

NAVIGATING POLITICS in Agile/Lean teams

Katherine T. Kirk
@kkirk

Intro

- Katherine Kirk (@kkirk)
 - Over 10 years contracting and freelancing in a variety of roles within the IT and Media industries
 - Coach, PM, Delivery Improvement Specialist, DBA, Web Admin etc etc
 - Specialise working with really "troubled" projects, where simplistic solutions don't quite cut it
- Tribal upbringing
 - Different perspective

Why 'Navigating Politics'

Agile/Lean doesn't always solve politics???

- This is a perspective from experience
- It's not based on theory
- You will see inconsistencies and things that need correction
- AIM: to focus and generate discussion

Agenda

- Introduction
- Tribal view
 - The collaborative structure
- My Journey in Technology
 - Corporate structure
 - Introverts In the Mix
- Why Agile/Lean doesn't always stop politics
- An Eastern Philosophy for Strategising
- Summary

INTRODUCTION

Politics has been around
a lot longer than Agile/Lean

2,400 years ago

Aristotle wrote about Politics

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-politics/>)

Oxford definition:

*“Activities aimed at improving someone's status
or increasing power within an organization”*

**Don't underestimate
politics' power to Kryptonite
your Agile/Lean application!**

People have died holding onto political positions
– think: historical and current wars

- “Take down that portfolio board transfer it to a spreadsheet ... its forcing people to be open about their priorities... causing conflicts in the executive team”

Manager after we showed him our last successful release:

‘I’m really pleased. You’ve done so well to do twice the work in the same time frame... I’m now confident you can keep up the pace with a 50% reduction in programmers as well’

Describing a political play:

“I’m all about trust, so don’t mention any of this to anyone”

CEO: “Stop mentioning Tech Debt. Its depressing me and not in line with our innovation strategy”

Politics is a symptom

- An activity which results from emotion
 - Frustration, pain, fear

A TRIBAL VIEWPOINT

The Trend of the Tribe Word

My perspective

- Tribe is a generic term that doesn't refer to the same thing or set of behaviours
- Tribal behaviours are different around the world
 - Desert tribe vs rainforest tribe vs North American Indian tribe etc etc
- Tribe: born into, married into, never changed – overrode even family
 - Arrunte versus Pitjantjara
- In technology – it means 'peer group'?

Agile/Lean isn't a tribe,
but it DOES have a tribal way of working

My tribe: Desert

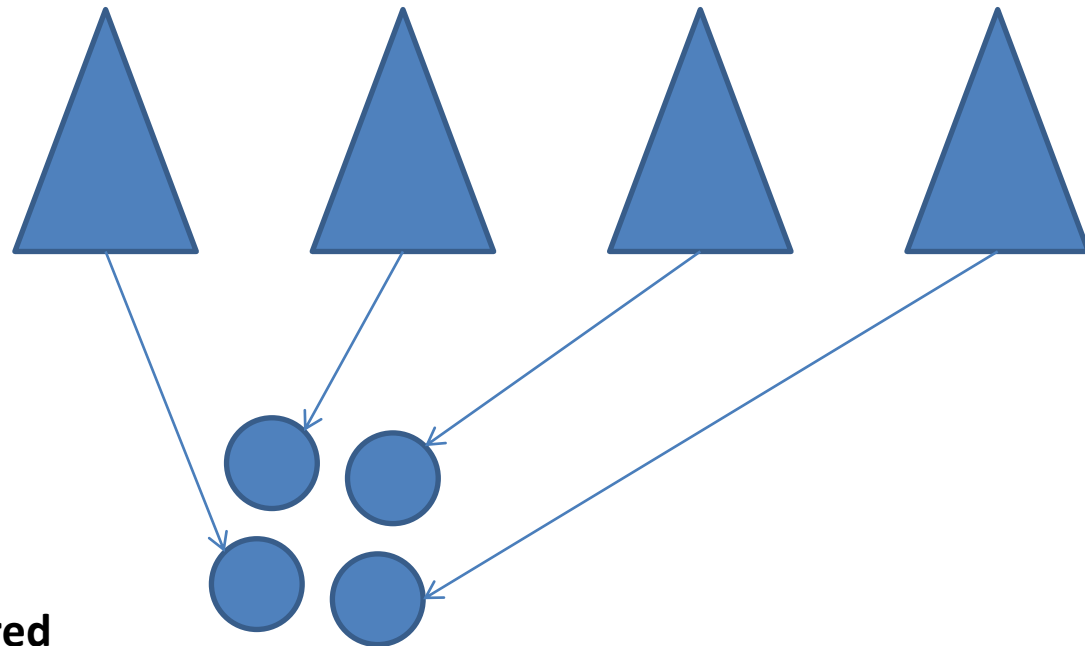
- Lots of space, limited resources, harsh context
- Whoever was best to lead at that time, did
- We had specialists
 - Hunters– spear throwing competitions –skill and strength
 - Foragers– knowledge sharing get-togethers –knowledge and experience
 - Elders – decision making ‘conferences’ –strategic thinking, compassion and wisdom
 - Facilitator/Healer (daily tribal life) - family connections – respected for compassion, organization skills

Family Group

- But lived and collaborated as a ‘family group’
 - 1 hunter, 1 forager, 1 elder, 1 facilitator/healer (daily tribal life) etc.
 - Collaborating /leading interchangeably
 - When critical could be very dictatorial – life was on the line
 - Experiential

- This is what I call a: Rotational hierarchy

**Peers to
compare/
share with**



**Family Group
– collaborate to
survive
-Lead when required**

AGILE / LEAN STRUCTURE

Similar!

- Specialists collaborating to innovatively succeed in a harsh environment
 - Tech – knowledge peer group
 - Design– ideas peer group
 - Facilitator – collaboration peer group

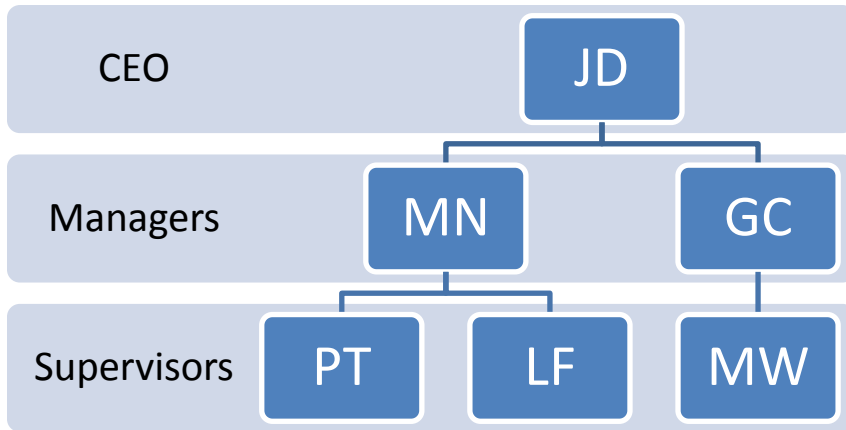
Contextual Collaborating/Leading

- Success = 1 tech, 1 design, 1 facilitator etc
 - Not competing or comparing against each other
 - Sense of mastery/value from their external 'peer group'
- collaborating to get something they deem valuable
 - which elevates their position or gains them acceptance in their chosen, external hierarchy/peer group

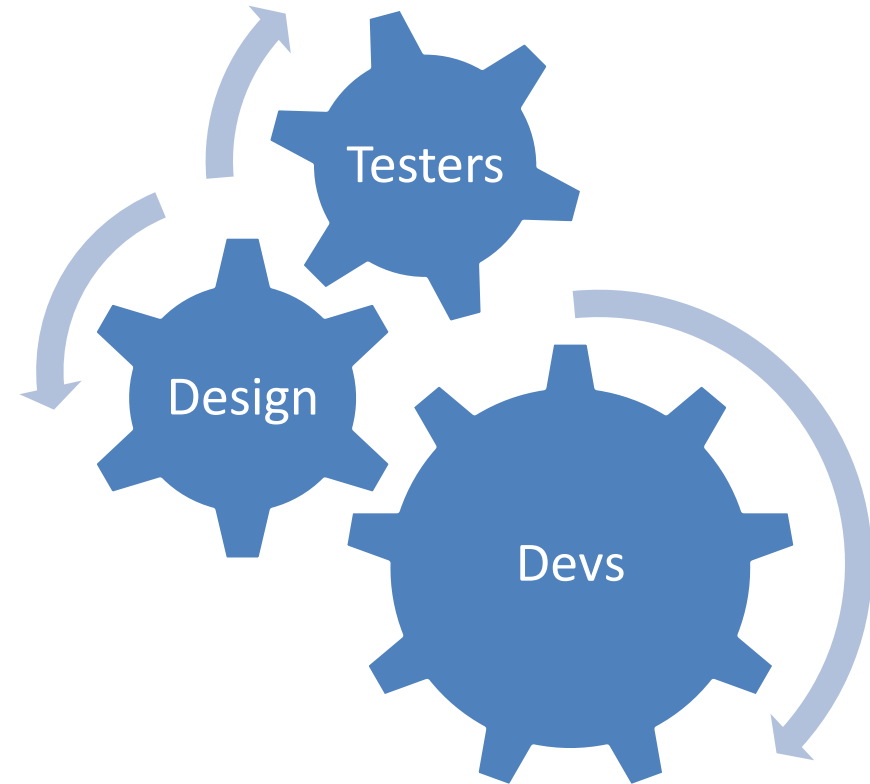
**POLITICAL SCIENCE THINKS ABOUT
THIS STUFF**

Clashing structures

Static



Rotational



Conflicting structure

- SO: this flexible Agile/Lean working structure
 - Rotational hierarchies
- Encased in a traditional, static structure
 - a deep rooted legacy from the past
 - think: class systems & old-style factories

Alternatives to traditional Hierarchy

- Political science in this space
 - Heterarchy?
 - Hierarchies interacting with a Hierarchy
 - Adhocracy?
 - flexible, adaptable and informal structure
 - Holocracy - you now can pay a fee to learn?

Go explore!! No need to re-invent the wheel

20 year old me: Corporate Hierarchy is new!!!

- My viewpoint when younger
 - Corporations / Hierarchy – AWESOME (along with supermarkets)
 - Ordered, uniforms
 - Stability
 - You GET PAID money which you can do with what you want, you owe no favours!

Core element of Power Hierarchy

- Corporations generally have a power driven hierarchy
 - This is often referred to as psychopathic (The Corporation, 2003)

Found the downside...

- What is this new thing call ‘psychopathic behaviour’???
 - Like the white culture overturned the black culture to make a profit or get to heaven – you could kill for power
 - Sometimes people in power weren’t that smart – not like elders
 - Self interested and manipulative
 - Charming
 - Unfeeling but could mimic empathy

Became aware

- Hierarchy was very powerful
 - The white culture dominated and nearly annihilated the aboriginal culture in Australia
 - I witnessed just some of it

- I was conflicted: what about other people? How could they not consider others? AMAZING
- Amazed that this world survived without caring for each other!!
- I saw a deep suffering. Every day at work. And I was drawn to solve it, wherever I was.

THEN I FOUND TECHNOLOGY

- Technology attracts Psychopathic Leadership
 - “Many of the jobs attractive to psychopaths – such as CEO’s, salespeople and media types – are often found in the tech industry”, Forbes – 2013 (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyclay/2013/01/05/the-top-10-jobs-that-attract-psychopaths/>)
 - Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work, by Paul Babiak, Ph.D., and Robert Hare, Ph.D., published in 2006

Top 10 professions, most psychopaths

- Psychologist Kevin Dutton—the Great British Psychopath Survey, 2013:
 1. **CEO**
 2. **Lawyer**
 3. **Media (TV/Radio)**
 4. **Salesperson**
 5. Surgeon
 6. Journalist
 7. Police Officer
 8. Clergyperson
 9. Chef
 10. Civil Servant

<http://www.spring.org.uk/2013/07/which-professions-have-the-most-psychopaths.php>

Today - historical legal and financial structure encourages psychopathic/old style management behaviour

Compassion can be turned off

- Although psychopaths can't become compassionate, normal people can turn off compassion and think like a psychopath – Huffington Post, 2010
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcella-mroczkowski/danger-empathy-and-psycho_b_667637.html)
- Studied 203 people deemed as having 'management potential' (Paul Babiak, Robert Hare and Craig Neumann) – found that this group had a much higher rate of psychopaths than in the normal population
(<http://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2013/04/25/the-disturbing-link-between-psychopathy-and-leadership/>)

**“... Let me tell you about this new
process I’ve found that gives you
MUCH more control ...”**

Introverts

- Technology industry has a large bunch of introverts which don't like interacting that much (yes, I'm stereotyping here)
- 'Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking' Susan Cain, 2012
<http://www.idgconnect.com/blog-abstract/7541/introverts-vs-extroverts-tech>
- (Now introverts are becoming very popular – e.g. Big Bang Theory)

“... we want management to consider their opinion, we just don't want to interact with management to tell them about it...”

Technology Industry liked Waterfall

- Back then...
 - Psychopaths didn't have to collaborate – they can make a plan and exert their power
 - Introverts didn't have to interact that much – they can document the hell out of everything and apportion blame rather than be in a confrontation

- Aaaaah!

But one BIG problem

- Technology Industry consists of
 - people working with people to make tools that help people interact
- There was a LOT of interaction, whatever the ideal structure they chose
- Even Waterfall had to try to ‘make interaction work’

So... I used tribal structures...

- I started using tribal structures and ways of working to respond to this demand ...
 - and in my own small world... it worked.
- Then saw it in a book: Agile/Lean –
 - official practices and everything!!!

Aaah... I had found my place

**SO WHY DOES POLITICS SOMETIMES
INCREASE AFTER AGILE/LEAN?**

Here is a hint...

	Traditional	Agile/Lean
Introvert's fear	Fortnightly meetings 1	Fortnightly meetings 13
Boss's horror	Do what the boss says? YES	Do what the boss says? Maybe

Simple, really....

Psychopathic self interested behaviour

+ introvert avoidance tendencies

+ high pressure change

+ plus collaborative, interactive Agile/Lean

+ pressure from traditional static hierarchical power structure...

All squeezed together = potential hotbed of politics

WOAH!

That explains it, then?

HOW I'VE DEALT WITH IT

Agile/Lean has Awesome Tools

- These already help
 - BDD, TDD, User Story formats, Story Mapping, System Mapping, Kanban Boards, Graphs, Charts, Meetings etc etc

Simplified Strategy?

- We still search for a simplified 'strategy'
 - To help on how and when to apply them

Without strategy...

- We invent more structure / rules
- But more structure / rules = less innovation & less adaptability to rapid change

- In a rapidly changing industry which relies on
 - innovation
 - deals with tricky technical and people problems
- We need help
 - Getting insight and
 - Dealing with people

WHAT I FOUND WORKS FOR ME

Investigated Eastern Philosophy

- I study Buddhism to find ways to eliminate suffering in the workplace
 - Buddhism generally focuses a lot on caring about people
- Particularly useful – Mahasi Vipassana
 - Vipassana is about facilitating Insight
 - Mahasi was a guy that tried to simplify Buddhist practices right down to what's essential

STRATEGY: COOLING DOWN POLITICS

Use Agile/Lean tools & practices

- Continually reference the Agile/Lean toolbox
 - find tools that you can pull out in this strategy format
 - Respond contextually – every political situation is different

1. Gain Equanimity

Get clarity about 'what is'

WHY: You can't get where you want to go without knowing what is and where you currently are

- Choose tools & practices which take the emotion out of the situation (with whatever tools you have)
 - Encourage inquiry without distortion (e.g. from emotion, concepts, prejudice or old-conditioning)

Calm View

- This is why psychopaths are appreciated – they can distance themselves from the subject
 - **BUT: this can turn into indifference and apathy**

2. Facilitate Insight

WHY: Or they will be destined to repeat the destructive behaviour

- Oxford Dictionary definition: “an accurate and deep understanding”
 - Lucky we are surrounded by Engineers then!
- Choose tools which help give people that ‘aha!’ moment

- You can start to get insight by contemplating this
(based on the Buddhist 3 universal truths)
 - Nothing will satisfy
 - (e.g. Innovation is now the norm)
 - Its not just about my perspective
 - (e.g. Speed and demand means we have to interact and consider others)
 - Everything changes
 - (e.g. Whatever we do is out of date as soon as we start)
- **But: insight does not necessarily instigate action!**

3. Utilise compassion

- THE MOST IMPORTANT
- WHY: so they can create a solution which people will buy into and actually follow through on
- Compassion helps us to anticipate the likelihood of an initiative/solution's success

Compassion–cognitive neuroscience

- Professor Singer – book/research
 - Alarmingly she says
 - “natural capacity for empathic resonance can easily be blocked – not just in psychopaths – but in all of us”
 - Empathy can lead to burnout – compassion motivates
 - She claims:
 - “The neural networks underlying the effects of empathy and compassion training are very different... [Empathy] increases negative emotions...[Compassion] ... increased activation in brain networks associated with affiliation and reward”

A psychopaths view

"I tell them [CEOs], get rid of the empathy. Focus on what you've got to do. The most important thing is the mission," he says. "Ask yourself what am I here to achieve?"
And "empathy," he concludes, "doesn't help you get there."

Andy McNab, 2014

<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/29/business/psychopath-andy-mcnab/>

- Here is where psychopathic behaviour fails us
 - psychopaths are not able to access that ‘database’ of compassion in order to understand how a people orientated solution or initiative might be like to experience...
 - they cannot use compassion tools to increase the likelihood of success of a people orientated solution

4. Apply Grit & Wisdom

- This DOESN'T get solved overnight – this is a continuous challenge
 - Stay the course
 - Think – how can I ensure sustainability and determination
- Continuous short cycles of action & experiments
 - More political = less dramatic change you should make
- Steadiness is vitally important to calm down chaos

The 'Strategy' Overview

- Equanimity – clarity
 - We need to see the situation as it is clearly so we can act appropriately WITH reality- to get effective actions
- Insight – right understanding
 - We need to be effective in our response – to focus on the right things (e.g. Jeff Patton's eternal quest of building the right thing versus building a thing right)
- Compassion – generate effective action
 - establish likelihood of success with a system of people interacting with and for people
 - Whatever we 'see', however we act, it will impact PEOPLE
- Grit – create sustainable actions and pace

Person asks the monk

“how long should I continue?”

The monk replies

“for as long as it is wise to do so”

SUMMARY

- In this ever changing technology industry, be always aware that
 - People are interacting with People to make software for People to Interact

Consider the bigger picture

Psychopathic self interested behaviour

+ introvert avoidance tendencies

+ high pressure change

+ plus collaborative, interactive Agile/Lean

+ pressure from traditional static hierarchical power structure...

All squeezed together = potential hotbed of politics

Its not your fault (but you've gotta deal with it)

- 1. Equanimity
 - Seek clarity through inquiry
- 2. Insight
 - focus on the right things
- 3. Compassion
 - establish likelihood of success with a system of people interacting with and for people
- 4. Grit/Sustainability
 - This is an issue that won't go away (e.g. Aristotle)
 - Expect politics (its not your fault!)
 - Find & incorporate ways of dealing with it long term

Finally....

- Perhaps this is a different perspective?
- Hope: open things up for discussion
- And encourage you to research the power of Compassion (Prof Singer's work)

Thankyou!

- Love to get your feedback
 - Please vote with the conference app
- Twitter: @kkirk