Can the Kanban Method avoid becoming another Management Fad?

Benjamin Mitchell
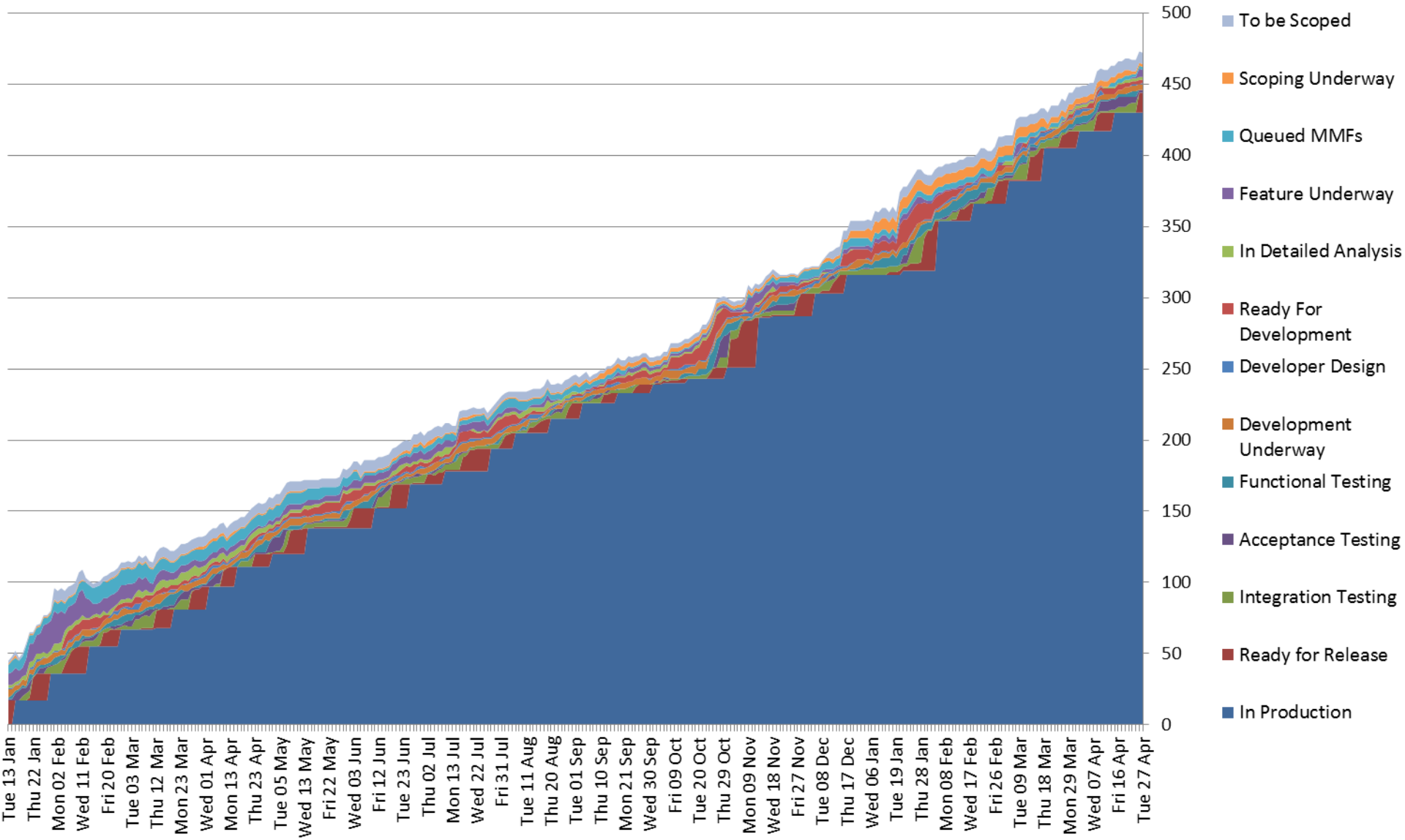Independent Consultant
benjaminm@benjaminm.net
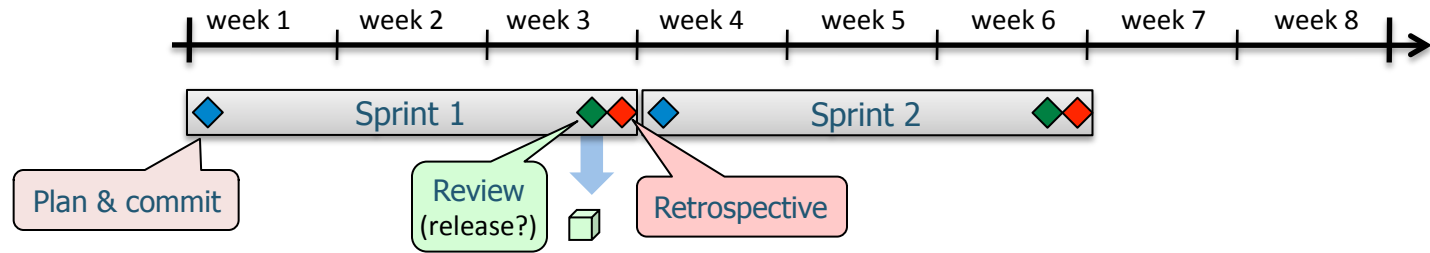http://twitter.com/benjaminm

Cumulative Flow Diagram of Stories by Process Stage

Legend:
- To be Scoped
- Scoping Underway
- Queued MMFs
- Feature Underway
- In Detailed Analysis
- Ready For Development
- Developer Design
- Development Underway
- Functional Testing
- Acceptance Testing
- Integration Testing
- Ready for Release
- In Production

Alternatives to Sprints

Sprints

week 1	week 2	week 3	week 4	week 5	week 6	week 7	week 8

Sprint 1 — Sprint 2

Plan & commit

Review (release?)

Retrospective

Separate cadences

week 1	week 2	week 3	week 4	week 5	week 6	week 7	week 8

Retrospectives (4w)

Planning cadence (2w)

Release cadence (1w)

Event-driven

week 1	week 2	week 3	week 4	week 5	week 6	week 7	week 8

Retrospectives (4w)

Planning (on demand)

Release (on demand)

Source: Henrik Kniberg
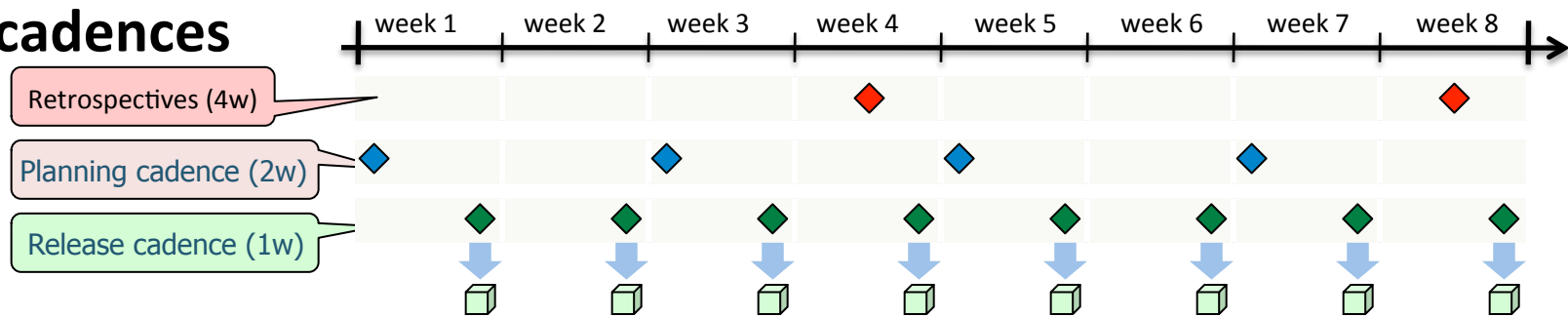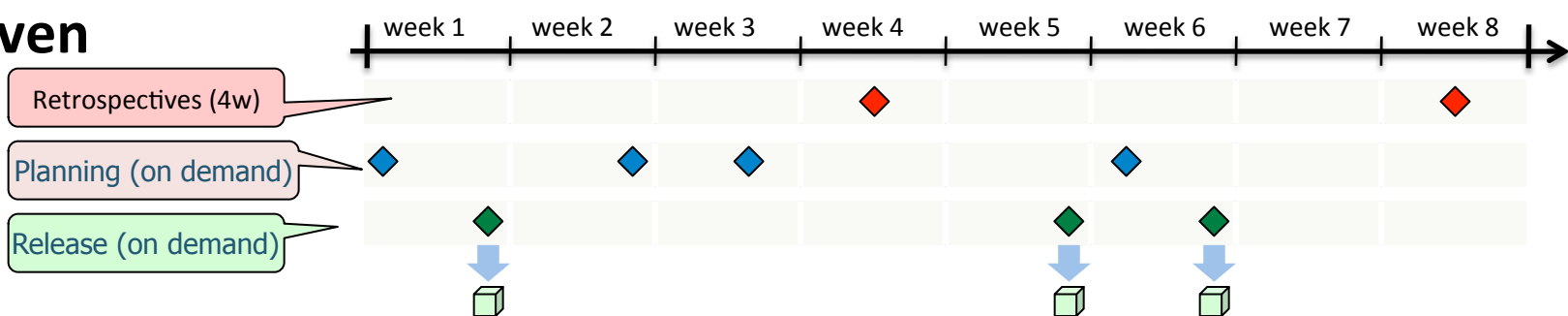
Things we learnt

- Pull vs Push: focus on what can we finish, not what can we start next?

- Decouple cadences: planning, review and release can be separated in time

- Making incremental improvements based on knowledge, can be more effective than waiting to make a perfect change

- Not all work has the same needs for timeliness

David Anderson's Kanban Method

- An approach to **incremental, evolutionary change** for technology development/ operations organizations

- It uses a work-in-progress limited pull system as the core mechanism to **expose system operation (or process) problems** and **stimulate collaboration** to **improve the system**.

Foundational Principles of the Kanban Method

- Start with what you do now
  - Evolve, rather than change your process
- Agree to pursue incremental, evolutionary change
  - Agree that a slow, gentle, evolutionary approach to improvement
- Respect the current roles, responsibilities and titles
  - Agree to respect current roles, responsibilities and titles to minimise fear and facilitate future change

The 5 Core Properties of the Kanban Method

1. Visualise the workflow
2. Limit Work In Process (WIP)
3. Manage Flow
4. Make Process Policies Explicit
5. Improve Collaboratively (using the scientific method and other models)

Logic of the Kanban Method

To gain broader support for the Kanban Initiative:

- "[agree] to respect current roles, responsibilities and job titles [in order to] eliminate initial fears"
- Position Kanban against sweeping processes that might include the "wholesale removal of certain positions" to "help individuals realize the benefits [of the Kanban Method]"

But:

- "What will happen next is emergent change. Beyond that we cannot predict."

Questions:

- Do you tell people this? Wouldn't this generate fear? How would they see this as a benefit?

Logic of the Kanban Method 2

It avoids problems of previous approaches:

- – Resistance: "a sweeping engineered change has recently failed due to resistance from team members"
- – Politics: "the politics of the organisation makes it too risky to propose and implement sweeping changes"

It achieves this by:

- – Building consensus agreement to fix problems
- – Developing a shared understanding of the process, focussed on data and objective, rational discussions
- – Avoid emotional, anecdotal and subjective discussions

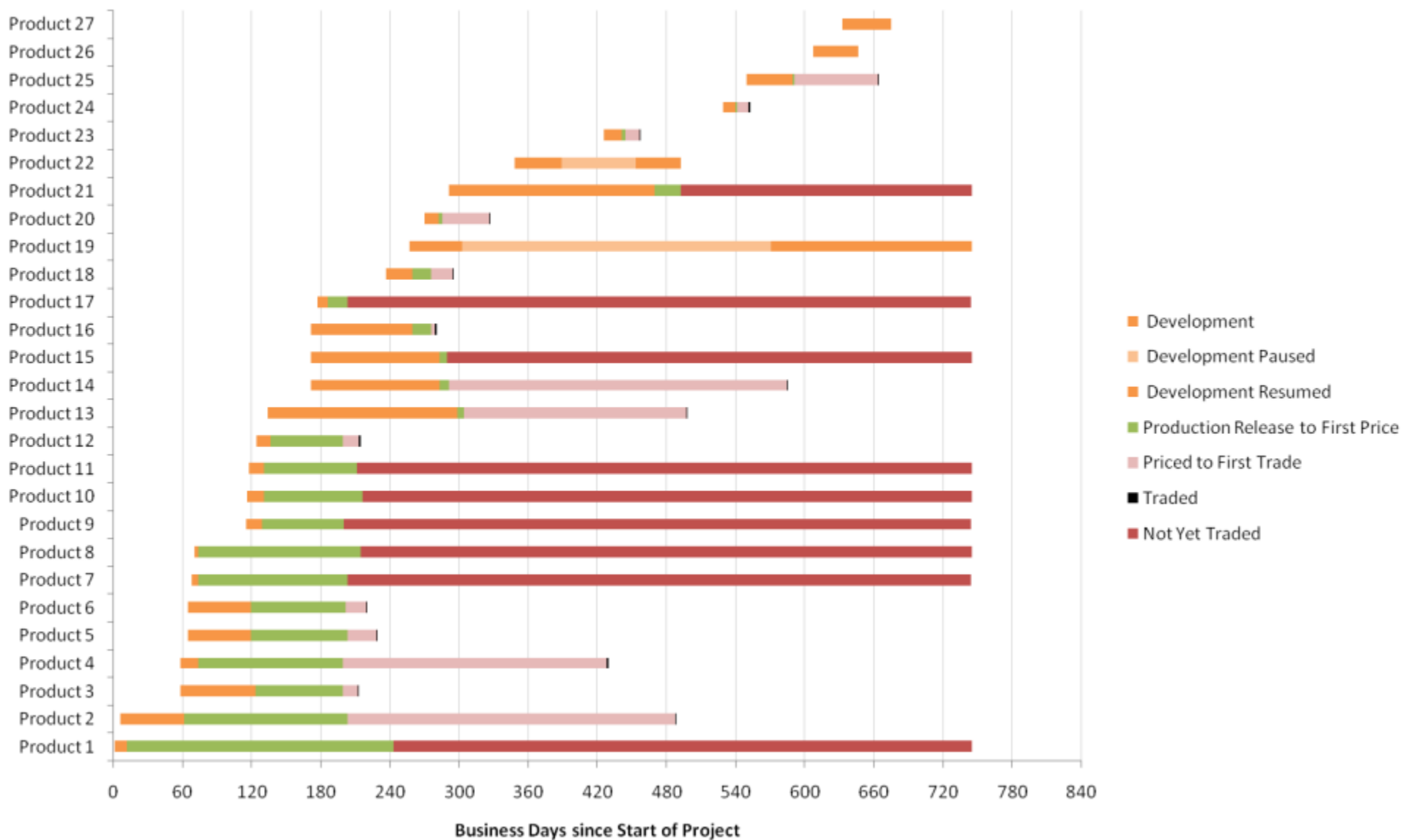Does this fix the causes of 'resistance' and 'politics'?

Logic of the Kanban Method 3

"It is the WIP limit that ultimately stimulates conversations about process problems"

"The team has the option to break the limit, ignore the problem and carry on, or to face up to the issue, discuss it and suggest a change."

This works fine, expect when it doesn't.

Timeline of Products from Development to Production Trading

Business Days since Start of Project

Legend:
- Development
- Development Paused
- Development Resumed
- Production Release to First Price
- Priced to First Trade
- Traded
- Not Yet Traded

Kanban Defensive Routines

- Ensuring that some work isn't visualised
- Not visualising because "there's too much work"
- Taking a board down because "we've got another tool (less visible/electronic) to do that!"

Unilateral Control Model

Core Values & Assumptions	Strategies	Consequences
• Be in unilateral control • Win, don't lose • Ensure no one feels bad • Act rational	• Advocate my position • Keep my reasoning private • Don't ask about their reasoning • Ease-in • Save Face	• Misunderstanding unproductive consequences and defensiveness • Mistrust • Self-fulfilling self-sealing processes • Limited learning • Reduced effectiveness • Reduced quality of work life

"It's not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail."

Conversations aren't contests!

Calvin

When a person pauses in mid-sentence to choose a word, that's the best time to change the subject!

It's like an interception in football! You grab the other guy's idea and run the opposite way with it!

The more sentences you complete, the higher your score! The idea is to block the other guy's thoughts and express your own! That's how you win!

Hobbes

Conversations aren't contests!

Calvin:

OK, a point for you, but I'm still ahead

Mutual Learning Model
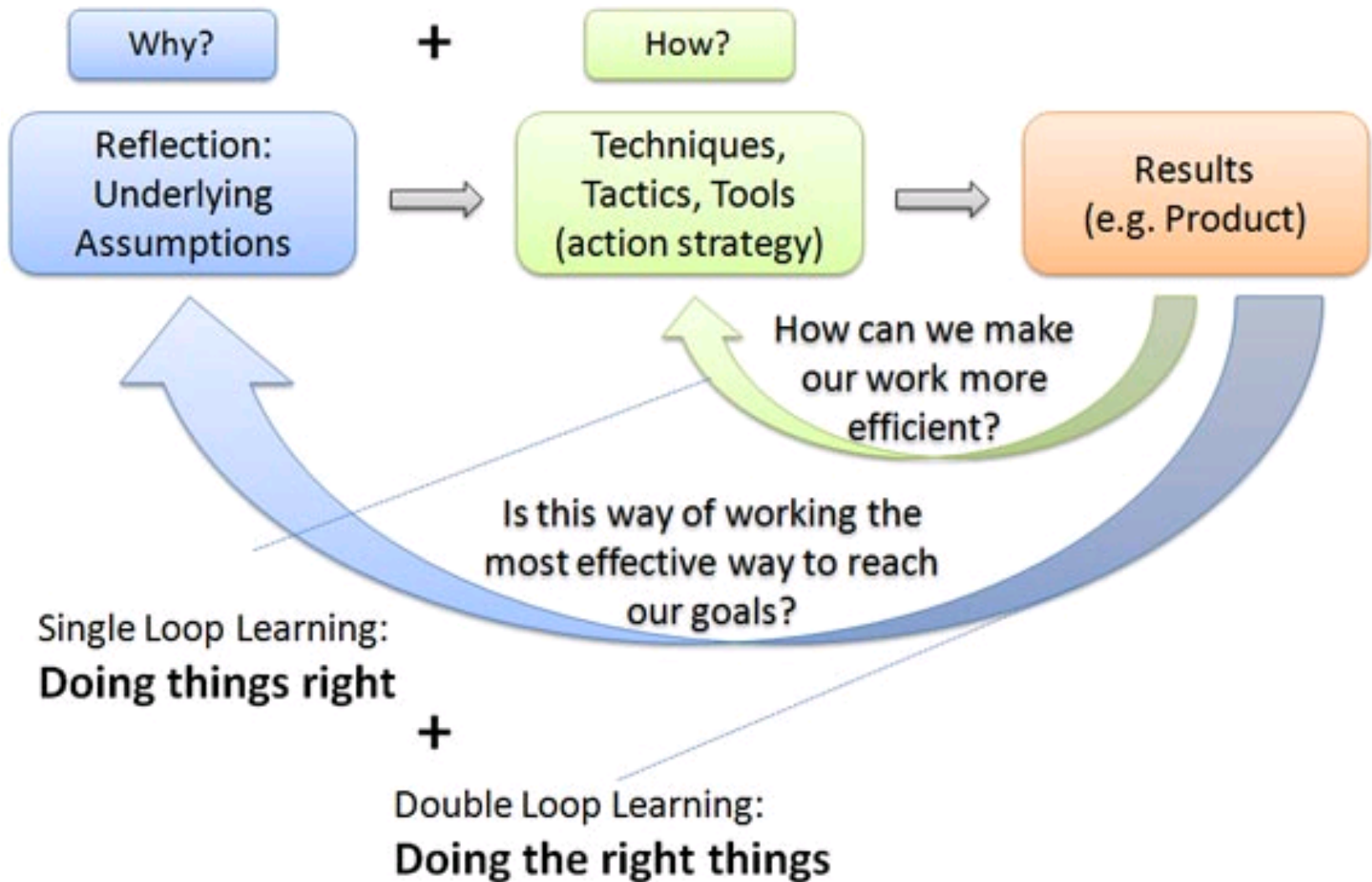
Core Values & Assumptions

- Publicly testable information
- Free and informed choice
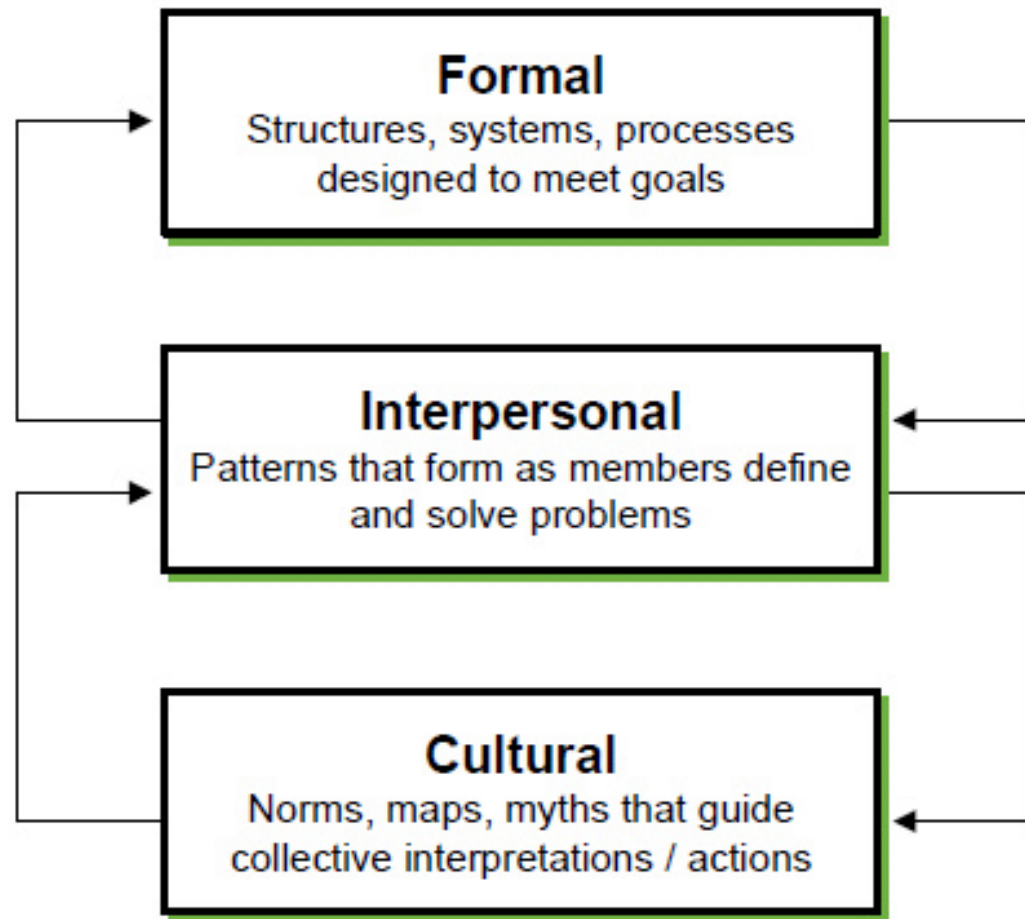- Internal commitment

Strategies

- Test assumptions and inferences
- Share all relevant information
- Use specific examples and agree on important words
- Explain reasoning and intent
- Combine advocacy and inquiry
- Jointly design the approach
- Discuss undiscussables

Consequences

- Increased understanding, reduced unproductive conflict and defensiveness
- Increased trust
- Reduced self-fulfilling, self-sealing processes
- Increased learning
- Increased effectiveness
- Increased quality of worklife

Organizational Steering Mechanisms
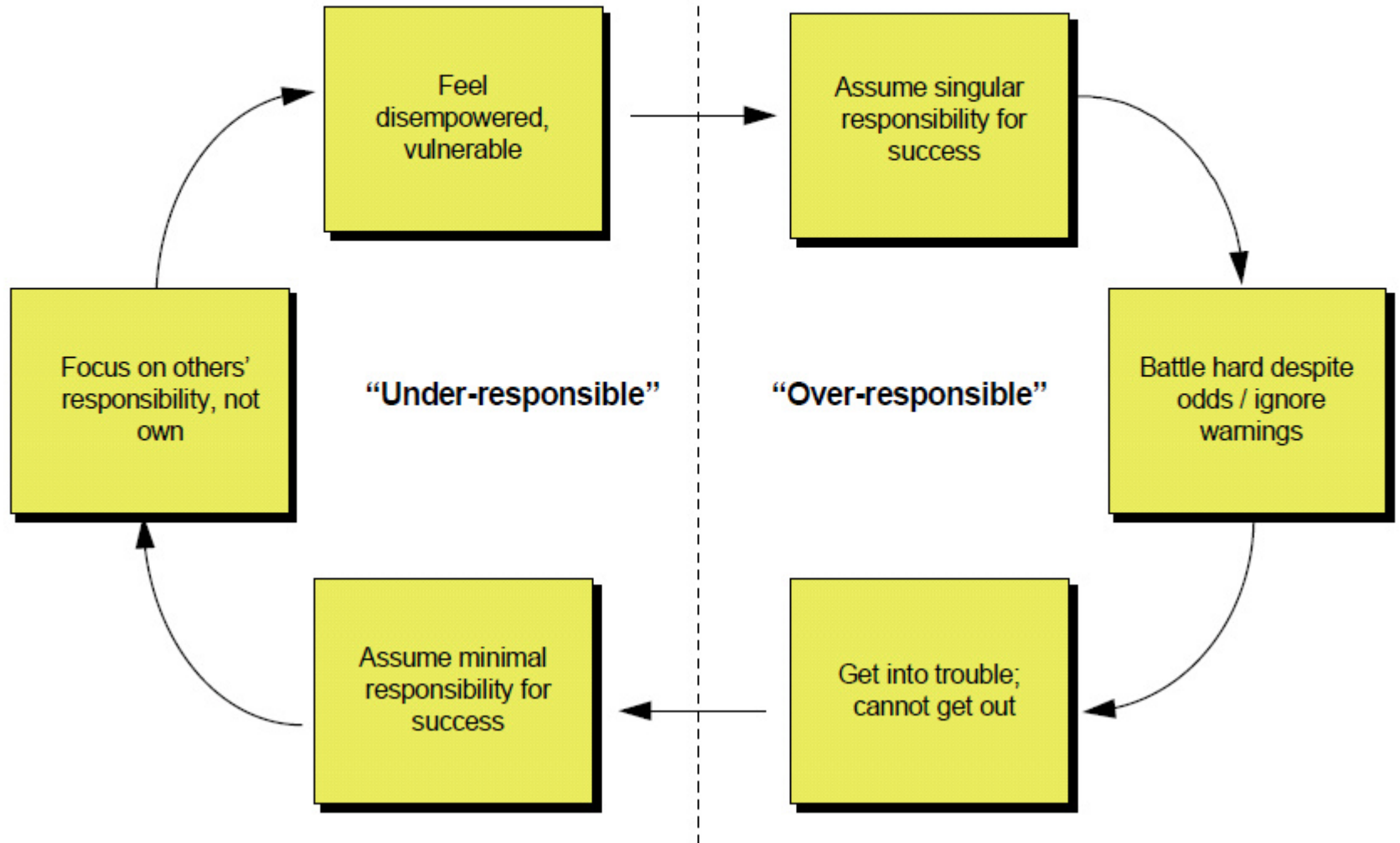
Formal
Structures, systems, processes
designed to meet goals

Interpersonal
Patterns that form as members define
and solve problems

Cultural
Norms, maps, myths that guide
collective interpretations / actions

Source: Diana Smith

The Cycle of Over / Under Responsibility

"Under-responsible"

"Over-responsible"

Feel disempowered, vulnerable

Assume singular responsibility for success

Focus on others' responsibility, not own

Battle hard despite odds / ignore warnings

Assume minimal responsibility for success

Get into trouble; cannot get out

I take
Actions
based on
my beliefs

I adopt
Beliefs
about the world

I draw
Conclusions

The Reflexive Loop
(our beliefs
affect what
data we
select next time)

I make
Assumptions
based on
the meanings I added

I select
"Data"
from what
I observe

Observable
"data" and experieces
(as a videotape
recorder might
capture it)

Dominant Frame

Core Values & Assumptions

- Be in unilateral control
- Win, don't lose
- Ensure no one feels bad
- Act rational

Existing Frame

Self

- I understand the situation and know the right answer

Other person

- Is uninformed or ill-intentioned
- May have questionable motives if they disagree

Task

- Get them to see things my way

Frame Experiment

Existing Frame

Self

- I understand the situation and know the right answer

Other person

- Is uninformed or ill-intentioned
- May have questionable motives if they disagree

Task

- Get them to see things my way

Altered Frame

Self

- I have some information but I may not see or understand everything

Other person

- May see things that I don't see which could help
- Is acting with integrity given their situation

Task

- Combine our knowledge to make the best choice

Most Responsible

↑

1. Consider options and make decision, informing superior subsequently

2. Provide options to superior with own recommendation

3. Generate options for superior and ask superior to make choice

4. Describe a problem to superior and ask for help in structuring it

5. Give problem to superior, watch and learn for next time

6. Drop problem on superior's desk and indicate helplessness

Least Responsible

Key Take-aways

- The Kanban Method risks becoming a fad unless:
  - it more clearly defines boundaries to it's applicability
  - addresses gaps/inconsistencies
- The gaps are around understanding where people experience embarrassment or threat
- The Mutual Learning Model is a learnable approach to double-loop learning that can overcomes these problems
  - This has to start with us

Thank You

- benjaminm@benjaminm.net
- http://twitter.com/benjaminm
- http://blog.benjaminm.net