How things don’t quite work at Spotify... and how we’re trying to solve it

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Based on a talk by Jason Yip, Big Apple Scrum 2016
Who here has watched the Spotify Engineering Culture videos?
Shout out what you remember from it
Spotify Engineering Video
Spotify is good at many things
Especially autonomy
But...
There’s a Toyota saying: “No problem is a problem”
This is about what does not work and how we might do better
Propinquity effect

Tend to form friendships and romantic relationships

Tend not to form close relationships
Propinquity effect and Agile

Tend to have good customer-team relationships

Tend not to have good customer-team relationships
It is hard to have empathy when you are “protected” from contact.
It is hard to build the right things if you don't have empathy.

we're so good at this
One of the first things I noticed when joining...
I suspect this is why we got away with it.
we can't really get away with it...

Advertisers
Artist managers
Ad tech intermediaries
Music industry intermediaries
Ad operations
Internal business operations

users
(everyone)

Employees
(high intent)
Gatekeeping context

- Low empathy
- Low engagement

PO

Designer

Product context

customer context
Facilitating context

PO

Designer

Product context

Customer context
“sound check”

Meet and greet with business operations teams

customer meetings

TPD Leads
Things I notice because my background is in Extreme Programming
There are some interesting, non-obvious dynamics that occur with pair programming and test-driven development.
There is a necessary development of trust because you are exposing your weaknesses.
key person dependency goes away fairly quickly
You can do things with less people

Manager
(to help coordinate all these people)

versus

AbcDe  aBcDe  cdabe
The pace tends to feel/be much faster

compensating for peaks and troughs

Pair pressure

Maybe I'll just check Slack...

Don't want to waste my pair's time...
"It's done, I just need to add tests"
Wow! A production defect?! That's weird...
Another thing I noticed when joining...

"There's not enough backend work to do."

"We might as well work on this until we get another iOS developer."

"We're stuck until someone can start on the frontend."
Pairing happens ✔

... but is inconsistent ✗

Instead, more likely to have code review on pull requests
Programmer testing happens [✓]

... but not typically TDD [✗]

... and builds are not always green...

(mostly due to external dependencies) [✗]
Product Backlog → Sprint Backlog → Sprint → Working Increment of the software

"Agile" at Spotify

XP Practices
- Whole Team
- Customer Ownership
- Test-Driven Development
- Coding Standard
- Refactoring
- Planning Games
- Continuous Integration
- Simple Design
- Sustainable Focus
- Small Releases
- Inversion of Control
No expectation for Agile coaches to have technical capability

Deployment should be so easy that even an Agile Coach can do it!
“Aligned autonomy” is not enough

See L. David Marquet and “Intent-based Leadership”
Select for experience with XP practices?

Hiring process

Incorporate XP practices in onboarding?

Onboarding process

Technical coaches for Squads?

Delivery process

Agile coach hiring process
Typical misinterpretations of the “Spotify model”
Talk to your neighbour about what you like from the "Spotify model"
Shout it out and I’ll tell you how it doesn’t quite work that way
Things about Spotify that might surprise you...
“An interested observer should be able to walk into the team workspace and get a general idea of how the project is going in 15 seconds. He should be able to get more information about real or potential problems by looking more closely.”

Kent Beck on Informative Workspaces
Most Squads don’t have Informative Workspaces...
Some Squads, especially newer ones won’t be familiar with what we might consider Agile basics -- partly due to growth rate
Squads are nominally responsible for managing delivery -- not every Squad is good at it
Not everyone understands the distinction between autonomy and laissez-faire (aka do whatever you feel like)
There seems to be more time spent discussing individual performance and growth than team performance and growth… (American influence?)
Agile is primarily limited to TPD, the business operations side of things is mostly isolated.
There is a lot of variation between Tribes and Squads
Is this depressing?

No. Let’s talk about why.
That time when I visited Japan...
In 2008, I went on a Lean Study Tour to Japan
Mighty Toyota; Tiny Showa

When Taiichi Ohno first visited the Koga foundry of the Showa Manufacturing Company early in 1984, he was his usual diplomatic self. After quickly walking around the facility he told President Tetsuo Yamamoto to bring him the plant manager. When Takeshi Kawabe appeared, Ohno asked, “Are you responsible for this plant?” Kawabe acknowledged that he was. Ohno then roared, “This operation is a disgrace. You are completely incompetent. Yamamoto-san, fire this man immediately!”

Yamamoto noted that Kawabe was no more and no less responsible for the condition of Koga than everyone else at Showa. It was being run the way Showa had always run its plants, no better and no worse. He suggested that rather than firing anyone, Ohno should act as their sensei and tell them what to do to make things better.
“Stop trying to borrow wisdom and think for yourself. Face your difficulties and think and think and think and think and solve your problems yourself. Suffering and difficulties provide opportunities to become better. Success is never giving up.”

Taiichi Ohno
Most Agile Coach candidates ask these questions

- What is the best thing about working at Spotify?
- What is the most challenging thing about working at Spotify?
The answer for both questions is the same:

Autonomy.
Autonomy means you are free to act.
Autonomy also means you have to face your difficulties and think and think and think and think and solve problems yourself.
Autonomy means you succeed by never giving up.
I do not find Spotify’s problems depressing because I am very confident that Spotify will not all of sudden give up on getting better.
Gnomes
Underpants
Business

http://southpark.cc.com/clips/151040/the-underpants-business
Phase 1: Implement “Spotify model”
Phase 2: ?
Phase 3: Profit!
“Stop trying to borrow wisdom and think for yourself. Face your difficulties and think and think and think and think and solve your problems yourself. Suffering and difficulties provide opportunities to become better. Success is never giving up.”

Taiichi Ohno
Phase 1: Face your difficulties and think for yourself
Phase 2: Solve your problems yourself
Phase 3: Profit!
Thank you for your attention