Organization Design at Society of Grownups

Project Team

Andrew Pucci (designer)
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Responsibilities

Project Leadership
Employee Research
Process Documentation

Tools Used

Individual Interviews
Task Analysis

What is Society of Grownups?

Society of Grownups was a MassMutual learning initiative founded to democratize financial literacy.

Challenge

After a period of high growth, leaders in the company started to recognize issues with communication. Groups unknowingly worked towards the same outcomes. We needed to find a way to increase awareness without overburdening folks.

Introduction

At the time of this project there were about 45 people at Society of Grownups. We had recently gone through a period of high growth and most teams had new members. A few leaders in the organization and I realized that we were having company-wide problems with communication. Groups of people worked unintentionally towards the same outcome. We were attempting too much at once without much focus on the bigger picture.

I researched options to codify the way we worked with each other inside the company. I had always worked in places that had some form of hierarchy specifying to whom each person was responsible. At Society of Grownups, we didn't have that. We had always envisioned ourselves to be a non-hierarchical, flat organization. The problem, though, was that no one had direct experience with this type of structure. More so, people held titles that implied hierarchy, like CEO or Head of Design. Responsibilities were murky, at best, and shrouded in a layer of confusion.

Few companies spoke about dispersion of leadership throughout the organization at that time. The most popular, though, was Spotify. Their model intrigued me; any defined leadership position was to service the organization in their charge. Unfortunately, the format seemed unlikely to resonate with our team at this size. Some of our functional teams were still quite small. Individuals would have to work on more than one goal at any given time, which did not seem compatible with the Spotify model.

To help with this, I proposed a leadership structure to the CEO and other leaders in the organization. Inspired by the Spotify model, it consisted of three types of leadership: Workstreams, Pods, and Circles.
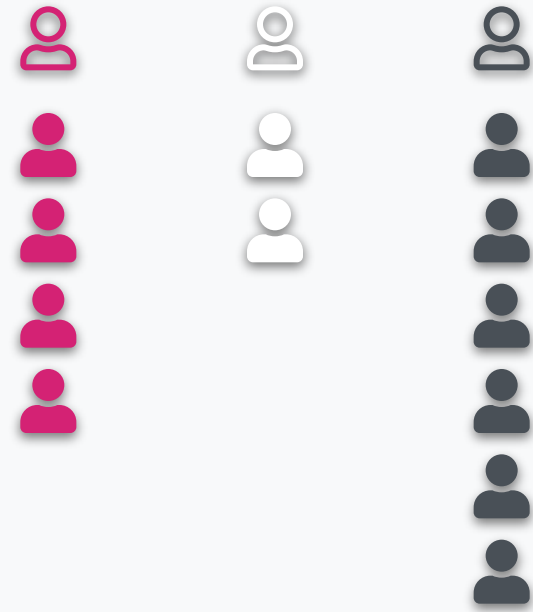
Workstreams

Workstreams are groups of people who share a common role in the company. For instance, the design workstream included brand designers, UX designers, and classroom materials designers.

Workstream leads:

- Understand how the business strategy will drive work demand from your Workstream, then hire as appropriate
- Ensure Workstream members are part of the right Pod(s) both for the individual and the company as a whole through Pod Committee activities
- Champion career development of Workstream members by focusing on their interests, needs, and desires
- Initiate feedback process on a regular basis

Workstream leads meet periodically to discuss growth-related challenges. The CEO handles hiring new workstream leads and setting the scope of any new workstream.

Right: Workstreams depicted by color, leads outlined.

Pods

Pods are groups of people working to accomplish a common goal. These groups typically include people from multiple workstreams achieving specific tasks or outcomes. In Scrum, Pod is most like a Scrum Team.

Ultimately, the direction of the company is the responsibility of the CEO. Building the basis for this direction is the purview of the Pod Committee, a group of Workstream Leads, members of the Strategy workstream, and Pod Leads. The Pod Committee handles oversight of pods including:

- Meeting at least quarterly to assess business and staffing needs and adjusting Pods accordingly
- Prioritizing business efforts including Pod projects, initiatives, and ongoing & future growth projects

Right: Three pods consisting of members from multiple workstreams. As described on the next page, pod leaders do not need to be workstream leads.
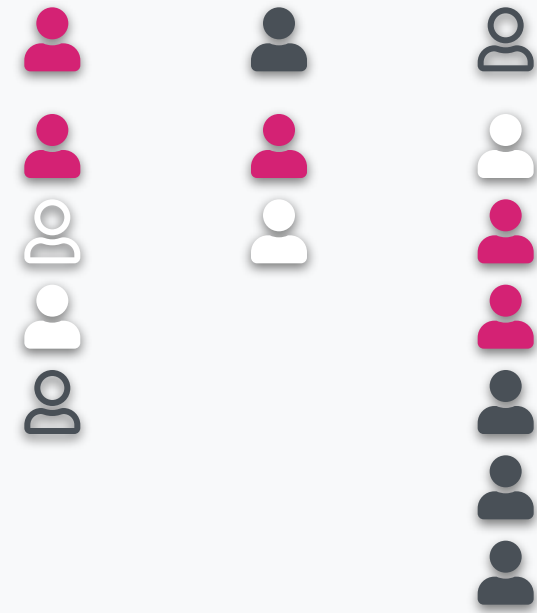
Pod Lead

A person chosen by the Pod Committee who:

- Works with Workstream Leads to assemble the Pod
- Works with Strategy & Finance to ensure business rigor
- Works with Legal & Compliance throughout Pod lifetime
- Works with the Pod to set and track goals and timelines for projects
- Reports updates and metrics on a weekly basis
- Facilitates feedback with Pod Members on a regular basis

Pod Member

A person appointed by the Pod Leader who:

- Completes work according to the timeline and goals set by the Pod Lead
- Works with Workstream and Pod Leads to convey interest in working with Pods
- Seeks and provides periodic feedback

Circles

Circles are a loosely associated group of people with a shared interest in a topic. Circles provide a way for folks to work together on things outside of official projects. For instance, I lead an Onboarding Circle to help improve our employee onboarding process. We also had public speaking, self improvement, and diversity in tech Circles.

A Circle Lead is a person responsible for formation of a Circle (this could be anyone in the company!) and sets meeting times for the Circle.

Conclusion

After getting feedback from the CEO and other leaders in the company, we implemented this leadership structure. Once the pod committee was formed, we picked three projects to transition to pods. At first, there was some confusion. People took some time to get adapted to the new process and some actively resisted the change.

A few months after the transition, the pod committee was happy with the improvement in communication. There were no further instances of duplicate work and folks had a better understanding of the company goals and priorities.

Challenges originated from this new structure, too. In particular, some people who were not part of the pod committee felt that they had no ability to provide input on the company direction. This was certainly a valid point and something we struggled with as we grew.

We never reached the point where every project was lead by a pod lead. Unfortunately, there was a massive shift in prioritization from MassMutual and much of the company was let go. I would have liked to evolve this structure over time to help reduce confusion and increase agency even more.