Patterns for Making Leadership Happen and Building Self-organizing Agile Team

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This report introduces fifteen leadership patterns that were discovered at Nokia. Inspired by hearing about Fearless Change patterns from Linda Rising at XP2015, I started the exciting journey to introduce pattern thinking into Agile leadership area. Though I was equipped with a number of leadership frameworks, I had no idea of an effective strategy to structure my first 1-on-1 with my new team. My effort in looking for an effective strategy in this case and trying the strategy with my new team resulted in my first Agile leadership pattern “Hometown story: Outside of work”. My Agile leadership pattern toolbox has kept growing and evolving ever since. Pattern language is a powerful way to capture successful solutions for recurring leadership challenges. And, while there is no guarantee that those leadership patterns always work (the same is true for any pattern), the beauty of a leadership pattern is that it gives Agile leaders a promising starting point to figure out their own patterns.

1. INTRODUCTION

It was XP2015 in Helsinki that I met Linda Rising for the first time. In her workshop, “Fearless change: Patterns for introducing new ideas”, I came to appreciate the beauty and power of patterns beyond the design patterns I have heavily used for years as a programmer. As a former programmer, my understanding of patterns was limited to design patterns. I never thought of capturing those proven change management strategies as patterns. Immediately after returning from XP2015, I couldn’t wait to try out some simple change patterns that Linda presented. Yet I was a little bit skeptical about the effectiveness of change patterns in my own work. I started from some seemingly simple change patterns (as shared in the following section). To my surprise, these seemingly little things actually had a big impact in helping make changes happen in my team!

When applying those change patterns in my team, I also started to notice some strategies or practices that I used repeatedly as an Agile software R&D team leader when interacting with my team and building my team to be a high performing one. I then shared those strategies with my colleagues in Nokia and Agile team leaders in local communities who were facing the similar problems and encouraged them to have a try. The feedback from those early adopters of these leadership patterns were quite positive. I then realized that a pattern language can also be written about effective leadership and building self-organizing Agile teams. Patterns are a good way to capture those successful solutions/practices to recurring problems.

At the time of this writing, there are currently 12 leadership patterns based on my own experience and co-created with the Agile community. In this experience report, I intend to share my story of the discovery, usage and growing more leadership patterns, as well as how to keep them alive.

2. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

My story with leadership patterns started in May 2015 when I joined XP2015 and learnt about change patterns from Linda Rising. At that time, I was an Agile and Engineering coach in Nokia Chengdu Technology Center. In my organization, there are around 400 people, together with nearly a thousand engineers in other Nokia Technology Centers around the global, working on a telecommunication network management software called NetAct®. We are using the Agile way of working for this large scale software development. As an Agile and Engineering coach, one of my responsibilities was to promote the Clean Code practice within my organization to improve the software creation quality. Nokia has invested a lot in this area, for example, Clean Code video trainings from Uncle Bob are provided to engineers, and 10% of their time is devoted to competence development. So I thought it would not be that difficult to make this change happen in my organization. However, the reality is that my initial attempts to introduce Clean Code practices simply failed. I got a number of excuses from engineers, for example, “I am quite busy with my current assignment”, “the code base I am working with is legacy code, so it is really difficult to apply Clean Code principles”, and “I hate top-down

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initiatives,” just to name a few. I remembered those change patterns Linda talked about in XP2015. “Why not have a try?” I told myself. So I started to be the **Evangelist** who was super passionate about Clean Code practices. I then figured out 5 **Early Adopters** to form a Clean Code **Study Group** to learn and apply Clean Code practice in our daily work. Small workshops were organized to share the successful experience from those early adopters, and we offered hands-on coaching to engineers who were interested in starting a **Trial Run**. More and more **Small Successes** were spread among engineers, and more and more engineers started to copy their peers to start to learn and try Clean Code practices. In this case, a top-down initiative was changed to a bottom-up movement, and now Clean Code has become one of the key strengths of Nokia Chengdu Technology Center. From this experience, I began to realize the power of patterns beyond software design.

A few months later, I was offered the position as the line manager of a 20-member software Agile team in my organization. The expectation from my boss at that time was simple yet not easy: lead the team to become a high performing one. I was full of passion and immediately rolled up my sleeves to figure out how I could make this happen. However, I soon realized that there was another challenge waiting for me as a new Agile software team leader.

### 2.1 The Challenge

With my engineering background, my first thought as a new team leader was to look for some pragmatic guidelines for me as a new Agile software team leader. For example, *Agile Leader for Dummies* (remember the classical yellow funny “for dummies” book cover?). Sadly I failed to find such a step-by-step guidebook. I then turned to my boss for help, and I was sent to some costly leadership training. I was so happy during the training to learn a bundle of leadership theory and frameworks. But I soon realized that I was still lost when I came back from the training and started working with my new team. I wondered, from the variety of leadership theory and frameworks, which one should I start with when facing a new team? This is exactly the same experience as my first time riding a bike or driving a car alone. Theories simply don't help much in these situations, and what I needed was a pragmatic step-by-step guide.

Even worse, I was expected to have Nokia regular “1 in 90” session (a 1-hour dialog with every direct report within 90 days) with each of my team members immediately after becoming their new leader. I was nervous about this. What strategy should I use in my first 1-on-1 session with my direct reports? What should I talk about in order to eliminate their uncertainty about a new leader? Ultimately, how could I establish trust between us from the very beginning?

“Am I the only one new leader looking for hands-on guide for the first 1-on-1 because I am stupid?” I was wondering...

### 2.2 Why Patterns?

After discussing my challenge with other Agile leaders in my organization, I found that I was not the only one suffering from the lack of a pragmatic guide and that most challenges and problems Agile software team leaders face are very similar! “Why not capture the proven solutions to those recurring leadership challenges in a standard and step-by-step manner?” I asked myself. Suddenly the idea “pattern” came to my mind.

The motivation of my endeavors is to capture and summarize proven solutions and practices for recurring leadership challenges in Agile software development team using a pattern language. The pattern language is applicable and powerful because, when summarized as pattern, a leadership pattern exhibits the following characteristics:

- **Patterns document proven solutions to problems that keep recurring**
- **Each pattern is a reusable solution in the specific scenario the pattern is associated with**

These characteristics are the same as for design patterns and change patterns. As claimed in the Emerging Leadership Theory, leadership is both science and art. When we say that leadership is science, then leadership patterns try to establish the connection between those observable behaviors and evidence and the associated consequences. Leadership, in this regard, is a process not ideology.

- **Different from design patterns, leadership patterns are also alive. This means that the interpretation of the pattern evolves over time and the outcome after applying the pattern is much more important than correctness in fully understanding the pattern**

This characteristic of leadership patterns reflects the artistic side of leadership. Because leadership is built on the relationships with people. The key for leadership in this regard is to understand **THE people** the leader is working with and for, and to figure out ways to motivate and interest them. And there is no perfect science for this. So different from design patterns, the documented solutions are just a sophisticated
starting point. The focus for any leadership pattern is on the outcome rather than the “correct” understanding of the pattern itself.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, I started my journey to discover my first leadership pattern about having my first 1-on-1 with my new team members.

3. DISCOVERY OF MY FIRST LEADERSHIP PATTERN

The challenge I was facing when planning my first 1-on-1 session with my new team was simple: Where and how should I start? My goal was clear – I wanted to build the rapport and trust with my new direct report to lay a solid foundation for our future cooperation towards becoming a high performing team. Probably this is also the common challenge for any new leader.

The inspiration of my first leadership pattern actually comes from The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, written by Patrick Lencioni. I read this book when I was an Agile coach, and I was impressed by how Kathryn, the new CEO of DecisionTech, Inc. in the fable, ran her first meeting with executive team members among whom trust is not fully in place. Before getting into any heavy lifting, Kathryn starts with something she calls personal histories: everyone would answer five nonintrusive personal questions having to do with their backgrounds. The result, as written in the book, “is quite amazing: After just forty-five minutes of extremely mild personal disclosure, the team seemed tighter and more at ease with each other than at any time during the past year.”

One of the reasons behind this little trick Kathryn uses can be found in Influence by Dr. Robert Cialdini. People like those who they share something in common. So by sharing some personal background and stories, it is more likely for those executives in DecisionTech to find similarities with each other. Liking in this case greatly helps people build rapport. Moreover, sharing personal histories, according to Patrick, is a low-risk but quite effective way to build up vulnerability-based trust where team members can act without concern about protecting themselves. And trust lies at the heart of a functioning and cohesive team.

Then back to my first 1-on-1 sessions with my new team, it seems that my scenario was quite similar to what Kathryn was facing. So I decided to adopt the same strategy: start with sharing personal history and personal information to build up rapport and vulnerability-based trust. The only thing I needed to do is to make it into a more structured 1-hour dialog. The final version of the agenda for this 1-hour dialog looks like this:

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**Agenda for the first 1-on-1 session with direct report for a new leader**

**Part 1: Personal histories exercise**

A 20-min free talk on nonintrusive personal topics like hometown, unique challenges in childhood or university, first job, hobbies, favorite movies, just to name a few.

**Part 2: Behavioral profile sharing and discussion**

A 20-min discussion based on a behavioral profile generated by some proven profiling tools like MBTI or Disc to better understand and empathize with each other.

**Part 3: Strengths and weaknesses exercise**

A 15-min sharing on each other’s (top 3) strengths and weaknesses in a comfortable way. After Part 1 and Part 2 discussion, now the atmosphere is much more relaxed for both, and we can go a little bit further to share some vulnerabilities.

**Part 4: Expectation for the new leader**

A 5-min session for the team member to share his/her expectation for the new leader. A forward-looking discussion can always wrap up the talk in a very positive manner.

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The result of using this solution with all my 20 team members was quite interesting. Nineteen team members out of twenty were surprised that I as a new leader started with something personal but business. But soon after touching something personal and identifying something in common, we took the first solid step towards developing trust. Later, it also turned out that this strategy greatly helped me to set up trust and relationships with my team to unite as one. However, one team member was afraid to open up himself,
reluctant to share more about himself, and concealed his weaknesses from me (and other team members). Not surprisingly, half a year later, this team member eventually had an open fight with another team member in the office in front of the whole team. It took me days to finally figure out that this team member had been trying to pretend to be a “nice” guy in work to avoid any conflict with others because of the lack of trust; but out of work, he was actually a man with strong opinion about everything. On one hand, it is a pity that it takes me half a year before finally building up the rapport with him; but on the other hand, we can treat this team member as the control group of my strategy. There are two major lessons I learnt from this: First, this start-with-personal-history solution is effective in that sense that it works for quite a number of people (as in my case and also as reported by other leaders, trainers, and consultants to whom I have recommended this solution); second, different from a design pattern, a leadership solution/practice is not guaranteed to work for everyone by just simply repeating it because leadership is about dealing with people.

This start-with-personal-history solution later evolved to “Hometown story: Outside of work” pattern, which will be presented in section 5.1.

4. CO-CREATE MORE PATTERNS

I was so happy with the finding of the “Hometown story: Outside of work” pattern. I couldn’t wait to share this with one of my friends who was a former HR director and a personal coach at that time. After congratulating my first success as a leader, she also shared her observation of the problem of the traditional performance evaluation process. As a new leader appointed in December, the next challenge I would face was the performance evaluation communication with my new team members in February. The biggest problem with the traditional annual performance appraisals is that they are usually annual (like in Nokia). However, employees actually need feedback and goal planning much more frequently. “Employees need weekly, even daily, performance feedback. Moreover, employees do not like being evaluated, but they are looking for feedback that is based on facts and is put in a more constructive way.” She continued, “Also most likely a performance appraisal session is a one-way lecture where a two-way conversation is expected by employees.” My friend then suggested that I try to have more frequent performance feedback sessions with employees and incorporate useful coaching techniques like the constructive feedback and powerful (open) questions. “Maybe we can together create a leadership pattern on this. Because I have been recommending this strategy to leaders

<table>
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<th>A structured performance feedback session</th>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency &amp; Format: Weekly or bi-weekly / Formal or informal</td>
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**Constructive feedback session incorporating coaching techniques:**

**Step 1:** Start with some small talk to build up rapport
Example: (Start with a small compliment) “I love your dress! You look great wearing it!”

**Step 2:** Clearly state the constructive purpose of this feedback dialog
Example: “I want to give my appreciation to you about...” or “I have a concern about...”

**Step 3:** Provide specific facts or observation
Evaluation is about making judgment, whereas feedback is neutral and based on facts or observation.
Example: “I noticed that...”

**Step 4:** Describe the consequence or impact of the behavior

**Step 5:** Use powerful questions to explore alternatives to achieve higher goal
Do not hurry into providing suggestions; rather it is better to use coaching questions to encourage the other person to explore alternatives that are more likely to be implemented.
Example: “Imagine the project schedule is met next time, what do you think you have done different to make it happen?”

**Step 6:** Summarize and check supported needed
This ends up the performance feedback session in a positive way by summarizing the actions points and giving the other person an opportunity to seek support from the leader.
I work with, and I have proven results!” So here is what we together summarized as an effective performance feedback session strategy, which later became the cornerstone of leadership pattern “Feedback, not evaluation”.

This time, in order to verify the effectiveness of this new leadership pattern, instead of applying it to all my direct reports as I did with my first pattern experience, I selected two candidates: One a low performer and one middle performer with good potential. Other team members acted as a control group in this “experiment”. I scheduled bi-weekly 45-minute performance feedback sessions with both of these two team members using the above mentioned strategy to either compliment their progress and achievement or work with them to raise the bar higher. After three months, the result was quite encouraging: The middle performer was transformed into a high performer and candidate technical leader in his Scrum. The low performer figured out herself that test automation is the area to best utilize her strengths and made good contributions to the team; she is no longer a low performer on my team. Meanwhile, when comparing these two candidates with other members in “control group” it was noticeable that the two candidates improved faster than others. Frequently receiving compliments or guidance on redirecting problem performance had an impact.

With the success of co-creating my second leadership patterns, I started to regularly share my experience with leadership patterns and early patterns in the local Agile community (e.g., AgileTour Chengdu 2016) and Agile gatherings or events in around China (e.g., TOP100 Software Summit 2016 in Beijing. Other people also started to share their solutions or practices for specific leadership challenges they faced. Not surprisingly, some common solutions for recurring problems emerged, and my leadership pattern toolbox kept growing. More interestingly, with the increase in the number of leadership patterns, besides providing a solution for specific recurring scenarios, I started to think about how I could systematically apply those leadership patterns to build a high performing team. This resulted in the so-called “six steps to high performance leadership” method.

5. SIX STEPS TO HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP

As a big fan of coaching techniques who has witnessed the magic power of coaching in both life and work, I have taken the “High Performance Team Coaching” training from Erickson Coaching International and been certified as a team coach. Based on my experience applying the “Erickson Solution Focused Coaching Arrow” team coaching techniques (Marie) in my Scrum teams, I have customized the Erickson coaching arrow into a six-step method for an Agile leader to build his/her team into a high performing one. Different from the Erickson coaching arrow that is designed for life coaching, these six steps to high performing leadership are specifically for an Agile leader to use coaching-like techniques to build a high performing team. I suddenly realized that our leadership patterns could be mapped into each of those six steps.

![Figure 1 Six steps to high performing leadership](image)

When this six-step method was summarized back in December 2016, I had only 10 leadership patterns at hand. But I soon realized that with this model in my mind, I immediately started to look for new leadership patterns for each step. I was surprised by my unconscious attempt to seek new patterns until I read Linda Rising’s new book, More Fearless Change Patterns, that stated, “cognitive scientists say our brains look for patterns even in random events.” Interestingly, this also applies to people in the Agile community I am working
Once people realized that patterns can be used to capture successful solutions in Agile leadership area (and in fact a lot of other areas as well), new patterns just started to flow. One good example was the co-create leadership pattern exercise during the Agiletour Chengdu 2016 event. I was invited to present the Agile leadership patterns during the event, and after the presentation, there was one open space discussion around the Agile leadership pattern topic. As the host, I suggested that everyone could share one good practice that always worked in one specific scenario in his/her Agile team. Then all the participants voted for the top three good practices that people were willing to have a try back in their teams. By setting up a WeChat (a popular online social media in China) group, people could send their feedback after trying the practice and help enhance or tune the practice. This exercise resulted in two new patterns: GOAT plan and Futurespective, not retrospective that most people found useful, applicable, and most important, working for a specific scenario.

So far I have collected 15 Agile leadership patterns in my toolbox, and I have mapped each of them to one of the six steps in the “six steps to high performing leadership” model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Leadership Pattern</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td><strong>Hometown story: Outside of work</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Share personal history, background, strengths and weaknesses in order to build up rapport and vulnerability-based trust.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Liking: the secret of building rapport</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Finding similarity (e.g., opinion, character, background, or life style) with your team members is the secret of building rapport based on modern psychological study.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Make the best use of Disc® profile</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disc report is the starting point for you to adapt your management style to be more effective with different types of people by understanding their inherent behaviors, communication preferences, and motivators.</td>
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<td>Set direction</td>
<td><strong>Common objective matters</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enable and encourage the whole team (not only the leader) to together discuss and decide the goal. A common objective motivates the whole team.</td>
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<td><strong>Culture can eat strategy for breakfast</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>A healthy and productive culture can contribute to a company’s bottom line. Team culture should be aligned and reviewed at the same time as drafting the strategy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Make it public</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Make team’s common objectives visible in the working area (e.g., posters). Most people believe almost anything they see in print.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarify objective</td>
<td><strong>Stretching but doable target</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>We tend to fall into the trap of setting either unrealistic or too easy target. The best strategy in setting the objective is to co-create a stretching yet doable target.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Key factors in the value chain</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Following the 80/20 rule, it is most cost-effective to focus on key factors (i.e., pain points or opportunities) in the value chain analysis.</td>
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<td>Team dialog</td>
<td><strong>Just say Thanks</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Saying thanks and expressing appreciation in a structured way is the most cost-effective way to motivate the team.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The Aha moment!</strong></td>
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<td>Use powerful questions to trigger thought-provoking discussions</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Feedback, not evaluation</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Providing frequent constructive feedback, rather than evaluation (i.e., simply giving praise or criticism), enables productive developmental conversations with employees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decide action plan</td>
<td><strong>Solution focus, not problem focus</strong></td>
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<td>When focusing on a solution, there is always a way. Focusing on the problem, there come more problems.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>GOAT plan</strong></td>
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<td>Goal, Owner, Action, and Timeline make a better plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
<td><strong>KFC (Keep-Fix-Cease)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Three powerful questions to reflect: What is working that can be kept? What should be fixed? What is not working that should be stopped?</td>
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Table 1. 15 Leadership Patterns

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<th>Futurespective, not retrospective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moving the team into the future helps to transition the team from a group of individuals to a real team faster than otherwise.</td>
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Due to page limit, it is not possible to describe all leadership patterns in detail; however, as of this writing, I am preparing a manuscript for those leadership patterns. So if you are interested in finding out more detail, here is the website where you can explore and contact me for further discussion: [http://brianliupeng.blogspot.fi/](http://brianliupeng.blogspot.fi/).

Another thing to be noted is that those leadership patterns are not something totally isolated from other existing work on patterns, for example, fearless change patterns. Just the opposite, those leadership patterns are inspired by fearless change patterns and are somewhat an extension of fearless change pattern work into Agile leadership areas. Moreover, you can also find some fearless change patterns can be perfectly matched to one of the above six-step to high performing leadership framework. For instance, Do Food can be used in “Team Dialog” step, Group Identity can also be used in “Set Direction” step, just to name a few. My own experience is that by combining all those patterns, a leader can immediately release the full power of existing good practice summarized by these patterns.

6. WHAT WE LEARNED

The journey of capturing Agile leadership patterns is surely not an easy one because not every practice is qualified as a proven solution for recurring problems. However, the time and effort spent in this endeavor is absolutely worthwhile when other people benefit from applying the patterns in their teams and more leadership patterns are co-created in the community. Besides the above 15 leadership patterns, I also have the following key learnings during this experience.

First, the pattern language is really a powerful way to capture and describe good practice for recurring problems in a way that is easy to apply. Taking design pattern as an example, software design is part art and part science and engineering. The beauty of a design pattern is to describe the known solution in a re-usable form that even a novice can immediately start to use. My own experience is that by appropriately applying those design patterns (i.e., the science and engineering part of software design), 80% of software design challenge can be covered (following the 80/20 rule). The same also applies to fearless change patterns and Agile leadership patterns. Introducing changes in an organization and leading a team are both part art and part science. There is an old saying in China that goes “Tao that can be described is not universal and eternal Tao”. In Chinese culture, people tend to think that leadership is something more like an art that cannot be described in a way to be easily copy-pasted. However, my experience of capturing those Agile leadership patterns shows that by focusing on the science part of Agile leadership, leaders can easily start to feel the benefits.

Second, the same as fearless change patterns, leadership patterns as described in this experience report are all heuristics. This means that there is no guarantee that they will always work (in fact, sometimes they simply do not work). However, the beauty of a fearless change pattern or an Agile leadership pattern is that it provides people a good starting point to have a try (for a novice without an idea) or to customize their own patterns. A good example is cooking recipes. There is no guarantee that following a cooking recipe will result in a delicious dish; however, trying out the steps at least guarantees there will be something ready to be eaten, and this serves as the input for continuous improvement. For example, one feedback I got regarding the “Hometown story: Outside of work” pattern is that “the structured agenda for 1st 1-on-1 with team really helped me because now I have a promising start point to figure out my own way – actually I have done that, thanks a lot for the pattern!”

Last, but not least, it should be noted that although Agile leadership patterns are described in a formal way, there is no “correct” understanding of them. Just the contrary, different people may have different interpretations of one pattern. However, the key of a leadership pattern is not to check the compliancy of people’s understanding; rather, the most important thing is for people to start to find something that works for them. For example, in one of my sharings of those leadership patterns, people have different understandings about what a powerful question might be (“The Aha moment!” pattern). Some prefer a coaching-like question to encourage others to have deep thinking; while some think a more direct question might be powerful. Actually I cannot say who’s right or who’s wrong. Because if we remember the situational leadership, in different phases of a team, a powerful question actually means different approaches. Moreover, even my understanding of these
leadership patterns is evolving over time. So in this sense, these leadership patterns are alive. It is the user who gives the life to those leadership patterns!

7. **THE WAY FORWARD**

Looking forward, the plan is to first share these leadership patterns in the pattern community and corresponding conferences to further enhance and formalize them. Meanwhile, I am also preparing a manuscript (in Chinese) to publish those leadership patterns to let more people know them and enable a wider discussion. I am also starting to setup a leadership pattern community first by inviting those who have participated in my sharing and workshops on leadership patterns. Because leadership patterns are alive. And with a community, they can keep growing and possibly we will end up with something very interesting.

8. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First of all, I want to thank Linda Rising for her fearless change pattern workshop in XP2015 in Helsinki which has given me a new perspective on the power and beauty of pattern language. My work on leadership pattern has been inspired by Linda’s fearless change pattern work.

I also want to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues in Nokia and friends in local Agile communities. I really enjoyed the discussion with you on leadership patterns and appreciate your feedback as kind of pilot group for those patterns. Especially I want to thank my friend Zhang Zaiwang who has encouraged me to write a book about Agile leadership patterns.

My special thanks also go to my shepherd Rebecca Wirfs-Brock. This paper would not have come together without Rebecca’s keen insights, questions, and edits. Rebecca’s review comments in our email exchange have surely helped to make this experience report a better one. Considering her busy schedule, her commitment and professionalism in guiding me through the journey have my full respect! I am really honored to have Rebecca as my shepherd: **Thanks, Shepherd, I couldn’t have done it without you!**

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