Complexity leadership in practice – How agile coaches at Spotify enable meaningful self-organization

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Increasingly, studies of leadership have shifted away from heroic individuals to a more integrated view of the organizing process itself (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). As many organizations try forms of organizing intended to be more team oriented and less focused on individual leaders, not least in the highly competitive, high speed world of software startups, the need to understand forms of organizing less dependent on individuals, and less dependent on leader-follower dyads, is greater.

It has been claimed that leader-centric models are no longer fit for organizations that need to work faster, be more flexible, manage more complex jobs (Bolden, 2011), and learn faster and more adaptively (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Managers, it has been suggested, should not be telling people what to do or how to do it but instead function as facilitators (Raelin, 2012), enablers of informal network dynamics in Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007), creators of conditions favorable for performance (Hackman, 1986), or non-participant work designers acting as catalysts (Hedberg, Bystrom, & Starbuck, 1976). The goal is to foster a development of leadership outcomes, rather than leaders and followers, necessarily (Day, 2001).

In the world of agile software development, organizations are attempting to practice organizing for adaptiveness and learning. Agile methods of software development, such as scrum, are usually team based, iterative in small increments and using peer-based decision processes where co-workers participate or even take full ownership of goal setting and prioritization, no manager needed. One of these organizations is Spotify AB, a Swedish software company developing and delivering streamed music services, mainly known for contributing to the death of the compact disc. The company has the explicit ambition to constantly challenge and improve their own practices for developing exciting new things for customers, as well as constantly improving the organization.

Spotify is organized in a multidimensional matrix-like fashion, with the squad as the main producer of value, grouped together in tribes and supported by product owner, chapter leads, and agile coach. While this structuring itself is important in self-leadership of squads, in this paper I am taking a closer look at the role of the agile coach as a practitioner of complexity leadership, and enabler of adaptive leadership – leadership as collective, concertive action causing impactful change – through the lens of the Complexity Leadership Theory framework proposed by Uhl-Bien et al (2007). This role, with no managerial authority, contributes greatly to enabling emergent, adaptive leadership in self-governing groups, both as formal squads but also spontaneous and informal patterns of workers throughout the company.

This paper contributes to the literature on new forms of leadership, and answers the challenge from Child & McGrath (2001) to identify alternatives to bureaucracy and develop theories that account for them, through it’s empirical, qualitative account of
how one variant of complexity leadership is practiced to enable meaningful self-
organization, as well as through showing that organizations can deliberately design for
complexity leadership, without assigning traditional managers to an undtraditional task.

1. Theoretical background

1.1 A new ontology of leadership as outcomes
In the past decades, a stream of leadership theorizing has emerged that moves away
from the study of “leaders” to the study of leadership as a process which may or may not
involve a lot of top-down direction. Drath et al. (2008) has characterized the classical
approach to studying leadership as “the tripod” ontology: leadership exists when you
have a) a leader, b) a follower, and c) shared goals. In their suggested alternative
ontology, leadership is present if a system is producing the leadership outcomes of
Direction, Alignment, and Commitment. Further, these outcomes are seen as generative
of longer-term goal attainment.

Theories of distributed leadership assert that leadership can be stretched across several
actors, interacting, and emerging as a consequence of these interactions rather than
residing in any one individual or action. It is an attempt to offer a systemic view of
leadership rather than “positioning itself as a distinct theory per se” (Bolden, 2011). As is
also pointed out by Drath et al (2008), the “new ontology of leadership” supercedes the
old ontology, or classical views of leadership as leader-follower-centric - from this point
of view, hierarchical leadership or any leader-follower-dyad is but one specific
configuration of leadership practice, and the new ontology also opens up other avenues
for studying leadership.

1.2 Complexity Leadership Theory
Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007) can be placed within the new
ontology in that it describes mechanisms rather than variables that produce leadership,
but while the process view of leadership is amenable to hierarchical or distributed forms
of leadership alike, CLT is especially concerned with organizing in the context of
knowledge-producing organizations, which are more exploratory by necessity, and deal
with environments more in flux, and thus, have a need to leverage the power of Complex
Adaptive Systems which are especially suited to these kinds of problems (Uhl-Bien et al,
2007).

All organizations, they argue, are some kind of bureaucracies, so for knowledge-
producing organizations who want to leverage CAS dynamic, there is the matter of
dealing appropriately with the interplay of formal and informal organizing (or
administrative leadership and adaptive leadership). Adaptive leadership is defined as an
emergent, interactive dynamic that produces adaptive outcomes in a social system (Uhl-
Bien et al, 2007). Administrative leadership refers to the actions of individuals in formal
leader positions, as formal leaders, in an organization. It is based on authority and
position, and thus has the power to make decisions on behalf of the organization in a
top-down way.

Since all organizations have both some measure of bureaucracy, and individuals with
their own volition, one could argue that every organization has both top-down and self-
organized elements, not least because formal decisions often may have unwanted
This is where enabling leadership comes into focus. Enabling leadership is about creating good conditions for adaptive leadership outcomes to emerge, and may involve keeping administrative leadership “in check” – making sure it is aligned with, not counter to, the emergence of adaptive leadership. (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) The enabling leadership is entangled across people and actions, it doesn’t have to be tied to any one role. However, with these two views of leadership we realize that leadership can be happening outside of managers, and without followers.

(1.3 Meaningful self-organization
Self-organized alignment by volitional agents is meaningful, and the more informed they are, the more meaningful it is. Compliance is meaningless if people have few options but to comply. If they can choose, and if they are informed in their decision, their decision is meaningful, it signals something about something.)

Viewing leadership as an ‘emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals’ (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 7; Drath et al, 2008, p. 639) allows for the possibility of studying leadership by studying work. It allows for the possibility of leadership happening even without any one individual “doing leadership” to anyone else, but as a team effect, rooted in the “in-between” of individuals (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). Concertive action, not aggregated acts (Gronn, 2002, p. 429). Bolden (2011) has suggested that it is an underresearched area how one might, in organizations, aim for “leadership development” as opposed to “leader development”. This study of agile coaches at Spotify aims to contribute to filling this gap. It is the stated goal of the coaches to help teams perform well, and looking at what Spotify means by “performing well”, we can see that what coaches are attempting to do is exactly develop leadership. The focus of the study is thus not on how agile coaches might “be” leaders but on how they attempt to enable the emergence of adaptive leadership.

3. The present study
3.1 Agile Software Development and Spotify (to be expanded with more “demographic” data on Spotify)

The agile manifesto is the “founding document” of agile software development philosophy. It has four tenets: 1) Individuals and interaction, over processes and tools. 2) Working software over comprehensive documentation. 3) Customer collaboration over contract negotiation. 4) Responding to change over following a plan.

Further it has 12 principles about how to work, for example favoring face to face communication, working software as the primary measure of progress, and building a supportive environment for motivated individuals you trust to get the work done.

The agile manifesto was a reaction to increasingly heavyweight development methods based on waterfall models. Waterfall models are predictive in that they divide planning, building, testing and deployment into phases separated by stage gates. Agile methods, such as XP (extreme programming) and Scrum, are adaptive and iterative. In scrum, at
the end of each 2-3 week sprint, “potentially releasable increments” are delivered (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2013).

The three core roles in scrum is the product owner, who represents the stakeholders, the development team, and the scrum master, who is a facilitator of the scrum method. The scrum master is accountable for removing impediments on the teams ability, and to buffer the team from distracting influences.

At Spotify, the core action happens in Squads organized in a kind of matrix, see Figure 1. Squads have a Product Owner and an Agile Coach. Members in squads also have Chapter Leads, that is their first line manager. A chapter is the group of employees within a tribe who are of the “same kind”, for example, java programmers. Since squads often are a mix of competencies, members in a squad will have different chapter leads, which may be present in that squad or in other squads. A chapter lead typically divides their time between being an "ordinary squad member” and manager duties.

![Figure 1. The matrix structure of Spotify’s Technology Department](image)

Related squads form Tribes together, headed by a Tribe lead. The Product Owners do not always belong to the department of Technology, but can come from the Product organization, but they work closely with squads in Technology. The third main department is Business.

3.2 The agile coach role
Agile coaches are typically based within a tribe, are not depicted in Figure 1, and are typically working with several squads in the tribe as well as supporting the tribe as a whole in collaboration with other coaches and leaders.

3.3 Study design
The present study is using a qualitative methodology to examine the role agile coaches play in enabling people in collectives with shared work at Spotify to produce leadership outcomes. Three questions have guided me in the design and data collection of this study:

1) What do agile coaches do here?
2) Why do they do it?
3) Why is the coach role needed here, what function do they provide?
To achieve this, an iterative approach have been used to combine a more open, exploratory mode of research with a more focused, theory driven mode. Contact with Spotify initially happened through another study, through which the role of agile coach was discovered. This author was later invited back to continue research on the broad topic of self-organizing practices. An information letter was sent out, inviting interested employees to be interviewed or shadowed. I was also allowed on location to come and go as I wished, and in this phase I held some informal interviews with a developer, a product owner, a leader development person in HR, and an agile coach. I was allowed to observe in the following meetings: a quarterly planning meeting, a daily standup, a retrospective, and a “POTLAC”-meeting (the leader triad around a squad meet and discuss squad issues).

Through observations and informal interview I became interested in the mechanisms of the agile practices used in meetings and daily syncs, as well as the function provided by the agile coach, and decided to proceed by focusing the study on the coaches. See Figure 2 for a timeline of the study and its context.

Figure 2. Timeline of study and overview of pre-study and study data collection

The material analyzed in the study reported in this paper is interviews with agile coaches. Pre-study observations were made to familiarize myself with the organization, its language and practices, so as to be able to ask “the right questions”.

3.4 Methods

3.4.1 Participants

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 13 agile coaches in Spotify, whereof 1 was in New York and the rest in Stockholm, during a time span of about 1 year.

At the time of interview, the coaches were aged 27-44 years ($M = 33.75$), with the shortest tenure being 6 months and the longest 3.5 years ($M = 20$ months). Three of the interviewed coaches also had a formal leader position, being the “chapter leads”, or line managers, of other agile coaches. Of the interviewed coaches, there were eight men and five women.

3.4.2 Procedure

Interviews were conducted individually at Spotify offices except in one case, where it was online through Skype. Interviews were in Swedish or English, about 1 hrs long, recorded and transcribed by this author.

During the interview, respondents were explicitly urged to when applicable try to think of specific situations and specific people when answering, and to give examples and tell of things they actually did, rather than describing the coach role in a general way. Follow up questions were also often geared towards this, to make more explicit whether what was said was based on things that had really happened. This was done to ground the conversation in experience, and to activate episodic memory rather than semantic memory (Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010).
It became clear from the first, informal interview with a coach that the coaches are a group that have thought quite a lot about their own role, about leadership and organization, and read on the topic. Attempts to ground the conversation in experience were done to counter tendencies to intellectualize, becoming too abstract or analyzing what was done rather than talking about what was done.

3.4.3 Coding and analysis strategy
Qualitative coding of the data was conducted with a mix of a priori, theory based codes and codes emerging from reading the material. A priori codes were based on the original research questions and components of Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). All interviews were first coded by hand, and then another round of coding was done using NVivo 9 software, providing both a second review of codes and finer granularity of coding.

Following a thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analysis then moved from the level of text to the level of codes, grouping related codes together and proposing links between them. Codes that were general were examined more closely. After this, codes were aggregated under new headlines on a more theoretical level. For each such level, a “results narrative” was written, rising above mere description to a more analytical level, and illustrative excerpts were chosen from the data material.

The results section in this paper in turn is based on these result narratives, and narrowing in on the research question: How do agile coaches enable meaningful self-organization?

4. How do agile coaches enable meaningful self-organization?

4.1 The goal of agile coaches: High performing teams
What is the goal and purpose of the agile coach role? The short answer is:

The purpose of the agile coach role is to help teams perform really well.

All coaches were asked this specific question and gave very similar answers. The most common term was “high performing team”, with variations “high impact team” and “hyper productive team”. Some coaches added that the goal is also a high performing organization, not least because the organization shouldn’t inhibit the high performing teams.

Expanding on the role a little bit, the goal is to help teams find good ways of working and to improve those ways, have a sense of autonomy and ownership, be motivated and feel like coming to work on Mondays is fun. The thought is: teams create value, and coaches support teams by working with them directly, and by working with the surrounding organization, to create conditions favorable for teams to create value. Some coaches also emphasized their role as culture bearers and change agents, driving continuous improvements and explaining, teaching, and modelling Spotify culture.

The purpose of the coach role is to help teams be high performing, but what does that mean more specifically? Being a “mature” team, high performing, or a team that “works well” was described both in terms of team outcomes and in characteristics of team
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal outcomes</th>
<th>Team states thought to generate goal outcomes</th>
<th>CAS mechanism</th>
<th>If lacking, the coach might:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Delivers on their mission (is productive)</td>
<td>* Team has a sense of ownership of delivering on their mission and on cont. improvement.</td>
<td>Solutions to problems are “homegrown”, not imposed. Teams do not just accept and implement, they contribute with their local expertise to generate more adaptive solutions. They “signal back” to the rest of the organization, making the whole more informed.</td>
<td>Ask team to come up with what THEY can do to address the problem. Try to get commitment to act on those things; Shift responsibility back to team; Ask permission, get buy in, don't push out solutions on team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Has a process of continuous improvement</td>
<td>* Teams focus on value, not married to solutions, when deciding what to do.</td>
<td>The use of focusing questions work to place value as a kind of attractor, making sure generated solutions align with what is valuable – allowing for bottom-up freedom and alignment at the same time.</td>
<td>Use questions to guide members to consider the value.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Team is biased towards action. When unsure what to do, they formulate a hypothesis and test it rather than over-analyse.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-organization happens in action and interaction, not thinking about action. Trying out new things and getting feedback is necessary for learning and adaptation.</td>
<td>Try lowering the bar. Make ideas concrete enough that they are testable. “Commit to trying one thing”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Communication is frequent, open, and everyone participates.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interaction is a necessary condition of CAS. It is a way for the system to inform itself and adapt to changes with less friction. By communicating, an agent signals to the rest of the system and is being signaled to.</td>
<td>Set a format so everyone has to contribute; dial down overly talkative; call on someone in meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Atmosphere is friendly, fun, not too stressed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being stressed or not feeling safe contributes to a kind of tunnel vision that makes agents less sensitive to the variety of signals necessary for innovation, and they may be less likely to themselves signal important information to others, thus making the whole less informed.</td>
<td>Try to create social situations such as “fika” for people to get to know each other more informally; address what is causing stress for people by talking with them &amp; their manager about redistributing work etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interaction within and between teams. A summary can be found in Table 1. The primary outcomes that marks a team as high performing, from the agile coach point of view, is 1) delivery, and 2) continuous improvement.

The team goal outcomes is the “point of it all,” so to speak, but what the coach seems to focus more on is the second column of the table, which are intermediary states that are believed to lead to the desired outcomes. If a team’s way of working can be characterized as in the second column, the goal outcomes are likely to also be happening or at least not be far away. The coach’s activity therefore is generally geared towards improving the states in the second column. Each state in the second column can be connected to a CAS mechanism, in the third column, as a proposed explanation as to why helping teams achieve this state might in turn lead to generating adaptive leadership outcomes – significant and impactful change by teams in the form of delivering value. The rightmost column of Table 1 are rather concrete examples collected from the data material of what a coach might do to try to improve team mechanisms, it is meant to be illustrative and not an exhaustive list of what was mentioned.

4.2 Coaches enabling meaningful self-organization in teams

The previous part of the results describe what coaches are trying to ultimately achieve in their roles, summarized in Table 1. In this part, the focus is on what it is that coaches do, and what function coaches provide for self-organization in teams. These enabling actions are summarized in Table 2, and each is explored further in this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enabling actions by coach</th>
<th>Function for self-organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Establish &amp; remind of simple principles</td>
<td>Meaningful alignment is possible through values and principles interpreted locally, not compliance with master plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Observe team, pay attention to dynamics, monitor</td>
<td>The coach is the one person whose full focus is on how the team work together, which might be a good thing to pay attention to if you want to improve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Making the unseen more visible and tangible (surfacing conflict)</td>
<td>By paying close attention to the team, and/or by using specific facilitation techniques, the coach can bring to light conflicts or issues the team has been unable to articulate. Articulating them increases the richness of context which makes meaningful self-organizing more likely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Enable and encourage constructive dialogue as the generator of new forms</td>
<td>In constructive dialogue, the various local interpretations of values interact – their differences are made more salient and synthesis is possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Increase sensitivity of system agents</td>
<td>Agents can’t organize themselves around anything if they’re not sensitive to various signals in their context. Increasing team members awareness of context, considering the consequences, and encouraging perspective taking enables them to understand stakeholders and peers better -&gt; take better action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Working on surrounding factors such as the other leaders in the team, particularly the PO</td>
<td>The PO is often influential in what the squad works on, and for giving context and interpreting value for stakeholders, and so it is important s/he is a good PO.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
4.2.1 Establish, and remind people of, simple principles

One way in which agile coaches enable and encourage meaningful self-organization in their teams is by focusing on simple principles, interpreted locally. Coaches all agree that value is the guiding principle for their work at Spotify, this was present in all interviews and one of the most common codes overall. It becomes a “simple principle” because it is that which actions, or other rules, are measured against. It guides the coaches themselves, when considering where and with what to work:

“*My manager doesn’t tell me what to do. He just wants me to do as good a job as possible, to provide as much value as possible. And the only one who really knows, in a way, what that means is me. So in that way, it’s very open for me to work in the way I think will make the greatest contribution. And because of that it will also be unique to each coach.*”

“It’s an ongoing process. I think I ask myself quite frequently: should I be here? Is this where I contribute the most value? Or at least, do I contribute enough value to rationalize staying with this team?”

And a focus on value first is something which they continually try to instill in teams as well:

“It is pretty common that you frame what is to be done, not as ‘solve this problem’ but as ‘implement this solution’. That may or may not solve the problem; but it is very common that, I think everyone, but especially engineers fall in love with a particular technical solution that seems fun to implement or that seems very good. But there I have to help the team to not focus so much on the solution but to focus on the value we really want to achieve. And then you might find that a solution that is 10% as big will also solve the problem. And what I see is that it is very difficult to focus on value because it is fluffier, it’s much easier to say ‘this is what we’ll do.’”

Focusing on value over solutions is focusing on the why before deciding what or how. Choosing a lens, “value”, over particular solutions enables alignment in a lightweight and adaptive way. “What is the smallest/fastest solution we can do, that is sufficiently valuable to our stakeholders?” is the Spotify equivalent of “What would Jesus do?” as a simple master rule to guide decisions; a powerful mechanism for aligning efforts across levels of organization, working both as a discussion catalyst on a team level and as a question to ask oneself, to enable re-alignment of one’s own work with the purpose of creating value.

Other simple principles can be rules of thumb like the 12 supporting principles of the agile manifesto. If a coach “spots” deviations from what these rules are intended to help with, that is a typical moment where the coach might intervene to remind people, in a meeting or “in the wild”.

“I try to be present and listen to dialogues between team members, both to listen and give opinions and coach a little bit, as it happens, to emphasize certain principles, values and so on. I might hear for example ‘we’re having some problems with them, they’re not responding.’ And I would say: ‘remember that face to face communication is always better than sending an email.’ Little things like that.”

This is grounded in the belief that how people interact matters a great deal for what comes out of interactions. A “high bandwidth” style of communication is seen as
preferable, more efficient, and more effective.

4.2.2 Observe team, pay attention to dynamics, monitor
The most frequently coded activities agile coaches do are observing and listening. In a general way, what they are paying attention to, is how the team is working as a team, and how that compares with their image, mostly based on experience, of what good teams do (see Table 1). This of course will mean different things in different settings, depending on the specific team, what the situation is, and specific individuals. It should be emphasized that the observing is not passive, but open, sensitive to whatever might arise in the moment, and tempered by continual judgment of when to engage, and when to stand back.

“Partly we have a role to observe the team. And to observe them in several ways, and see ‘they’re trying to do this, this is what is actually happening, and this is what the results seem to be. And they can see these parts of it but not those. But to understand what happened, I think they have to see those other parts that I have seen.’ And to help them become aware of the things they didn’t see initially.”

"So, sometimes people want your feedback, sometimes people want your opinions and sometimes your opinions are really good. Sometimes they’re terrible, hehe. Sometimes it’s a good idea to butt into a conversation and say ‘where are we going with this?’ - sometimes it’s bad. That is by far one of the hardest parts of this role, I think. Knowing how and when to engage. But, that is what we’re thinking about, whereas, often, people in the team aren’t thinking about that. They’re not thinking about ‘when is the most appropriate time’, they’re thinking ‘what about this, this is my idea!’"

What an agile coach brings to the table is time and willingness for attending to the dynamic of the team. When everyone on a team is focusing on the person talking, the coach is the one observing the people listening.

“So if we’re trying to facilitate a meeting and look at the way people are interacting with each other, sometimes it not so much about what people are saying but it’s what people are not saying.”

“And what I’m looking for is, are they with me on what we’re doing? Do they seem to think this is valuable? And sense the energy level, I’m looking for: where is the focus? Are they mentally present or just their bodies? Is anyone fiddling with their phone, is anyone having their computer up?”

This highlights a possible benefit of having a dedicated coach role: it guarantees that there is someone paying attention to how the team itself is functioning, without requiring multitasking from any one individual, especially not one not interested in such things. The coach thus lends a kind of metacognitive function to the team by allowing the team to observe itself “thinking” – that which emerges from interactions of agents within the system.

Observations are not only in the moment but over time, of course, coaches watch teams and individuals develop. They may also pay attention to patterns, for example, that a team has failed to deliver on their commitments for several sprints now using that same planning technique, but they seem unaware of the connection between what they do and
the results they get – maybe they should reconsider their technique? Having observed, some kind of feedback loop is common.

4.2.3 Making the unseen more visible and tangible (surfacing conflict)

After observing, the most commonly coded thing agile coaches DO is questioning and mirroring what they see. They often go together, so that, the coach first observes something, tells the team or an individual “this is what I see”, and then question: “is this what you see too?” or “why is that?” or “is this important to our stakeholders?” Questions and mirroring can be about literally anything, but the basic function they provide is to make the unseen or unspoken more visible and more tangible.

Asking questions can be a way for the coach to introduce tension (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) by making conflicting views and priorities, incongruities, apparent and thus, possible to work through:

“Tell me how you’re doing this’. When someone comes in and sort of pokes at these things they haven’t thoroughly looked at before, it opens for the possibility that someone says “this is how we do it” and then someone else says “we do? Because I never did it that way...”. So my job is to come in and ask a lot of questions, and just plainly ask them to tell me how things work and in that way, open up a dialogue in the team.”

This way, coaches enable meaningful self-organization by simply making visible the fact that one is “unaligned and unaware of it”. The coach isn’t telling anyone what to do, but they are creating the opportunity for the team to face what they are doing and to consider if it is what they want to be doing. The decision to actually change anything still lies with the team.

Being closer to acting is overall an important ideal that coaches try to achieve for teams, and, for Spotify as a company. “When in doubt, make a decision,” one coach quotes the CEO as saying. Teams typically work with some way of visualizing their work – on a wall or digitally – and articulating around the work, for example in daily standup meetings and in interacting with the written notes on the wall. When speaking of making the unseen more visible, or the visible but abstract more concrete and detailed, the coaches seem to mean that this functions to make action more probable.

“And if there is a disagreement between people as to how they might proceed, I might ask them, ‘what would help them make the decision easier?’ Or, ‘Are you missing any information right now that would help you to know better which way to go?’”

“I ask like, ‘so when are we going to get feedback from the team we’re doing this for?’ And really encourage them to go face to face and show people, and demo, and do as much of that as possible whereas traditionally we tend to fall away from it... and just kind of do what we think people want rather than having a real open dialogue, that’s always been a challenge for this tribe.”

If visualizing and talking in itself is not enough to make team members commit to some course of action, the coach might try to “lower the hurdles” even more by suggesting a course of action (more likely when the action needed is in relation to continuous improvement of work process than some technical area in which the coach is not
proficient), or by further questioning to reach “one small thing” that the team will commit to trying.

“Get them to think about like, so, here’s a problem, or here’s something that is not ideal. What could we do? What possible things could we do to address it? And encourage them to come up with at least one possible thing that they are willing to commit to try.”

“Often it is enough to offer some ideas and they’ll say ‘ok we’ll try one’ and sometimes you have to challenge them a bit. ‘My suggestion is we try alternative 1 for two weeks and then evaluate it. Are you prepared to commit to that step?’”

Together, observing and surfacing – through questions or mirroring – create a kind of learning loop for the team that covers a great deal of what the coaches are trying to do for teams. It is also the main point of the retrospective, a regular meeting facilitated by the agile coach for teams to reflect on how their ways of working are working for them.

Last but not least, coaches use specific facilitation techniques to bring to light possible problems, conflicts or misunderstandings.

“If you facilitate a situation where you get the team to really look at these things it is my experience that more or less always they will start to see that “actually, we don’t agree on this, we don’t understand this at all”. Different people have different views. “Oh, but when we talked about this before you said this and that?” – No, that’s not at all what I meant! “Oh, ok” – and so they start to see that the team actually had differing views and opinions on this.”

This can be anything from certain “formats” of a meeting they’re facilitating to visualization techniques, playing agile games to “simulate” various ways of working or decision situations, and so on.

4.2.4 Enable and encourage constructive dialogue as the generator of new forms

Describing the telltale signs of a High Performing Team, what was most commonly mentioned was communication. HPT communicate a lot, they interact respectfully, and everyone is heard. A team may be able to do this more or less on their own, but it is important that it happens since this constructive dialogue is generative of novel and better solutions:

“I think it’s very common in companies that you consider it too expensive to have all these 10 people sitting in a meeting for one hour, so they only pick one developer, who is Tech Lead or something. But then you’re limiting yourself to only his brain, what says that he... it may work in some environments where this one person has all the information, but, we’re working with very new things, we’re trying to build something completely novel here. Then you need everyone’s input.”

“As a coach you don’t want to steer the discussion, but also make sure no one is dominating it completely. So you learn as a coach to find formats that makes this better or worse. I know which of my teams I can pose some open questions to and they will together find such a dialogue and come to a decision, and which of my teams don’t work well under such conditions and will never have a very productive dialogue, so I find ways for them to do it. /.../ Finding something to make their interaction different.”

As is suggested by the second coach, a constructive dialogue does not have to be self-
organized to happen. Here a theme is visible that will be explored more in the discussion, the idea that outcomes matter much more than how you get there. If the team can self-organize and run a great retrospective, or create a constructive dialogue, that is great and means that the coach can focus their efforts elsewhere to continually improve the organization. If they can’t really get there on their own, that’s ok, because the coach has techniques and experience and knows what to pay attention to.

While the team is trying to come up with solutions, the coach is trying to enable a team dynamic that will generate great solutions. Enabling that may require a lot from the coach, or very little. There is a broad spectrum for the coach here, from doing nothing and having the team completely self-organize, to “throwing” them an open question that they run with, setting a format/technique that will enable dialogue, to directing the dynamic more “live” – dialing up and dialing down people who should maybe talk less or more, to acting as a surrogate and yourself asking the question you sense others want to but are not, or simply contribute your own personal perspective in a discussion as a participant.

Making a dialogue constructive is not just about everyone having a say but what one is saying. Team members need to contribute with their best judgment, voice dissent when necessary. “Politely question your colleagues’ – politely. We’re tough on our products but not our colleagues” explains one coach.

The goal is an open environment where people feel safe to express even “half finished” thoughts without risking being gunned down. Only half of the motivation seems to be because coaches believe decisions will be better with this kind of dynamic, the other half is due to it being more pleasant and motivating for people to feel they’re being heard and valued. It makes people feel better, and like they belong, coaches explain.

The constructive dialogue is a place for the kind of asymmetric interaction related to preferences (which includes knowledge, skills, beliefs etc) that is generative of adaptive leadership outcomes (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). By fostering heterogeneity, transparency, and respectful ways of interacting, agile coaches are strongly enabling meaningful self-organization.

4.2.5 Increase sensitivity of system agents

Coaches not only work with formats and facilitation techniques, nor live direction of dynamics, but also by affecting the sensitivity of agents within their system. What kinds of cues to agents respond to? How do they respond? Different ways of interacting may give rise to different results, and affects possibilities for alignment.

One “cue” we have already brought up, as it was such a major one: considering the value of any solution or action, as the main cue to be sensitive to.

Other examples include trying to enhance team members’ awareness of context, how their actions affect others in their team, and how the team’s actions affect others in the organization.

“I talk a lot about journeys. 'What is it that you know, that they don’t know? And what have you done to explain it to them, so we all know we’re going to Paris and
not London? /.../ People become much more aware of their surroundings and what is happening around you, how people see you, how you see them."

"[About developers sometimes being snarky reviewing each others code]. So, we pulled together all the Android developers, from several teams, in a discussion on how we work with this, how we could improve and so. So that was a way to get each individual to see their role in the whole, and that how you act actually affects others and so on."

Making agents in a system more sensitive to context works in tandem with making the context more transparent and rich. You can spell out “stakeholder value” in blinking neon letters, but it won’t help them align with it if they won’t open their eyes.

Working on improving empathic skills is also encouraged by the coaches, taking other’s perspective to understand stakeholders and colleagues, and oneself, better.

"In this situation where two team members can’t communicate, I talk to them one by one, I hear what the problems are. I explore with them – ‘so what do you think will happen if you never confront each other about this?’"

"Thinking about how they affect others in a group with their behavior, both positively and negatively. A lot of that is either new to people, they’ve never been asked or challenged to think about it before. And for some it’s very difficult."

Encouraging team members to consider the consequences of their actions on others, and be more attentive to the needs of others, strengthens mutual interdependence within the system.

4.2.6 Boosting surrounding factors

4.2.6.1 Working around the team
Coaches have a very broad area of interest and influence. They don’t want to address at a team level what could be better addressed at the tribe level, for example, and the coach is hired to the tribe, not a team. Deciding what kind of approach to coaching to use and whom to coach seem to be decided at the tribe level, in a kind of collaboration between agile coaches and tribe management, and based on where it is believed coaches will have the most impact. It can be with the teams that need the most help, or with teams doing highly prioritized work. Deciding where to focus was brought up by several coaches as a bit of a difficulty. Some felt they had responsibility for too many teams, leading to too much “context switching” and leaving little time for necessary contemplation or to just sit with a team and get to know them better. Having many teams was described as feeling like you just popped in, “sprinkled some fairy dust” and left. Several coaches mentioned at the time of interview that they had just decided in their tribe to work in a more focused way with fewer teams.

Another way coaches seek to maximize impact and value is by working with the other leader roles around teams, especially the Product Owner (or equivalent).

"In principle, the Product Owner is like any team member. They’re really a part of the team. So that’s one of all the variables you can work with coaching a team."
However, the PO usually have a very big influence on what the team is working on, how the team works - if you have a clear vision and a clear ‘this is what we’re here to do’ that helps very much. So most [coaches] invest a lot of effort into working with them.”

The Product Owner often has a central role in providing context for teams, and interpreting what it means for a team to provide as much value as possible. In one of the larger tribes, the coaches got together to create a competence framework for PO, so they would be able to better support new PO, many who were new to the role. When a coach is starting up a team, preparing the PO is an important opportunity to have great impact on the team-to-be. If the PO has experience from other, more traditional organizations previously, some “unlearning” might be necessary to make sure they use a more democratic style, share information and so on. The PO is supposed to help and support the team in building “the right things”, that is, focus on what is valuable for stakeholders. Not be a manager with all the answers – ideally.

The coach might also support the chapter leads, the line managers in a tribe. This was typically brought up when talking about interpersonal conflict, helping the CL prepare for a difficult conversation with a team member for example.

Thus coaches have a great possibility for influence in their tribes through influencing other’s ways of interacting, promoting agile principles of transparency and helping others be better leaders and better colleagues.

It seemed to be common practice that the three leader roles around teams, Product Owner, Chapter Lead, and Agile Coach, got together on a weekly basis to discuss team issues. It was also described that how in practice, the responsibilities of the roles would conflate to some degree. While each role has a different focus, it seemed common to feel a shared responsibility for helping the team become better in a way that made clear cut lines between roles irrelevant. Specific team configurations would also play in to this – in some teams, the CL is the manager of most of the people in the team, in others, there is no CL present in a team. In teams where a CL is not present with their people on a day to day basis, the AC might be substituting as the CL’s eyes and ears in a way they’re not in teams where the CL is present all the time but the coach isn’t. Some teams have a PO more skilled and interested in “people stuff” and may adopt a more coaching style, and so on.

4.2.6.2 The good and the bad entanglement

From a few of the coaches, a somewhat different view of how the company is structurally organized emerged. One suggested things had been in the described way, while the other described the situation at the time of interview to be in the described way. The suggestion was that the administrative leadership, in this case, how the product organization was “too strong”, and how goals are made into metrics, was thought to work counter to rather than aligning with and supporting the espoused ideal of self-organization.

“It is my opinion that we have a rather strong product owner organization and hierarchy that shows up a bit... too far down, with the teams. /.../ For example in our tribe, we have [n] squads. I think we’re a bit too locked into these [n] squads, the constellations of people are too locked. And that is probably because there is a
Product Owner for each squad. And those PO’s are very keen on ‘this is my mission, this is what I’m evaluated on, and so I need these people to deliver on my mission.’ /…/ I try to make our Key Results be more like, what is it we’re trying to achieve? Not what we’re trying to deliver. What is the intended effect of what we’re delivering?"

An interesting aspect of this is that while this coach suggested that maybe the emphasis on “alignment” over “autonomy” was a bit too strong where he was and management should let up a bit, another coach felt that, from his point of view elsewhere in the organization, maybe “autonomy” had been overemphasized over “alignment” – and they attributed the same kind of problem to their respective causal explanation.

"The most important thing is that we succeed as a company, not as a team. So that push for autonomy might have created some sub optimization in areas. And you can sense some of these tendencies. Like a manager who is pissed off because he requested help and got the reply ‘that’s not our priority’ and he thinks that, this is the primary priority in the company, how can they say that?"

The latter coach heard of sub optimization and saw it was because teams prioritized autonomy over alignment. The first coach on the other hand, saw that a strong focus on deliverables in the metrics meant that a manager would be unwilling to change anything, for example let some of “his” people go work on something new and prioritized, in the 3 month period that was planned because that would affect his ability to deliver on his mission – resulting in sub optimization. Teams are so “aligned,” they’re following a plan over responding to change – the inverse of one of the four values of the agile manifesto. These situations highlight that to strengthen the self-organizing capabilities of the system, agents need both the freedom to act on their volition but also sensitivity to the relevant context of what value they’re meant to be working towards.

A different example of how a coach might work with entanglement issues was described by a coach who recently moved to part of the organization that was deemed a bit troubled. They did not have teams, or teamwork, and there was interpersonal conflicts. At the time of interview, the coach described their work as mostly 1 on 1’s, and the goal was to prepare them to begin to have the discussion of how to be organized.

“I’m preparing everyone to get there. Right now I am working with the management team, we’re reading a book on shared goals and how that affects a team, and how you can’t be a team without a shared goal. Soon they’ll be like ‘oh, we need a goal for each team!’. At the same time I’m talking to individuals, preparing them and gauging where they are and how they feel about working in a team. /…/ If we had everyone in a room and I asked ‘what works and what doesn’t?’ we couldn’t do anything with the output. Some would say we should have four teams and others, two teams. We can’t do anything with that, because the manager hasn’t formulated a vision yet. We need to consider where we’re going [before discussing how to organize]."

The coach believes that form must follow from purpose, align with purpose. Starting with the value, starting with a mission, and then, aligning the organizational form to support that mission. (tänker en ref med nät om organizational configurations??) The coach is also neither imposing the mission, or the form, but working with leaders and
employees to create “fertile soil” for teams to eventually grow. The episode highlights the enabling leadership that coaches can provide. Even while having strong opinions on what helps teams, that teams are good way to work and so on, coaches see that solutions must grow organically in alignment with some purpose. Lacking the authority to impose solutions on teams also helps to insure this – if coaches are to change teams, that change must grow organically or it won’t stick.

5. Discussion

5.1 Functionalism – the theoretical interchangeability – entanglement!

An interesting find is how the agile coaches seem to have a functionalist view of their organization and their work. The importance of not being “married to solutions” was repeatedly stressed in various ways by most coaches - the focus, from which all else follows, should be on what value, essentially, what effects, are desired. As described by Drath et al (2008), the function of processes do not determine the structure, one might reach the same (or a similar enough) outcome in several different ways. In systems theory, this concept is referred to as equifinality, and it is present in the coaches stories through several levels of the organization.

One coach said: “we could send a rocket to the moon if we thought it would help us deliver on our mission”, referring to that it is the ends, not the means, that are specified to the team.

The concept of equifinality is clear enough in what is wanted from team's thinking: focus on the effect, and on what difference will make a difference, not on “solutions”. However, it is also present in the coaches own work and in how Spotify is organized in a larger sense. The outcome desired from teams is “high leadership”, but whether this is produced by the team alone or highly supported by PO, CL, and AC, or somewhat supported by those roles, or whether it is the AC or the CL who has a 1 on 1 with that team member being a jerk, and whether the team is using a physical board or a virtual tool to visualize and track their work, is not what matters. What matters is the effects of the practices. If a practice contributes to a good outcome, it is, basically, a good practice.

This also allows for equifinality’s flipside, multifinality - that the same “form” may produce different outcomes. This is also a reason to align with the help of an attractor, interpreted locally, rather than importing solutions from other organizations or even just other teams. As coaches stress, each team picks their own way of working, a tool that works well for one team may not be valuable to another team and the point of the tools isn’t the tools, but their effects.

Since agile coaches' time and attention is not unlimited, it is desired that teams should be able to produce impactful change themselves. Most coaches said that their goal was basically to make themselves redundant, but that, in practice this was unlikely to happen because of the state of flux teams and the organization is in. There are always new teams, or teams with a new member, or a new mission, and so on, that might mean they would benefit greatly from some coach support.

Some things need to happen for teams to be “high performing”, these things are entangled across people and roles, and they may “pop up” in the form of something the
coach does, something the coach teaches, or in the team regardless of coach. Which forms are more likely however will depend on things like richness of context, sensitivity of agents, and where people focus their attention.

5.2 Two modes of working - on the system and in the system – conditions & perturbing actor

It is the stated goal and purpose of the agile coaches to help teams perform well, and looking at what Spotify means by “performing well” (Table 2), we can see that what coaches are attempting to do is develop leadership, rather than themselves doing leadership. The focus of the study has thus not been on how agile coaches might “be” leaders but on how they attempt to develop leadership as concertive action. They do this by use of mechanisms to enable meaningful self-organization (Table 2) for themselves and for teams, tending to their organization as a Complex Adaptive System and seeking to leverage the dynamic capabilities of CAS. Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on identifying and exploring the strategies and behaviors that, when appropriate CAS dynamics are enabled, foster organizational and subunit leadership outcomes such as innovation, learning and adaptivity (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

In the language of CLT, the work of agile coaches is to a large degree practicing enabling leadership to foster adaptive leadership, all within an administrative leadership framework (Spotify, a company that still has a CEO, managers, and hierarchy).

The agile coaches have two “modes” of working as enablers of generative dynamics, which could be classified as working on and working in the system. They work “on” the system for example by providing structure when facilitating, teaching various agile tools such as a daily standup practice, visualising work, and by working to make sure teams get what they need, or know how to ask for it, from their PO and other people around them. Spreading ideas and working to improve individuals awareness and sensitivity also works to influence under what conditions team members work.

Their other mode of working is “in” the system, or live. While choosing a format for a retrospective might be considered setting conditions, what coaches describe they do most of all is observing and questioning - something that happens live, in the moment. Being there, in person, and paying attention, provides an extra dimension to a situation no format can provide. Working live means the coach can provide the team with what s/he thinks they need right now, in this moment, to improve the dynamic, perturb the system by injecting tension to break a possible false consensus, or to reinforce behaviors the coaches consider beneficial.

Whether the coach is working on or in the system, s/he has no formal authority to tell anyone what to do. This is an important point differentiating the agile coach role from a manager adopting a “coaching style”. Teams adopt ideas and practices they find useful and valuable, and dismiss those they don’t like. This means the coach has incentive to themselves consider the value of the practices they propose to or use with teams, and to make an effort in making that value or the rationale behind something transparent and clear to the team in a way that someone with the power to “push out” rather than offer suggestion does not have to do. This need for consent by those with “skin in the game” is a crucial part in what makes alignment meaningful. That individuals with a choice adopt a certain practice means something, it is an alignment that carries information, it signals
back to the system in a way that mere compliance with “pushed out” solutions simply
does not.

5.3 Two levers for fostering self-organization – richness/sensitivity
At the time of interviews, interviewed employees at Spotify seem to conceive of their
own organization as having to innovate, fast, to stay alive. Large corporations such as
Google and Amazon are competing in the same space of streamed music services and to
beat the competition, Spotify mostly needs to innovate faster. When the challenge is not
to perfect the application of known procedures, but to “out-learn” the competition,
leveraging the dynamics of Complex Adaptive Systems are especially appropriate for
rapid exploration of solutions (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

A CAS is an open systems whose components (agents) are interrelated and is capable of
adaptation and evolution. This means certain conditions must be met for CAS to emerge
and function effectively, for example, agents have to be able to interact with each other
and their environment (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). The coaches strengthen
the ability of the system to self-organize through two main levers, on an abstract level:
a) by increasing the richness of the context, and b) by increasing the sensitivity of agents
to context.

The interest of the organization however is of course not to have any self-organization.
There is no a priori guarantee that what is self-organized is 1) fit for its environment or
2) in any way in line with the organization’s vision and mission. One wants to employ
CAS dynamics to rapidly explore solutions since one cannot know beforehand, what
solutions will be good – but the solutions to what problem? Solutions that align with the
vision and mission of the organization.

To achieve this, the cues for agents to respond to, relevant to the organization’s mission,
can be made more salient to agents in various ways. Agents getting their context only
delivered through a manager will have a poorer/thinner context than agents in a context
rich with signals. Encouraging team members to for example focus on value before form
is drawing attention to cues regarding the company vision. Strengthening individual
team member’s confidence to speak their minds, and making sure the conversation
format encourages them to share their best judgment, makes the environment richer for
their colleagues, enabling better decisions.

The other lever is to work on agent sensitivity, since the richness of the context won’t
matter if agents aren’t picking up on cues, however abundant. Coaches work to increase
agent sensitivity to user needs, awareness of context, considering the consequences of
their own actions on colleagues, and perhaps even noticing themselves and their own
behaviours more. Making agents more sensitive, and linking what they’re sensitive TO to
the company vision and mission on different levels, strengthens the interdependency
between agents and thus, the capability for self-organization.

In practice, any action by a coach may be working on both these levers at once,
especially considering that team members are at once agents in the system and provide
context to others.
6. Conclusions

Spotify is a company who are explicitly trying to achieve teams with what one might call very high degrees of leadership, realized in teams themselves take ownership of their vision, their products, and their ways of working and create impactful change (high value), all while making sure they coordinate with other teams and share what works. They’re weary of traditional management techniques, but they are not substituting that with a “no management” laissez-faire style. Spotify has been lauded by Jeff Sutherland, the co-creator of Scrum, as “agile done right” (Sutherland, 2014), and by Alistair Cockburn, one of the authors of the agile manifesto for their implementation of an agile scaling matrix (Kniberg & Ivarsson, 2012). Several of the coaches told of deciding to come to Spotify because they are at the forefront of agile organizing and thus, an exciting place for an agile coach to work and to have stimulating peers.

Spotify are attempting to balance autonomy with alignment through the use of agile methodologies and where agile coaches seem to play an important role. This study set out to learn more about how the agile coach role might enable the kind of adaptive leadership outcomes necessary to stay competitive in a fiercely competitive market.

Are agile coaches leaders? Yes, but more than that, what they are working to achieve is leadership outcomes generated by a team. From this perspective I think it is uninteresting whether they “are” or “are not” leaders. They are people who, without formal authority, attempt to catalyze adaptive leadership outcomes in collectives. They do this by making use of two levers to increase the CAS capabilities of the system: increasing the richness of the context, and increasing the sensitivity of agents.

More concretely, coaches work to enable meaningful self-organization by: establishing and reinforcing simple principles; observing group dynamics; making the unseen more visible and surfacing conflict; enable and encourage constructive dialogue as the generator of new forms; increase the sensitivity of agents to context, consequences, and other agents; and boosting surrounding factors, such as developing leaders.

The fact that the agile coach is a dedicated role probably contributes to the ability of the CAS to meaningfully self-organize, by preventing the coach from being able to “push out” solutions on their teams and instead have to get permission and buy in from the team to have real impact on them. That agents have real volition means their organizing is meaningful, signals more, than mere compliance. Just like heterogeneity is valuable for the generative capability of the constructive dialogue, on a higher level, it is valuable for the adaptive capabilities of the organization as whole.
7. References


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