

The Invisible Gun

"My boss is on my team."

I pulled a gun on my boss, while on a plane no less. He was noticeably shaken, but no one was hurt, and I escaped notice of the Air Marshals.

The conversation that brought me to the brink began when he turned to me and said: "This agile coaching stuff is fine, but you could be so much more. You have 6 people reporting to you now, but I know you could manage a much bigger team."

"Thanks," I said. "And you're right; I was a great traditional manager in a previous life. "

He clapped me on the shoulder encouragingly. "I knew it. This is just the start for you."

"It's funny you bring it up actually," I said, "because I have been meaning to talk with you about my direct reports."

"Oh?" he asked.

"Yes. You see, on an agile team, it's essential that the team feels genuinely free to self-organize, and that simply can't happen when there's a power imbalance in the room. Having the boss on the team--or worse, having the boss serve as the team's scrum master, which is what I am doing now--is generally not a good idea. As I mentioned when I was hired, giving me direct reports might someday become an issue, and I believe it has. So I think it's in the company's best interest for the team members to report to someone else, if I'm to be

effective in doing my job as an agile coach.”

“That’s silly,” my boss said. “I can be impartial. So can you.”

I shook my head. “Even the most benevolent manager is a danger to self-organization.”

“I disagree,” he insisted, while getting clearly annoyed. “You’re wrong!”

He was digging in for an argument, backed by his belief that he was a good guy and would never hurt a team, even unknowingly. I knew I had to do something drastic if I wanted to make any progress. So that’s when I pulled the gun. It was invisible, but thanks to my years of improv training, it was quite convincing. If you’ve never tried it, turn abruptly on your boss, who is sitting next to you on a plane, while brandishing a pantomime pistol will get his attention. My boss jumped, and even once he realized that his life wasn’t in danger, proceeded to look amazingly uncomfortable.

Still pointing the gun at him, I explained: “See, the trouble is, every manager has an invisible gun, whether he knows it or not. Some bosses carry big shotguns, while other, more self-aware managers carry small pistols. Regardless of the size, they all have them. Because of this gun, ‘suggestions’ often become ‘directives’ in the minds of employees. It’s not a boss’s fault necessarily, nor is it the fault of the employee; after all, we’ve been trained to listen to our bosses, and we have a financial incentive to do what the boss wants. We’d hate to get shot. No one wants to get a bad review, or worse, lose his job.”

I holstered my weapon for the duration of the flight. The conversation didn’t end there, however. It took another month or so, but I eventually succeeded in getting my reports assigned to

someone else in the company who wasn't on the team.

Needless to say, my boss hasn't flown with me since. My act of aggression was well worth it though, as my relationships with developers on the team improved once I became a team member and not a boss, and a huge number of the issues our agile transformation was experiencing went away. Even someone like me who is a huge advocate for agility can't help but skew the power in the room in an unhealthy direction if he's someone's boss.

Being agile is hard. Even under the best circumstances, with the most self-aware teams and organizations, you're bound to surface dysfunction and struggle with impediments. Don't make your job harder than it needs to be by creating power imbalances. Let teams be free to self-organize.

Can you still have direct reports in an agile organization? Yes you can. While I'm a fan of flat organizational structures, I realize that "no bosses" is impractical for the vast majority of companies. No problem: Have your bosses, just don't put them on the same team as their reports and your agile journey will be far less of a bumpy ride.

Agile Principals at risk:

"The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams."

"Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and *trust them* to get the job done."