Better SAFe than sorry?

Why scaled agile frameworks do not necessarily improve your bottom line and what to do about it.

Conny Dethloff & Moritz Hornung @ SDS-Community Broadcast on April 10th 2024

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Thanks for having us!

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9 years as a manager at OTTO: actively shaping global cultural change and transformation

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Learning from nature how living systems work

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What is a framework and why have they become so popular?

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Framework: A selection of tools and methods. No more and no less.

A collection of tools and methods to solve problems in organizational design. They generalized assumptions or observations about how to ideally organize to solve certain problems.

Frameworks are not good or bad by default like a hammer can be used correctly or not.

Application of frameworks recognizes that structures and processes are no longer sufficient for value generation.

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The manager's dilemma: making the right decisions in the face of an uncertain future

> *Only those questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide.*

Heinz von Foerster

The biggest challenge for managers in decision-making is the expectation to make „right decisions" under uncertainty.

This is a fallacy: A decision is only necessary when there are one or more options that are both as good, thus there is no knowledge available to „decide".

If it can be calculated it is not a decision. If it can be evaluated on facts (like investments) it is not a decision. Thus; right or wrong cannot be determined before judging the outcome of a decision.

Frameworks are a pleasant relief to this dilemma

If you need to decide "right" you can choose to decide what everybody else decided.
The question shifts from "What is the right decision?"
to "What is a socially accepted decision?

The social acceptance of agile frameworks is high, despite its obvious investment and maintenance costs. Using established frameworks meets common expectations.

Insurance: If the implementation of a framework does not work (=expected results are not achieved) the responsibility can be attributed to the framework (or the people)
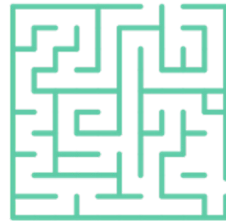
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What patterns can be observed when frameworks are applied?

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Organizations are no machines; however, most managers treat them like this

Complex Domain
e.g. social systems
Emergent practices

Ordered Domain
e.g. technical systems
Best (good) practices

Chaotic Domain
e.g. crisis
Novel practices

Socialization of „classical" managers defines how they see the world (Business administration and Engineering)

Best practices are for ordered environments only, like technical systems. This is where best practices work, like in engineering or manufacturing.

However social systems are complex environments that are contingent, thus what is "best" can only be tried out in a specific context, not copied.

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Please, trash your labels!
Organizational design is about fit not about perfection and ideals

Fun fact: It has been said everything about organizational theory in the last century already. Every "new" organizational philosophy or framework emphasizes a few organizational aspects to address current, widespread problems ("Zeitgeist") and creates new "buzzwords".

There is no perfect organizational design but only a fitting one. And that design is as unique as the company and its past, culture, and future ambitions.

„Every solution creates also a solution problem."

„Today's problems are solutions of the past."

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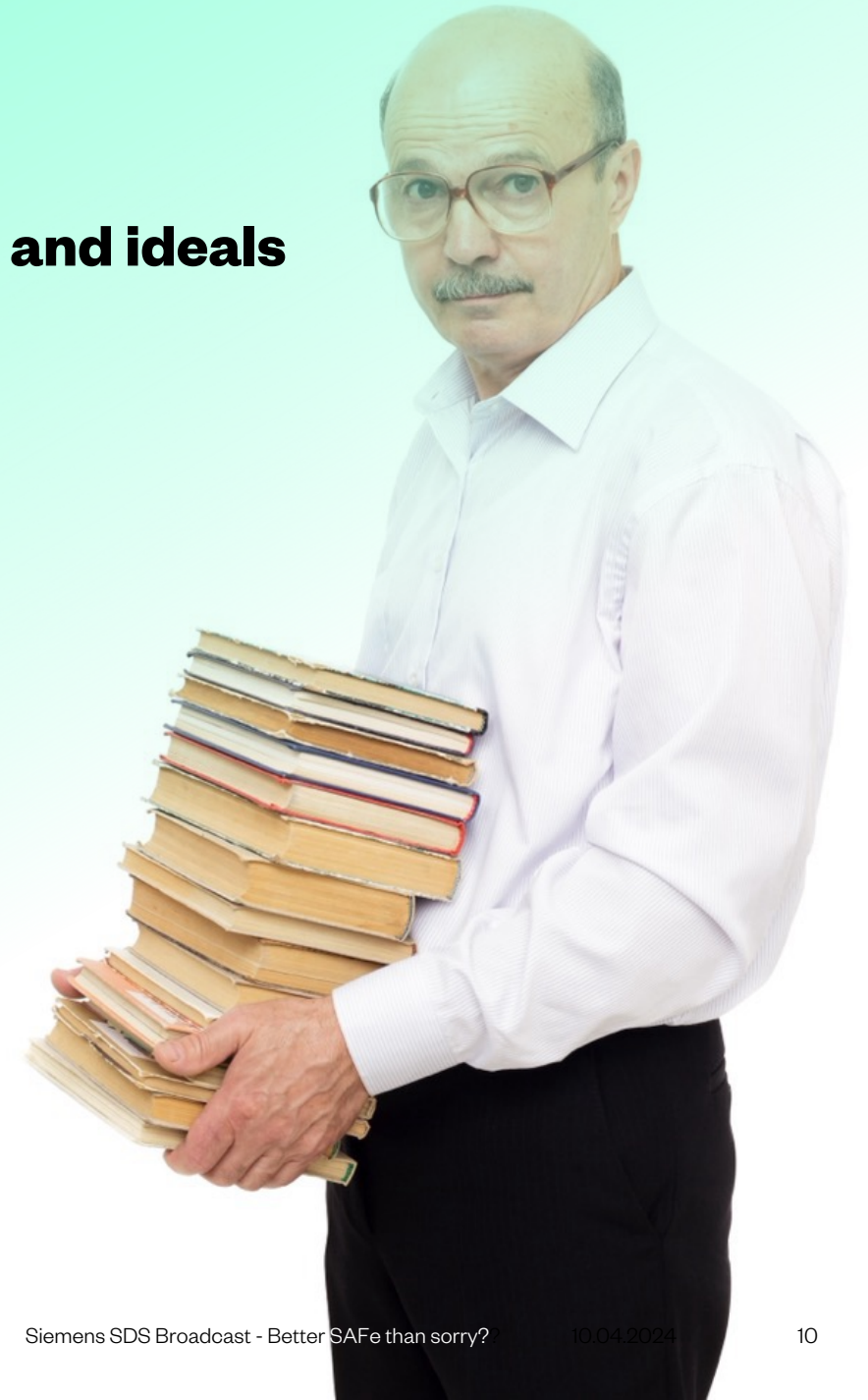
Each framework SAFe, LeSS, Nexus, Kanban, Scrum and alike emerged in specific fitting (!) contexts

Scrum: How can a team deliver in the best possible way and generate value?

Kanban: Emerged in manufacturing. How can a team keep work flowing and thus generate maximum output?

LeSS, SoS, Nexus: How to organize the interaction of several teams working together to build something?

SAFe: How to design entire organizations to deliver continuously?

However, if you adopt a framework, you also adapt the question and the solution, despite your specific context (objectives, as-is, culture, and alike)

A framework must apply its solutions,
as it has already limited the solution space by its design

A craftsman has a variety of tools available, and they are applied based on the problem that is found not because the tool is available.

There is no need to use a drill if another tool is more suitable! You can turn a screw in the wall with pliers or use a screwdriver. The result is the same, but the effort is different.

For frameworks it is different, to be unique they need to exclude or limit valid tools and methods (like a waterfall, central decision-making, planning, and others) thus limiting the solution space.

Sooner or later a framework locks organizations in:
It is more important to be compliant than effective

Path dependency kicks in: There were no "wrong" decisions in the past → (still) trying to be right, sunken costs, keeping up the appearance, making it work

Instead of solving problems at the bottom-line things become dogmatic: it is about "agile leadership", "agile procurement", or labeling various activities as "agile", even in contexts where it is not applicable by default (e.g. hardware design)

Problems that have been caused by the adoption are not accepted → Risk for cynicism and inefficiency

How can you escape the framework trap and improve your bottom line?

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First: We are very sorry...
There is no silver bullet. There is no "standard framework way" to paradise.

> *There is no change without pain.*

Shi Heng Yi

Image © Marko Priske for Shaolin Temple Europe

Step 1: Decide if anything you heard today could be true...or not.

Ask yourself:

How different does "working agile" feel compared to working "classical"?

How much did you adopt the goal to work "agile" instead of solving bottom-line problems?

Do frameworks take too much for granted, despite their claim for empiricism?

Step 2: Take an outside-in view.
Begin by suitably describing your situation so that you can work with it.

Description: What can be seen or measured?
Objective data, like velocity, bug rate, estimation success, etc. that is not disputed.

Explanation: What is causing the situation?
Assume causality or correlation; but be aware that there is no linear cause and effect in complexity.

Evaluation: What do you think about it?
This is never objective, but subjective. Understand, what incentives, values, preferences, etc. people apply to make this evaluation and why they differ.
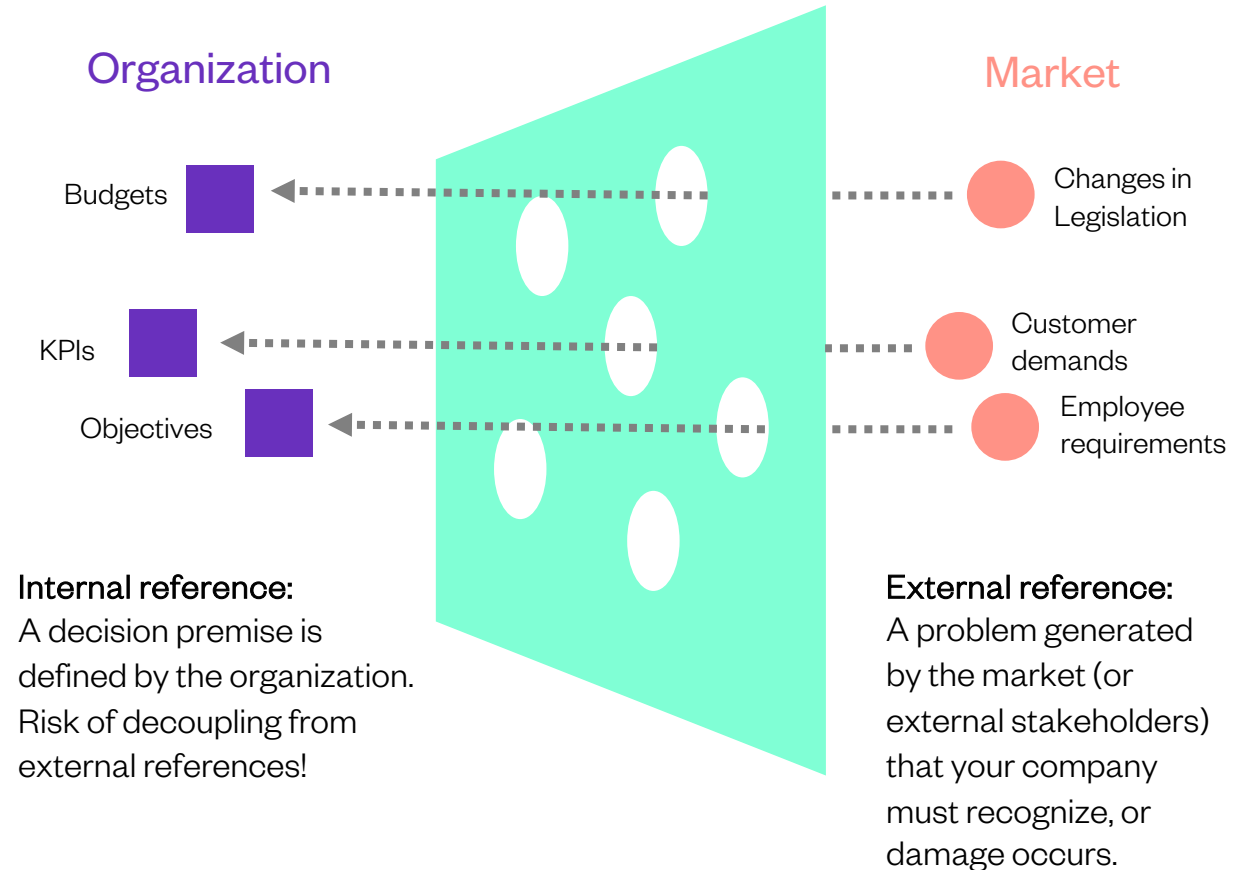
Step 3: Start to distinguish between real problems and internal issues

Change only happens if a sufficient sense of urgency is there.

Real urgency is created by changes in the relevant environment (market).

You heard the term "change story". A story is only as good and relevant as the topic that is addressed.

Make sure you address external references instead of internal ones. Being "agile" and applying a framework or following a rule is an internal reference. Your organization decides to make it relevant!

Organization

Market

Budgets

KPIs

Objectives

Changes in Legislation

Customer demands

Employee requirements

Internal reference:
A decision premise is defined by the organization. Risk of decoupling from external references!

External reference:
A problem generated by the market (or external stakeholders) that your company must recognize, or damage occurs.

Step 4: Create a "safe space" for finding out what works best to solve your relevant problem

Organizational cultures are strong immune systems for organizations. These shared expectations, beliefs and rituals "how things are done here" resist change – and that is a feature, not a bug.

To overcome you need to start where you are. Use formal power to create a space where it is understood that the "best way" needs to be found not defined.

Start working empirically: Do things differently and iterate from there. Failure means you learned something about how the world (in your organization) really works.

Try to become a better version of your organization, not a copy of another one.

Frameworks should not be seen as best practice and used blindly. There is no such thing as best practice. Although organizations are comparable, they are different in detail.

The organization's problems and core causes should be described in the best possible way.

Existing frameworks can then be used as a basis for taking suitable tools and methods to implement them.

Thanks for your valuable time!

,, Survival is optional.
Nobody needs to change.

W. Edwards Deming

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Before we head into Q&A

10 Seconds of self-promotion... ☺

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