

Information for decision-makers considering large consultancy firms' Agile offering

*Curated review of large consultancy firms' offering of Agile services,
to help decision-makers make informed choices
and get better results*

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We are uncovering better ways of working
by doing it and helping others do it.

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Premises

Introduction

Now that Agile passed the early adopter stage, there are many companies interested in adopting it. Yet those companies without extensive Agile experience have a hard time evaluating what will bring them value and what not. Many of the larger companies look at large consultancy firms and their solutions for scaling Agile and for Agile Transformations, and they don't know if they can trust those or not. In this document members of the Agile community are collecting and analysing available information. Some of these practitioners have been there, know how things started, how things went, and how they pan out with what results.

The information collected in this document is to help them make an informed decision. If you like it, re-share it: <https://bit.ly/agileOffering4DecisionMakers>

The links to **all the sources used for this article** and the evidences used, are in **Appendix 1**.

How to use this document

You can download this document (open the File menu and select Download), and if necessary edit it to leave only the most relevant info before sharing it with a decision-maker. You may want to create and share a 1-page summary to introduce the topic to the decision-maker before sharing the whole document. In both cases include the link to the original document. For practitioners, you may want to share directly the link to this document.

Contributors and guidelines for contributions

This document is a collective effort with multiple contributions, mainly from the Agile community. If you want to discuss this document, and contribute to the curation of its content, join the group: <https://groups.google.com/g/agileinformeddecisionmaking>

This is an open-source document where we share valuable knowledge with decision-makers from organisations that are considering the solutions offered by large consultancy firms for scaling Agile and for Agile Transformations. With the purpose of supporting them in making an informed choice. These are the guidelines for contributors to this document:

- You can add anytime to fix spelling mistakes
- Please don't remove things others wrote
 - Except if people misquoted you, in which case you correct
 - If you quote someone, please inform them, so they can read if they still agree with the quote.
- If you disagree with something, add a comment and start a (civil) discussion

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- As this may be a controversial topic for many, we want to stress that we want a civilised conversation, no shouting match.

Feel free to add, write, comment, spread and read. If you like it, share it.

A message for large consultancy firms and their consultants

Many of those working in large consultancy firms are friends, respected Agile practitioners, and competent Agile professionals trying to improve things from the inside. And then there are many graduates and junior consultants starting their careers with energy, passion, and a strong will to do well. The content of this document is not intended as a reflection of their talent and professionalism but as a reflection of the solutions adopted and sold by the large consultancy firms.

The large consultancy firms are all invited to adopt Agile to run the consultancy firm at all levels: << Some things can't be told. You live them or you don't. But they can't be told. >> They are also invited to engage with the Agile community and are encouraged to act on the parts of the feedback that are constructive and useful, in order to accommodate the desire for the improvements needed by their clients and the practitioners.

Large consultancies getting off Agile consulting on the wrong foot

Agile Software Development has started as a bottom-up movement coming from practitioners for practitioners working in professional software development.

In a moment when medium-large IT projects had more chances to fail than to succeed, a fundamental shift in the basic assumptions on how to approach professional software development had turned the tide with a streak of repeated successes that brought Agile Software Development from a fringe movement into the mainstream.

During this period of time, a few small-medium size consulting firms in the tech sector adopted Agile Software Development as a means to succeed in their own mission of helping customers with challenging IT projects, as well as a way to run their own company. One such consulting company worth mentioning is ThoughtWorks, which pioneered Agile Software Development, hired some of the authors of the Agile Manifesto, and made a reputation for themselves for their rate of success with innovative and challenging IT projects. Another one is Crisp.se from Sweden. Another one is Equal Experts.

With many products and services gradually becoming digital, software development started to be ubiquitous. At the same time the accelerating rate of change and innovation, the unknowns and uncertainties that challenged professional software development from the advent of the Internet, started to become commonplace also for all types of organisations beyond tech and IT. This has been the start of the age that some may call the Information or Knowledge or Interconnectivity Age. That is when Agile values, principles and techniques

started to inspire larger enterprises and companies both from within and outside the Tech sector.

All this created a rapid expansion in the demand for Agile consulting services from companies willing to learn this new way of working, and it consequently created a rapid expansion of the Agile services market, at the same time when the traditional management consulting market was declining.

This led several large traditional management consulting companies to rush their entry into the Agile services market without previous understanding or experience in Agile Software Development, or in adopting Agile to run their own company, and without direct experience or alignment with the fundamental shift in the basic assumptions on how modern organisations work. To make things harder, the business model of large consultancy firms relies on the margins made on junior consultants. So the large consultancy companies adopted solutions that their junior consultants could implement at the client site, and that resulted in simplistic solutions with the same limitations as the pre-Agile approaches and unfit for the complexity of modern organisations.

Conclusions

In an opportunistic move dictated by the contraction of the traditional management consulting market, several large management consulting companies entered the rapidly expanding Agile service market without any previous knowledge, understanding, or experience and ultimately without sufficient competence in Agile. And they equipped their junior consultants with simplistic solutions that perpetuate exactly the same limitation Agile is intended to overcome.

Agile solutions from large consultancy firms

When large consultancy firms entered the Agile service market as new players, they resorted to one of these strategies to quickly shape a catalogue of offers to scale Agile and for Agile transformations for their potential customers, and to equip their junior consultants with solutions they would be able to implement at the client site:

- **The Swiss army knife strategy:** they adopted one of the commercial heavyweight scaled frameworks, typically SAFe, that allegedly contains the answer for all foreseeable needs (see <https://bit.ly/SAFe4DecisionMakers>).
- **The extended Swiss army knife strategy:** they extended one of the commercial heavy-weight frameworks, typically SAFe (see <https://bit.ly/SAFe4DecisionMakers>), for a specific industry, making it even bigger and heavier.
- **The cut and paste strategy:** they adopted one of the freely available models such as the *Spotify model*, which was never intended to be copied and reused. On the contrary, the actual learning from the Spotify model is not the model itself that is a snapshot in time of a moving target, but the journey that led to the continuous

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gradual emergence of a model that at any point in time perfectly fits the specific context and circumstances of the Spotify organisation.

- **The made-up solution strategy:** they created a new solution applying the traditional approaches they are comfortable with, while adding the Agile terminology and new ideas from various sources, typically misunderstanding and misrepresenting those ideas. And then integrating everything together.

These solutions so shaped consist of canned solutions and standard recipes to be offered to every client as a proven solution.

Whereas Agile is based on an empirical approach that consists in starting from a small and intentionally incomplete starting point in order to gradually experiment, learn, adapt and evolve an approach that fits the different and changing context and circumstances of every individual team, department, and organisation.

None of the solutions created by the large consultancy firms that have no good knowledge, understanding and experience of Agile, have been vetted by members of the Agile community, peer-reviewed and validated, and they don't have any verifiable history of successes. Whereas the approach in the Agile community is to share and peer-review any new idea and contribution to the community in order to validate the idea, in a way that is very similar to the one used also by the Open-Source movement.

To implement those solutions on the client side, the large consultancy companies resorted to:

- their junior consultants after they had undergone a 2-day certification class;
- SAFe certified professionals, often those less experienced in Agile and more willing to apply the framework by the book;
- or charging the client for a very expensive plan and PowerPoint presentations, for then leaving to the client the responsibility of the execution of their plan.

Conclusions

Large consultancy firms that entered the Agile service market created an offering of solutions for scaling Agile and for Agile Transformations that ultimately consist in 1-size-fits-all canned solutions and standard recipes that are polar opposites of good Agile and that don't have any verifiable proof of working well other than marketing material.

Evidence of the lack of Agile competence of large consultancy firms

In order to promote their presence in the Agile service market, large consultancy companies started to produce and publish their offering and Agile-related content for potential clients (listed in [Appendix 1](#)).

Most of that content has been produced or edited by their Sr. employees without much Agile experience. And while at first superficial look some of the content may seem ok because it copies and imitates some original Agile content, after reading it carefully a series of beginner's mistakes become evident.

Those mistakes demonstrate a lack of understanding, knowledge, and experience with Agile, a lack of engagement with the Agile community and a lack of attention to its feedback.

McKinsey & Company

In terms of publications that demonstrate a fundamental lack of understanding of even the most basic aspects of Agile, McKinsey is definitely a top performer.

In several of the articles analysed, there is a use of the language, the terminology, and the rhetoric commonly adopted from genuine Agile content, but those terms are used in the wrong context and with the wrong meaning on what it seems a cheap imitation of counterfeit goods.

One of the articles presents the made-up concept of Agile pools where a pool of identical replaceable generalist resources are dynamically moved around to work on new incoming tasks. Whereas Agile instead pursues productivity with longstanding teams with stably dedicated team members, that are T-shaped in the sense that they are specialists and to some extent also generalists, and where the work moves to the teams and not the other way around. None of the alleged authors of the article has previous experience with Agile.

Another article imitates the language of networked organisations, self-organisation in teams, and empirical approaches to work, while in the substance the article describes up-front planning, top-down management, and predefined processes. Again, none of the alleged authors of the article has previous experience with Agile.

In another article there is the made-up concept of an Agile Manager, the article imitates the language of the Spotify model but in the context of traditional top-down management. Again the alleged author has no previous experience with Agile.

Going back a few years in 2011 in the tech and IT space, reacting to the rising popularity of Agile Software Development, McKinsey was the proponent of another made-up idea they named "Two Speed IT." A few years later after a series of repeated failures the Forbes magazine, Boston Consulting Group as a former proponent of such an approach, and Martin Fowler who is one of the authors of the Agile Manifesto, all rebuked that practice as fundamentally flawed. The article is still available today in McKinsey as a suggested solution for their clients. Again the alleged authors have no previous experience with Agile Software Development.

McKinsey tends to sell very expensive plans for scaling Agile and Agile transformations to their clients while they often leave the burden of the execution to their clients. Please note that Agile transcends the duality and separation of planning and execution

because in Agile the two activities are inextricably intertwined, progressing in parallel in a process of gradual refinements.

As several practitioners reported, several McKinsey clients tend to leave behind the plan bought from McKinsey when they start to experience the consequences of the fundamental flaws. Regardless, McKinsey clients don't usually speak publicly about their negative experience with a McKinsey "Agile Transformation." Maybe because of the amount of money spent. But when asked personally they are open to admitting they have abandoned the recipes sold by McKinsey because they did not work. Given the propensity of McKinsey to make up Agile terminology, it is possible sometimes to spot some clients that went through a McKinsey "Agile Transformation" because of some of the terms that are still lying around, beyond the obvious Two Speed IT, and Agile Pools you can look for: North Star, Playbook, NWOW, CoE, Maturity Assessment, ...

In conclusion McKinsey & Company has a track record of made-up Agile concepts and Agile terminology imitation that actually loop back to old traditional ways of doing things. The alleged authors of their content lack understanding, knowledge and experience of Agile. The content has not been shared and discussed at any Agile conference, meetup, or in any collaboration with the Agile community. Everything points to a lack of expertise in Agile.

Gartner

Gartner's presence in the Agile space is limited compared for example to McKinsey, but they have a unique talent for getting things wrong.

Around 2010, reacting to the rising popularity of Agile Software Development, Gartner suggested the idea of Bimodal IT that is very similar to McKinsey's "Two Speed IT." And sharing the same flaws it has been equally unsuccessful. A few years later Forbes, Jez Humble author of Continuous Delivery and Accelerate, and Martin Fowler that is one of the authors of the Agile Manifesto, rebuked that practice as fundamentally flawed.

In 2016 Gartner published an article that suggests a way to combine Design Thinking, Lean Startup, and Agile. The diagram that imitates Agile diagrams has a certain success spreading beyond Gartner's clients, and leads to a few derivative variations. But a non-superficial reading immediately reveals the fundamental flaw: the three approaches are combined in a way that resembles a Waterfall linear gated process instead of an Agile approach.

In December 2021 Gartner gave it another go mapping the skills for Agile developers, failing to map correctly the core skills versus other valuable but secondary skills and including irrelevant or detrimental skills.

All these flawed insights that Gartner shared with their clients still today are available for their clients.

In conclusion, Gartner has a track record of demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of Agile Software Development, and an inability to learn and correct their mistakes.

Accenture

Accenture is not only a management consulting company but also a technical consulting company where their software development teams do not adopt Agile Software Development by default and are not known for mastering Agile either.

Accenture as a technical consulting company is not renowned for delivering IT projects on time, for their technical excellence, for their ability to succeed in challenging IT projects, or for mastering Agile Software Development as a means to their own success.

While the management consulting branch of Accenture provides solutions for Agile Transformations based on SAFe with all the well-known flaws, limitations and problems that SAFe brings (see <https://bit.ly/SAFe4DecisionMakers>).

Accenture also created an extension of the already overcomplicated and heavyweight SAFe framework for the Automotive industry, calling it AutoScrum, which the Agile community has strongly criticised for its flaws.

In some of their publications, they show a superficial understanding of Agile in the form of an iterative process applied to a traditional linear process consisting of a linear sequence of stages. This approach completely misses the empirical nature of Agile which is one of the key elements that make Agile succeed where the previous approaches have failed.

The alleged authors of the articles and solutions offered by Accenture don't seem to have previous experience with Agile.

Deloitte

Deloitte has been very active in terms of Agile offering in the space of scaling Agile and Agile Transformation.

In terms of publication of content Deloitte started off on the wrong foot by extending a graphical representation of the Agile practices by making it over-complicated while the relationship between the practices is oversimplified, and the separation of the practices between strategy, planning, development and delivery while typical in traditional approaches is the polar opposite of Agile.

Typical Deloitte's offering for Agile Transformations consists of internal made-up solutions each defined like a traditional process consisting of a linear sequence of stages. Additional articles that detail the approach reveal common misunderstandings around Agile that are expected from a beginner. For example in an article the Bimodal IT is described as a valid stepstone to Agile when the model is well known to have failed multiple times without bringing any organisation closer to Agile. None of the alleged authors of the solutions and the articles has previous experience with Agile.

For scaling Agile Deloitte resorts to offering solutions based on SAFe with all the well-known flaws, limitations and problems that SAFe brings (see <https://bit.ly/SAFe4DecisionMakers>).

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In conclusion, Deloitte has repeatedly made beginner mistakes and resorted to flawed approaches.

KPMG

Agile promotional material and content from KPMG replicate some of the high-level introductory content largely available from the Agile community. By doing so KPMG demonstrates the ability to identify the right content to be reproduced in their own material.

Then as soon as they start pitching their approach to an Agile Transformation they fall into the classic beginner's mistakes:

- they focus on a target operating model as an end state defined upfront, whereas in Agile it emerges and evolves gradually while doing the work, and continue to evolve along the changing context and circumstances;
- they misrepresent the Agile adoption journey with a linear path with predefined stages of progress;
- they pitch concepts like Agile Centre of Excellence where in Agile excellence is achieved through a distributed community;
- they focus on planning practices where Agile focus first on the opposite end of the stick, on delivering outcomes early and often and from that learning, adapting and steering;
- and finally for their Agile Transformation offering they resort to SAFe with all the well-known flaws, limitations and problems that SAFe brings (see <https://bit.ly/SAFe4DecisionMakers>).

As for the other large consulting companies, no one of the alleged authors of the solutions and the articles published has previous experience with Agile.

In conclusion, KPMG stands out compared to the other large consultancy firms for the ability to copy the right high-level content from the Agile community, while falling into the beginner's mistakes in their offering.

Boston Consulting Group

Compared to the other large consultancy companies' beginner mistakes, BCG makes mistakes that are common for an intermediate learner. While they still show a lack of expertise that is needed to offer professional services to their clients in the Agile space.

The solution BCG is usually offering for Agile transformations is a copy-paste of the Spotify model that was never intended to be a model to be copied but a high-level snapshot of what Spotify looked like at one point in time during its journey to gradually grow and evolve something that was a good fit for their own context and circumstances at the time, something very personal that is expected to continuously evolve and adapt. So this is the first mistake.

While in other publications BCG reveals other mistakes in their thinking about Agile, for example with concepts like

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- end-state target operating models, where in Agile there is a status of continuous improvement;
- north star, as an upfront defined solution, whereas in Agile a good solution is discovered gradually while the work unfolds and doing it reveals the direction of movement;
- traditional processes consisting in a linear sequence of stages.

While these may seem minor details, they reveal a lack of understanding of the empirical nature of Agile which is one of the key elements that make Agile succeed where the previous approaches have failed.

Like for the other large consulting companies, no one of the alleged authors of the solutions and the articles has previous experience with Agile.

In conclusion, while BCG stands out compared to the other large consultancy firms offering Agile services, the level is far below the level of expertise required for the job at hand.

Final conclusions

The offering of these large consultancy firms, coming from a position of authority derived from their brand and history, actually reveal their lack of competence in Agile and their lack of understanding of the key innovative elements of Agile.

Selling their Agile solutions with well-known serious flaws is irresponsible both to their clients, the Agile practitioners and more in general the whole Agile community.

The demonstrated inability to react and adapt to the criticisms and to the failures of their canned solutions and standard recipes, the failure to engage with the Agile community to learn and to contribute, and the failure to empower the experienced Agile practitioners among their employees, demonstrate their inability to adopt, practice and be Agile, and leave Agile experts wondering how can they help other organisations' Agile journey when they cannot help their own.

General trends

While there is widespread public criticism of the flaws in the Agile offering of large consultancy firms, clients that failed to adopt a solution from one of those consulting firms are less prone to share their stories publicly. While it is becoming more common for Agile practitioners and professionals to work with clients that are trying to recover from a previous failure with one of those consultancy firms.

More in general, more organisations are asking for genuine Agile professionals that are framework agnostic, and that have a real understanding and hands-on experience of good Agile.

On a less positive note, smaller or newly formed small consultancy firms without any Agile experience are trying to emulate these large consultancy firms in order to enter the market of

Agile services. The number of smaller consultancy firms trying to do that has raised so much leading to an offering of services to fake Agile expertise:

- Offers to become an expert in a weekend by getting certified with a 100% guarantee of passing the test
- Fake or unknown Agile conferences where speakers have to pay to speak, so that they can pose as experts in their cv
- Ghost writing of Agile content for the company blog
- Genuine Agile practitioners approached by individuals asking or offering money to link or like or endorse questionable low-quality content.

Alternatives to the large consultancy firms

Agile is not something that can be bought in a box and installed.

Neither is it something that can be implemented inside a project or a programme with a discrete start date and end date and a predefined scope.

More than a sprint or even a marathon, adopting Agile in an organisation is more similar to running, an ongoing journey with many starting points, like many waves that at some point come together to form a bigger wave that turns the tide.

Find in [Appendix 2](#) some examples of large companies that successfully developed Agility at scale with tangible and lasting benefits, and other ways to succeed with Agile.

Like any transformational process, adopting Agile cannot be outsourced or delegated, but is a journey that must be owned by the organisation itself, and all the missteps and mistakes are a necessary part of the development the organisation needs to go through to learn the necessary skills and develop its Agility. Authentic and experienced Agile practitioners can help an organisation by providing some guidance, avoiding fatal mistakes, and helping the journey like a steward or a sherpa.

How to recognise genuine Agile consultancy firms

There are things to look for to recognise a consultancy firm with a real and robust expertise in Agile. Below is a list of things a genuine Agile consultancy firm usually does.

- It employs Agile to run its own consultancy, at all levels (they do not just sell “Agile” to its clients).
- It employs Agile to be successful in what they do for its clients, and they excel in it (a tech consultancy for example should be known for its technical excellence and ability to deliver successfully even the most challenging projects).
- It has a people-first approach with its employees; its employees are visible at all levels and they are empowered and trusted to make important decisions.
- It offers flexible contracting to its clients, like Agile contracts, going beyond the iron triangle, to support collaboration and offer flexibility to adapt the details as the work progresses, including scope changes.

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- It has many leadership members and many employees that are genuine Agile practitioners (see below).
- It is not affiliated with any particular framework or methodology or any particular certification body, instead, it adopts and takes inspiration from multiple frameworks and a variety of sources, and even innovates.
- It is visibly engaged with the Agile community, shares content and is receptive to feedback and suggestions for improvements.

How to recognise genuine experienced Agile practitioners

There are things to look for to recognise Agile practitioners with a good understanding and robust expertise in Agile. Below is a list of things genuine experienced Agile practitioners usually do.

- They participate in the Agile/Lean community (online social networks, meetups, conferences, etc.)
- They have contributed to the Agile/Lean community including in open initiatives aimed at collectively uncovering better ways of working by doing it and helping others do it; and by doing so, the contributions have been reviewed and validated by peers.
- They have been inspired and influenced by prominent practitioners and widely respected community members that personally or indirectly contributed to their intellectual journey, its start, its path forward, and until now in their current landscape.
- They have 10+ years of experience as hands-on Agile/Lean practitioners (one to become an expert has to successfully deliver multiple times and excel with Agile/Lean in a variety of different teams, organisations and contexts).
- They have experienced good Agile multiple times in places renowned for their Agile/Lean mastery and high levels of Agility.
- They have personal characteristics such as being a team player, empathic, comfortable with uncertainty, comfortable with ambiguity and lack of control, non-directive, non-judgmental, non-defensive, flexible and resilient.

Thank you

Thank you for writing, commenting, reading, and spreading this document.

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Appendix 1 - Sources

Agile solutions from large consultancy firms

- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2021/10/29/why-big-bang-agile-transformations-are-a-bad-idea/>

McKinsey & Company

- https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lucaminudel_agile-butnotlikethis-bigconsultancyfirmsbuilders-activity-6930512798393233408-JzGI/
- <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/operations/our-insights/how-can-corporate-functions-become-more-agile>
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- <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/a-two-speed-it-architecture-for-the-digital-enterprise>
- <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2016/software-agile-digital-transformation-end-of-two-speed-it>
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Gartner

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- <https://www.gartner.com/en/documents/2798217>
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Accenture

- <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/accenture-case-study/>
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- https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/pdf-67/accenture-taking-the-agile-transformation-journey.pdf

Deloitte

- <https://web.archive.org/web/20170422145921/http://blog.deloitte.com.au/agile/2016/03/07/navigating-the-agile-landscape/>

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- <https://medium.com/tech-sojourn/7-things-wrong-with-deloitte-agile-tube-map-641192e20068>
- <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/digital-transformation/agile-enterprise-transformation.html>
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- <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/deloitte-safe-partnership.html>
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Boston Consulting Group

- <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2016/five-secrets-to-scaling-up-agile>
- <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2021/schneider-electric-agile-at-scale-transformation>
- <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2022/what-employees-say-about-agile-transformations>
- https://web-assets.bcg.com/img-src/BCG-Agile-Transformation-Management-Jan-2019-R2_tcm9-211497.pdf

Appendix 2 - Alternatives to large consultancy firms

- Examples of how other companies successfully achieved agility at scale
<https://www.smharter.com/blog/how-large-successful-companies-achieve-agility-at-scale/>
- An approach based on principles (downscaling)
<http://p2.fed.wiki/view/welcome-visitors/view/agile-at-scale-generative-principles>
- Agile Cross-team Collaboration (downscaling)
 - <https://www.smharter.com/blog/2022/08/08/agile-cross-team-collaboration-how-tos-long/>
 - <https://www.smharter.com/blog/2022/11/21/transcending-agile-cross-team-collaboration-with-shared-work/>
- Invitation based change
<https://openleadershipnetwork.com/positions/invitation-based-change/>
- A long list of alternatives
<http://p2.fed.wiki/view/welcome-visitors/view/agile-practices-and-patterns-for-the-whole-organisation/view/practices-and-patterns-for-the-organisation>

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