From Principles to Practices

aka There is not Spotify Model
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

SOFTWARE REQUIREMENTS

ANALYSIS

PROGRAM DESIGN

CODING

TESTING

OPERATIONS
“I believe in this concept, but the implementation described above is risky and invites failure.”

Dr. Winston W. Royce
Scaling Agile @ Spotify
with Tribes, Squads, Chapters & Guilds

Henrik Kniberg & Anders Ivarsson
Oct 2012

Dealing with multiple teams in a product development organization is always a challenge!

One of the most impressive examples we’ve seen so far is Spotify, which has kept an agile mindset despite having scaled to over 30 teams across 3 cities.

Spotify is a fascinating company that is transforming the music industry. The company has only existed 6 years and already has over 15 million active users and over 4 million paying. The product itself can be likened to “a magical music player in which you can instantly find and play every song in the world”.

Alistair Cockburn (one of the founding fathers of agile software development) visited Spotify and said “Nice - I’ve been looking for someone to implement this matrix format since 1992!” so it is really welcome to see.

So how is this managed?

We have both presented at conferences and been caught in engaging discussions around how we work at Spotify and how the company handles agile with hundreds of developers. Many people are fascinated by this, so we decided to write an article about it.

Disclaimer: We didn’t invent this model. Spotify is (like any good agile company) evolving fast. This article is only a snapshot of our current way of working - a journey in progress, not a journey completed. By the time you read this, things have already changed.
“the team structure works well for us because it is well-aligned with our culture, our technical architecture and platform, our product, and even our workspace”

Anders Ivarsson
Organisational culture
“Culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organisational situations deriving from culture are powerful.”
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Edgar H. Schein
“If we don’t understand the operation of these forces, we become victim to them”
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Edgar H. Schein
Schein culture model

Culture as a Onion Slice

- Artifacts & Products
- Norms & Values
- Basic Assumptions

Culture as an Iceberg

- Visible Part
- Invisible, immersed, Part
From principles
- Transparency
- Collaboration
- Feedback loops
- Aligned Autonomy
- Psychological Safety
Transparency
Top 3 Check-in

- Creates transparency in two directions
- Helps with focus
- Spreads by example
- Sparks conversations
Collaboration
Tribe Standup

- Started as OKR sync
- Became Delivery Standup
- Now a Tribe Standup
- Representatives from every squad meet once a week
Big room planning

- Run every quarter
- Seeded with goals (company, mission, tribe, squad)
- Every squads presents their ideas
- Leads present priorities
- Together we agree on the work and create OKRs
Feedback loops
Taps with squads

- Leads meet with every squad
- Usually 1-2 per Quarter
- Four topics:
  - Impact
  - Delivery
  - Health
  - Help
Lunch with the leads

• Informal opportunity for a conversation
• Easy sign-up
• Close connection
Aligned Autonomy
Setting clear expectations

- People need expectations
- Defining clear boundaries enables autonomy
- Autonomy comes with responsibility
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@jchyip
Structure for thinking about principles

- Make Playback fabulous for consumers and develop the media platform other teams can depend on
- Spotify drives innovation of formats and effortlessly delivers content making it accessible to everyone, everywhere while protecting the rights and intentions of creators

Product  Delivery  People  Technology

STRATEGIES
Discussing aspirations

- Seeded with initial ideas
- World-cafe style conversations
- Discuss, suggest improvements
Creating aspirations collaboratively

- Review outcomes of the conversations
- Vote on the most relevant “to focus on”
Aspirations
Aspirations

Spotify drives innovation of formats and effortlessly delivers content, making it accessible to everyone, everywhere while protecting the rights and intentions of creators.

Make Playback fabulous for consumers and develop the media platform other teams can depend on.

Strategies:
- Product
- Delivery
- People
- Technology
Aspirations

Playback Pillars and Aspirations

We acknowledge that Spotify’s end users are our most important stakeholder and that well functional playback of content is their most fundamental expectation on Spotify.

PRODUCT

- We always evaluate user impact when implementing changes and back our decisions with insights based on data.
- We also enhance and evolve our product based on insights on what is good for the product and the user without explicit requirements from stakeholders.
- Our products must solve and address pain points that can be understood intuitively by the user without specific input from stakeholders.
- Our contribution to Spotify is a strong competitive advantage and a key differentiator.
- We only implement or advertise functionality that we believe in and is of proven user value.

STRATEGIES

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- Make Playback fabulous for consumers and develop the media platform other teams can depend on.
Aspirations

Playback Pillars and Aspirations
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- We always evaluate user impact when implementing changes and back our decisions with insights based on data.
- We also enhance and evolve our product based on insights on what is good for the product and the user without explicit requirements from stakeholders.
- Our products have sold and are easy to understand interfaces that together with top-notch developer support enable Spotify teams to innovate on the playback experience.
- Our contribution to Spotify is a strong competitive advantage and a key differentiator.
- We say "true," and will not implement or advertise functionality that we don’t believe in and that don’t have a proven user value.

Playback Pillars and Aspirations
We always know why we deliver what we deliver.

- We deliver often and ship early.
- We value learning and experimentation over perfection.
- We tell the truth about progress and estimates. All work is explicitly visible.
- We have clarity over the scope of our work and don’t commit to any delivery unless we are committed and can fulfill the commitment.
- We create slack time to inspire innovation and bold moves.
Aspirations
Aspirations

**Playback Pillars and Aspirations**

**PRODUCT**
- We always evaluate our impact and implement changes and back our decisions with insights based on data.
- We also enhance and evolve our product based on insights on what is good for the product and the user without explicit requirements from stakeholders.
- Our products have solid and easy to understand interfaces that together with top-notch developer support enable Spotify users to innovate on the playback experience.
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**DELIVERY**
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**PEOPLE**
- We have a psychologically safe environment that enables trust and an open collaborative culture.
- We set an example for how to embrace diversity and inclusion at Spotify.
- We work in small squads with clear inspiring missions. Squads are located and organized by area and cross-functional.
- We cultivate the growth mindset and always strive to improve.
- We are generous in giving and receiving feedback to support each other in this.
- Everyone gives and feels the respect they deserve as a valued title member.

**TECHNOLOGY**
- We work together on everything from requirements to code.
- We create the best solution to problems together.
- Our technical roadmap is aligned with the product roadmap.
- We aim for an always-releasable master branch for bug prevention over bug detection.
- Our solutions are designed with simplicity in mind; no functionality is added early and we value removing features whenever possible.
Psychological safety
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Amy Edmondson
Introduction workshops

First we create a shared understanding
Getting data

Understand what is the “current state”
Action-focused squad workshops

- Each squad (and leadership team) worked on practical actions
- Some were tiny, some lead to interesting new practices
Psychological Safety in Playback

- I understand that people are different and I encourage everyone to be themselves
- I am curious and open to others’ opinions without judging
- I encourage others to ask questions
- I am mindful that my words and actions affect others so I adjust my behavior
- We all make mistakes and I provide a context where others feel safe admitting theirs
- Emotions do belong at work

Show respect
Assume good intent
Listen without judgement

Be kind
Care for one another

PLAY BACK
PLAY BACK
Feedback jar

• We run a series of workshops on giving and receiving feedback
• We needed a tool to help people visualise progress
Mistakes column

- Existing culture of blame-free incident post-mortems
- Wanted local practice as a regular reminder
- Small things reflected upon weekly
Effectiveness Review

- From Sociocracy 3.0 (now called “Peer Review”)
- Facilitated workshop
- 360 participants
- Direct, honest

https://patterns.sociocracy30.org/peer-review.html
What’s not to like about this code

- How to get better talking about problems in code
- Separate author and the code that is written
- Identify “problems”
- Mob-programming session to fix them
To your own practice
What kind of practice?

- Distinguish between different types of practice
- Establish an allergic reaction to Best Practice
- Use Good Practice when it’s evident
- Focus on developing Emergent Practice
Inspiration for your set of principles
“[…] theory is important, to urge management to examine its assumptions and make them explicit”
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Douglas McGregor
Change
“We aim to make mistakes faster than anyone else”
“We aim to make mistakes faster than anyone else”

Daniel Ek
THERE ARE TWO THINGS I DON'T LIKE

CHANGE AND THE WAY THINGS ARE
At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.
“[…] cultural change is an evolutionary process from the present, not an idealised future state design.”

Dave Snowden
“A learning-oriented culture is a valuable organisational resource, but creating such a culture is not an end in itself. I argue that a learning organisation is created by focusing renewed employee attention on the work, not by trying to change the culture. A learning culture emerges as a by-product of practice with a new way of working—one that is more interdependent, more aware of others’ tasks and needs, and more willing to improve—not the other way around.”
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Amy Edmondson
“Things become better when we accept them as they are; not as we want them to be.”

From Tobbe Gyllebring (@drunkcod)

via Gitte Klitgaard (@nativewired)
Thank you!

Marcin Floryan
Tech Tribe Lead at Spotify

Questions? @mfloryan