. COCKBURN

Tell us a little about yourself (your PhD, your jobs, your hobbies).

Probably the most significant thing I've learned about myself is that I grew up traveling the world and living in different cultures: Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, USA, Sweden, Scotland, Switzerland, Norway, France, Australia, Argentina. I got my PhD in Norway. Hence, I have to accept all cultures as valid and not try to change them. This applies to my consulting, as anyone might notice.

My main hobby is traveling and meeting people. After that, dancing, pretty much any kind. After that swimming, ideally underwater with fish.

How many languages do you speak ?

It varies by year. At one point Swedish, Norwegian, German, Swiss German (Zurich dialect), French, English. But then my Swedish and Norwegian got muddled together so I had to forget Norwegian to protect my Swedish. Then I learned Spanish. Now I'm not sure Swedish is still good. Each of these languages at a level I could teach classes in them. I now teach in French, Spanish and English. The others just for the rare social occasions.

How many languages do you code?

I started with Algol, moved to Simula67, from there to SmallTalk, from there to Ruby. Learned Javascript on the fly for a while. Passed through Pascal, Basic and Assembler. Currently only Ruby is meaningful. I don't know how to touch an IDE any more (haha), so I discuss the design while the other person drives the IDE.

Where are you now ?

I bought a house in the Tampa, Florida area during Covid times, when I knew there wouldn't be travel. I still travel often to Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador and Europe for clients and to see friends.

If you were an animal, what would you be? and why?

A dolphin. I love water and swimming, especially underwater - recreational free-diving (apnea) just to be with the fish. Dolphins are also very social, play, and pretty much do what they want :)).



BEFORE AGILE MANIFESTO

How was the IT World before Agile Manifesto? What were the weakness of waterfall projects and other IT projects?

I started consulting in 1991. Incremental development was already a known "best practice", but we couldn't get most of our clients to do it. The better small teams were doing this standardly, but couldn't get their organizations to accept it.

In my major project in 1994, the client already had user-centric, incremental-iterative with staged delivery well in hand, so that was an easy situation. Aside from that client, most of our energy was just to get any kind of incremental-iterative to happen.

The web changed a lot - there was no way to develop websites with linear thinking, so suddenly that part of the conversation went away, except to try to convince all the people around them to try it.

Did you know the other 16 signatories before?

Some. None of us knew everyone, although there were overlapping groups. Arie von Bennekum was new to everyone, as he was only notified about the workshop a week in advance. He jumped on a plane, stayed for 2 days, and jumped back.

Did the signatories have the same profiles (technical, management) and the same seniority?

I think everyone had been a programmer in their life, but only a few were still active programmers. Brian Marick was a testing specialist, Jim Highsmith, Steven Mellor and I were pretty much in the process space by then, and so on. There was a large age difference from the youngest to the oldest, but all had significant years of practice behind them. The experience level was very high, as shown by the quality of the conversations



The signatories of Agile Manifesto

photo : <https://www.agilepartner.net/en/the-developers-the-forgotten-of-agility/>

Can you tell us about Agile Manifesto Genesis (thinking, meeting, etc.)

Hmmm, a long story. I gave a number of interviews in 2021 on just this question - see:

- The interview with Geir Amsjø: <https://vimeo.com/511574656>
- The Agile Uprising interviews:

<https://coalition.agileuprising.com/t/podcast-updated-alistair-cockburn/680>

<https://agileuprising.libsyn.com/manifesto-co-author-interview-alistair-cockburn>

* My description of 3 decades of agile: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fG6N-QNDblM>

Manifesto Co-Author Interview: Alistair Cockburn (updated Feb 22 2017)



Oct 6, 2016

In short, I see it as a conjunction of 3 sets of overlapping conversations that were in play in the 1990s:

1 - The patterns movement. The patterns community had been holding a certain type of very affirmative yet critical discussion since the early 1990s. A number of the manifesto authors had participated in those and were familiar with that style of dialogue, at least Ward Cunningham, Kent Beck, Martin Fowler, Mike Beedle and me. I think that is the main reason the workshop worked so well.

2 - The WOOD workshops, 1993-1998. The "Workshop on Object-Oriented Design" was organized by Jon Hopkins, who liked to ski, hence Snowbird in February :). In 1994, he had Ivar Jacobson, Adele Goldberg, James Rumbaugh, Ward Cunningham, Kent Beck, Martin Fowler, Larry Constantine, and me all there. Just wow.

I was the orchestrator for the manifesto meeting, so I modeled the manifesto meeting after the WOOD workshops. A number of the manifesto authors had been at the WOOD workshops, where we also held a very relaxed and friendly style of dialogue. So, at the manifesto meeting, we already had me, Martin Fowler, Ward Cunningham, and Kent Beck, who had lived in the dialog cultures of both WOOD and patterns workshops. This experience sets a tone for a meeting, held in place by at least four or five people (including here Mike Beedle)

3 - Light methodologies. In the second half of the 1990s, a number of us had hit on lightweight, human-centric approaches. My own started in 1992 and was used on the big project in 1994. Scrum was in industrial use by the mid-90s, XP was in industrial use in the US, FDD also, in Australia, and DSDM in Europe. The "pragmatic programmers" had their book out.

DURING AGILE MANIFESTO

Legend says that you met in a mountain chalet and signed the Agile Manifesto around a Savoyard fondue and white wine! Myth or reality? Can you tell us about Manifesto signature?

LOL. Not quite. Bob Martin wanted to hold the workshop in Chicago in February, which everyone who has been to Chicago in February knows is ugly cold. Jim Highsmith and I were living in Salt Lake City, home of the 2002 winter olympics and home of great snow. I was already planning a workshop like WOOD for February, 2001, so I just pivoted my plans and offered to do the organizing if we held it at Snowbird.

So at least the ski resort part is true. The Aspen room at The Lodge at Snowbird. A nice little meeting room with a good view of the slopes. Just as with WOOD, we arranged for meetings in the morning and evening, with afternoon for conversations on the slopes or in the bar, however people preferred.

All the writing was done in the Aspen room on the whiteboard there. We sat in a half circle around the whiteboard - with no wine in sight - and word-smithed the first part of the manifesto until we had unanimous agreement on every word. The principles section wasn't quite so lucky, but the values section was unanimous to the word.



We speak less of the twelve principles of Agile Manifesto. What is the link/the story between the 4 values and the 12 principles?

Values are high level, but already 2nd level.

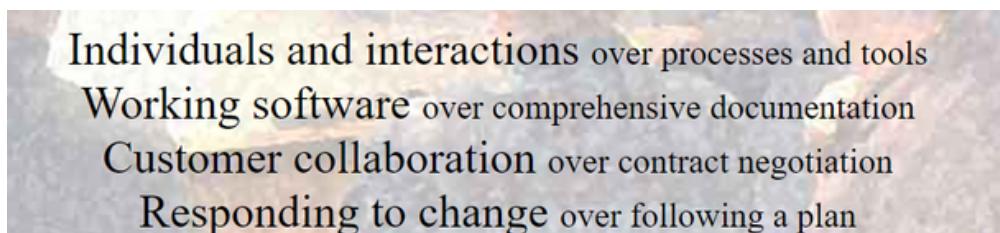
We spent an hour searching for a word, to begin with. At the end of the hour, we had two words in a tie: Agile, and Adaptive. After some more discussion and a final vote, Agile came out ahead of Adaptive. Personally, I think you need both, but in all cases, Agile became the word.

Then we said, "Nice word... But what does it stand for?" And after some hours, wrote the values section appeared, to anchor what we intended with that word.

Then we said, "Nice values... But what do those mean in practice?" And so we started on the principles. But at this point we started having more significant differences, either in expression or in advice. Also, people started to leave for their flights. So we never got complete agreement on the principles.

Personally, I suspect that every co-author finds one of the principles a bit jarring to them. For me it is the "emergent" one: "The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams." Well, also the phrasing " Welcome changing requirements, even late in development." I would rather they didn't change, quite frankly. It would be really nice if they didn't. However, since I know they will, "Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage." This part is true. So it's just the phrasing of the first part that makes my skin creep.

I'll bet that each one of us has trouble of some sort with at least one of the principles. Not enough to veto it, but with some wish to tune it.



In your opinion, why there are no women signatories of the manifesto?

There were very few women working on methodologies at the time, so there was nearly no one to invite besides Adele Goldberg and Rebecca Wirfs-Brock.

Adele had pretty much backed out of that work by that time but could have been there. Rebecca just should have been there. It was totally her space. She had participated in patterns work, she had been at the WOOD workshops, she was a great advisor to my first book, I had invited her to the WOOD 1998 workshop that I organized. Honestly, I gnash my teeth every time I think that I didn't notice she wasn't on the list of invitees.

But those are the only two women I can think of who were working in the methodology design space in the late 1990s, so even now I can't suggest someone else who would have been there.

I should say one thing. At the end of the meeting, we asked ourselves if we should keep the manifesto updated over time. And someone pointed out that the writing was a very specific result of exactly those 17 people in the room at the time. That if anything changed, the place, the year, the participants, the result would have been totally different.

So, if Rebecca or Adele or another woman had been there, we would not just have slightly different wording, we would have had an unknowably different workshop.



Adele Goldberg

Rebecca Wirfs-Brock

Do you think this manifesto was going to have such a big impact in the IT world and other areas?

We obviously knew it would have impact. We had many high-publishing people in the room, with large reach, and we were really happy with the writing. I knew I had to memorize at least the Values section and had that memorized by the time I drove to the bottom of the canyon.

But what actually happened was so much faster and so much bigger than what we imagined. Thousands of people were already doing or were hungry for these ideas. Over the next decade, agile groups just outperformed all the other groups that even the IEEE, SEI and PMI had to join in. Now some variety of agile is mandated by government agencies, it is being used outside of software. I don't think any of us foresaw this level of impact.

AFTER AGILE MANIFESTO

Do you think that the manifesto is still pertinent in current society?

It's important to recognize that we were fighting a particular battle at the time. The right-hand side of the values tells you who we were fighting. The Software Engineering Institute was driving process-focus. Rational with the Rational Unified Process was driving tools. The Project Management Institute was driving contracts and plans.

What we were basically saying was, "Please just let us talk to the customers and deliver code for them to look at! And then fix it up to suit them better"

We couldn't even do that.

So when people complain that we focused "only" on working software and not enough about customer value, I would like them to notice that we won that particular war that was in play in 2001. By now the battle has shifted to a different place.

The part that stays valuable even today is the selection of the four values.

There are dozens of things that are really important to focus on during any project, but imagine that you only get four or five to write in stone and live from for the rest of your life - Which four would you pick?

We chose:

- Individuals and interactions
- Customer collaboration
- Working software (as opposed to just documents)
- Responding to change

Those four values are still a pretty good set of values to live from.

I recommend every team go through this exercise and see what they come up with. They will be different from our four, but probably also really potent.

Have you participated in the creation of Scrum?

No, I had nothing to do with it. I read of it in 1994, when they wrote their first article.

Do you think that frameworks should evolve? If yes, why?

I am on record as saying that every project needs its own, specific methodology, tailored to them. That means that in an ideal world, we should have a whole catalog of methodologies and frameworks, each being listed with the situation in which it was found useful.

If we had that catalog, project teams could flip through the catalog to find other projects that were operating in similar circumstances, pick one or two to copy and evolve from, and then tune their working style from there. And then, if they like what they had done, write it up and add it to the catalog.

So, the frameworks shouldn't evolve, they should be used and discarded, and new ones formed, all the time. This is, it might not come as a surprise, the basis for the Crystal family of methodologies. :).

ALISTAIR'S INFLUENCE

Do you have a favorite value? If yes, which on and why?

Individuals and Interactions. I live from this.

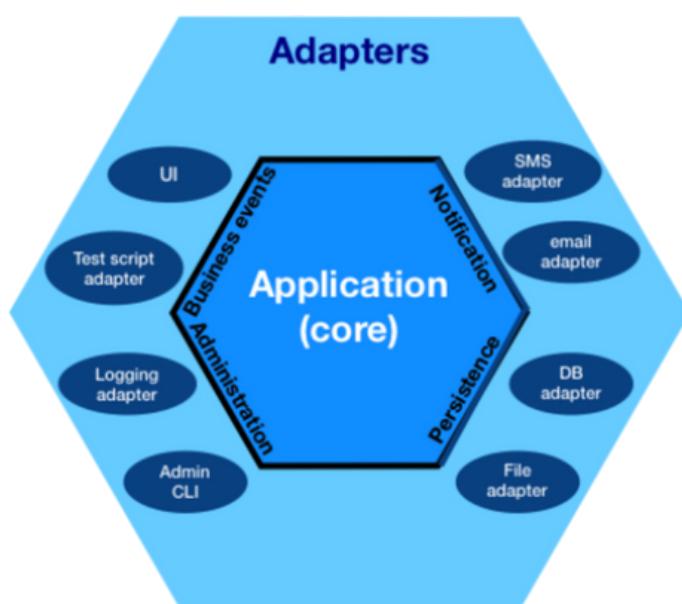
Today, we talk a lot about hexagonal architecture in France, but this concept exists since 2005, and you have your share of responsibility. Can you tell us more about hexagonal architecture and why is still relevant today?

I first drew the hexagon for a design class in 1994. I solidified the ideas when helping a friend with his design problem around 2000. I finally understood the concept of "ports" and "adapters", and got sample code, in 2005. That's when I published the pattern.

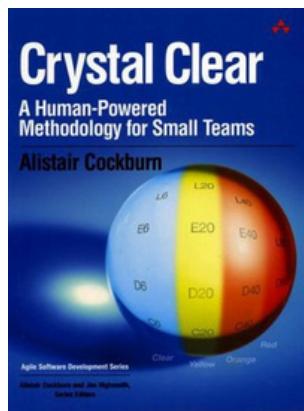
Kevin Rutherford picked it up and wrote about it for years, mostly without much uptake. Then the Domain-Driven Design community found it useful - because it clears all the non-domain element out of the way - and started popularizing it.

Quite strangely, I'm still learning what this pattern is, myself. Only in 2022 did I realize it was an example of a UML "Component" combined with the Strategy pattern. That is so perfect that this is how I prefer to describe it these days. The pattern stays the same, but my way of describing it changes with the years.

The pattern is important today for two reasons. The first is that technologies are changing so fast that we need an easy way to plug in new technologies as they show up. The other is that microservices are becoming common, and well-designed microservices implement the hexagonal architecture directly.



Can you tell us about Crystal, its creation, and its purpose?



I was working for the Central Bank of Norway in 1997. I already knew that methodologies had to be different and tailored, but hadn't reached the full conclusion yet: As I looked around the Central Bank, I saw that there was absolutely no way that any one methodology could fit all the projects they had, from mainframe COBOL and assembler to workstation object-oriented to data warehousing. All I had to do to break any theory I had was to turn my head and look around: One of the projects around me had to work differently than whatever I thought up.

I concluded that there can be no such things as The One Best Methodology, that we need dozens of them. But how to organize and describe the desirable ones?

I chose two dimensions: how many people need to be coordinated on the project (the project's size), and how much damage and death results from an uncaught mistake (the project's criticality). There are other dimensions and factors, but those two seemed major.

In fact, two is too many, people can't handle a two-dimensional selection. So I selected project size as the main index. Project size changes the communication and coordination structures the most. Then I coded them by color, indicating how heavy (dark) the methodology would be. "Clear" for teams of under ten people, Yellow for perhaps two dozen, Orange for up to 50, then Red, Purple, Blue and so on.

All of them shared only three main elements:

- Close communication.
- Frequent delivery.
- Reflective improvement.

Everything else could be tailored to the team, but those were essential.

"Crystal Clear" I wrote up in its own book. Crystal Yellow and Orange were described as chapters in other books (Surviving Object-Oriented Projects and Agile Software Development).

I have pretty much given up on methodology design in the last 15 years, focusing just on the question: How do we become more effective? without making the methodology the central question.

That gets us to the Heart of Agile :)

Let's talk about passion, the heart, simplicity, and humans now. What is Heart of Agile? When and why was heart of Agile born?

In 2014, I was talking about how agile had become too complicated, we needed to get back to its essence. Craig Brown, a friend and currently CEO of Everest Engineering, challenged me to package that. At the next Advanced Agile workshop I taught, I played with that diamond shape and wrote the four words: Collaborate. Deliver. Reflect. Improve.

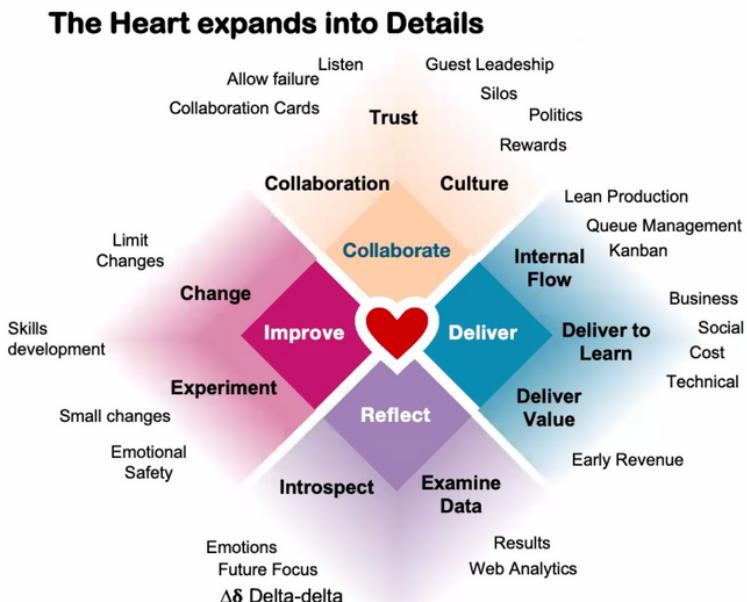
I ran the four words in various workshops for the next six months to see if they were sufficient, and found they were, so I went public with it.

Since then, we have found a few important and powerful things about these four words:

- They apply outside of software. Once we replace any reference to work products with the word "decisions", we can apply all of the agile ideas to any industry and any initiative. It is even suited to social impact projects, where people don't know any of the usual agile or Scrum vocabulary.
- These four words don't change anyone's job description or title. They are only behaviors. Thus, they can be incorporated into any but the most hard-core waterfall-style project.
- They are simple, and easy to introduce. They are not scary. Everyone already knows how to collaborate, we just have to make it more meaningful and easier for them to do that. Collaboration is technical, but there are appropriately technical people on every project, in every industry. And so on.

You might notice the similarity to the three core elements of Crystal. That's probably not an accident. :)

The big surprise to me was that I chose the word "heart" specifically to match "kokoro", which means "essence" and "heart". But everyone is happy to see an actual heart in our work. The heart almost has taken precedence over the four words. It took me a while to adjust to, but I like that, although I still keep focus on delivering results.



What is Shu-Ha-Ri?

Shu-Ha-Ri are three Japanese words that I first encountered during my first draft of the Agile Software Development book, around 2000. They are used in Japanese martial arts to describe the path of learning:

- In the first stage, Shu (follow) the student doesn't ask any questions, but only copies the instructor.
- In the next stage, Ha (break), the person starts branching out with different techniques, different weapons, different variations.
- In the final stage, Ri (leave, as in, leave the dojo), the person operates at the level of intuition and reflex, inventing, combining differently per situation in a full-body response.



The surprise is that these levels apply to all skills development, not just martial arts. Children go through them in learning, as do adults.

Understanding that this sequence is normal helps us understand why less knowledgeable people ask for recipes to follow, while the deep experts shy away from recipes. Exactly the problem with canned methodologies and frameworks: they are recipes suited for beginners, but not the best for every situation

You can read a longer version of this description at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140329201601/http://alistair.cockburn.us/Shu+Ha+Ri>

You have Kokoro engraved in your skin? What is Kokoro?

Good eye. I was looking for a way to stay with the small Japanese tradition of shu-ha-ri that I had constructed, and at the same time find a way around the level shu, which I find is a block to learning and causes most of the arguments in our field.

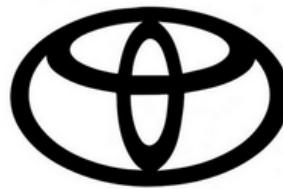
Kokoro is Japanese and means essence, or heart, as in the heart of being something. The Japanese samurai Musashi used the word kokoro to describe the essence or heart of being a samurai, so it has a good history. For this reason, I use the word "heart" of agile, and not "essence of agile" or "center of agile".

It turns out, happily, that in the heart of agile, we use words that are not mysterious: Collaborate, deliver, reflect, improve. My hope is that we can make learning so simple, using words and ideas everyone already known, that we can avoid the fight over recipes that comes when we propose shu-level technique.

And finally, to address your question: Why the tattoo? Because I got the tattoo for Ri in 2012. When I came up with Kokoro, it was inevitable that this tattoo had to show up, too. It matches my life journey, too. In 2012, I left home, left the dojo, to become a nomad - very Ri of me! By 2016, I had simplified my life to the basics. Kokoro or "heart of" can also be seen as "radical simplification". Indeed, my life had become radically simpler, as had my consulting advice, and by extension, the way I approach learning. So it all fits together.

There are many Japanese terms and concepts in agility like Kanban, Kaizen, Shu-Ha-Ri and Kokoro. Do you think Japanese culture is a real source of inspiration for agility?

There is a bit of salesmanship in choosing words. The western market these days love things oriental, Italian and sufi-mystic. Hence shu-ha-ri, kaizen, kanban, all the Toyota Production words. Not just ordinary numbers or binary numbers for estimating, but Fibonacci numbers - how cool is that?. And if you can inject something by the mystic poet Rumi in there, extra points.



In my case the three levels, shu-ha-ri, were existing terms for something I was already talking about, so I decided to use known, existing words rather than try to create my own ladder of learning.

Kokoro I added just to try to stay in the same tradition.

Do you provide training for “Heart of Agile”? Does it exist a Heart of Agile community?

Yes, to both. What is interesting is that both my training and my personality have changed since teaching the Heart of Agile classes. Having to live with the word Collaborate every day just shifts a person's behaviors. It has been interesting to watch. For the communities, we let people set one up wherever they like, or just have a heart-of-agile themed session in whatever other agile meetup group they have. In Heart of Agile meetups, what people discuss is how they have improved collaboration, delivery, reflection and improvement

Since there are no shu-level technique in the Heart of Agile, there is no specific one thing to teach. There is only dialog and exchange of ideas about how to improve at each of the four words.

There are meetups in person in Paris, in Edinburgh and in Tampa, Florida. Interestingly, thanks to the Covid lockdowns, all of the Latin American continent came together and merged the different local communities into one big community. Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Santiago, Medellin, Quito, Mexico City, Panama, Costa Rica - they all help each other organize very interesting joint events. Now, post Covid, some in-person local meetups are happening again.

Do you have support (video, site) to advise us to discover heart of agile?

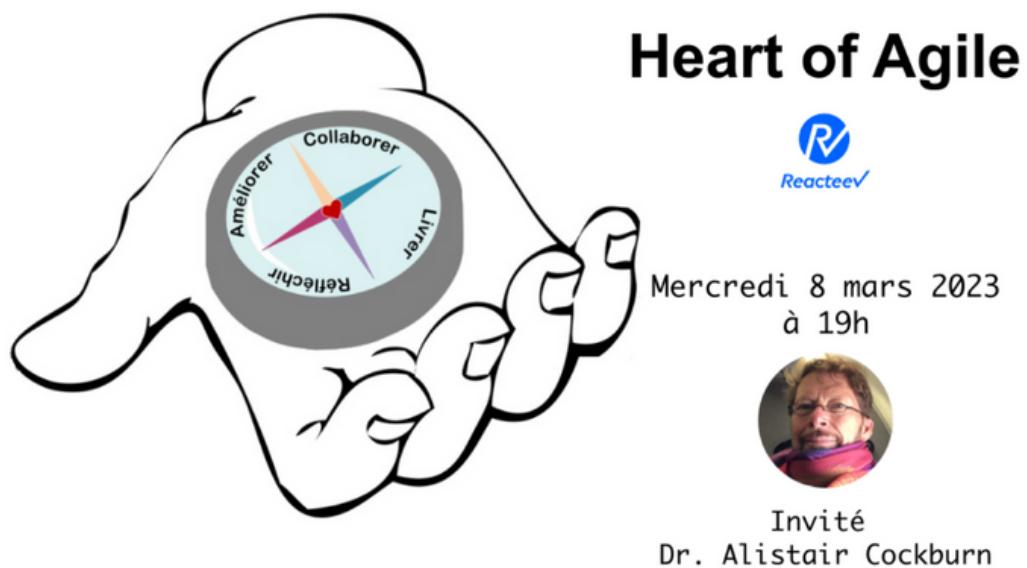
At the Heart of Agile site, there is a Library, which has blogs, presentations and articles in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. it is laborious to search through, we haven't found good search plug-in, but there are articles and presentations.

See <https://heartofagile.com/library/>.

Additionally, there are some number of videos of my presentations of mine online, a web search will turn them up.

When are you coming to France?

Tuesday next :). Watch out!



Meetup Heart of Agile

Événement de Heart of Agile - Paris

mer., 8 mars 2023, 19:00 - 22:00 (votre heure locale)

5, Rue du Mail, Paris, Île-de-France, FR, 75002
Métro Bourse

