Agile In Name Only

A solution, not a problem

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Learning Outcomes:

• Recognize *decoupling* and identify it as a solution rather than a problem
• Use the Isomorphic pressure model of institutions to identify competing sources of legitimacy
• Apply this understanding to find levers to help move organizations in the direction of Agile

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AGILE IN NAME ONLY IS A SOLUTION NOT A PROBLEM?

Who is this guy and is he crazy?

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A little about me

• 13+ years as a professional developer
• Degree in Business
• Graduate work as an Organizational Communication researcher
  – Diffusion of Innovation Theory
  – Institutional Theory
  – Network Communication Theory

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OKAY, SOME OF THAT SOUNDS FAMILIAR...
Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Geoffrey Moore’s ‘Crossing the Chasm’ diagram
circa 1991

Innovators  Early Adopters  Early Majority  Late Majority  Laggards

smaller chasm

The Big Scary Chasm in Question

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Diffusion of Innovation Theory

- Rogers (1962)
- Looks at how innovations spread through a population
- Measures pressure to conform as a mechanism for diffusion
- Ubiquity as an outcome

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(neo) Institutional Theory

Adapted from DiMaggio & Powell (1983)

Coercive
- Carrier: Rules, laws, sanctions
- Social Basis: Legally sanctioned
- Dependence

Mimetic
- Carrier: innovation visibility
- Social Basis: Culturally supported, conceptually correct
- Uncertainty

Normative
- Carrier: Professionalism
- Social Basis: Morally Governed
- Duty, obligation

Isomorphic pressures
(neo) Institutional Theory

- Meyer & Rowan (1977)
- DiMaggio & Powel (1983)
- Looks at how innovations become ingrained to the point of being taken for granted
- Legitimacy as a driver
- Isomorphic pressures as a mechanism
- Measures conformity as an outcome
So What?

What does this have to do with Agile In Name Only?

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Predictions/Findings

• Early adopters are driven by a desire to improve performance (Rogers, 1983)
• This increases variation as innovations are adapted to meet organizational needs

• XP
• Scrum
• ASD
• RUP
• Crystal Clear
• DSDM
• Lean SD
• SAFe
• Less
• DAD
• Nexus
• Enterprise Scrum

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Predictions/Findings

- A few dominant forms emerge
- Dominant forms are legitimized through success stories, certifications, professional associations, regulation and mandates (DiMaggio and Powel, 1983)

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Predictions/Findings

• As an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption provides *legitimacy* rather than improves performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977)
Predictions/Findings

• May be considered irrational or negligent not to conform (Meyer, 2000)

• HBR: “Embracing Agile”
• HBR: “The Secret History of Agile Innovation”
• HBR: “Understanding Agile Management”
• Forbes: “HBR’s Embrace Of Agile”
• Forbes: “How To Make The Whole Organization Agile”
• Inc.: “4 Qualities That Make an Agile Leader”
• Inc.: “5 Things Business Leaders Can Learn From Today’s Developers”

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Predictions/Findings

• Westphal and Zajac (1998) found that the market price of corporations increased when they adopted a legitimate practice, regardless of whether they implemented it or not.
ORGANIZATIONS ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO BE AGILE (AT THE VERY LEAST) IN NAME ONLY
Predictions/Findings

- Innovations may become **decoupled**: gaps occur between policy and implementation, integration is avoided, program implementation is neglected, vocabularies are adopted but inspection and evaluation are ceremonialized (Meyer and Rowan, 1977)

- Dinwiddie, et. al. (2016) describe open resistance and rejection of agile adoption as a recognized anti-pattern, yet call out as perhaps worse "**the people who say they agree and put on a face of compliance, but passive-aggressively undermine the effort. Perhaps they only half-heartedly attempt a new way of working, or attempt it only when they think someone is watching.**" (p.22)
AGILE IN NAME ONLY IS WHAT INSTITUTIONAL THEORY DESCRIBES AS DECOUPLING
Predictions/Findings

• The institutional pressures that cause the underlying issues of decoupling are greater on larger enterprises. This is due to increased visibility and attention from regulators, the media, and the public. They are therefore held to higher standards of institutional compliance (conformity) than smaller organizations (Ingram & Simons, 1995; Powell, 1991)
Predictions/Findings

• Later adopters are more likely to engage in decoupling than early adopters. (Meyer)
SO WHY DOES THAT HAPPEN?

Decoupling happens when competing institutions place actors in a double bind.
Isomorphic Pressures

Coercive
Dependence

Mimetic
Uncertainty

Normative
Duty, obligation

Isomorphic pressures
Decoupling - Legitimacy is needed from both.
“the first ‘interest’ or problem of the modern actor is – not to accomplish prior goals of some sort – but to be an actor” – Meyer (2010)
DECOUPLING IS A SOLUTION, NOT A PROBLEM.
WHAT CAN WE DO WITH THIS?
Workshop

• Split into small groups
• Agree on an actor to discuss (Manager, Developer, PO/PM, Eng. Department, etc.)
• Answer the questions:
  – From where does that actor traditionally gain legitimacy?
  – In an Agile context, where does that actor gain legitimacy?
  – How might this create a double bind?

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What levers are available?

- What success stories support Agile legitimacy?
- What certifications, professional associations, etc. support Agile legitimacy?
- What regulation and mandates support Agile legitimacy?
Workshop

In your organization:

– What pressures give legitimacy to continue the status quo?
– What pressures give legitimacy to the new way?
INTERESTED IN MORE?

STILL THINK I’M CRAZY?

Find me at an Open Jam

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References

• Ryan, B., & Gross, N. C. (1950). Acceptance and diffusion of hybrid corn seed in two Iowa communities (Vol. 372). *Agricultural Experiment Station, Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts."

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Thank You!

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