

Understanding Squads, Tribes, and Guilds

Agile Guide

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There are countless ways to form an [Agile team](#) in the world of [project management](#). But before we can delve into various grouping terms, such as squads, tribes, chapters, and guilds, we must first get to the core of why these groups exist in the first place.

As any good [project manager](#) will tell you, strong team culture is integral to a project's success. Legendary baseball player Babe Ruth [once said](#): "The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime."

The same is true of Agile teams. For example, a [Scrum](#) team could have the best UX specialist in the world, but if they don't work well with other team members, the team won't be able to deliver the best software possible. The [Agile Manifesto](#) principles reference the importance of teamwork on numerous occasions, highlighting the value of motivated, self-organizing teams that communicate regularly and seek to continuously improve.

But how do you build the perfect "squad"? It's essential that project managers take some time to choose their team members. As Dr. Suzanne Bell [points out](#), team success "hinges on some basic tenets of team composition." When groups are organized correctly, they can thrive.

One example project managers can take inspiration from is the Spotify model, where teams are organized into squads, tribes, chapters, and guilds. Let's examine these groups in more detail.

The Spotify model

Music streaming platform Spotify is one of the world's most recognizable companies. Founded in 2006, it has rocketed in popularity and now joins technology giants such as Apple, Microsoft, and IBM in embracing the Agile methodology.

The Spotify model was released in 2012 as part of a whitepaper called [Scaling Agile @ Spotify](#) by Henrik Kniberg and Anders Ivarsson. The aim was to provide an insight into how the company organizes its teams and maintains an [Agile mindset](#).

The whitepaper outlined four key groups:

Squads

A squad is a small unit of people (usually between six and 12) working together on a long-term mission. These teams work autonomously through the various stages of software development. Spotify squads choose their own [project management methodology](#), be it [Scrum](#), [Kanban](#), or an alternative option. There is no official leader, but a product owner will prioritize the squad's work without getting directly involved in the working process. Squad members also have an Agile coach to guide them through the project.

Tribes

A tribe is a group of squads working in related fields. It is designed to have no more than 100 members – this is in line with a concept known as [Dunbar's number](#), which suggests that stable social relationships are difficult to maintain in groups larger than 100 people. There is a tribe lead who will help encourage productivity and innovation among the various squads. Spotify tribes gather regularly to share updates, offer insights, and showcase new products.

Chapters

A chapter is a collection of people who share a similar skill set and work in the same tribe. The chapter is led by a line member, who is also a squad member. Spotify chapters work across different squads and hold regular meetings to discuss their specialized area.

Guilds

A guild is a wider community of people who share the same interest. While chapters exist in a single tribe, a guild can include members from multiple tribes. There is a guild coordinator who

helps to unite all the different members. Spotify guilds are designed so members from any area can come together to share their knowledge and best practices.

These groups were specifically formed to maintain an Agile philosophy at Spotify as its developer headcount rapidly grew in size. So, how can you tell if it will work for your organization?

Should you create squad teams?

If you want to scale Agile at your organization, the Spotify model is a good source of inspiration. Its appeal lies in its simplicity, offering an easily accessible path for teams to organize their work in a way that suits their culture. It is an informal approach that encourages self-management and innovation. It also aligns well with the principal [benefits of Agile](#) itself, including customer satisfaction, improved quality, and greater adaptability.

However, there has been some concern among Agile professionals about the practice of directly implementing the Spotify model and treating it as an established organizational framework. Kniberg himself [said](#) the model was not “intended to be a generic framework” that project managers could adopt in their own organization. It was an example of how Spotify worked in 2012 and its individual approach to scaling Agile. The whitepaper even [states](#): “This article is only a snapshot of our current way of working — a journey in progress, not a journey completed. By the time you read this, things have already changed.”

Professional Scrum trainer Kate Hobler goes one step further and [argues](#) that trying to replicate the Spotify model in your own company is “like trying to transplant a kidney from a total stranger. There is a chance this transplant will not get rejected, but we have a way better chance of winning a lottery.”

The overall message here is that the Spotify model is just that — a model for Spotify. For your organization, you may need something more.

Build your own model

So, how can you build your own Agile team model? Start by drawing inspiration from Spotify’s group design. Maybe you like the idea of squads, but not tribes or guilds? Tweak the [team structure](#) to suit you — take what you like from it and disregard the rest.

Another tip here is to remember the value of autonomy. The Spotify model is admirable because it creates a positive atmosphere where teams can self-organize effectively and foster their individual creativity. If you are creating a hybrid approach where you incorporate

practices from various models and methodologies, make sure you don't make it too prescriptive – give your teams the freedom to work the way they want.

Finally, focus on your culture. What makes your organization unique? Prioritize the cultural elements you don't want to lose and figure out how to build them into your Agile team model.

To help you on the road to scaling Agile, why not try a [project management platform](#) such as Wrike? Whether you want to split your organization into squad teams or follow a different formation model, Wrike can help you boost collaboration with features such as [team dashboards](#), [shared calendars](#), and [interactive Gantt charts](#). Manage multiple teams with an all-in-one software solution – [start your free trial](#) today.

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