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Becoming a Technical Leader

How Developers Can Learn the Language of Business Stakeholders

How to Effectively Lead Remote IT Teams

From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams

FACILITATING THE SPREAD OF KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION IN PROFESSIONAL SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

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Becoming a Technical Leader

IN THIS ISSUE

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Anna Radzikowska has more than 10 years of experience in finance, training, and project management while working in the public sector, for big companies, and running her own business. Currently, she leads the product-support team and is product owner of RPA solutions in the finance sector. Being a Kanban Management Professional and a member of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants helps her combine theoretical knowledge and project work with practical application in daily activities, resulting in continuous support, training, and improvement even after a project ends.

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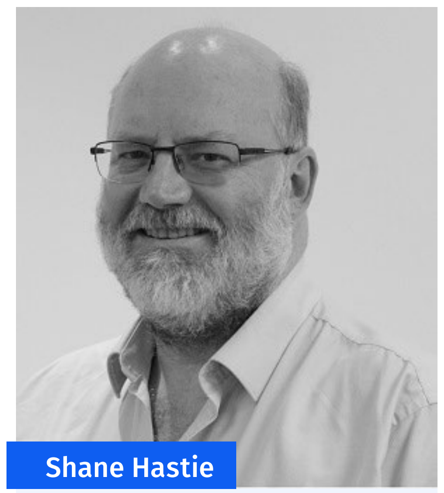
A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Shane Hastie

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Leadership is a set of competencies that can be learned. A search online will present lists of the top N traits of leaders (where N is any number from 5 to 101!)

Commonly these lists include things like honesty, integrity, confidence, communication, decision-making, empathy, focus, enthusiasm, loyalty and decisiveness. Some of these aspects can be considered personality traits but all of them can be learned and strengthened through self-discipline and deliberate intent. Effective leadership has always been a key factor for organisational success, and this remains the case in modern tech-heavy orgainsations.

Traditionally these are not competencies that are heavily emphasized in technology education programs, yet consistently the factors that influence career and organisational success are not how well your product works but how well your teams work together, how well they respond to your customers and how well they are led.

For this minibook we've pulled together six articles from the InfoQ content that explore different aspects of what it takes to lead effectively in the technical world.

We start with Ben Linders interviewing Jessica Ingrassellino about why great managers are great teachers, she provides advice on leading teams by focusing on strengths as a means to address growth areas and advises leaders to ask "What information, resources, or accomodations can I give each team member to help them succeed?"

Anna Radzikowska provides advice on communicating outside our normal spheres and learn the language of our business stakeholders. Words carry meaning and the same words can have very different meaning in different contexts. She says that "people throughout history have communicated with each other, and how true communication intentions have been distorted by words getting lost in translation."

Ben Linders interviewed Michael Ventura on his book *Applied Empathy: The New Language of Leadership*. Ventura reminds us that empathy is a muscle you train and it takes practice and dedication. He says that "Questions are more important than answers; as leaders we should look for ways to connect with our customers and employees, and listen more and talk less."

Todor Gigilev talks about his experiences leading distributed teams, which are more and more the norm today. Distributed teams need different leadership approaches to co-located teams and we need to adapt our communication and interaction to take into account cultural and other differences that come with distribution. He points out that for any product "the most crucial part is the team that will deliver it."

Continuing in the explorations of what's needed when working with distributed teams, Shane Hastie interviewed Johanna Rothman and Mark Kirby on their book *From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams*. Their goal in writing the book is "to solve the problem of thinking distributed teams could use exactly the same practices as collocated teams. And, we wanted to help the distributed agile teams work better".

We close with Shaaron Alvares' piece on Humanity at Work: An Interview with Rich Sheridan, Author of *Chief Joy Officer*. He talks about bringing joy into the workplace and says that "in order to truly begin to understand what joy means in the workplace, we need to delve into the sort of things that are less visible, into questions such as: Why do we exist? What do we believe about ourselves? Who do we serve, and what would delight look like for them?"

Hopefully you will find some useful advice and answers to questions about what's needed to build the competencies of leadership and feel inspired to bring joy to your own workplace.

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

– Jack Welch

Q&A with Jessica Ingrassellino

Great Managers Are Like Great Teachers

by **Ben Linders**, Trainer / Coach / Author / Speaker

Differentiated instruction strategies have helped Jessica Ingrassellino to find ways for each of her team members to best grow and flourish with the opportunities available. She applies this by adjusting content, process, and outcome, approaching each individual as an individual with respect for their needs.

Ingrassellino, director of quality assurance at Salesforce.org, gave a presentation about "How Great Managers are Like Great Teachers" at the European Testing Conference 2019, held February 14-15 in Valencia, Spain.

This conference aimed to get experts and practitioners together to talk, learn, and practice the art of testing. Presenters looked at advanced new methods for making testing more effective as well as at enriching our understanding of fundamental methods to grow a stronger community.

InfoQ interviewed Ingrassellino about the challenges she faced when she became a manager, how she applies differentiated instruction in managing and leading her team, dealing with company policies, rules, or culture, and how to continuously evaluate employees.

InfoQ: What challenges did you have when you became a manager?

Jessica Ingrassellino: As a manager, I found that I was very concerned with the well-being of my team. At first, I felt really challenged because I worried that I didn't know how to best help my team help themselves. With each challenge, I realized I was able to look into my previous experience as a teacher, and that I was actually equipped to help/mentor/manage in a better way.

The Interviewee

Jessica Ingrassellino

is the director of quality engineering at Salesforce.org. She is active in the education community as a member of the Industry Advisory Board for CUNY TechWorks, teaching Python and software testing at Queensborough Community College. Ingrassellino shares her love of learning and testing with the world, speaking nationally and internationally about her experiences as a tester, teacher, and musician.

For example, when I was teaching high-school music, I had a class of students of mixed ages and abilities. There were about 45 students in this particular class, so quite a large group. I had one student who had just moved from outside of the United States with her family and who did not speak any English at all. If I had continued to teach her using only materials written for a high-school English speaker, she would have done poorly in my class, because she would not have had the chance to display her understanding of the material. I adjusted the inputs so that the student was able to use video demonstrations and audio recordings to learn how to play the piano. She learned to read sheet music very quickly and actually excelled at playing the piano and displaying understanding of musical notation. My concern for the student and her well-being and my decision to adjust my approach and strategy meant that my student was able to succeed in the class, learn music, and display her understanding in a way that was appropriate for her skills and abilities. Practically, this meant that she would be one step closer to meeting her arts requirement and graduating in the American educational system.

InfoQ: What is differentiated instruction?

Ingrassellino: Differentiated instruction is an educational strategy where the teacher plans instruction in ways that meet the different needs of the students in their classrooms. For example, some students are excellent readers and prefer to work alone, while other students enjoy social learning and group work. Teachers can adjust the content of their lessons, their teaching processes, or the products that the students create. For example, when I taught students about music history, I had to adjust for the reading differences in my 40 to 50 students. Many were at or below a 12-year-old reading level, despite being 14 to 18 years in age. So, when I planned my lessons, I found easy, medium, and difficult levels of reading in each topic. Students were encouraged to select the reading that worked best for them, and the information that the students needed to learn was available in each of the readings. The only difference was the nuance and level of detail in the readings.

InfoQ: How do you apply differentiated instruction in managing and leading your team?

Ingrassellino: Differentiated instruction strategies have helped me to work with each of my team members to find ways that they can best grow and flourish with the opportunities available. For example, I have noticed that many enterprise quality-engineering organizations structure their quality teams using the exact same practices across the board, for every member of the team. I apply a differentiated approach by spending time getting to know my team members, especially their strengths, areas for improvement, and professional goals.

For example, some members of my team are really happy working as individual contributors, and they want help in goal setting and priorities. The meetings that I have with those individual contributors are focused on goal-setting strategies, team communication strategies, with an emphasis on how that tester will make specific improvements. In those meetings, I am like the teacher who adjusts the content/input to be focused on goal setting and the outcome to be reaching specific goals.

For other team members, growth and leadership skills are very important. Those team members need me to adjust the input to have more strategic, open-ended discussions. The meetings are focused on idea sharing and high-level strategy, and the outcome is fuzzier, requires ongoing work, and is less deterministic than a goal-setting outcome. In fact, this outcome may even be failure, and reflecting on failure is a learning goal. It is quite different than other methods of articulating success.

In both of these examples, I adjust content (what is discussed), process (what strategy I use to work with the team member to achieve their goals), and outcome (what constitutes success).

InfoQ: I'm assuming that there will be things that will apply to every team member like company policies, rules, or culture. How do you deal with that?

Ingrassellino: Again, it's important to understand that every person is different. Each team member may have different reactions to the same company policies, and it's important to listen to their concerns and enable them to be change agents. Let's take two team members for an example. Carla, for example, may have challenges because a "no remote work" policy is conflicting with caring for a family member or with a personal illness. I would encourage Carla to learn about the company, investigate the reasons behind this policy, and see if there is any room to change the company policy. I would work with Carla to learn how she could suggest change and give her information about how these kinds of changes happen. In this way, even if Carla does not see the situation end the way she wants, she can grow and become a strong part of the company culture, and have a greater understanding. She can also make an informed decision about her next steps. (Does she want to stay? Does she prefer to leave?)

There are times when a team member will bring up an important issue with overall company culture. For example, let's say Jon is an individual with a disability requiring a wheelchair, and he feels concerned and uncomfortable about the workspace. In this instance, it is important to recognize Jon's experience by discussing specific current policy (content) with him, helping him to create a plan to move forward using structures within the company, and allowing the employee to investigate and participate in leading company change (strategy). When an employee sees that the outcome (better working environment) has happened and they have been a part of the change, then a culture where employees are listened to and respected is reinforced.

The key to both of these situations is, again, adjusting response with differentiation. What I would discuss with Carla, who has an individual concern, is different than what I would discuss with Jon, who has a more global concern. The differences in discussion (content) are subtle, the actions (strategies) are similar, and the outcomes for either might look different (work from home or have a more accessible workspace), but approaching each individual as an individual with respect for their needs is critical for this to work.

InfoQ: What benefits have you seen?

Ingrassellino: Perhaps the greatest benefit I have seen from this style of leadership is trust. I feel that professionally, and to a good extent personally, I know my team members. I have come to a better understanding of where they find challenges and joys. Because of this, I am able to present them with challenges and growth opportunities that are realistic stretches suited to their direct capabilities.

I feel that my team members trust me to help them move forward. I know that they have not always been happy to receive critical feedback, as it can be incredibly difficult. However, they have remained open to giving and receiving the feedback. So, they trust that I can hear something I may not want to hear and they trust that I have their professional interests in mind when I provide feedback and discuss how to move forward.

InfoQ: How can we evaluate employees continuously?

Ingrassellino: In education terms, this is called formative assessment. Formative assessment happens all the time, even when we don't attend to the practice. For example, using a poorly made piece of software causes a user to become frustrated because things keep going wrong. They know the software is "bad", even if they cannot say why right away. In schools, kids base their opinions about how they are doing on their grades, and also on the way their teachers act and react to their work. In management, people generally have a sense for how they are doing, and so do their managers. For my team members, and many software testers in general, it is so easy to get bogged down by the day to day that sharing feedback about great work, or feedback about areas of concern, can be easily forgotten.

Unlike summative assessments (which are the tests and yearly review types of things), formative assessment, with fast feedback cycles, provides the most value to learning because team members can improve as soon as the feedback is given rather than only have the chance to improve once a year. However, to be a formative assessment, the feedback needs to be intentional and frequent. Managers need to provide tangible feedback. If the feedback is positive, the manager can provide more value by pointing out the actions that were positive. If the feedback is constructive, then it needs to have an actionable component so that the employee knows how to improve their performance. It is best if this is discussed with the employee so that they can become change agents.

Giving formative feedback is easier when it is done regularly. Regular feedback gives every team member the opportunity to reflect on their performance and make improvements so that they meet their goals when their yearly reviews occur.

InfoQ: If people want to learn more about differentiated instruction, where can they go?

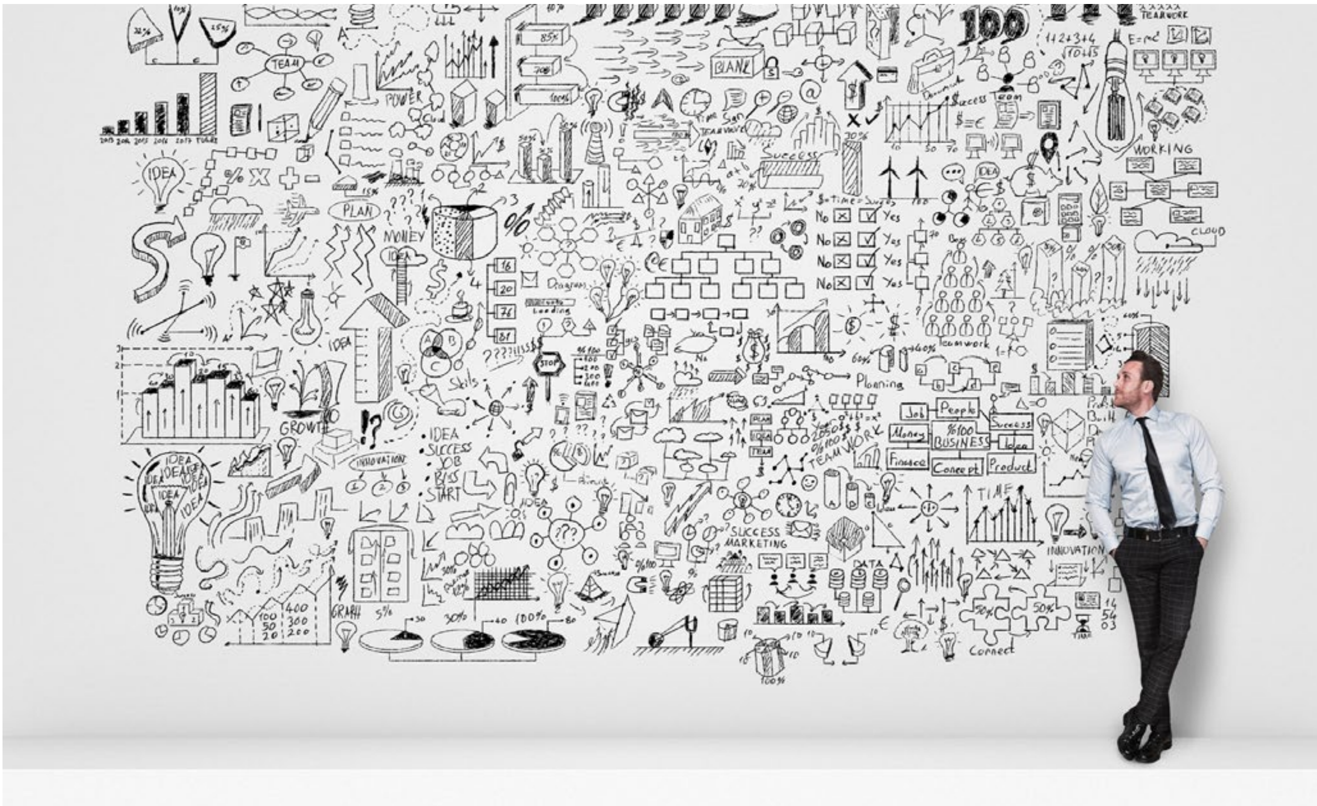
Ingrassellino: A search of "differentiated instruction" in Google will yield thousands of results, and can be narrowed based on what someone wants to know. I would recommend Carol Ann Tomlinson's *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* as a primer. One can abstract the basic principles into a management context from the classroom context.

Also, here is a paper on the application of differentiated strategies in teaching programming, which people may find interesting: "Student Usage Patterns and Perceptions for Differentiated Lab Exercises in an Undergraduate Programming Course".

As for a book that talks about these principles in software engineering? Maybe I need to write it!

TL;DR

- Management is challenging because everybody has different strengths and weaknesses.
- Differentiated instruction strategies help managers to lead teams by focusing on strengths as a means to address growth areas.
- Ask yourself what information, resources, or accommodations you can give each team member to help them succeed.
- Ask yourself if there are processes that you can change or improve to help every member of your team, especially members who might be struggling. Can you involve them in the process?
- Ask yourself what success looks like for each member of your team. Recognize that it will be different for each person, and work together with each to help them find their success.



How Developers Can Learn the Language of Business Stakeholders

by **Anna Radzikowska**, Kanban Practitioner | Product Owner | Project Manager

For over 15 years, I have been interested in what we call "the magic of words and language". It is strictly related to how people throughout history have communicated with each other, and how true communication intentions have been distorted by words getting lost in translation. Now, when I have to move fluidly between business stakeholders and developers, I see even more often how spoken or written messages can be misleading, if we understand through incorrect filters.

What is the easiest way to learn foreign languages? Talk to people who speak them. This rule is also applicable to we who cooperate and communicate within the project environment but stay in separated clusters (like a developer team or operations) on a daily basis.

If we look at different groups taking part in the software development process, we might easily see that they communicate on different levels in terms of language, using different dictionaries (sets of words, meanings and sentences), which makes it difficult to understand each other.

This article is a sneak peek at where I have observed the most tension: talking about impediments and blockers, individual and team learning, real options, and risk management.

Impediments and blockers

Business stakeholders recognize blockers just as we developers do, as bottleneck issues, and work to address them; what we need to do is give these items monetary value. If they materially affect the financial position of a company at the end of the reporting cycle, we have to recognize them in financial statements. It's not enough to say, "We are blocked, do something." To allow business stakeholders to correct and efficiently prioritize issues, we should support their decision-making process with information that will help monetize problems. What part of the work is blocked and for how long? How does it affect delivery time? Is there any unexpected developer idle time? What other items in the queue depend on the blocked one? This kind of information will support not only the project manager but, most of all, the budget owners in making good decisions.

What is important from a business stakeholder's perspective is an understanding of the problems you have as developers. That's why I try to provide stakeholders with parallel situations they can easily relate to. Do you have a problem with increasing work in progress? Relate it to inventory management or assets under construction. Does your project seem to create technical debt? Compare it to out-of-fashion bikes in your warehouse or a necessary loan repayment.

You can read more about inventory accounting for product developers in my article "Bikes, bananas, and work in progress" at Kanban Dragons.

Budgeting and planning time for teams to learn

I will start with something obvious, yet much forgotten: if we optimize our process for busyness and working at full capacity, we never leave time for a team's active learning. I use the word "active" intentionally, because passive learning is something that happens to us when we repeat the same set of tasks, a well-known phenomenon that was studied in the 19th century. However, this applies mostly to manufacturing.

In our knowledge-based work, making time for learning is crucial and is similar to finding time for improvement.

Of course, this does not mean that we should tell the team, "From now on, between 2:00 and 3:00 PM, you will learn and improve." Rather, it is about giving people space, comfort, and the safety to say, "Now I will learn. Now I will read. Now I will do the work which will help us later on." Give them the confidence of knowing that if they are idle, they can use the time for self-development, which is never a lost investment. But each project, in order to be sustainable, has to give its members space for learning and improving, which then becomes part of regular project budgeting (until it can be directly connected to project goals).

When we are budgeting a project, the learning part falls under the category of research expenses, and it shouldn't be capitalized but always written off. That's why you don't need to account for it or track it separately. However, we may do this in our project reporting if that is the level of detail that the stakeholders require.

Benefits of individual and team learning

Let's start with the statement that knowledge work is a constant learning process. At any given moment in a project, we perform using the best of our knowledge. But we should never, and we do not ever, stop learning. When I design a workflow with a team, one of our basic tasks is the design of learning phases, not the steps in the process or determining which phase precedes which. We focus purely on learning.

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What I show to my projects' stakeholders is discovered work versus anticipated work, through continuously and transparently reporting what we had planned when the project started and what we found out during analysis and development. This helps them to understand how we progress with regard to the budget and timing, how we make decisions on what we continue to develop, and what is less of a priority at any point in the project.

Business stakeholders are not our enemies; once they have enough sound information on where we are and what we expect to happen, they are willing to accept reasonable requests or decisions — even additional learning time that team members may require.

What we can do is approach the opportunities for learning with the learning-curve effect. Although this is something we should not avoid, I often see people skipping over this element when planning a project or forecasting work. We tend to translate the metrics and statistics from the stable state to the initial phases, when the team is still formulating. Similarly, this applies to a person new to a role, who needs to learn not only his or her place in the project but also new responsibilities.

Let's keep this in mind when planning work or identifying impediments. I discussed the learning-curve effect in more detail in "Never stop learning — why is learning-curve effect so powerful?"

Real options

The InfoQ article "'Real Options' Underlie Agile Practices" explores how we can use real options for deferring decisions to the last possible moment. I would like to clarify that what is referred to as a "real option" in the article is based on the Black-Scholes model, which is the method for options valuation but does not actually cover what real options are.

What we recognize in financial management as real options are alternatives for project or business investment. We have four such options to consider in our projects: the option to delay, the option to expand, the option to abandon or withdraw, and the option to redeploy.

I will skip over the option to delay, as it is covered in depth in the InfoQ article.

The option to expand exists when a company can make further investments that increase the net present value (NPV) of a project (which originally maybe did not seem worth undertaking).

The option to abandon or withdraw is the option to close down the project during its lifetime, as continuing to work on it is no longer financially justified. From my personal experience, this option is the most difficult to enact, due to sunk costs and the psychological aspect of the decision.

The final option is to redeploy, which is when a company decides to repurpose the outcome of the project for another one. This is not always possible, hence cannot be taken for granted, but having this option minimizes the sense of loss that would result from a project closure.

Each of these options requires careful analysis of project cash flows and stakeholder decisions based on financial projections. To choose the option to delay over abandoning, we would need to ensure that the project NPV is either still positive or will be positive after the course change. Business stakeholders and sponsors would reject any decision that negatively affects NPV.

Risk and uncertainty management in accounting

Let's differentiate between risk and uncertainty. Risk is something that may or may not occur, but we are able to statistically calculate its probability or frequency based on past records. Uncertain events are those which we cannot predict with statistical confidence.

To deal with uncertainty, we do market research that aims to minimize it. We can use surveys, gather feedback, and perform retrospectives.

Risk management, based on data, gives a much broader range of possibilities. The most common strategy is to use expected values, which focus on the probability of outcomes. The next one is sensitivity analysis, which we can use when we can establish dependencies between the key variables in the project. It usually involves changing one key variable to observe how the others behave. Let's imagine that stakeholders ask us what the impact of moving one of our developers to another project would be. We should treat this developer as a key variable and analyze his or her impact on other variables: e.g., losing one developer means decreased total cost but increases time to delivery. Losing a developer may also affect the team's learning curve, likely affecting project budget. Once we have connected and analyzed all dependent variables we have recognized, we can decide whether this scenario is acceptable from our project perspective. What additionally supports us in these cases are real options, and this is how all of these concepts play together.

Probably well known to developers are different kinds of simulation, including Monte Carlo simulation, that lead us to better understand the impact of a risk to the project. It relies on a huge number of data and can analyze more variables at once. What's important for the Monte Carlo method is the randomness of input data to generate more reliable probability distributions. Because this method gathers a lot of data points, it is more reliable in assessing probability than, for example, sensitivity analysis, which only considers the perspective of one variable.

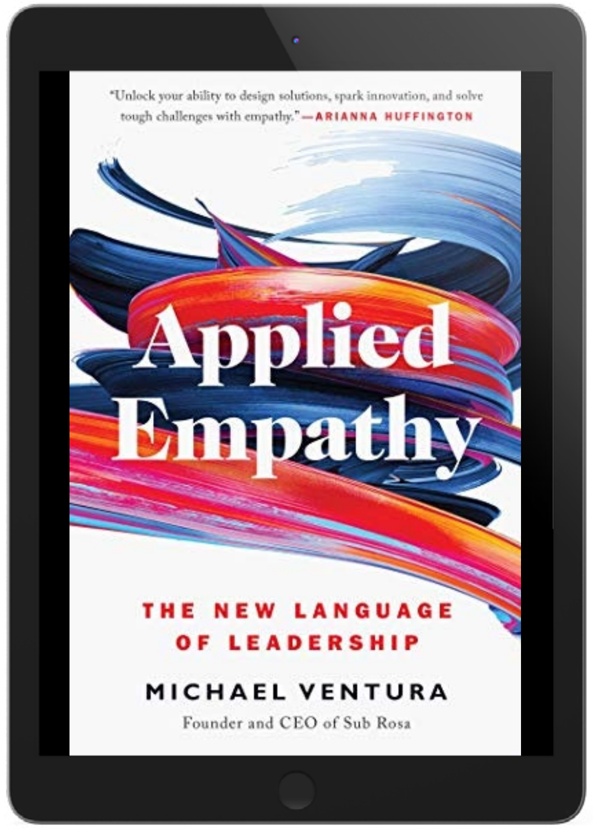
Speaking of impact, we can use the impact-probability (or severity-frequency) matrix with four options for project risk: accept, transfer, control/reduce, or abandon/avoid.

Finally, what is maybe not directly laid out by data analysis but is worth considering are the types of stakeholders you deal with. People typically fall into one of three categories: risk seekers, risk neutral, or risk averse. It is important to keep in mind the personality of your stakeholders. It's worth being aware of this classification not only when discussing project risks but also when trying to persuade someone of a new idea or when building a business case. While probably no one consciously thinks about personal risk preference, it is relevant to most of us all the time.

Even in rough areas like accounting or product development, there are still people behind the processes. Communication is the key to understanding our peers and customers; frequent communication helps to take advantage of extensive knowledge on both sides, and all of us can either contribute to this understanding or at least learn something that enriches us.

TL;DR

- Different people use different sets of words and meanings — be mindful of them.
- Impediments and blockers are bread and butter for everyone, not only product developers.
- Individual and team learning is crucial for our products, too.
- When a project is stuck in a dead end, don't panic, but try to apply real options.
- Be risk aware and learn how to deal with it in ways other than using only a risk log.



Q&A on

Applied Empathy: The New Language of Leadership

by **Ben Linders**, Trainer / Coach / Author / Speaker

The book Applied Empathy by Michael Ventura explores how understanding people and learning about their perspectives can help us to lead with empathy. Questions are more important than answers; as leaders we should look for ways to connect with our customers and employees, and listen more and talk less.

InfoQ readers can download an extract of Applied Empathy.

InfoQ interviewed Ventura about the role empathy plays in leadership, empathic archetypes, tensions that can slow down change, getting insight into the inner workings of the company and building connections with customers, and developing empathy skills.

InfoQ: Why did you write this book?

Michael Ventura: *Applied Empathy* was written because we knew it was needed. Everyone talks about empathy like it's a rare gift that some people have and others don't. That's not the case. The concepts shared in this book will help people to adopt an empathic leadership mindset, which over time will allow for empathy to become a part of their leadership DNA.

InfoQ: For whom is this book intended?

Ventura: It's for leaders, which is not to say exclusively executives or CEOs. I believe everyone has the capacity to lead and the lessons included will help anyone, no matter the stage in their career, to think differently about their work and their actions.

InfoQ: How did you get interested in empathy in organizations?

Ventura: I've been working with organizations for nearly 20 years, helping them to build stronger brands, better products, and more resilient internal cultures. Throughout this work, I've consistently seen empathy play a critical role in building powerful organizations and initiatives. Whether it was helping GE build a patient-first mindset for their healthcare practice, working alongside Nike's innovation team to bring new products to consumers with authenticity and integrity, or helping one of the world's largest financial institutions to embody their mission and share it with their thousands of global employees, empathy plays a critical role in deeply understanding the needs of your audience and facilitating a connection with them.

After years of doing this in a freeform manner, we thought it was time to develop a more formalized approach. We began by creating a 12-week curriculum and teaching it at Princeton University. Via academia, we were able to really field-test this thinking and improve it with the help of our willing students. Following that, we were invited to bring our work to the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was fascinating to bring the same training to a different group of students and see how it worked just as effectively. From there, we knew we were on to something powerful and began to more formally roll out this thinking out to our clients.

InfoQ: What role does empathy play in leadership?

Ventura: Too many leaders think they have all the answers. They believe that they have already done the legwork and there is no need to leave the ivory tower to connect with the people they serve. This is not the case. The best leaders know that questions are often more important than answers. They know that every person they interact with has discrete needs that should be addressed. They take the time to ask the right questions and then are willing to do the work within both themselves and their companies to bring real, systemic change to life.

InfoQ: What are the seven empathic archetypes?

Ventura: One of the key methods we developed to help people connect with the idea of empathy was the creation of our seven empathic archetypes. We all love this sort of stuff. I'd bet most of you reading have taken at least one personality quiz (you know, the ones that tell you what Star Wars character or snack food you are most like). From Buzzfeed to Meyers-Briggs to StrengthsFinder to the Enneagram, a good diagnostic quiz aimed at helping us to better understand ourselves is something we all love.

The archetypes function in this way — to help you better understand your empathic personality. Unlike many of these tests, however, our desire isn't to compartmentalize you into a singular and specific type. We don't want to pigeonhole anyone and say, "This is who you are." Instead, we've introduced a series of archetypes that can be thought of as a kit of parts; something you can pull from depending on the context and the perspective required to meet any situation head on. The ultimate aim is to help you become defter and more effective at perspective taking, regardless of the circumstance.

The archetypes each have a corresponding behavior. Together, they help us become a more well-rounded and thoughtful empath. They include:

- The Sage — Be present. Inhabit the here and now.
- The Inquirer — Question. Interrogate assumed truths.
- The Convener — Host. Anticipate the needs of others.
- The Alchemist — Experiment. Test and learn at all costs.

The Author

Michael Ventura

is the CEO and founder of Sub Rosa, a strategy and design firm that has worked with some of the world's largest and most important brands, organizations, and startups. Ventura has served as a board member and adviser to a variety of organizations, including Behance, the Burning Man Project, Cooper-Hewitt, and the UN's Tribal Link Foundation. Applied Empathy, his first book, was published by Simon & Schuster in May 2018.

- The Confidant — Listen. Develop the ability to observe and absorb.
- The Seeker — Dare. Be confident and fearless.
- The Cultivator — Commit. Nurture with purpose and intentionally grow.

Take a moment to consider each of them. I'm confident that there are already a couple that feel like second nature to you. These are probably the areas where you're naturally inclined to use empathy to adopt a perspective, without even realizing it. What about the ones that feel less comfortable to you? The ones that make you think you've never really put yourself into that kind of behavioral state. These areas are just as important as the strengths you've uncovered. As we work on skilling-up in these weaker realms, we become better able to understand others and ourselves more deeply than before.

InfoQ: In your book, you mentioned four tensions that can slow down the change process in organizations. What are the tensions and how can we deal with them?

Ventura: There are a variety of tensions that emerge when we try to use empathy. These manifest within areas of an organization and its subsequent culture, and can present a resistance against us as individuals trying to practice empathy.

One of the first areas this can be detected in is in objective versus subjective problem solving. You may be an objective, linear thinker working in an organization that values creativity and operates more subjectively. This doesn't mean you can't be successful within that organization, but in order to do so, you're going to need to be more empathic and consider whether the solutions you provide account for the culture of the company at large and aren't solely a reflection of your objective mindset.

Another area of tension manifests in top-down versus bottom-up cultures. Having worked with lean, agile startups as well as the military and the government, I've seen that empathy can have a role in both types of cultures. The important point is to understand what sort of culture you are operating within and to what degree the culture (top-down or bottom-up) is supporting or hindering empathic thinking. Some bottom-up cultures operate via a decision-by-committee model. This can be massively empowering for employees, but can also lead to analysis paralysis and grind progress to a halt. When practicing empathy, it's important to assess the company culture and determine where perspective is needed most. Let that guide decision making and communications up and down the organization.

The third tension we discuss in the book is human-centered versus ecosystemic design. Sometimes we need to focus solely on the final recipient of a solution: the user, the consumer, the customer, etc. We use human-centered design to truly optimize research for this person or group of people, and the insights gleaned help to inform the choices we make. Alternatively, sometimes decisions need to be more ecosystemic in nature, which requires a consideration of a variety of elements within a system. Examples may include B2B partners, the supply chain, the media, shareholders, employees, competitors, etc. Taking the perspective of each of these helps to paint a more accurate, holistic snapshot of the ecosystem, ultimately helping leaders make more well-informed choices. This can be time consuming and frustrating for those who want to simply trust their gut, but without doing the work of conducting the research, talking to partners, and more, you won't have enough insight to make thoughtful and fully informed decisions.

The last tension we'll talk about here is the difference between passive and proactive leadership. Some organizations are inclined toward slow and steady growth. They are risk averse and don't want to make any big bets — instead moving slowly and only making choices that have a safe, conservative outlook on growth. It's critical for any leader in an organization to understand what sort of environment they are operating within. Perhaps you're inclined to take big bets and gamble on innovations that could revolutionize your business, but you work within an organization that isn't comfortable with that. Again, it doesn't mean it can't be done, but it's important to identify and to learn how to operate within that system. By leveraging empathy, leaders can maintain an awareness for the comfort/discomfort these choices may cause and proactively assuage them accordingly.

In truth, there are many more tensions that can be evaluated, but these four are some of the most common and are worth considering when looking to understand how your own style of leadership aligns with that of your organization.

InfoQ: What elements can we examine to get insight into the inner workings of companies regarding empathy?

Ventura: There are lots of places where you can ultimately track the effectiveness of empathy, but many of them are unique to company and context. That said, retention of top talent, growth of existing talent, high-performing teams, innovation, consumer brand affinity, and product usability/adherence are some great places to examine when starting to build your empathy scorecard.

InfoQ: What can companies do to build empathic connections with consumers?

Ventura: Listen more and talk less. Go out and meet your consumers. Ask them good questions and then truly care about their answers. Don't take the one-way-glass, focus-group approach to fact gathering, but rather sit down across from consumers and meet them on their turf. Understand what makes them tick and why your brand is or isn't relevant to them. Empathy truly starts with connection.

InfoQ: What have you learned from the project retrospectives that you have done at Sub Rosa?

Ventura: The most important thing we learn in retrospectives is what not to do again. They present a great opportunity to learn how to improve processes, decision making, methodologies, resourcing, etc. As with any empathy-driven approach, it requires the curiosity to ask tough questions and the bravery to act on the answers you uncover.

InfoQ: How can we develop our skills for applying empathy?

Ventura: Practice. Empathy is something that must be constantly practiced if you want to make it a part of your leadership style. It's not something you can only do once in a while if you really want it to work. With dedication, it becomes part of your thought process in every decision and you begin to consider the "other" more and more often. Ultimately, your leadership and decision making become more well informed and considered.

TL;DR

- Empathy is not about being nice, sympathetic, or compassionate. These are the side effects of empathy's perspective in taking power.
- Applied empathy is a series of tools and methodologies that help you practice empathy and bring it into your daily leadership style.
- Empathy is a muscle you train. It takes practice and dedication.
- Organizations that bring empathy into their businesses improve their internal culture, relationships with consumers, and ultimately their bottom line.
- Practicing empathy requires the bravery to ask hard questions, take new actions, and change what must be changed in order to improve the business and yourself.

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How to Effectively Lead Remote IT Teams

by **Todor Gigilev**, CEO at Dreamix

If you are about to build a software product or implement a digital platform, there are many things you need to consider — product design, technology stack, architecture, and so on. And the most crucial part is the team that will deliver it.

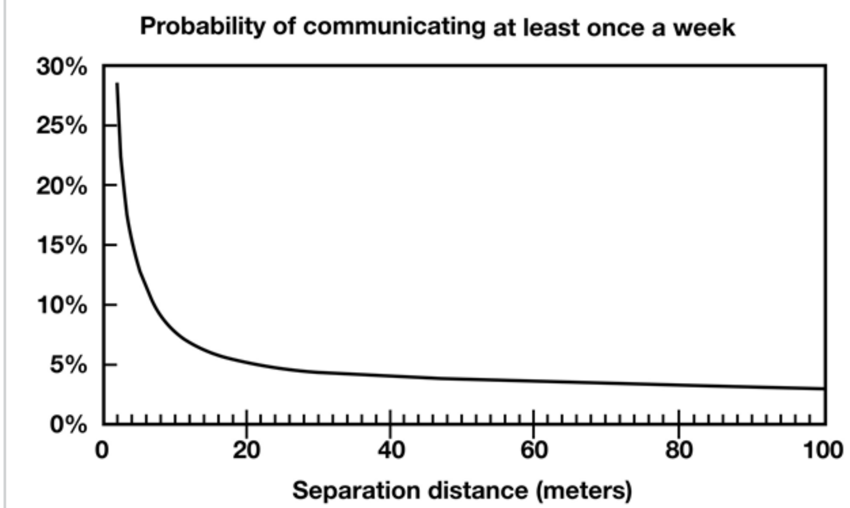
Many people think that selecting proven experts and giving them a pile of cash is enough to reach success. However, history has proven that's not the case — many multimillion-dollar companies with big cash cushions that could afford all the talent they wanted have lost the race to a small competitor. Take the example of Overture, a company with a billion-dollar valuation, that got outcompeted by Google Ads, which was a startup at that time, or the Swedish broadcasting group that spared no money to hire the most brilliant names in media but failed to create a streaming service that could compete with Netflix.

In his book The Culture Code, Daniel Coyle dives into what makes some teams extremely efficient and why others fail miserably. Much of his research shows that the most critical part in delivering a successful product is the team, team dynamics, and team culture.

For the past 13 years of running my software-development company, I've been involved in forming many product-development teams. Most of them have been distributed. In this article, I outline the risks and how to solve them when working with distributed teams.

But first, what is a distributed team?

Colleagues that are in the same building just a floor above you could be considered to be located remotely, in addition to team members located in another city or a service provider in another country.



From *Managing the Flow of Technology*, Thomas J. Allen (1977).

According to Thomas Allen, even a distance as short as a few meters is enough to impact team dynamics. Allen's curve shows that the distance of separation influences the frequencies of social interactions and other communication. Social interaction drops by 90% between people more than 8 meters apart. You might communicate more with someone on another continent than with colleagues on the other side of the office.

From my point of view, delivering projects for partners from Europe and the USA, we are always working as part of a distributed team. That is why we have devised processes that solve the challenge of distance. Let me share our experience and what has worked for us and our partners.

It all starts with creating a bond.

I am writing this article on my flight to Miami, traveling to meet the new CIO of VistaJet. VistaJet has just acquired JetSmarter and made JetSmarter's CEO, Sergey Petrossov, the head of IT for VistaJet. Although we have worked with VistaJet for more than seven years and I know pretty much everyone there, I am still eager to go meet Sergey face to face.

You always first need to build trust, and you really need to meet in person to bond with someone new — your ape brain always says that a person you've never met is probably a threat to your well-being. As you meet, chat by the fire, tell your stories, and drink a couple of beers, you have the opportunity to find shared experiences and preferences — and also discuss your weaknesses, which creates an even stronger bond.

This is also the reason why my company starts each new partnership with either a visit to our partner's office or by welcoming them to ours. Forming this initial bond is what drives us through the challenges of the projects that are yet to come.

Incorporating new team members

Your initial team is set up. You've met with at least the top members of the distributed team you've decided to work with and the rest via video conferencing. Your software product/platform is going great. It's attracting users and you need to fuel the growth by adding people to the team. Here is the tricky part – you need to make sure you add the right people, not only in terms of expertise, but also in terms of fitting in with the existing team and sticking to the same practices and standards.

There is an interesting experiment in which one person pretends to be a slacker and demoralizes the team. It turns out that a strong formal or informal team leader can negate the bad influence of this person. But what if you get many bad influences?

One of my main jobs as CEO is to make sure that we have no misfits within the team. That's why we have a two-step (and, for senior staff, a three-step) interview process that tests both soft and hard skills. We're careful in our selection and we're quick to fire during a new worker's trial period (six months for senior team members). But when working with remote freelancers, make sure you do a thorough interview before bringing someone in! You can use HackerRank to check if they have solid IT skills — start with core programming fundamentals, object/functional-oriented programming, design patterns, algorithms, etc. then delve into the details of the frameworks you will be using, such as Spring and Hibernate for Java or .NET specifics.

Additionally, conduct a second interview that tests their team work, interpersonal skills, and fit for the culture you want to establish in your product team.

How you onboard might be even more important. An experiment run by one of the biggest IT companies showed that only one hour of a good onboarding process doubled employee engagement. This sounds like one of the best one-hour investments you can ever do for your project!

I have made the mistake of onboarding people by telling them how great the company is and how interesting their project/team is. It turns out to be far better to ask the newcomer about himself or herself and let them talk. You can ask questions about:

- their past experience and how it fits in the project,
- what motivates them and what unique skills they have, and
- their personal aims/hobbies/challenges outside of work.

If the new person is at another location (e.g., at a software partner like my comapny), send something small, like a branded T-shirt, a keychain, or any token that represents being part of the team to increase engagement.

You need to make new hires feel safe. The last thing you want is people who feel unable to ask questions, propose new ideas, or experiment with better solutions. Google has been always recognized for encouraging safety and freedom to contribute. This kind of environment has created the image of people like Jeff Dean, the "Chuck Norris of the Internet".

Google was struggling to create a working advertising platform. While Google Ads is currently the company's main revenue generator, Google AdWords (as it was them known) in the early years did not work well at all! No one could solve a major issue in the algorithms. One weekend, Dean fixed this problem even though he was part of a department that had nothing to do with Google AdWords. This shows that when people feel safe and have freedom and autonomy, they can contribute to solving big problems, even if these problems are not part of their responsibilities.

In order to build safety, you can take specific steps:

- Organize a special time (e.g., sprint retrospectives) when people can freely ask questions.
- Allow any questions and take them seriously, even those from the most junior people.
- Show people your weaknesses and fallibility — even if you are the leader, others must know you are a human being. This encourages others to reveal their problems early on as well.
- Don't kill the messenger. Thank people who raise serious issues as early as possible. Don't make them feel bad that they spotted an early problem because next time they will not let you know until it is too late.

The best measure of team collaboration is how many times team members interact. If you are not in the same office, make sure you design special meetings for interactions. Encourage people to do it even online. For example, tell George to call Stefan because he has something interesting to share!

Or ask your remote team to get together for lunch and give them a topic to talk about. It can be inspiring if the topic is not about work but something of social value, such as how can we stop poverty or why did we end up with the situation in Syria.

The best and most neglected of practices is shared experiences, meaning face-to-face interaction and having fun. Don't doubt the benefit of getting people together. I am personally investing in inviting our partners to join us during our team-building events. Each year, we celebrate our company anniversary at the seaside. We will celebrate at one of the best Black Sea resorts. If you are one of our partners, just reach Burgas, Bulgaria on 13 July — the rest is on us!

These shared experiences are the best way to strengthen team spirit, motivate people, and show that you care not only about what each person delivers at work but also that you value them as people.

A shared sense of pushing towards one goal drives motivation and engages team members. Statistics show that motivated people can be as much as 500% more productive than unmotivated ones!

I hope you have found some actionable advice on how to get the most value from your distributed team. Have fun while applying it!

TL;DR

- In order to build trust and bond with someone, you really need to meet in person — your ape brain always says that a person you've never met is probably a threat to your well-being.
- Make sure you do a thorough interview before bringing someone new to the team. You can use tools like HackerRank to check their IT skills.
- With an hour of good onboarding, you can double employee engagement. It turns out to be far better to ask newcomers about themselves and just let them talk.
- The last thing you want is people who feel restricted from asking questions, proposing new ideas, or experimenting with better solutions.
- The best measure of team collaboration is how many times team members interact. If you are not in the same office, make sure you design special meetings for interactions.

AUTHOR Q&A

From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams

by **Shane Hastie**, Director of Agile Learning Programs at ICAgile

The Interviewees

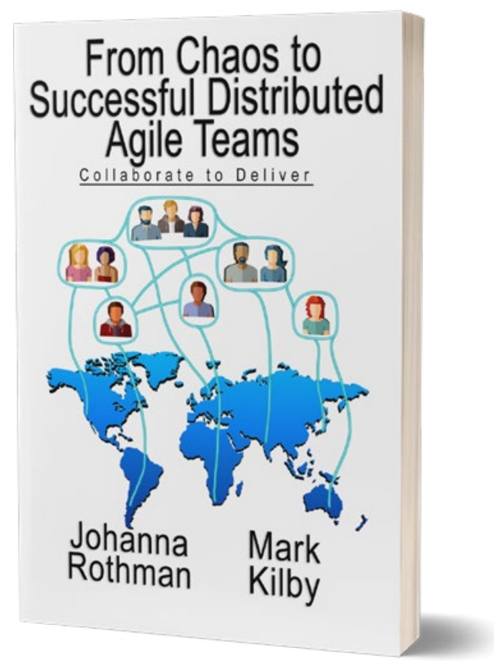
Johanna Rothman

known as the "pragmatic manager," helps leaders and teams see problems, resolve risks, and manage their product development. Rothman was the Agile 2009 conference chair and was the co-chair of the first edition of the Agile Practice Guide. Rothman is the author of 14 books whose subjects range across hiring, project management, program management, project portfolio management, and management.

Mark Kilby

with over two decades of experience in agile principles and practices, has cultivated more distributed and dispersed teams than colocated teams. He has consulted with organizations across many industries and coached teams, leaders, and organizations internally. Kilby also co-founded a number of professional learning organizations such as Agile Orlando, Agile Florida, Virtual Team Talk, and the Agile Alliance Community Group Support Initiative, among others.

Johanna Rothman and Mark Kilby have written a book titled *From Chaos to Successful Distributed Teams: Collaborate to Deliver.* The book provides advice for anyone working in or with a distributed team on how to overcome the common (and some uncommon) challenges that distribution and distance bring to team collaboration.



The book can be purchased either here or here and InfoQ readers can access a sample chapter here.

Rothman and Kilby spoke to InfoQ about their ideas.

InfoQ: Why did you write this book? What is the problem you want to address?

Johanna Rothman: Back at Agile 2017, I was walking to the last session and saw Mark walking to the last session. I asked him, "Did you see anything useful about distributed agile teams?"

He said, "Nope, you?"

I said, "Nope." Then I paused. Very briefly. I asked, "Wanna write a book with me about distributed agile teams?"

Mark Kilby: I took a very long time to think on it (about half a millisecond) and said, "Let's do it." That's when our journey as a distributed writing team began.

Rothman: Here's why I asked Mark. I'd been working with clients who thought they were colocated. They weren't. Worse, I'd worked with clients who, even though they were distributed, thought they could work the same way a colocated team could work. All of these people could not make their preferred agile approach work.

Kilby: I had worked with several teams and companies where they had valued experts in different locations. Some had prior experience with agile and some did not. They wanted the benefits of agile without having to relocate everyone. Some of these same teams had also worked on open-source projects and had experience working remotely. They just wanted better communication and collaboration.

What agile gave them was a way to rethink the game of distributed development.

Rothman and **Kilby**: (We often say this together!) We wanted to solve the problem of thinking distributed teams could use exactly the same practices as colocated teams. And we wanted to help the distributed agile teams work better.

InfoQ: It seems that more and more organizations, agile or not, are using distributed teams. What is driving this trend, and is it a problem?

Kilby: At Sonatype, where I am now, they specifically started with distributed teams to bring in the best talent from all over the world. Their products grew out of the open-source ecosystem. So many of their people understood how to work effectively as remote workers.

What they also wanted was to leverage agile principles and practices so they could collaborate quickly and easily. They knew they would be in a rapidly changing market and wanted to use agile to respond quickly to that market.

Rothman: Some of my clients had different reasons. They wanted to make it easier for people in metropolitan areas to live wherever they wanted to live and not spend all their time in the car commuting to work. Or not spend all their money on housing.

Some of the managers also wanted resiliency in their organization. The more dispersed you are —assuming everyone has a reasonable infrastructure — the more resilient the teams and therefore the organization is. You have some people in weather somewhere? (Think hurricanes and blizzards.) Chances are good that other people are not "enjoying" the same weather.

There is one potential problem we see: thinking a distributed team will save you money. Neither of us has found that to be true. The fewer hours of overlap the team has, the longer the cycle time. The longer the cycle time, the longer duration and more expensive the project.

So, no, distributed teams are not a problem because we now have sufficient tools to use for communication and collaboration. However, if managers focus on resource efficiency, they too often lose the value of the people doing the work.

InfoQ: Are there some common patterns for distributed teams, and what are the characteristics of the different types?

Kilby: We see three basic patterns for distributed teams.

Satellite teams have most of the team colocated and one person or a few people remote. Usually, the remote people work from home. Typically, this pattern arises when you have work-from-home programs or you have one team member whose spouse finds an opportunity in another city. In this latter case, the employee may be prepared to leave the organization but they are so valued, they are offered an opportunity to work remotely.

Cluster teams arise when you have subgroups of the team in different locations. This might occur by function (product owner, ScrumMasters, developers, QA, etc.) or it could be a more random arrangement. The difference is the majority of the team is not in a single location.

Rothman: We often see a couple of developers in one location, a couple of testers in another location, a PO in a third location, and possibly an agile project manager/ScrumMaster/coach in a fourth location.

Kilby: The third type of pattern is the nebula. You have everyone dispersed. No one shares an office and everyone collaborates online all the time.

You can have hybrid combinations of these patterns, but you will still see these three patterns in the hybrids.

Rothman: Notice that all these names have a reference to space. What we don't have in a distributed team is the physical space. What we need is to bring the space-time continuum to the team.

InfoQ: What are the particular challenges that distributed teams face when they are trying to work in an agile manner?

Kilby: One of the biggest challenges occur when experienced agilists try to apply the same practices to distributed teams as they do for colocated teams. A typical practice like the retrospective can become complicated and painful depending on the distribution of your team members and their hours of overlap.

Instead, we recommend going back to principles and looking at how the practices you want to use were trying to apply those principles. How might the principles suggest different practices for your context to achieve the same goal?

Rothman: For the retrospective, how much can we do asynchronously in prep for the meeting, and how much do we need to do together? Mark has extensive experience with asynchronous prep and synchronous discussions.

Maybe the team has a small kaizen event every day, especially if they don't have too many hours of overlap. Maybe the team only has a retro when they are together, once every quarter.

InfoQ: What changes do distributed teams need to make in order to use an agile approach? Can they use Scrum out of the box?

Rothman: Distributed agile teams can rarely use an out-of-the-box approach such as Scrum. Scrum, specifically, has many real-time rituals. Many teams find that they spend hours and hours and hours in meetings. That much meeting time doesn't make sense for a distributed team.

Instead, if teams use the agile and lean principles and adapt the practices to their context, they are much more likely to succeed.

Here's the biggest challenge I see, specifically with Scrum: When does the iteration start and end?

If you're within six hours of overlap, that might just be a working agreement between the team members. But what if you only have four hours of overlap? What to the westerly people do when the iteration "ends"? When do they demo? When do they conduct a retrospective? I don't actually see how to manage Scrum when you have fewer than six hours of overlap. Yes, that means that if you have team members across the US, I recommend you don't use Scrum.

There are many other challenges. Most of those challenges are because the team doesn't have sufficient hours of overlap.

InfoQ: You've mentioned "hours of overlap" a few times. Why the emphasis on this?

Kilby: Many people talk about time zones and how they separate people. But I've worked with people who preferred to work early or late hours in their local day so they could collaborate with the rest of the team members.

And, I've worked with digital nomads. Those are people who travel the world, living in some place for a while, then moving to another place. These people decide when they will work, so they can work with the team.

Time zones don't matter. Hours of overlap do.

Rothman: When Mark first said the phrase "hours of overlap," I did that little "Eureka!" thing. You know, where you say, that's exactly the right way to phrase it? Then all we had to do was show what we meant.

I'd used time-zone bubble charts before. Those work well when you're not changing to or from standard time. But they don't work under these conditions:

- When the country or state changes to Daylight Saving Time. Every country seems to change on their own schedule. And, some states in the US don't change at all.
- When people prefer to work early or late and that works well for the team.
- When people have daytime obligations that take them away from work. Even if it's an intermittent thing like a child's doctor's appointment, if the team creates its weekly hours-of-overlap chart, everyone can see the effect on the team.
- The hours-of-overlap chart is like an information radiator. It tells the team when we can work together.

InfoQ: Are there any examples of organizations that have achieved effective collaboration with distributed teams, and what did they do to achieve it?

Kilby: There are several examples: Automattic, which develops the WordPress blogging platform; GitLab, which builds software-development platforms for distributed teams; also, my current company, Sonatype, has successfully been using agile practices in distributed teams for the last six years and had small collaborative teams before that.

From my experience at Sonatype and other companies, and from what I've read about companies such as Automattic and GitLab, many of these companies achieved this distributed collaboration by giving their employees choice, by being very transparent with their employees, and by being willing to experiment with new ways to work.

Another way to explain their success: they trust their employees to work in the company's best interest even though they cannot see them every day.

Rothman: Particular Software is a 100%-dispersed (nebula, in our terms) organization. They achieve collaboration partially through technical tools such as GitHub, and partially through collaboration tools such as Zoom.

One of the company values is around what they call "maturity in interaction". That means they offer feedback to each other and retrospect on the work. I would call this inspect-and-adapt on everything: how they collaborate to produce the work, the interactions for that collaboration, the work itself (process and product).

Here's what I noticed: they team on everything. They do almost nothing as individuals. They say, "Our success working remotely is a function of everyone working remotely, of the tools we use and how we use them, of our values, and the culture we have carefully crafted over time — and, of course, of the quality of the people we hire."

Because they default to collaborative work and they create transparency around everything, they can effectively communicate.

InfoQ: How should leaders engage with and support their teams when they are distributed?

Rothman: We recommend everyone start with these three mindset shifts:

1. Manage for change. This means experiment.
2. Emphasize communication and collaboration.
3. Use agile principles, not practices.

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When leaders embrace these mindsets, the leaders optimize for the team by focusing on flow efficiency. The leaders do not focus on resource efficiency, optimizing for the individual.

The leaders remove the too-typical remote impediments, such as insufficient infrastructure access or insufficient licenses or permissions for the various tools. And, when leaders use agile principles, they don't consider attempting to standardize on boards or frameworks for the teams.

If an organization wants the benefits of distributed agile teams, the entire leadership must embrace these mindsets. That's a big ask.

Kilby: You should always start with small experiments. Decide what one thing you want to change. What guidance can you get from an agile or lean principle? How does it apply to your remote context? Don't just try to replicate a colocated practice in a remote environment. That will likely fail. Often, the small change might mean coming up with a new practice that aligns with agile and lean principles. Discuss the proposed experiment with those interested and impacted to get ideas on how to best run the experiment.

Once you have the experiment started, run it for a short period of time (days or a few weeks) and make sure you can get feedback from those potentially impacted. This is another area where communication and collaboration come into play. What did we observe? What worked well? What surprised us? Did we prove what we set out to prove?

Once a team or organization becomes accustomed to small experiments, you can take on a larger one. One organization I coached started with lean coffee Q&A sessions to help connect people across the organization in an informal manner every two weeks. The format became so popular for building relationships across the company, we went for a larger experiment with one of the all-hands meetings. Since everyone in the organization would physically co-locate for a few days during these all-hands meetings and we could never set an agenda that satisfied everyone, we tried an open-space format. The company has used this approach for the last four years with great success in raising key issues, planning new initiatives, and building stronger connections across teams.

TL;DR

- Distributed teams are normal today and there are valid reasons for having a distributed structure.
- It is possible to use agile approaches in distributed teams.
- You need to adapt your approach — none of the agile brands work right out of the box in distributed teams.
- When adapting practices, go back to the agile principles to understand the intent behind a practice.
- Sufficient hours of overlap are necessary for distributed teams to be effective.

Humanity at Work

Interview with Rich Sheridan, Author of *Chief Joy Officer*

by **Shaaron A Alvares**, Coach / Editor / Trainer

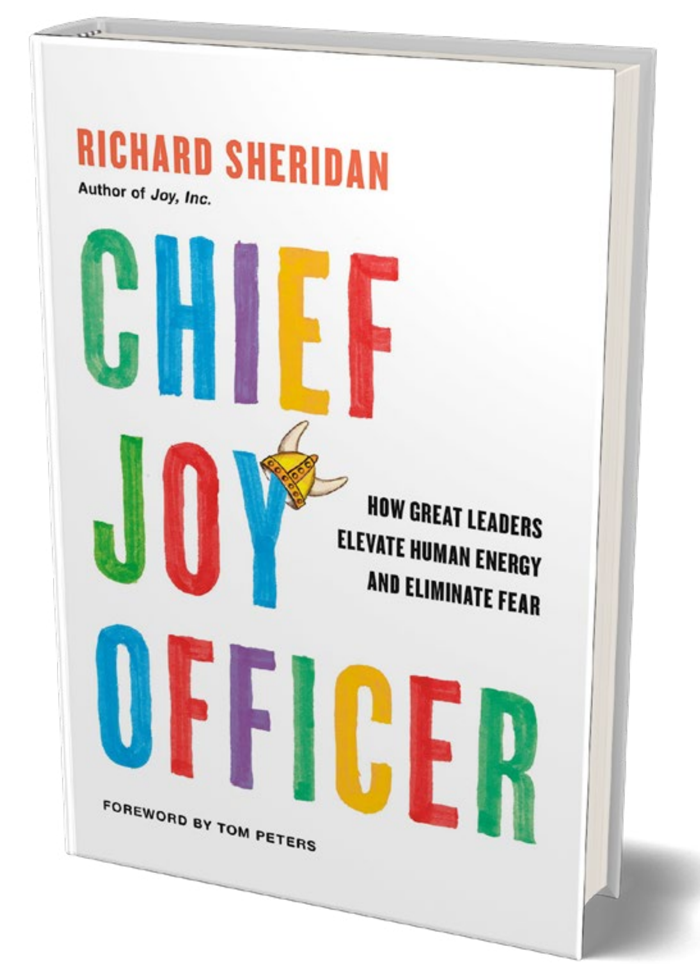
The Author

Richard Sheridan started his career in programming in 1971. Since then, he held various roles in technology and became a VP of product development in 1998. With James Goebel, chief architect, he founded Menlo Innovations, where he serves as CEO and chief storyteller. While Sheridan's focus has always been on technology, his passions are leadership, culture, teamwork, and organizational design, with one inordinately popular goal: the business value of joy. Some call it agile, some call it lean... Sheridan and his team call it joyful. And it produces results. Menlo Innovations and Sheridan have received several Inc. magazine revenue-growth awards, numerous culture awards, invitations to the White House and to speaking engagements around the world. There is so much interest that they are doing a tour a day of the Menlo Software Factory.

Since 2001, Richard Sheridan's company, Menlo Innovations, has pursued bringing joy to technology. As CEO, Sheridan has sustained a culture in which the business value of joy is at the core of everything the company does.

Sheridan has said, "At Menlo, we do more than design and build great software. Not that great software is a small thing. It's rare. But we aim for something higher. Our processes, our culture, our work ethic — they all aim toward a single goal: joy. Our company's mission statement is being intentional about restoring joy... through every step of what we do."

InfoQ interviewed Sheridan a few months after the publication of his most recent book, *Chief Joy Officer,* in late 2018.



InfoQ: Can you tell us more about your company's values, about the importance of joy and what you call "the business value of joy"?

Richard Sheridan: This all goes to what we believe is our company's purpose. In our company, we talked about ending human suffering in the world as it relates to technology, which sounds funny to people when they hear that for the first time. Technology often causes suffering or pain whether we are end users and we don't know how to use it or we are the people who develop software and are working long hours under frustrating processes for managing projects. That's where joy comes in. We wanted to delight not only our end users with software we are creating for them, but also our engineers. I think this goes to the heart of the engineers. It brings great joy to an engineer to see their work get out into the world and delight people, and even greater joy when people get back to them and say, "Really, you did that? I love that product! You made my life better because of that!" Our goal is to regularly bring that kind of joy to our people and the people we serve.

InfoQ: More and more research and studies confirm that employees experience or net promoter score is directly related to customer experience. When employees and developers thrive in a great culture and can see the impact of their work on customers, they enjoy their work more and feel more engaged.

Sheridan: I think about it in terms of a restaurant. If the owners of a place you like to eat at were really mean to their cooks, do you think that might show up in the food you eat there? Would you eat at a restaurant where the cooks feel

like they're not respected by the people who own it? Then, maybe the wait staff there wouldn't be very nice to you because no one is being nice to them.

These are things that are really important for us as leaders to think about when we create a company culture.

InfoQ: How does joy translate in everyday life at Menlo? How can we bring more joy to work and help people around us feel more joyful?

Sheridan: In order to truly begin to understand what joy means in the workplace, we need to delve into the sort of things that are less visible, into questions such as: Why do we exist? What do we believe about ourselves? Who do we serve, and what would delight look like for them? Human energy lifts the spirit of your team and purpose drives it forward. A shared purpose gives us that sense of why we work so hard every day on a particular goal, which in Menlo's case is to delight those people we intend to serve. Energy and purpose are really at the root of what makes Menlo a joyful place to work — and then of course there are the other things we do as well that add joy to the room. There's no question that laughter, as an example, is part of joy. There is a component of joy that is happiness and while we may not be happy every minute of every day because the work we do can be challenging, I think we do need to carve out space and activities for having fun, for being playful, cheerful, and supportive.

At Menlo, we all work in one big open room; there are no cubes or offices or walls or doors. We work shoulder to shoulder with one another, so there's an atmosphere of collaboration where people are literally talking to each other all day long. We tend to reduce time spent in meetings, so that we can spend more time creating.

InfoQ: Happiness at work is becoming important for leaders and corporations as they try to drive up employee engagement. Joy and happiness seem similar but are different. Joy is believed to come from within and some say is an attitude of the heart and a state of being. Happiness is known to be external and changes with circumstances, and is more temporary in nature. I believe that to sustain joy at the workplace, it's important to foster a culture where joy and gratitude result in freedom from fear. I see safety as a prerequisite for joy. What steps have you taken to foster a culture of safety at Menlo?

Sheridan: We're hearing more about the idea of psychological safety. Google found out that where people feel psychologically safe, they thrive. If we want to create a strong culture just in general, however we want to call it — safe, experimental, resilient, etc. — we have to look at all of our human processes during the end-to-end employee lifecycle: how do we recruit people to work here, how do we interview them when they choose to interview here, how do we decide who succeeds through that interview process, how do we onboard them, how are we going to provide feedback or promote them, and so on. If we're going to create a strong culture based on safety and joy, this culture must be lived in every step of those processes.

A simple counterexample is when companies and leaders talk every day about the importance of teamwork and collaboration, yet their foundational human process that occurs once a year, the annual performance review, is centered around individual achievements in comparison to everyone else on the team. That's a simple example of how we can destroy a culture of trust and collaboration in just a moment. At Menlo, we interview candidates in groups. We bring 30 or 40 people in at a time, and since we do everything in pairs, on the model of pair programming, we interview in pairs. We put two candidates together and we ask each candidate to help the person sitting next to them succeed, help them get to the second interview, to make their partner be successful, to demonstrate good kindergarten skills and play well with others. From the first moment of our human processes, candidates are learning about our most important cultural elements.

InfoQ: Adam Grant has written a beautiful book about the importance of selfless collaboration, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, in which he writes "The more I help out, the more successful I become. But I measure success in what it has done for the people around me. That is the real accolade."

Sheridan: Absolutely! We all inherently understand that an abundance mentality is better than a scarcity mentality because it leads to a safe and joyful approach to human interactions.

InfoQ: What were the challenges along the way? Are there downsides to fostering a culture of joy at the workplace?

Sheridan: Well, it's hard work and some might consider that to be a downside but I don't. We, humans, are wired to work on difficult things. Anybody who chooses to do something differently, the way we have at Menlo, is going to first be called crazy until considered genius for having tried and succeeded at something different and difficult. The hardest part is to stick to your beliefs no matter what is happening. Often, people give up on their dreams and objectives because they didn't know quite how close they were to success when they gave up. Maybe they were 99% percent of the way or maybe they were 98% percent of the way there and they gave up because the journey is hard.

InfoQ: Nelson Mandela said, "It always seems impossible until it's done."

Sheridan: I often remember when President Kennedy announced in 1962 that we were going to send a man to the moon and bring him back. He said, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." It was such a bold pronouncement given where the space program was at the time. I think that in that single statement though, President Kennedy did three things.

He called us to work on something hard, challenging, something innovative.

He called us to work on it together, because we humans are wired to work in community with one another. Teamwork is what gets us ahead, not individual heroes.

And he called us to work on a very big purpose, something that was bigger than ourselves.

When we combined those elements together, hard work in community with one another and something bigger than ourselves to serve others, we do amazing things as human beings.

InfoQ: That's beautiful! Is there a relationship between joy and retention or attrition at Menlo Innovation? Would you say that it's a leading measure of success?

Sheridan: I think there is a relationship between a joyful culture and retention, yet we have our attrition here, too. I don't think that the goal of any organization should be to avoid attrition because there are a lot of people at different stages of life who for different personal reasons may want to move on. Organizations create other issues when they try to artificially prevent attrition. If someone finds an opportunity, there may be a bunch of reasons why they think that's going to be a better spot for them, and we need to honor that as leaders. Trying to retain people with benefits such as pay increases can often have the opposite effect of what we are trying to achieve, a joyful culture. People may feel trapped, may feel more challenged to find similar opportunities elsewhere, and may become bitter for being trapped in a job. As employers and leaders, we need to reflect about what we don't want to see happening such as losing people we don't want to lose. It's tempting for people who read our books, or interview me, to think we're perfect and we're not. We are a regular company with human teams who walk in everyday with their personal lives, emotions, and challenges. But we support each other, we display genuine kindness, we ask somebody how they are, we listen and empathize with what they say, how they feel. Ultimately, we need to learn to care for each other and the human organization.

InfoQ: How can we scale a culture of joy and empathy?

Sheridan: You are familiar with scaling agility, one team at a time. My suggestion to all your readers is to not think about the complexity and the burden of moving all the mountains of your organization at once but just thinking about the small piece around you. Be the change you want to see around you and change yourself first because that's the easiest place to start, not that that's even easy. When we bring a joyful energy at work, it becomes infectious, and then others' joy becomes an interesting feedback mechanism because you may need that every once in a while. Maybe you came out of a difficult meeting and somebody smiles at you. My encouragement to leaders is, for the moment at least, don't worry about the big picture, just worry about the little picture which is the part you have direct contact with. Little success seeds. People will ask how you did that here because they want to do the same for their group. Once you start sharing what you do to create a joyful team culture, people will want to know what you're doing, transfer to your team, or try the practices you've implemented. All of a sudden, you and your teams will become the tour stop inside your organization.

InfoQ: You have three daughters, and I am sure that you think about how we can better prepare our workplaces to welcome our new generations of Millennials and Zs. Millennials make up 50% of the workforce today, and Zs started entering the workforce in 2015. These generations come with high expectations of culture, work/life balance, happiness at work, and social justice. What can we do to welcome and better retain them?

Sheridan: I happen to believe that people are the same across the world. Every generation wants to feel a sense of purpose in their work, wants to take care of their families, wants their parents to be proud of them, and wants to contribute to the well-being of their neighborhoods, communities, and nations. I think these are simple universal human truths. Our younger generations are more vocal about what they want and are more likely to change jobs between the age of 18 and 35 because they have more opportunities. At Menlo, our culture of joy, collaboration, and innovation is why people stay or come back to work with us. We constantly receive referrals from current employees and from parents who are sending us their children.

InfoQ: We evaluate the health of a company by its stock price and other financial performance metrics. Soon, new generations will be looking for a different set of criteria such as joy, humanity, leadership, and inclusion indexes. Companies will be prompted to measure and post a culture index composed of values such as joy, work/life balance, collaboration, growth, etc. New workers will not only choose jobs based on these indexes, but will most likely choose to invest their time and money in those companies that best align with their vision of life, work, and future. What are your thoughts?

Sheridan: There are certainly companies that measure that sort of thing. The Gallup organization has been measuring employee engagement for over 50 years and the numbers have surprisingly not moved at all. Whether organizations measure a joy index or not, organizations that are humanizing the work through creativity, human energy, collaboration, purpose, innovation, and invention are going to succeed. Customers will decide which companies are creating the most innovative and creative products that they want to purchase and use, and employees will decide where they get to be the most human. The joy index will probably simply spring from which company survives and which didn't wake up to the idea that human energy could actually allow us to survive in the marketplace.

TL;DR

- Engineers thrive in workplaces that allow them to interact with customers and see firsthand the result that their work has.
- Human energy and purpose are at the heart of what makes Menlo Innovations a joyful place to work. Energy lifts the teams' spirit and their shared purpose drives it forward.
- If we want to create a strong culture based on joy, happiness, safety, and engagement, we have to look at all of our human processes from end to end in the employee lifecycle.
- Our younger generations are more vocal about what they want and are more likely to change jobs to find the company values that are important for them.

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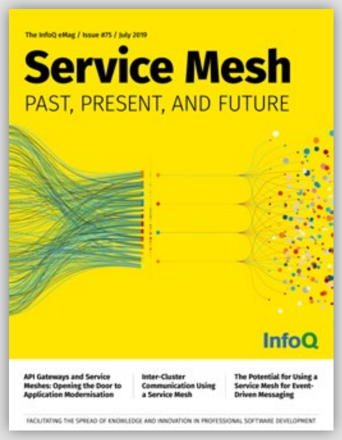

This eMag aims to remove some of the confusion around the topic of “service mesh”, and help architects and technical leaders to choose if, when, and how to deploy a service mesh.

In this eMag, we discuss the unique aspects of databases, both relational and NoSQL, in a successful continuous integration environment.

ODR brings you insights on how to build a great organisation, looking at the evidence and quality of the advice we have available from academia and our thought leaders in our industry. This is a collection of reviews and commentary on the culture and methods being used and promoted across our industry. Topics cover organisational structuring to leadership and team psychology.

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