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Leadership Delegates the Transformation to Others (Anti-pattern)

Or “I Delegate This Transformation To You …”

Consumer

In general there are a couple of consumers of this anti-pattern:

1. Transformation leads and agile coaches. For transformation leads this is something seen when people first decided they need to “go agile”. Coaches can also help.
2. Increasing self-awareness of leadership. This is one of those anti-patterns that your sub-ordinates will feel uncomfortable discussing with you. So there needs to be a degree of self-awareness that you might be the problem. To quote one of the transformation leads “I've seen the problem, and it is me”.
3. Peer-to-peer accountability. For any leadership group, even the most senior, it should be expected that peers can call each other out when they see this ant-pattern.
4. Release Train Engineers / Scrum Masters. After the senior leadership has decided to “go agile” you will often see middle managers exhibiting this anti-patter. RTE's should work these issues as part of their “coaching” job for trains; Scrum Masters for teams.

Description

This is a starting anti-pattern for leadership at many organizations. For coaches it is something seen when people first decided they need to “go agile” at the most senior levels of the transformation. Classic indicators are when the leadership team are only able to provide a couple of hours (say) to talk about agile and then appoint someone to take care of it. And while this is something that you will see most obviously with senior leadership, the pattern will repeat all the way through the various layers of management as they pass through the transformation.

In summary, we always start the transformation with the teams and launching them. Management sometimes don’t acknowledge they are the ones that need to transform too!

Impact

Without a real understanding of how the move to agile affects the way work is executed in the organization, without lining up the true goals of the transformation, without really understanding the

changing role of leadership in the transformation, without developing an understanding of the cultural challenges faced by the organization, and without developing lean-agile expertise, the transformation to agile will be impeded:

1. Since there is limited understanding of how work will be executed, there is a natural feeling that this effects other parts of the organization but that “I” do not have to change - I can still get the status reports I want, I can still get tell people what to do and so on. This creates a mismatch between how the organization is expected to operate and how the leader (in this instance) is expecting to work. If it continues, the organization will naturally fall back to old ways of working resulting in only superficial improvements in how it executes as the organization works to accommodate leadership requests.
2. Since there is a limited understanding of the goals of the transformation, the organization will interpret the reason themselves or, failing that, will simply decide that this is just the current flavor of the month. The result will be a non-aligned transformation, which means that even if successful “in the micro” the transformation will not produce the business results expected overall.
3. Since leadership will continue to behave in the normal mode of operation, they will continue with old ways of working and, worse, will assume that they “are agile”. For example, when leaders hear the concept of “servant leadership” they assume this means “delegation of decisions” without necessarily understanding how the system of delivery needs to be changed to allow true delegation.
4. Since leadership does not understand the impact of the cultural challenges faced by the organization they will be unable to help the organization overcome them. Worse they could, through their behaviors, actually reinforce old thinking reducing the ability to change. For example, at many organizations there is a strong feeling that “if you only do sufficient planning then the results will be predictable.” Agile approaches suggest that many things are not predictable, that no amount of additional planning will improve that, and that sometimes you need to use a more “scientific method” approach where you get feedback. The result is that leadership is often not comfortable with the amount of ambiguity, try to enforce more planning, which takes us straight back to old ways of thinking.
5. Since leadership have not done lean-agile leadership, while they may understand it in theory, they do not understand it in practice. This means when the agile teams / trains bring up issues, they are not in a position to address this issue in a lean-agile way. This could well result in old ways of thinking.

The overall result is that while the transformation will look successful on the surface, while management will “declare success” of their part of the organization moving to an agile operation, the transformation will be in name only, with limited business results. Leadership is responsible for the overall system, and can only improve that if they have real knowledge of the new system.

Transform the teams but management keeps working in the old world. Team feels demotivated and not empowered. Team launches could be regretted work.

(Potential) Remedies

Take the time to help management and supervisors understand that they need to lean in. Many will interpret agile / lean words based on their current frame of reference which is the more “scientific”, “plan-based” approach. But people can be shown that its not “business as usual”.

1. Make learning for management and supervisors experiential so that it is hard to just to think they know they already know this. For example, a portfolio prioritization workshop using their data will help them understand WIP and capacity limitations.
2. Signal that the new learning is different to business as usual. This can be done with standard facilitation tools (eg no powerpoints, postit based activities) but also more subtly by mixing up expectations (eg invite a guest speaker, use the backward bike)
3. When you have time with management / supervisors part of your goal should be to set up time for the next learning.

In general once management understands the problem you will be able to ask them to lean in more effectively:

1. Allocate real time learn about the new approach. Insist on specific learning outcomes so you do not feel the time is wasted.
2. Go and see people that are actually working in the new way, ask questions.
3. Work with a coach as mentor on the real problems that you are facing today.
4. Do it. Really do it.

While it might not always be possible to hit a home run with management straight away, you should start the transformation with management as a key early component.

Examples

Symptoms include:

- Transformation lead asks for 2-3 day training for leadership on lean - agile principles. Leadership says you have an hour.
- Leadership does not attend training that they expect their people and teams to take.
- Leadership does not use lean-agile practices as their way of working. For example, they expect their teams to have a Kanban board but do not work a Kanban board with their peers.
- Leadership only partially attend key events (such as the PI (Big Room) Planning event or Inspect & Adapt, Lean Portfolio Management meetings) preferring to turn up as a guest for an hour or so over a multi-day event.
- Leadership insisting that status reports and meetings are still needed and that they need to be adapted to leadership's timing and needs instead of working through the ceremonies and constructs of the agile organization
- Leadership not taking the time to learn about lean-agile approaches.

Want To Know More?

- Source: What Kinds of Problems Do you Typically See As The Organization Transforms to Agile / Lean?

AntiPatterns, Smells, Leadership

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