A Guide to the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe)

Agile Guide

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What Is SAFe Agile?

What is SAFe? SAFe stands for Scaled Agile Framework, and it is a knowledge base used by development or Scrum teams to implement Agile principles into large organizations. It adjusts the best practices of Agile project management to make the methodology work for bigger teams.

Created by Lean-Agile experts Dean Leffingwell and Drew Jemilo, SAFe was released in 2011 and has grown in popularity since then. The KPMG Global Agile Survey of 2019, which surveyed 120 participants across 17 countries, found that SAFe was the most commonly used framework for scaling Agile.

SAFe incorporates knowledge from four different areas: Agile development, Lean product development, systems thinking, and DevOps. It blends Lean and Agile practices and applies them at an enterprise level to increase business agility and assist organizations as they grow in size.

SAFe is divided into four segments: Team Level, Program Level, Portfolio Level, and Large Solution Level. The first two are sometimes combined into what is known as Essential SAFe, while a combination of all four is often referred to as Full SAFe. The framework offers guidance to organizations to work across these levels.

The core values of SAFe

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Similar to the Agile Manifesto, the Scaled Agile Framework is based on four core values. These are:

Alignment

When companies are scaling Agile, all teams must be aligned across the organization and working towards the same goal. This is particularly vital for geographically dispersed teams where misalignment can hinder an organization's ability to react to change. SAFe supports alignment by clearly outlining team roles (e.g. Scrum master) and synchronizing activities, enabling organizations to keep up with competitors.

Built-in quality

SAFe promotes a high standard of quality, ensuring that it remains a priority rather than an afterthought. Building these quality standards into the development life cycle is important, especially in a large-scale system where untested batches can pile up quickly. SAFe organizes built-in quality under five categories: flow, architecture and design quality, code quality, system quality, and release quality.

Transparency

Transparency is crucial to building trust in teams and creating an open environment in an organization. SAFe promotes transparency by ensuring full visibility into team backlogs, clearly outlining goals, and breaking workloads down into short-term commitments so obstacles can be spotted quickly.

Program execution

Producing working software is a central tenet of SAFe and, indeed, Agile itself. Teams must be able to execute programs successfully to provide real business value. This is why SAFe places a huge emphasis on reliable systems that consistently deliver profitable outcomes.

These four core values must be supported by a leader with a strong Lean-Agile mindset. By combining the flow-management properties of Lean with the iterative approach of Agile, they will be well-equipped to accelerate enterprise delivery and increase customer satisfaction. Leaders must also possess a desire for lifelong learning. By embracing new methods and encouraging teams to adopt them, they will create a culture of continuous improvement.

The 10 principles of SAFe

The Scaled Agile Framework also outlines 10 principles for Agile teams. They are:

1. Take an economic view

Good economics is an essential element of Lean methodology. The SAFe model promotes the practices of delivering early and often and applying an economics framework. This helps to reduce delays and shorten lead time, cutting costs in the process.

2. Apply systems thinking

Systems thinking includes three key concepts: the solution is a system, the enterprise building the system is also a system, and the optimization of the full value stream. By simplifying these concepts, SAFe offers a holistic view of solutions development.

3. Assume variability; preserve options

Variability is inevitable in Agile. Rather than avoid it, developers should learn to manage it effectively and preserve options using a set-based design. This involves creating multiple design choices at the start, evaluating them regularly, and then eliminating them as needed.

4. Build incrementally with fast, integrated learning cycles

This principle also aims to reduce risk with the initial creation of a range of design options rather than just one. Throughout the development process, the solution can be built in increments, with each timeboxed period improving on the previous one.

5. Base milestones on an objective evaluation of working systems

By using a working system as a model, teams can make better decisions and plan their milestones accordingly. Milestone examples include design, development, and testing. Regular stakeholder input is valuable here to ensure that the potential for ROI remains strong.

6. Visualize and limit work in progress, reduce batch sizes, and manage queue lengths

To boost the flow of work, SAFe recommends the three elements outlined above. Teams can use a Kanban board for greater visibility, create smaller batches to minimize holding and transaction costs, and increase the processing rate to shorten the wait time.

7. Apply cadence, synchronize with cross-domain planning

A "rhythmic pattern of events" will add routine and structure to the development process. When these cadences are synchronized, multiple events can occur simultaneously, adding a variety of perspectives to help stimulate decision-making.

8. Unlock the intrinsic motivation of knowledge workers

Using the SAFe model, leaders can motivate their workers by considering the role that compensation plays as an incentive, listening and offering regular feedback, and giving team members autonomy in their work.

9. Decentralize decision-making

While strategic decisions should still be made by leaders, other decisions can be passed on to team members. The team can take care of any frequent and time-critical decisions, freeing leaders to focus on larger priorities.

10. Organize around value

By using the specific organizational patterns outlined by SAFe, enterprises can produce deliverables and react to changing customer demands quickly. This approach aims to add structure to the Agile environment and optimize value delivery.

The above principles can act as a useful guide for teams when scaling Agile on an enterprise level.

Benefits of SAFe

The extensive knowledge base and guidance offered by the Scaled Agile Framework can lead to an array of benefits for Agile and Scrum teams. Some of these are covered in the four core values: greater alignment, high-quality products, boosted transparency, and successful execution.

Other benefits

- **Better engagement:** SAFe helps multiple Agile teams (or an Agile release train) to collaborate effectively on one project, improving employee engagement and productivity.

- **Simplified structure:** The clear definitions and boundaries offered by the SAFe model create a sense of structure in an organization.

- **Faster time to market:** By optimizing value flow, the SAFe model shortens lead time and accelerates product delivery.

The benefits of SAFe are evident, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the right framework for your team. To help you decide, we've compiled a few factors worth considering.

Is SAFe right for your team?

First and foremost, the Scaled Agile Framework is suited to big projects, including large-scale Scrum initiatives. If an enterprise wants to achieve Agile at scale across multi-team portfolios and programs, then SAFe could be the ideal option.

Another scenario could be that you have already tried to scale Agile across your enterprise, but there is a lack of uniformity, alignment, and consistency. SAFe can help you tackle these obstacles with an organizational strategy that unites teams across various departments.

SAFe is also suitable for organizations making the initial transition to Agile. If you are new to Agile, you will likely be unsure about the values, principles, and various management roles involved. SAFe can solve this problem with a prescribed framework that will help you to structure your teams and ease them into the Agile methodology.

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