



# Why Culture Change can Blow Up In Your Face

(and how to prevent it)

Katherine Kirk

QCon2019



A Christmas story

How hard is culture to  
change?

# The “Culture Change” usual routine...

1

Had the inspired time

- Inventing the amazing ‘new way forward’
- Convincing everyone

2

Roll out time!!!

- Enthusiasm and forcefulness

3

Reality confounds

- Whaaaa? Why is this happening?

4

Try tonnes of stuff

- This should work, this should work, this should work....

5

Things are blowing up!

- Why??



Intro

What I've  
become....



“Hell Specialist”



Student of difficulty



Why have I got this job?

My favourite thing to do is empower others  
by...



Revealing 'invisible forces'



Illuminating practical ways  
to deal with it

Often  
borrow from  
Buddhist  
Monks and  
Nuns

Don't like being disturbed

- Meditation

Spent 2,500 years finding patterns

- Reduce difficulty
- Increase effectiveness

Focussed on empowerment



The big difficulty ....



# What I borrowed from Monks and Nuns



See things as they are

Illuminate 'invisible  
forces'



Empower teams and  
individuals

Calm down  
Clear their heads  
Get problem solving



Work out a realistic  
pathway forward

Use different  
techniques to test ideas  
Risks? Opportunities?



Follow through

Realistic expectations

(hint hint)  
Realistic Expectations

---



Typical Scenario:  
“Culture Change Blowing up”

# The Kick Off



## Project Manager – Agile / Lean Rollout

Gets agreement –  
team and leadership  
Review the 'new  
culture' principles –  
empowerment,  
transparency etc



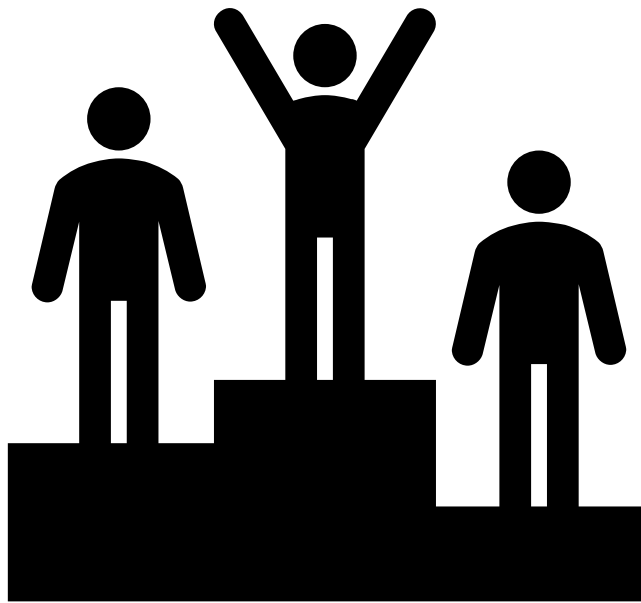
## Boss – give me a projection

(That makes me  
happy)  
Because we ALL  
want to do it: should  
be quick – 1-2  
months?



## Rollout unity and determination

Inspired actions  
Push, push, push!  
Consultants  
Training



- Consultants / specialists / contractors leave
- Training is over
- Rollout project runs slightly over (but everything kinda does, right?)
- Should be worth it!!!!

# The Wobble in the Middle



Project Manager –  
Reports in

Its been rough –  
but everyone is  
DOING Agile /  
Lean practices...  
kinda



Boss – OK- I'm  
expecting those  
improvements now!

(tired and  
irritable from 2  
months of  
reassuring and  
inspiring)



SURE!

Resistance,  
depression,  
anger

# The sting in the tail



We aren't getting the results promised



Everyone isn't getting along!!!

Too much pressure

Blame and shame

- Those that have Agile Lean culture
- Those that don't



Lots of HR time

Sack those that aren't Agile Lean culture?



BURNOUT

Leadership

Change agents

Teams





Huh? Oh COME  
ON!

Burning out from what?????

# Burning out from WHAT???????

Reassuring

Inspiring

Mediating between factions

Keeping 'positive and upbeat'

Extra churn from HR related meetings

Extra churn for 'supporting direct report' meetings

Reminding – Agile Lean culture

Re-convincing Agile Lean is better

Attending training

Getting coaching (leadership, team, individual)

Attending extra conferences

Reading extra material

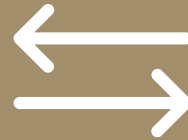
Attending weekly Agile Lean groups for help and community

# Fallout



Boss

Unhappy  
Thinks Agile  
Lean doesn't  
work



Change agents

Exhausted  
Panicking –  
looking at  
contracting as a  
possibility



Teams & specialists

"Agile Lean isn't  
being done  
properly!"  
"Agile Lean  
doesn't work"

... culture?



BLAME



SHAME



SELF PITY



ENTITLEMENT



RESENTMENT



COMPETITION

The opposite  
result!!!



Practices are 'in place'



Culture isn't



Now culture is impairing  
delivery



How did that  
happen?



Take a step back for a  
minute...



# What is culture?

Can 1 person have culture?

- Can come from one....

Is it between two people?

- Can have conflicting cultures...

Does it **have** to be between multiple groups?

- 1 or more teams?

What is work vs society culture?

- How do those interact?

Is culture from practices? Goals? Aspirations?

- Huh???

# Its an endless conversation

....

---

There are entire conferences,  
papers, consultant specialisations  
on just on that one question



I need practical answers to practical situations

My clients and I don't  
have the time



# How to deal with difficulty



See things as they are

Illuminate 'invisible forces'



Empower teams and individuals

Calm down  
Clear their heads  
Get problem solving



Work out a realistic pathway forward

Use different techniques to test ideas  
Risks? Opportunities



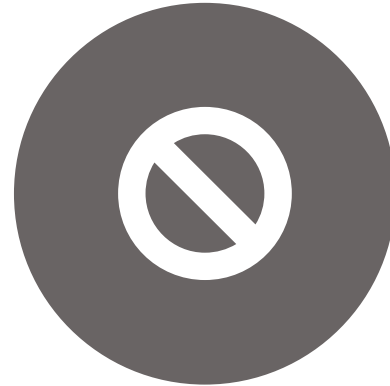
Follow through

Realistic expectations

# Whatever the difficulty...



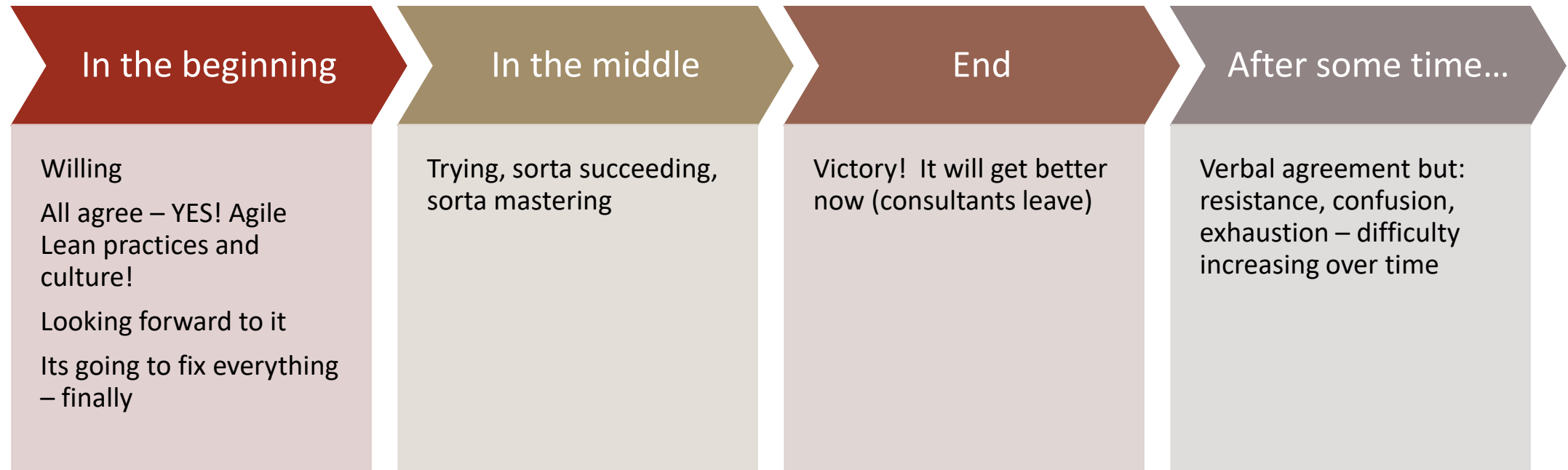
ITS CULMINATING IN BEHAVIOUR



AND THERE IS BEHAVIOUR  
WHICH IS NOT CONDUCTIVE TO  
DELIVERY

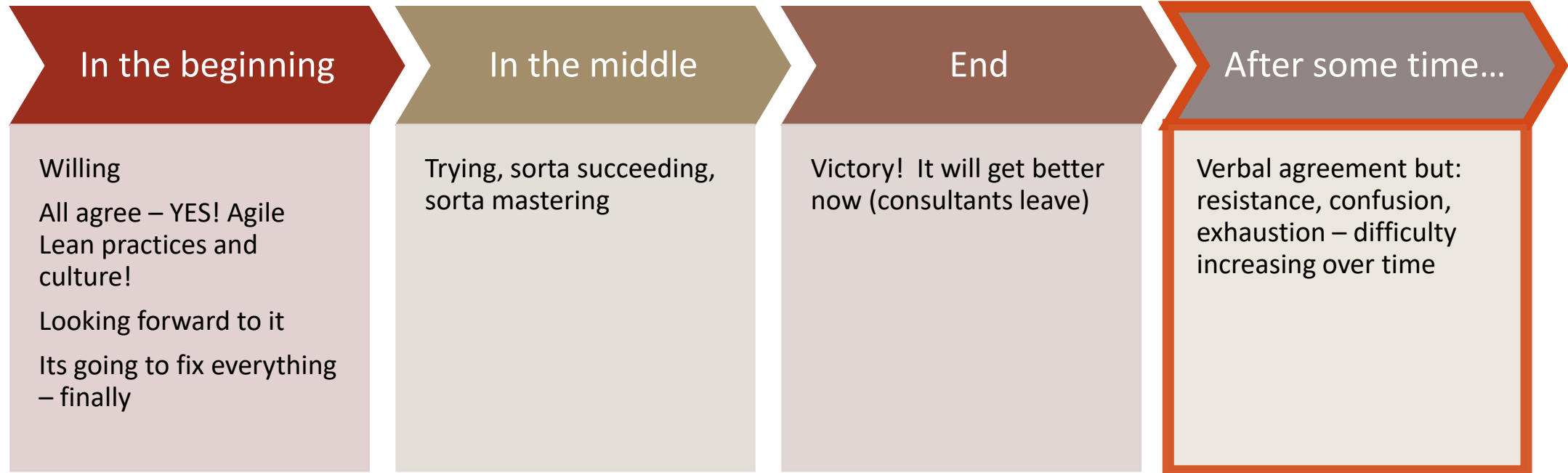
# So lets reflect on behaviour: Imagine the BEST scenario

---



# So lets reflect on behaviour: Imagine the BEST scenario

Difficulty I'm interested in...





The Sting in the Tail





# The “Invisible Force” We Fail To See ....

( .... drum roll... )



Habitual Reaction

Ever gone on  
a health kick?



December

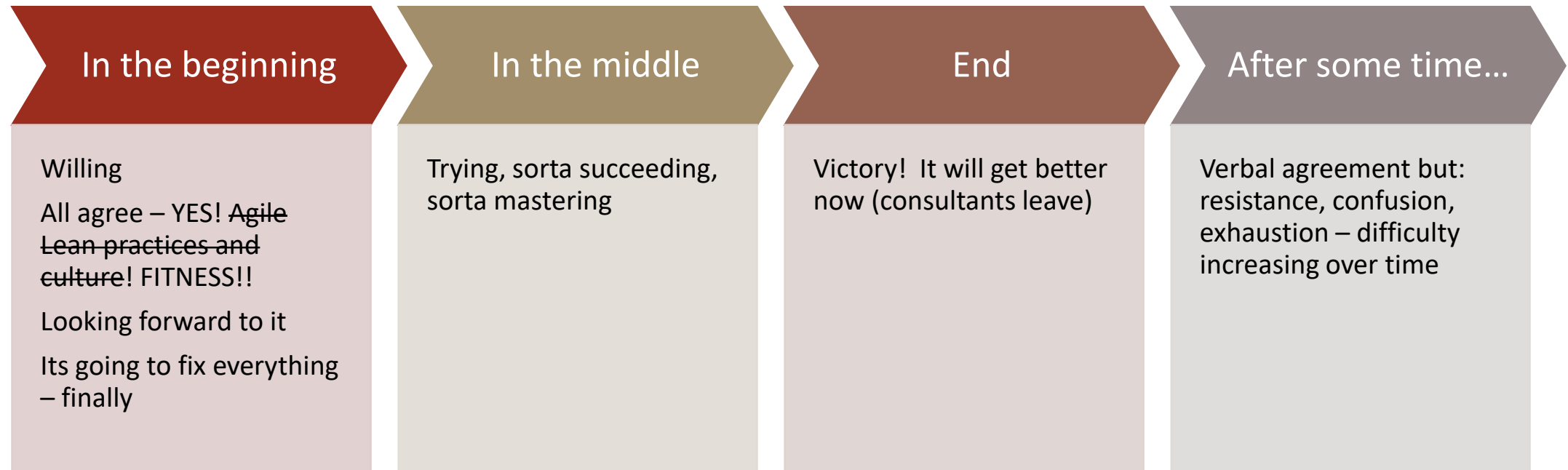
Get  
unhealthy  
over Xmas



January

Dry – no  
alcohol  
Gym

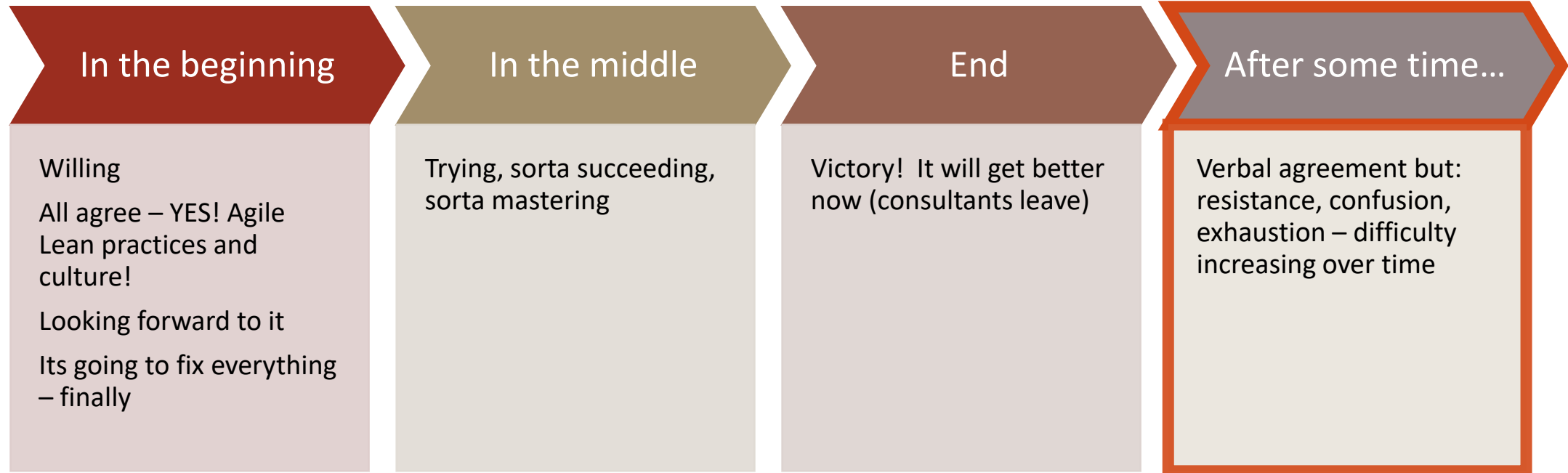
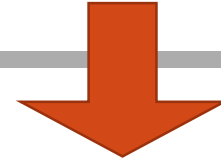
# So lets reflect on behaviour: Imagine the BEST scenario



Does that mean that 'being  
healthy' is dumb concept?

# What's happening in Feb onwards?

The REAL difficulty starts...





Our 'bad habits'  
kick in again after  
the 'inspired time'  
has worn off



# The Buddhist Monks and Nuns: Focus on habits

- For real change we need to concentrate on habit
  - Mitigate interruption to meditation



Think ...



Cigarette smoking



Junkfood



TV

# We forget that this applies at work...

Bad habits come back again and again  
And its our job to be prepared!!!!



We don't factor HABIT in



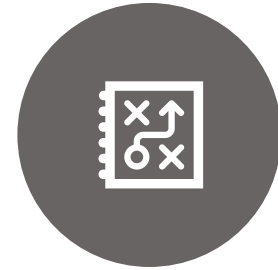
OUR  
PROJECTIONS



EXPECTATIONS



JUDGEMENTS



ASSUMPTIONS

# So after the inspired 'roll out' time frame

- We **stupidly** get surprised when
  - People and teams start to falter
  - Coaches, facilitators, project managers, leads are in MORE demand
  - Leaders encouragement and support is needed more than ever



# AFTER rollout – people need....

Reassuring

Inspiring

Mediating between factions

Keeping 'positive and upbeat'

Extra churn from HR related meetings

Extra churn for 'supporting direct report' meetings

Reminding – Agile Lean culture

Re-convincing Agile Lean is better

Attending training

Getting coaching (leadership, team, individual)

Attending extra conferences

Reading extra material

Attending weekly Agile Lean groups for help and community

And if you aren't  
prepared....

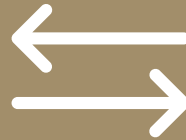


Blows up in  
your face



Boss

Unhappy  
Thinks Agile  
Lean doesn't  
work



Change agents

Exhausted  
Panicking –  
looking at  
contracting as a  
possibility



Teams & specialists

"Agile Lean isn't  
being done  
properly!"  
"Agile Lean  
doesn't work"



Lets go back to the original  
story....



# Replay: Assume the bad habits will return!

- That's when the work will REALLY start....



# Adjust for Habitual Reaction 'Sting'

## Expectations

- Done in 2 months?
  - Practices and techniques – maybe
- Then 6 months – 12 months of habitual behavior change

## Judgements

- Sack them / hire them?
  - Depends – bad person or bad habit?
- Promote them / demote them?
  - Depends – bad person or bad habit?

## Assumptions

- Effort by leadership and change agents finished in 2 months?
- After 2 months the REAL effort for leadership and change agents will begin

# A typical scenario: The Kick Off



## Project Manager – Agile / Lean Rollout

Gets agreement – team and leadership

Review the 'new culture' principles – empowerment, transparency etc



## Boss asks for a projection

(That makes them happy)



## Include time changing embedded habitual reactions

2 months rollout

6-12 months habitual behavior – call it Embedding Culture



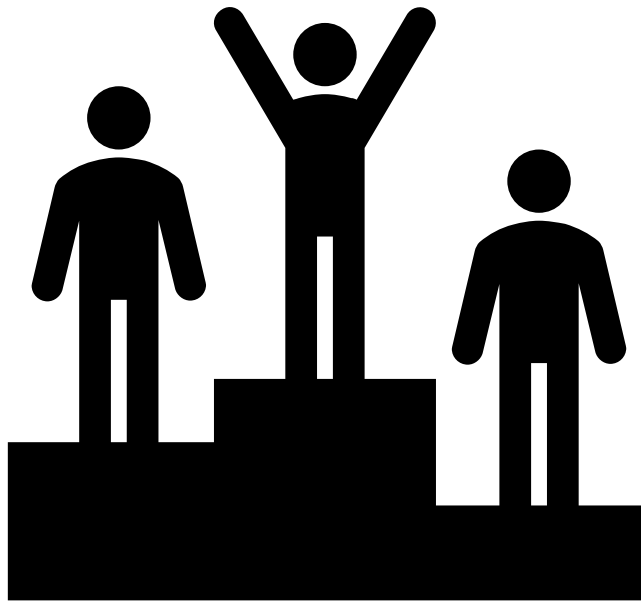
## Rollout unity and determination

Inspired actions

Push, push, push!

Consultants

Training



### **Phase 1 (Prep) and 2 (Rollout) are over**

- Consultants / specialists / contractors leave
- Training is over
- Rollout project runs slightly over (but everything kinda does, right?)

Phase 3:  
Embedding  
~~Culture~~ Habits

---

**NOW the  
work  
starts!!!!**



# Creating REAL ~~culture~~ habit change

## Phase 3: Embedding

### Mastering habitual reaction

- Unwinding bad habits
- Creating good habits

### How? The MARATHON

- Gently
- Patiently
- Diligently

# BE PREPARED: After Phase 1 & 2 of the rollout

Reassuring

Inspiring

Mediating between factions

Keeping 'positive and upbeat'

Extra churn from HR related meetings

Extra churn for 'supporting direct report' meetings

Reminding – Agile Lean culture

Re-convincing Agile Lean is better

Attending training

Getting coaching (leadership, team, individual)

Attending extra conferences

Reading extra material

Attending weekly Agile Lean groups for help and community

# A Wobble in the Middle?



Project Manager –  
Reports in

Its been rough –  
but everyone is  
DOING Agile /  
Lean practices...  
kinda



Boss – OK- I'm  
expecting those  
challenges now!

Prepared for  
reassuring and  
inspiring



Phew! I can show  
progress – its just  
going to take time

Endurance,  
Persistence,  
Repetition etc



# Benefits

## Less unnecessary sacking and HR churn

- Bad team / bad habits?  
Bad person / bad habit?
- Retain good people – don't confuse bad habits with incompetence

## Better capacity management and projection

- Change agents
- Leadership

## Better capability understanding

- Some Change Agents are just best for initial roll out
- Long term change agents are a different breed
- Leadership – are they capable of the 'long haul'?  
If not – alternative reporting line? A buffer?

# So why do we miss/ignore including habits?

---

Projections, assumptions, judgements, expectations

Habit  
changing is  
just not  
“sexy”



Hard for consultants to sell



Doesn't feel 'instant' and flashy



We don't want to see  
weaknesses

# Why face this if you can't do anything about it?



You can give fair warning of what's going to blow up

Leadership limitations?  
Change agent exhaustion?  
Team / specialist resistance?



You can give good explanations of why things are 'blowing up'

The requirement for continued support to embed culture



You can have excellent learnings from WHY it blew up

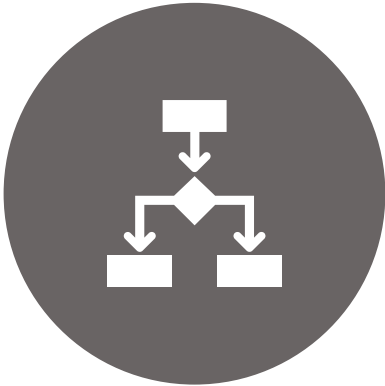
Not enough prep for the aftermath from habitual reaction  
Not enough capability of leadership to keep inspiring



You can use that information to build a wiser path forward

Hire change agents in the future who are patient and have endurance  
Ensure leadership is trained and coached about the value of 'OK to fail'  
Build in time for change agents and leadership to ramp up support - especially after any consultants, coaches and contractors leave

# Benefit of 'seeing' habits?



GET MORE CHOICES



CHOOSE YOUR  
BATTLES MORE WISELY



LESS SHOCKS AND  
SURPRISES



# Habitual Reaction – A VERY quick rough example

Avoiding hell in culture change scenarios

# My Personal Trick: Get Practical FAST

---

## Think 'Habit' not Culture

Replace every reference to "Culture" with "Habit" in my head

## Change Mindset

Change my mindset to how I would help a group

- Changing habits like smoking, drinking, junkfood etc

## Challenge Our View

Then challenge my judgements, assumptions and expectations with a good soak of what reality might actually look like

# Beware

## Lofty goals - Executive

- Intelligent vision
- Global awareness
- Innovative solutions

## Simplistic solutions – On the Floor

- Add beanbags
- Regular pizza nights
- Snack cupboard
- Friday drinks





Get Realistic

# How to deal with ~~culture~~ habit difficulty



See things as they are

Illuminate 'invisible forces'



Empower teams and individuals

Calm down  
Clear their heads  
Get problem solving



Work out a realistic pathway forward

Use different techniques to test ideas  
Risks? Opportunities




Follow through

Realistic expectations



Focus on the  
~~culture~~ habit  
difficulty

- Brainstorm all the people issues
  - On the floor
  - Leadership
  - Change agents

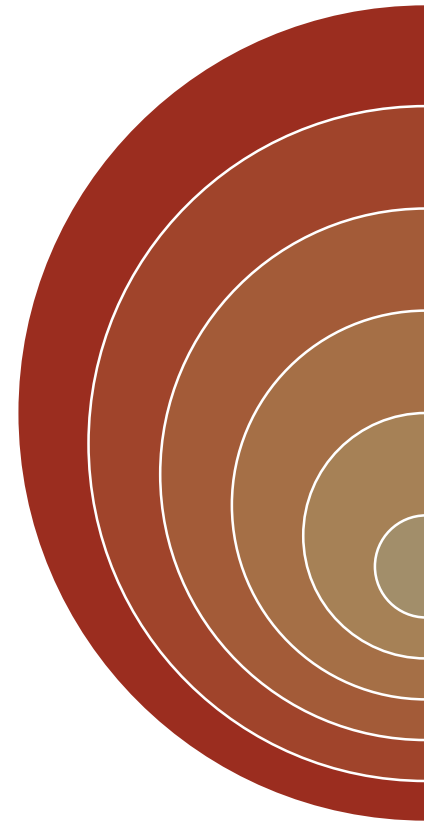


Sort the issues  
into categories  
of difficulty

For instance....

- Hierarchy
- Boundaries
- Doing it all
- Unclear strategy
- Micromanagement
- Hidden information

Transform to  
the opposite  
to find your  
~~culture~~ ←  
habit goals



Hierarchy	• <b>Collaboration</b>
Boundaries	• <b>Inclusivity</b>
Doing it all	• <b>Focus</b>
Unclear strategy	• <b>Purpose</b>
Micromanagement	• <b>Empowerment</b>
Hidden information	• <b>Transparency</b>

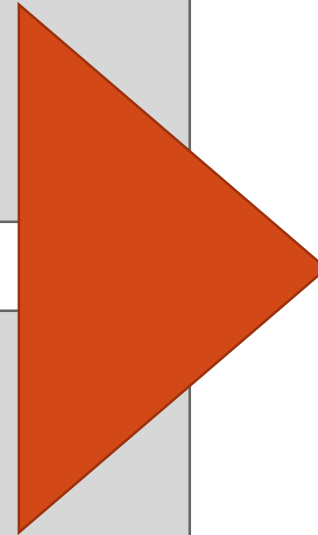
# Compare against your previous goals and intended activities

## Corporate Board Level Culture Wishes

- Intelligent vision
- Global awareness
- Innovative solutions

## Teams / Specialist Culture Wishes

- Add beanbags
- Regular pizza nights
- Snack cupboard
- Friday drinks



## ACTUAL Cultural Habit Change Needed

Collaboration

Inclusivity

Focus

Purpose

Empowerment

Transparency



Do we understand the hidden time and effort of changing ~~culture~~ habits?

## **Hierarchy => Collaboration**

- How many years habit in play? 5 years
- How entrenched is the habit?
  - This gets you thinking about the people
    - Leaders? High – suits and ties
    - Change agents? Medium – mixed bag
    - Teams? High – been in the co for long periods
- Considering the above – guestimate and open discussion about
  - Likelihood of effort – high??
  - Likelihood of time – 1-2 years at least??



# Are we capable of changing the ~~culture~~ habits?

- Brainstorm – what skills and tools are needed to help change entrenched habits?
  - **Leaders** – patience, inspiring, reassuring
  - **Change Agents** – diligence, realistic, endurance, able to negotiate between factions
  - **Teams** – safe to fail
- Do we have these skills and tools in place?
  - Leaders – No
  - Change Agents – Partially
  - Teams – Getting there



AHA: Insight!

Oh – we have


- Entrenched Hierarchical leaders and teams
- Very enthusiastic ‘flash in the pan’ change agents with no patience – who argue with change agents who are hierarchical

That could BLOW UP IN OUR FACE!

Need

- Extra time and coaching with leaders and teams
- Hiring or training for change agents – diligence, stress management, negotiation skills

In other  
words: get us  
the skills &  
time needed  
for ~~culture~~  
habit change



Reassuring

Inspiring

Mediating between factions

Keeping 'positive and upbeat'

Extra churn from HR related meetings

Extra churn for 'supporting direct report' meetings

Reminding – Agile Lean culture

Re-convincing Agile Lean is better

Attending training

Getting coaching (leadership, team, individual)

Attending extra conferences

Reading extra material

Attending weekly Agile Lean groups for help and community

# Summary: Whole different approach

## Old way of looking at culture change

- Transformation: Push, Fast, Flashy, Loud
  - Inspire
  - Convince
  - Positive
  - Upbeat
  - High standards

## Actually – in Phase 3 that's irritating

- Habit changing: Pull, Gentle, Steady, Persistent
  - Support
  - Patient
  - Endurance
  - Repetition
  - OK to fail
  - Realism
  - Gentle persistence
  - Contextual understanding

# See the 'invisible force' that might blow culture change up



Changing culture habits

What are our 'bad habits'?

Where is it most entrenched?



Do you and your people

Have the skills?

Have the time?



After initial roll out

How long might culture habit change take?

How much effort might culture habit change take?



Have we at least had a discussion about how that might affect

DELIVERY???????

# DISCUSS and DISCOVER: Find the hidden time and effort

Area of difficulty	Time <i>(habit has been in play)</i>	How entrenched is the habit?	PREDICT: How long to unwind and replace habits?
Hierarchy	5 years	High	??
Boundary fighting	2.5 years	Low	
Doing it all	1 year	Low	
Unclear strategy	2 years	Medium	
Micromanagement	1.5 years	High	
Hiding information	3 months	Low	

This is NOT an exact science

This process is just a quick way to get perspective

Remember: test your ideas after!

# DISCUSS and DISCOVER: Find the hidden time and effort

Area of difficulty	Ideal Habitual Reaction	Capability <i>(to transform and embody the habit)</i>			Capacity <i>(to spend time changing the habit?)</i>		
		Leaders	Change Agents	Indv	Leaders	Change Agents	Indv
Hierarchy	Collaboration						
Boundary fighting	Inclusivity						
Doing it all	Focus						
Unclear strategy	Purpose						
Micromanagement	Empowerment						
Hiding information	Transparency						

## Collaborative Guestimate- ing Phase 3!!

Area of difficulty	Culture Change Needed	Likely timeframe to change habitual reaction?	Capacity to support?	Capability to support?
Hierarchy	Collaboration			
Boundary fighting	Inclusivity			
Doing it all	Focus			
Unclear strategy	Purpose			
Micromanagement	Empowerment			
Hiding information	Transparency			
	<b>ESTIMATED OVERALL</b>	<b>X time after rollout to embed</b>	<b>Low – need to make time</b>	<b>Medium – need some training and development</b>

# Plan for the 'Sting in the Tail' Habitual Reaction



## Training

Leadership in collaboration  
Change agents in gentle persistence  
Teams – OK to fail



## Make time in the schedule for

Leadership to reassure and inspire  
Change agents to remind, explain, repeat  
Teams to fail and try again



## Realistic timeline and follow through and measures

Based on the list per above  
Measure progress month by month based on real goals drawn from difficulty



# Culture Habit change in Phases?



## Phase 1: Investigate

Research and Development

- What should we do? Why? How? Considering....?



## Phase 2: Rollout

The initial culture intro

- Setting up initial rollout - 2 months?



## Phase 3: Help the Habit

Consider the 'invisible force that blows up culture change'

- 6-18 months
- Habitual Behaviour Change – otherwise known as 'Embedding Culture'



# DON'T BE FOOLED

- In practical terms...
- Culture change
- Is habit change
- With that mindset – get practical quickly and effectively and dig out of hell and into amazing

# At the end of the day....

---

Its actually about

# This is just compassion at work



Using empathy and equanimity  
to assess the demand we put on  
people



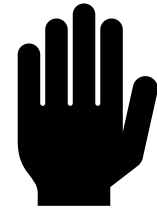
Accepting that we are all human



And change takes time

# There is no need to

- Go on a 'sackathon'
  - Abandon long serving people
  - Tie yourself and HR up for years
- Walk away from your valiant attempt at change
- Become depressed from feeling trapped
- BURNOUT





Culture change  
can happen

**Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!**

- Just like the example with the gym
  - You CAN get healthy
  - Your culture CAN get healthy
- Having that aspiration is a good thing
- But its all about habit, diligence, patience and leeway

# Deal with ~~culture~~ habit difficulty



See things as they are

Illuminate 'invisible forces'



Empower teams and individuals

Calm down  
Clear their heads  
Get problem solving



Work out a realistic pathway forward

Use different techniques to test ideas  
Risks? Opportunities?



Follow through


Realistic expectations

# Worst case

- You can realistically see the workload ahead
  - Avoid a nervous breakdown
    - Say 'no' to the 'promotion'
    - Leave the company
    - Transfer to a different division
    - Take a year off







Warning:  
Ignorance here  
is NOT bliss

If you do or don't illuminate this  
'invisible force'

- Its still going to happen
- Whether you like it or not

You can be ready

- Or you can nearly drown

You can be empowered

- You are NOT helpless - you have a choice

---

Hope that  
helps