Agile at Spotify

Some initial impressions

Hi all,

This has been a busy summer for me. I recently accepted an Agile Coach position at Spotify in Stockholm Sweden and have relocated myself and my family there.

For those of you unfamiliar with Spotify, they are a world leader in music streaming. They recently launched in Canada (my home country) and are now in over 58 countries world wide.

They are also heavy users of Agile.

This email will give you a taste of what Agile is like within Spotify, some first impressions of the company, and a few words on high performing teams.

Agile at Spotify

Spotify is by far and away the most mature Agile organization I have had the pleasure of working with.

As outlined in these two videos:

https://labs.spotify.com/2014/03/27/spotify-engineering-culture-part-1/

https://labs.spotify.com/2014/09/20/spotify-engineering-culture-part-2/

Spotify has iterated deeply on textbook Agile. They started out as a Scrum shop, abandoned that after a few years, and have ended up at a place where teams are given uber high autonomy. Each team is treated, and acts like, it's own little startup.

This is great in that teams are empowered to move fast, take initiative, and get things done. But like any organization - scaling this becomes a challenge.

No one here needs to be sold on Agile. It's just want teams do. Likewise there is no single interpretation of Agile - each squad (or team) does it differently. Some do straight Scrum. Others Kanban. Some do more XP style. Others have created their own.

Culture

I have never seen a company try to continuously improve themselves more than Spotify. Retrospections here are real. Code reviews here are 'hard and just'. And they give teams every incentive to continuously improve what they do every day.

Part of that responsibility fails to Agile coaches - to ensure teams are regularly stopping and asking how they can improve. But more than that the company is always asking for feedback and looking for better ways to present metrics, track company wide initiatives. You name it. They want to improve it.

No Projects - No Project Managers

This is something that really surprised me when I got here. Spotify doesn't do projects. They do missions.

Instead of forming traditional projects (with budgets, timelines, and clear definitions of scope) they give teams a mission, and then get out of the way while they go execute on that goal.

Tremendous responsibility. Tremendous ownership. By some very young people (often in their late 20s or early 30s). It's remarkable. Just like a little startup, they are given some runway, asked to build an MVP of whatever it is they are after, and then they report back in regularly on how they are doing.

Instead of asking them when it's going to be done, management instead asks them if there is anything they need. Complete reversal of what I am used to seeing back home with the Oil and Gas companies I regularly work with back home.

It's a beautiful thing to watch - all this empowerment and initiative. But it's also scary. Because of the competition they face.

There is no 2nd place

Spotify has come to the conclusion that the internet favors monopolies. By that I mean there is no room for second place. Google won search. Facebook won social. Spotify wants to win music.

Needless to say competing with the likes of Google and Apple is very real. Shaw Communications (a cable company I worked for a few years ago) also sees Google and Apple as real threats to the way they do businesses.

Needless to say, the internet has made the world a competitive place, and the destructive forces of capitalism take no prisoners when it comes to serving customers.

So there is real urgency and real drive behind a lot of what Spotify does.

High Performing teams

I feel I could write an entire letter on high performing teams, but I will just start with this. The level of compete Spotify has been able to foster in it's teams is amazing, and I have never seen teams, or an organization this large all pushing this hard in the same direction.

What I mean by that, is everyone one here really cares. It's not that they are workaholics, or don't have outside lives. It's more that here the vast majority care. Care deeply. They all want to improve at everything they do.

That's infectious. It makes me want to improve as a coach. It makes others around them want to strive and do better. And the result is an organization that is pushing hard and improving continuously as they go.

Hack week / Innovation

One more thought before I go. This week is hackweek at Spotify. Twice a year, the company takes a week off and lets everyone in the company build or do whatever they like to improve anything they want at the company.

It could be innovating on the product. It could be creating an arcade style joystick controlling for deploying software. Or just putting up meeting signs around the office so people can find meeting rooms.

Spotify knows it can be disrupted, so they are working hard to disrupt themselves before anyone else do. Innovations dilemma and all that good stuff.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Innovator's_Dilemma

So it's pretty cool watching this companies literally trying to kill themselves before someone else does - because they know they the music industry has forever changed, and 1st place goes to those to solve how to bring the right song to the right person and the right moment in time.

Thanks for listening all. More to come.

Jonathan

(and apologies for any typos - I type these hard and fast as a stream of conscious).