



Thawing the Frozen Middle to Create a Self-Organizing Transformation

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Success of a transformation ultimately must rest with organizational managers, not teams and coaches. Our transformation focus often did not initially include the layers of management around a team and ultimately limited progress. This experience details how I supported leaders at various levels to allow and equip them to take ownership and organize continued transformative growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

I bought into the agile myth that managers go away, or are at least less intrusive than before a transformation occurs. But here I am, in the middle of a large-scale agile transformation and there are managers everywhere. Some are extremely supportive, but many feel challenged and confused about how the change affects them. The manager's confusion, lack of support or lack of engagement will in turn impact a team's ability to succeed in the new paradigm. The environment around the team must change, and it is the managers that must change it for the transformation to be successful... but they are stuck. They are the frozen middle. We've learned the agile myth is not true, and the frozen middle will be a much more potent force than expected, for good or ill.

As coaches we often focus on our agile teams helping them embrace the agile values and set them on a path of continuous improvement and empowered self-organization. Additionally, we can coach managers towards their own path of continuous improvement and empowered self-organization. As coaches we must thaw the frozen middle and drive focus on the environments created around teams.

I will share with you my journey in partnership with a group of senior managers that recognized the need for leadership focus, created lightweight structures to enable self-organization, generated organizational vision, and created simple tools and coaching relationships to continue transformational progress.

2. BACKGROUND

I am a senior coach at Wells Fargo working on Agile practices for 10 years, the last 4 focused on organizational transformation. For the majority of 2019 the group I partnered with had teams across the maturity spectrum, from newly established to three-year practicing. Part of my core focus was providing coaching support for managers in the organization. I built a relationship of trust with senior managers to unlock the partnership that would unfold.

This particular organization started their agile journey four years ago and majority of the team members in this group are on teams practicing either Scrum or Kanban. The coaching focus has been on building strong teams through training and persistent partnership with the scrum master, product owner and development team. Coaches have had a much less consistent relationship with the front-line managers. If a manager has a coaching relationship, it often occurred organically based upon the interest and willingness of the 1-up managers. Prior to my engagement, senior managers had a light or non-existent relationship with coaches outside of elevated conversations regarding teams thought to be underperforming.

3. JOURNEY OF THE FROZEN MIDDLE

3.1 The Opportunity

As with many transformations, the early years were focused on standing up teams and helping them work in a new way. With each new team finding success, the demand for new teams and coaching support increases. My experience is very similar.

When it comes to standing up new teams, our coaching group has, through years of practice, become very good at it. Teams are energized, trained, adopting behaviors and practices and improving quickly once stood up. The team and the coach feel a shared sense of accountability to mature.

As new team demand increased and we started to step back from well-established teams new challenges emerged. Some examples:

- Teams we viewed as mature had come to be dependent on coaches. They were high performing but felt challenged organizing without a coach present.
- Team improvement slowed or legacy behaviors crept back after coach ramp-down.
- Coaches were frequently pulled back into team engagement when the team was under-performing or impediments exist.

We observed that teams were not as sturdy over time as we'd hoped. Some teams were not truly empowered by their managers, but it was masked by the protection provided by a coach. For some teams the pressures of individual performance appraisals instead of team outcomes led to legacy behaviors of individual contribution over team collaboration. We observed managers attempting to address struggling teams without new techniques and perspective, leading to command and control reflexes or the weaponization of metrics.

We learned that a team in the long-term will only be as good as the environment around the team allows.

Managers are accountable for creating the environment for successful teams and they did not have the training, tools or coaching support they needed leading to many of the challenges above.

We recognized the gap and the opportunity. As a coaching group, we needed to train and coach managers in a more comprehensive and persistent way. We segmented this idea into two levels:

- **The managers to which the team members report directly (1-up).** Inclusive of how to lead differently, moving from a command-and-control/fixed mindset to a servant leader/growth mindset, such as, how to engage with impediment removal and team performance, etc.
- **The senior managers of the organization who set the culture and behavior targets for the entire group, inclusive of the team members and the management team alike.** Focus on how do we lead the managers, set behavior expectations, embody agile behaviors and principles in themselves.

While we have made great progress at both levels, the focus of this experience report is on the senior manager segment.

3.2 Preparing with Vision

Over time I had built a trusting relationship with the senior manager responsible for the majority of people on the scrum teams. The managers were experiencing some challenges such as feeling disconnected from teams, unsure of how to lead, waning performance in some areas, and more teams to establish. I asked a critical question, "Are we creating the right environment for teams, and the right expectations for our managers in their role of environmental change?" The ensuing conversation made it clear we had opportunity in this area and we wanted to act. In partnership with the senior managers, we drafted five simple statements describing the environment we wanted to create as leaders.

We strived to create an environment where:

- **We relentlessly pursue improvement through continuous learning and adjustment.** This challenges us in two ways—how do managers promote the idea of continuous learning at a team level while moving away from the 'x functionality by y date' mentality of the past, and how does continuous learning and adjustment apply to managers?
- **We are focused on how well teams are doing.** This challenges us to embrace servant leadership and the understanding that healthy teams produce sustained value for our customers. We need to shift away from focusing on how good the thing is and focus on how good the team is, allowing the team to focus on how good the things are they create.
- **We are outcome driven and data informed.** This challenges us to change our value lens. Historically we may be 'data driven'—focusing on project-type metrics (dates, costs, paper milestones). To be 'outcome driven' we need to change our value lens to customer value while allowing us to be informed (but not driven by) delivery type metrics.
- **We are actively changing the environment to help teams achieve increasing levels of success.** This again challenges us to be servant leaders—but is a call to action. Historically managers may be engaged with the work itself giving direction and dictation to teams to help them be successful. This

challenges us to change where our actions take place—moving managers away from the work and towards the environments in which teams exist.

- **We endeavor to create teams that can deliver with no (or limited) dependencies.** This challenges us to create truly cross-functional autonomous delivery teams. Managers have the largest voice in team formation and often times this is informed by existing HR constructs. This is a part of the environment managers can have a tangible and early impact.

With this we were ready to work with the senior management team.

3.3 Engaging with the Senior Management Team

My role was to design and facilitate the conversation for the senior management team. To do this, I adapted David Anderson's Kanban Litmus Test [1]. The Kanban Litmus Test is designed to help assess progress with Kanban, but I thought we could apply the test independent of method. It is a series of four questions, with each question being a prerequisite for the next. I replaced 'Kanban' with 'agile teams':

1. Has management behavior changed to enable agile teams?
2. Has the customer interface changed, in line with agile teams?
3. Has the customer contract changed, informed by agile teams?
4. Has your service delivery model changed to exploit agile teams?

We did not get past the first question.

The focus on whether or not management behavior had changed generated a significant amount of discussion and energy. Initially, the discussion focused on the managers reporting to the senior management team, but quickly the group chose to look in the mirror and recognize how little their own behaviors had changed—and more importantly—felt compelled to do something about it. I now had some fantastic raw material, engaged leaders with the desire to apply change to themselves, vision articulating a different perspective for our role as managers, and a willingness to work closely with a coach for guidance and consultation.

I was able to guide the team to two important realizations: managers at all levels should be personally taking action to impact the environment around teams, and we should model agile behaviors and techniques as we take action.

The senior management team had two new questions: What are we going to do, and how are we going to do it?

3.4 Structure for the Senior Management Team

As their coach I wanted to provide counsel on how to self-organize in an agile way. We chose to adopt a mixture of techniques, create focused discussions on our work, bring transparency to our progress and drive improvement in ourselves. All are techniques that occur within their teams, allowing the managers to have a shared experience and language with their team members while demonstrating change within themselves.

The following techniques were adopted by the senior management team:

- **Kanban Board.** The senior management team created a Kanban board in JIRA to bring visibility to their own work focusing on changing the environment around teams.
- **Daily Stand-up.** Three times per week the senior management team huddled around the Kanban board to discuss actions they are taking and impediments.
- **Backlog refinement.** Weekly discussion about the backlog of work, focused on creating a shared understanding of the work, our intent, and success criteria.
- **Retrospectives.** Monthly discussion to examine what improvements we could apply to ourselves and our processes.

With a structure in place, the senior management team was ready to go but they needed to figure out what their 'work' was in order to achieve their vision.

3.5 The Work

As the senior management team came together in the following weeks to discuss the work they should pursue, they started to feel the battle with their adversary, strong legacy muscle memory. Early ideas generated by the senior management team were a reflection of where they were in their Agile journey. Examples included

examining staff assignments and managing new team standup, capacity planning activities comparing projects to current team assignments, etc.

As a coach I was happy to be there in these moments to challenge the group with some key questions. Are these actions that will get us closer to our vision improvement through learning? Are we actively changing the environment to help teams achieve? Are we changing our own behaviors?

The senior management team responded beautifully. They quickly recognized having a structure of agile techniques is not enough—but instead the work of the management team needed to be different. The senior managers recognized that in order to change the environment for increased team success they needed to be connecting with teams in a different way to understand their needs more deeply.

The need to engage with teams directly to create collaborative partnership became the first ‘work’ of the team. We used the Kanban board to visualize this work, with one card per team engagement. As the senior managers took ownership of these conversations, they would represent their progress on the board, but more importantly each completed card was a conversation between manager and team resulting in something learned.

The senior management team had a lot of ‘a-ha’ moments through this process. With my coaching engagement they were able to begin change within themselves, and realize how challenging it is creating a real sense of empathy for the change experience of the team members. The managers began to see their work in a different way because of the ‘a-ha’ moments with their teams, learning about their experience and perspectives and how better to support them. In the following months the senior management team generated two particularly important sets of work.

The first set of important work focused on the senior management team expanding on their original organizational vision to create success criteria they called Conditions of Satisfaction. With a robust organizational vision and the Conditions of Satisfaction expressing observable goals, the senior managers invited participation from all levels of their organization to collaboratively identify opportunities and explore solutions together. This critical work set clear the leaders’ intentions on culture change while applying this change to themselves in a very visible and tangible way and created collaborative partnerships instead of top-down directives.

The second set of important work did not emerge immediately but rather slowly as the transformation continued. The senior management team had started to change the relationships with teams, but hadn’t necessarily changed the engagement with the managers within their organization. While the senior managers had performance and maturity metrics for teams, how could they know if their managers were leading in an agile way? This realization led to the second set of important work. With this opportunity in mind I used the 9 Principles of Agile Leadership from the Agile Business Consortium [2] as a guide to help the senior management team define expectations for managers in their organization. The result was a series of 20 questions they could use within their respective management teams to set expectations of behavior while giving some structure on how to engage with their managers in a different way. Significant learnings came of this—both validating for our current direction and visibility into challenges that were not previously understood.

The senior management team has been able to define the right work to drive toward their vision, actively own and drive these improvements and do so by adopting agile techniques and behaviors.

3.6 Results

As a coach supporting this leadership team, I’ve been happy to observe significant results throughout the engagement. Some highlights:

- A clear vision reflecting Agile values and principles inclusive of observable success criteria has been established and embraced organization-wide.
- Less reliance on coaching for teams—the conversations has changed from ‘coach, please help this challenged team’ to ‘coach, please support me in helping this team in a healthy way.’
- Increased (and different) collaboration with teams (less command and control, more servant leadership).
- Positive response from teams as they feel managers helping in a different way as they walk beside them in the journey as partners.

Most importantly, the senior managers now have a way forward to self-organize around their work in a way that reflects the culture they desire. The frozen middle has been thawed, they are un-stuck and owning

their transformation and holding themselves accountable for progress. I am confident their momentum will continue.

4. WHAT WE LEARNED

As a coach and as a senior management team, we learned countless lessons. Most significantly as coaches and transformation focused team members, we learned the importance of leadership and management coaching. We always understood the value of coaching our leaders, but not all manager groups are as willing to engage, and as such are often overlooked or avoided when it comes to coaching investment. My engagement and subsequent results with this group showed us in very real terms how far reaching the impact of leadership coaching can be. Going forward we will make a significant investment in coaching managers in addition to team-level coaching, thus increasing the capacity of the coaching team while simultaneously imbedding transformation ownership within the leadership structure.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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