

Too many cooks or not enough kitchens?

A photograph showing several people in a professional kitchen environment. In the foreground, a person with light-colored hair tied back is focused on a task at a counter. Behind them, another person is visible, and further back, more kitchen equipment and shelving can be seen. The lighting is bright, typical of a commercial kitchen.

Elizabeth Ayer
RustConf 2023



I love open communities

Open space... ?





<https://opensource.com/open-organization/resources/open-org-definition>

Open orgs are characterized by:

- Transparency
- Inclusivity
- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Community

The problem with successful open communities....

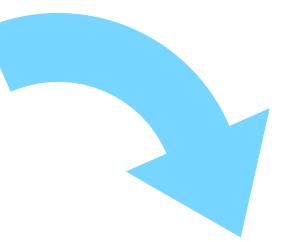
**The problem with successful open
communities....**

is that people want to join them.

An open working space...

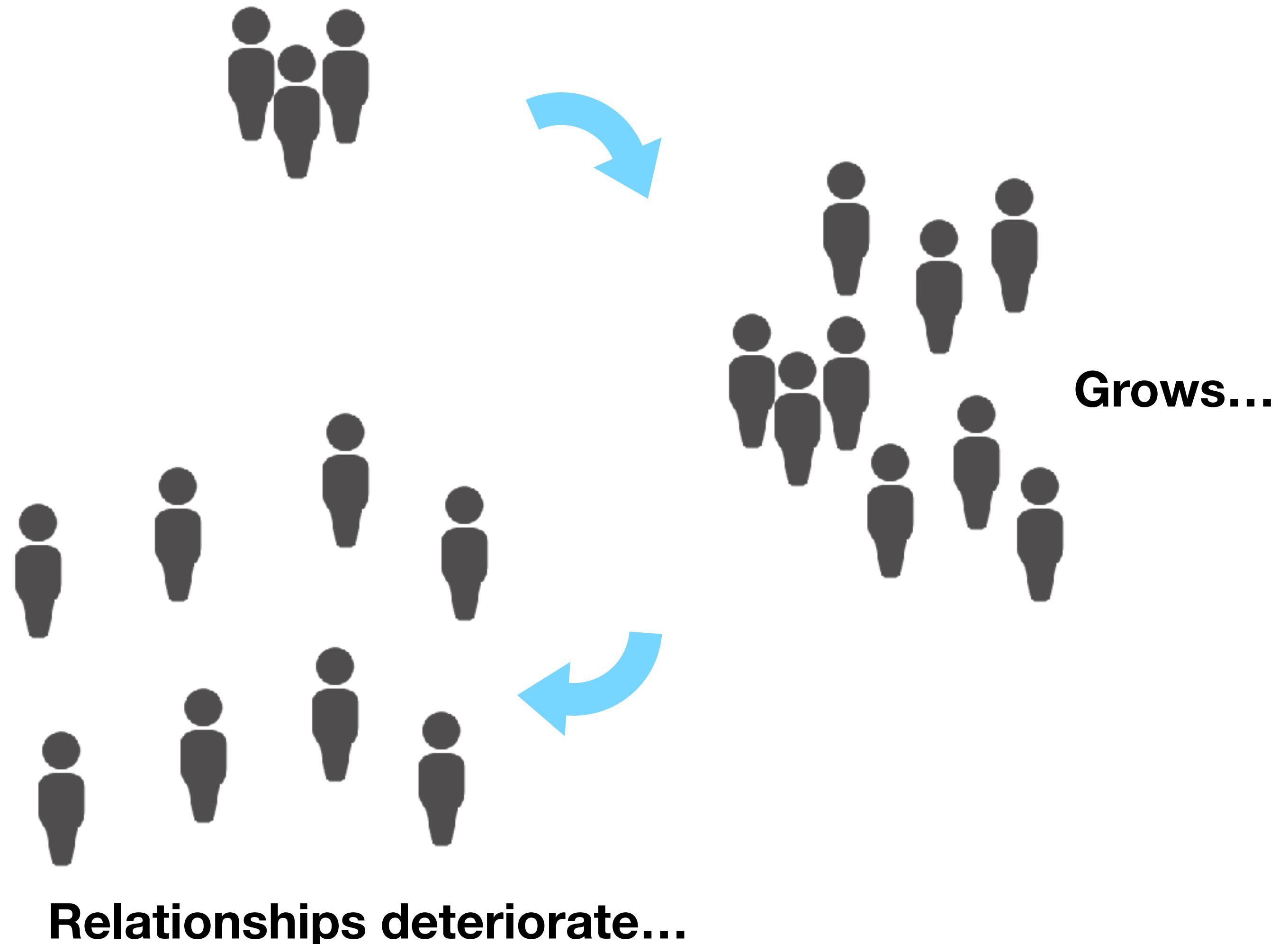


An open working space...



Grows...

An open working space...



An open working space...

And the space dies



Grows...

Relationships deteriorate...



Why does this keep happening?

The collapse of spaces

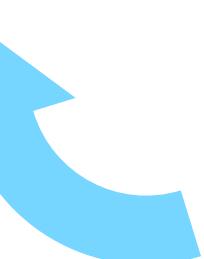
An open working space...

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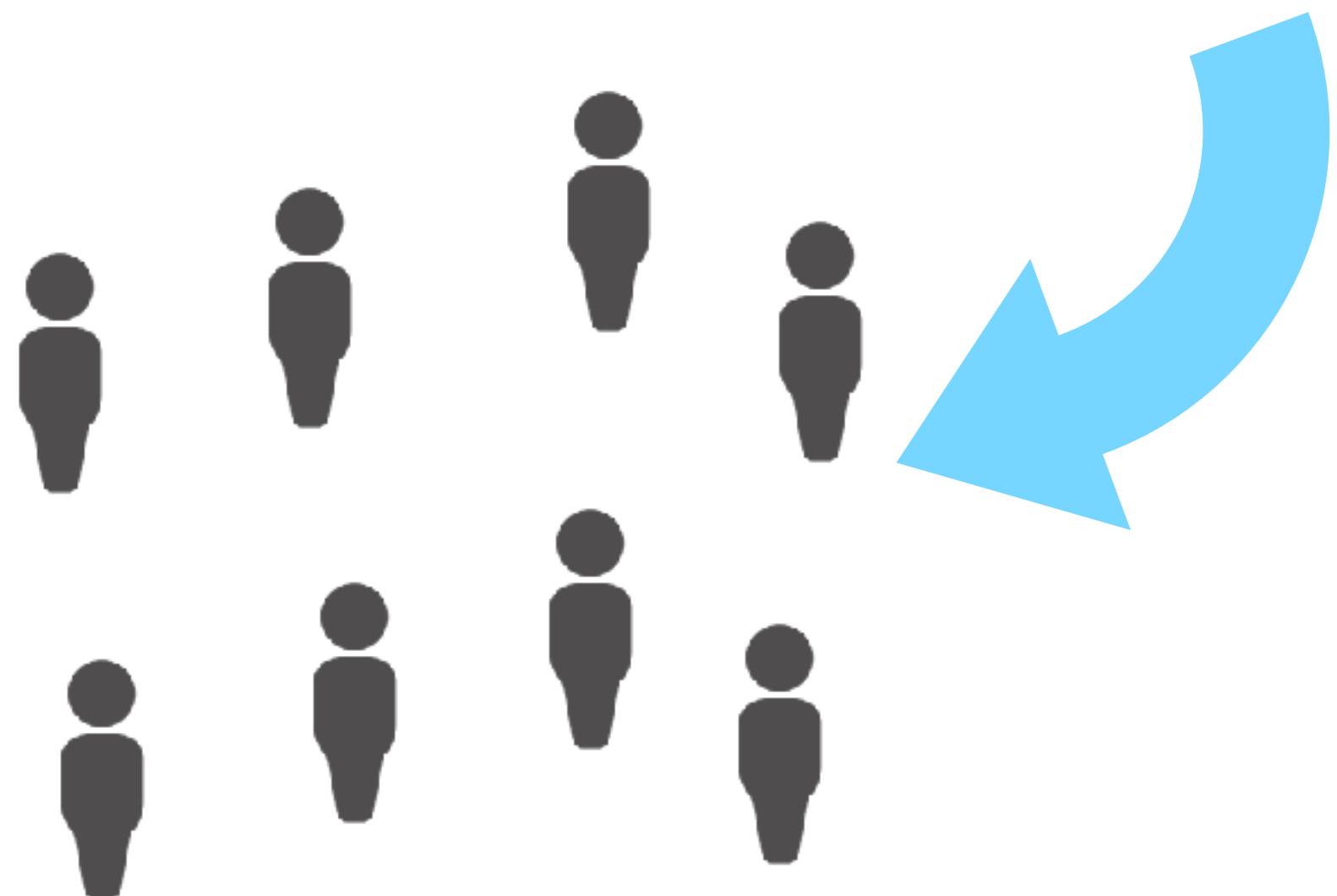


Grows...

Relationships deteriorate...



What's really going on here?



Relationships deteriorate

Is there such a thing as “just too big”?

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Yes and no.

**Business academics largely agree
that yes, there is an optimal team
size and optimal meeting size.**

THE perfect team size:

Framework/Approach	Team Size
Scrum 2017	3 to 9
Scrum 2020	Less than 10
Scaled Agile Framework	5 to 11
Wider accepted number (magical number 7 plus or minus two)	5 to 9
Research from Hackman and Vidmar (perfect team size)	4.6
Research from Ivan Steiner (peak productivity)	5
Elon Musk from an interview (maximum number of people in a meeting)	4 to 5
Jennifer Mueller, Professor at Wharton	no more than 5

Apostolos in <https://www.leadingbeat.com/what-is-the-ideal-team-size-and-why-it-is-important/>

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 - find logistics manageable
 - deeply understand others' positions
 - feel psychologically safe

The joy of structure

Any social group has structures, it's just a question of whether they're visible.

The Tyranny of Structurelessness



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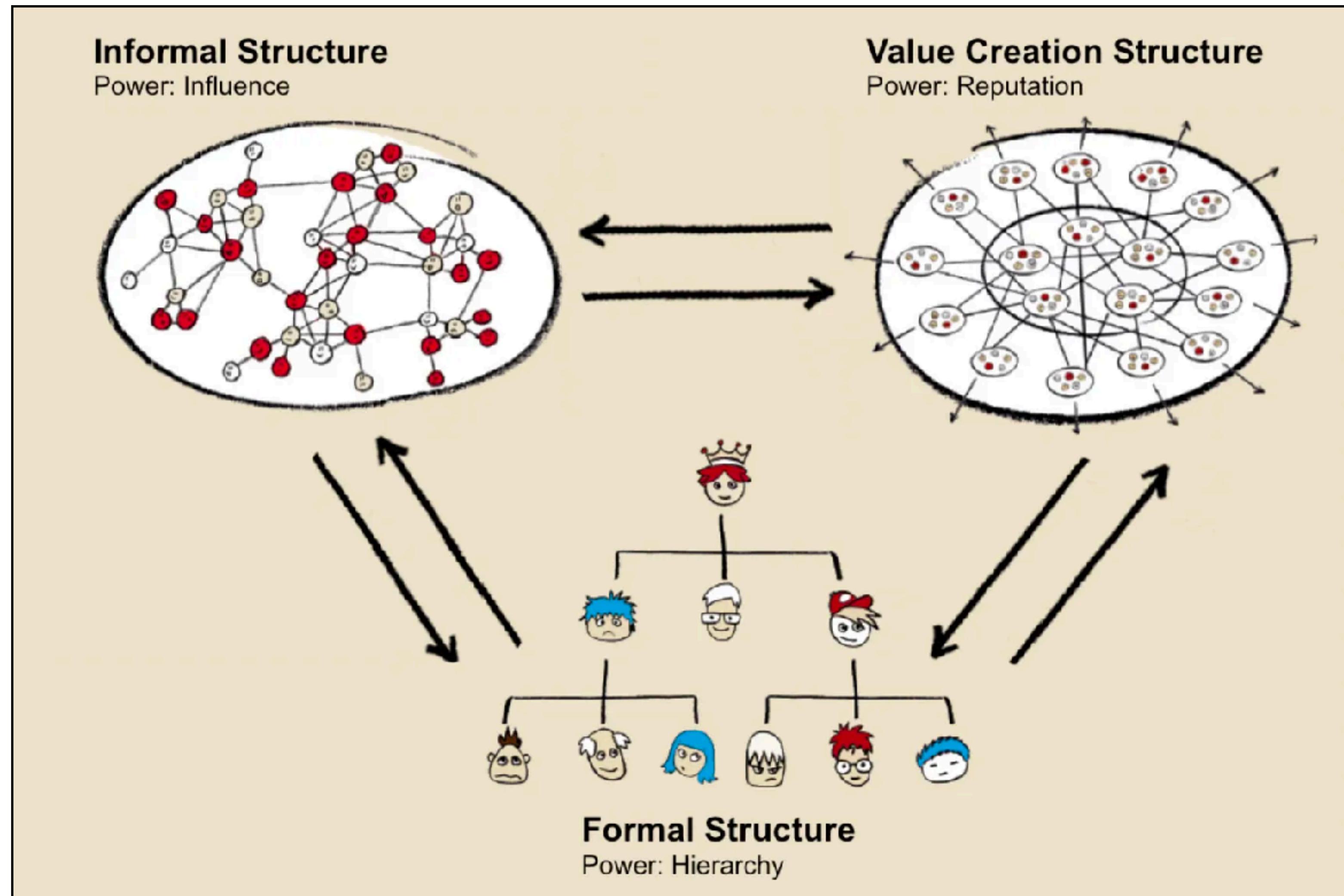
Effective movements raise leaders based on

- Competence
- Dedication to cause
- Talents
- Potential contribution

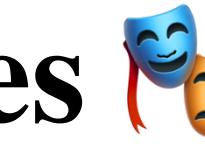
**Make existing structures visible, then
use agreed mechanisms for evolving
them.**

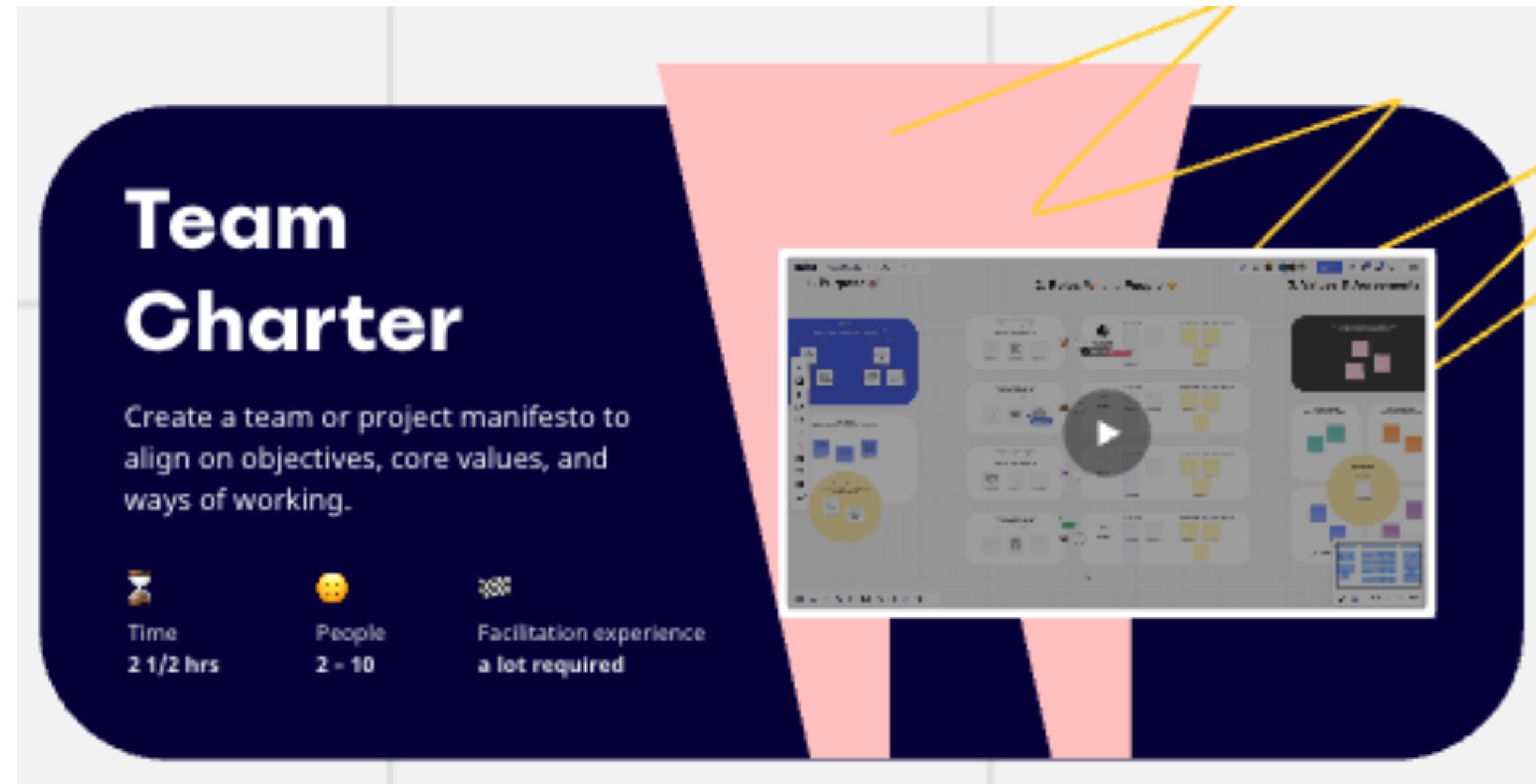
For software companies, the problem is *three* structures in tension: informal, formal, and value-creating.

Org Physics (Beta Codex)



Team internals: Team charter (Miro)

1. Purpose 
2. Roles  & People 
3. Values & Agreements 



Between teams: Team API (Team Topologies)

Team API

Date:

- Team name and focus:
- Team type:
- Part of a Platform? (y/n) Details:
- Do we provide a service to other teams? (y/n) Details:
- What kind of Service Level Expectations do other teams have of us?
- Software owned and evolved by this team:
- Versioning approaches:
- Wiki search terms:
- Chat tool channels: #_____ #_____ #_____
- Time of daily sync meeting:

| Team type: (Stream-Aligned, Enabling, Complicated Subsystem, Platform)

**Principle 1: Fundamental building
block is the team.**

Principle 2: Different techniques are useful for designing team spaces vs between-team spaces.

Principle 3: Team structures should serve the purpose, and always aim to be lightweight, visible, and regularly maintained.

**Are networks of 5-8 person
teams the only way?**

No.

Business culture creates an environment where networks of teams are a good answer.

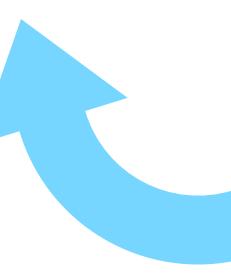
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The Tragedy of the Commons



The Tragedy of the Commons

The Tragedy of the Commons is not real.



Elinor Ostrom demonstrated that the Tragedy of the Commons is *not* inevitable.

She documented systems for sustainably managing resources.

Design principles for common resource management (Ostrom)

- 1. Define clear group boundaries.**
2. Match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions.
3. Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules.
4. Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities.
5. Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behavior.
6. Use graduated sanctions for rule violators.
7. Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution.
8. Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

What makes this so hard?

Reason #1 this is so hard:

Excluding people is *really* difficult

“Inviting people is easy. Excluding people can be hard. ‘The more the merrier,’ we are told from childhood....

At the risk of dissenting from millennia of advice along these lines, let me say this, you will have begun to gather with purpose when you learn to exclude with purpose. When you learn to close doors....

[T]houghtful, considered exclusion is vital to any gathering, because over-inclusion is a symptom of deeper problems – above all, a confusion about why you are gathering and a lack of commitment to your purpose and your guests.”

- Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering*

Reason #2 this is so hard:

It takes work. A lot of work.

So about “transparent”....



Image: the glass house by Tom Hart

Creating healthy spaces is high-value work.

Is it really *work*?

Is it really *work*?

Yes.

Glue work, aka “interpretive labor”, aka “non-promutable tasks”

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Directing attention to important risks | Onboarding new members |
| Promoting standards | Improving inclusivity |
| Spotting misunderstandings | Managing stakeholders |
| Facilitating productive conversations | Scheduling |
| Recording decisions | Making team materials accessible |
| Organizing team resources | Hiring support |
| Improving working agreements | Interpreting signals and data |
| Communicating outside team | Giving feedback |
| Seeking alternative perspectives | Making code shareable |
| Dealing with disagreement | General humaning |
| Fielding requests | etc. |

Reason #3 this is so hard:

**Commitment to purpose takes courage
and determination**

**Without putting the work in, shared
purpose diffuses and eventually
evaporates.**



Is this the death of open?

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No.

Purpose

Transparency
Inclusivity
Adaptability
Collaboration
Community

All the links

- **The Open Organization** <https://opensource.com/open-organization/resources/open-org-definition>
- **Ideal team size rollup** <https://www.leadingbeat.com/what-is-the-ideal-team-size-and-why-it-is-important/>
- **Tyranny of Structurelessness** <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>
- **Org Physics** <https://nielspflaeging.medium.com/org-physics-the-3-faces-of-every-company-df16025f65f8>
- **Example Team Charter** <https://miro.com/templates/team-charter/>
- **Team API Template** <https://github.com/TeamTopologies/Team-API-template>
- **Elinor Ostrom's 8 Principles of Managing the Commons** <https://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commons/index.html>
- **The Art of Gathering** <https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-art-of-gathering-how-we-meet-and-why-it-matters-priya-parker/588739>
- **Glue Work** <https://noidea.dog/glue>
- Bonus! **Transparency is surveillance** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JEzXL5OXPI>
- Bonus! **Team Topologies** <https://teamtopologies.com/book>
- Bonus! **The original blog post** <https://medium.com/@ElizAyer/organizational-boundary-problems-too-many-cooks-or-not-enough-kitchens-2ddedc6de26a>

Thank you!

Elizabeth Ayer

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