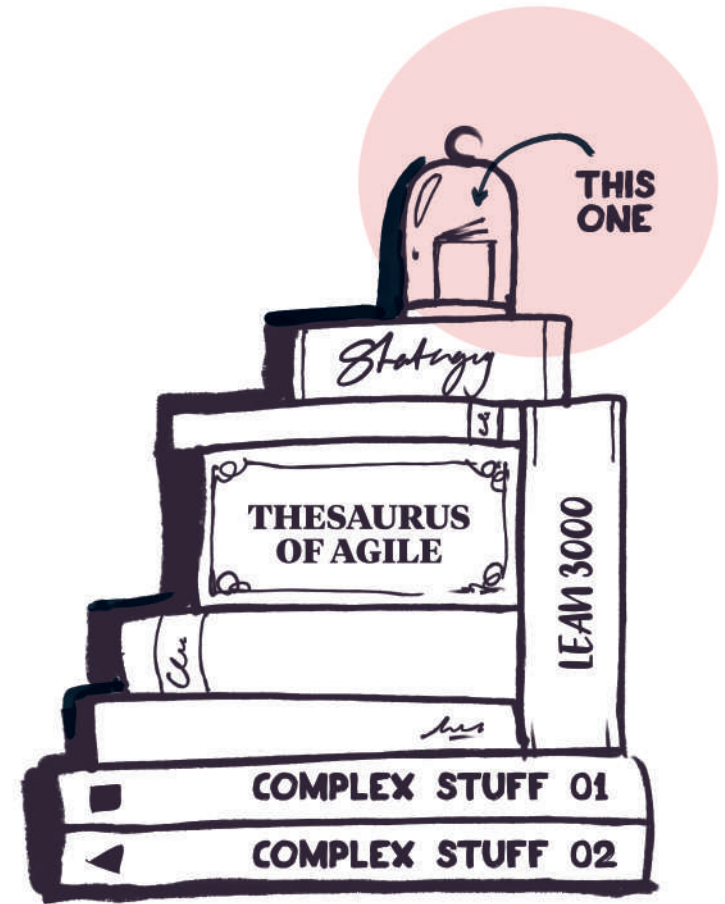


Issue 1 . Oct 21

Tiny Tales from the Frontline

—
A collection of thoughts
inspired by our work



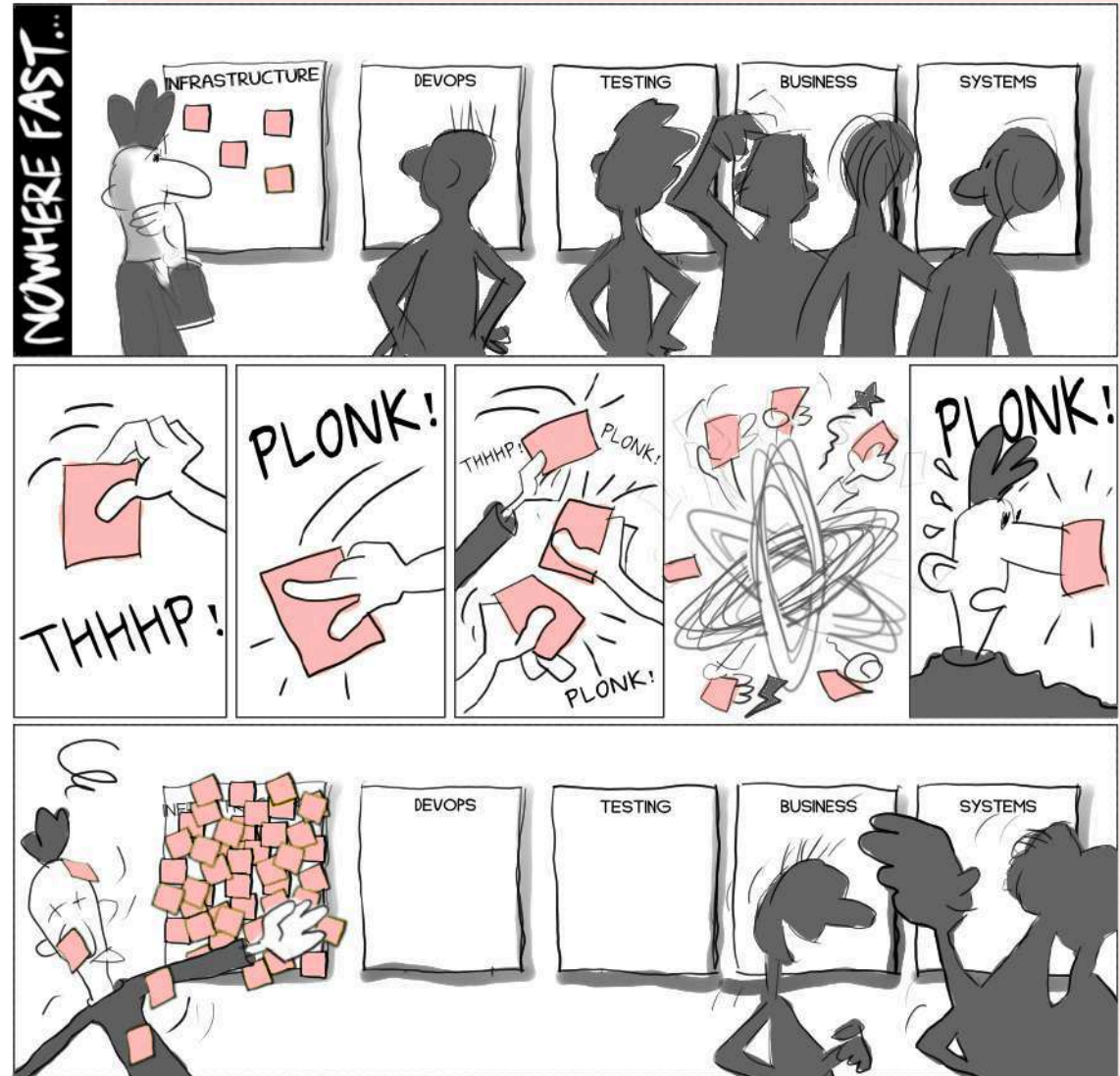
HYPR



For the most part, we're stating the obvious. But with pictures. Feel free to share and use and brighten up a deck. If we bring a smile to your face, we've all won.

A blizzard of Post-it Notes

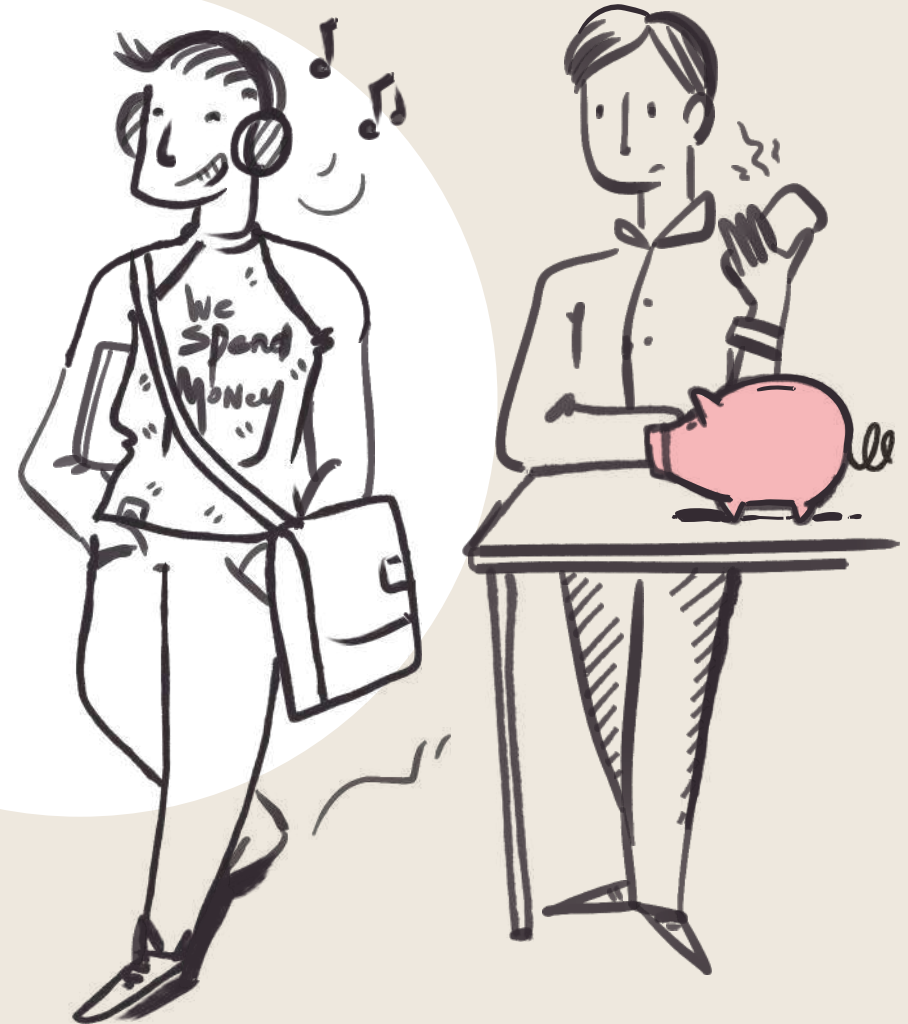
Teams are working across six big whiteboards at a PI planning session. As the session evolves, the board marked 'Infrastructure' disappears in a blizzard of Post-it Notes. So many that they start falling off. In their minds, the Dev teams are just passing "a few things" to Infrastructure. Multiplied by five. And Infrastructure has given up trying to explain or ask for any support. It's just life. Show managers the whole system, says John Seddon, then wait for them to realise what the real problem is and that they're a part of it – or at least hold the solution.

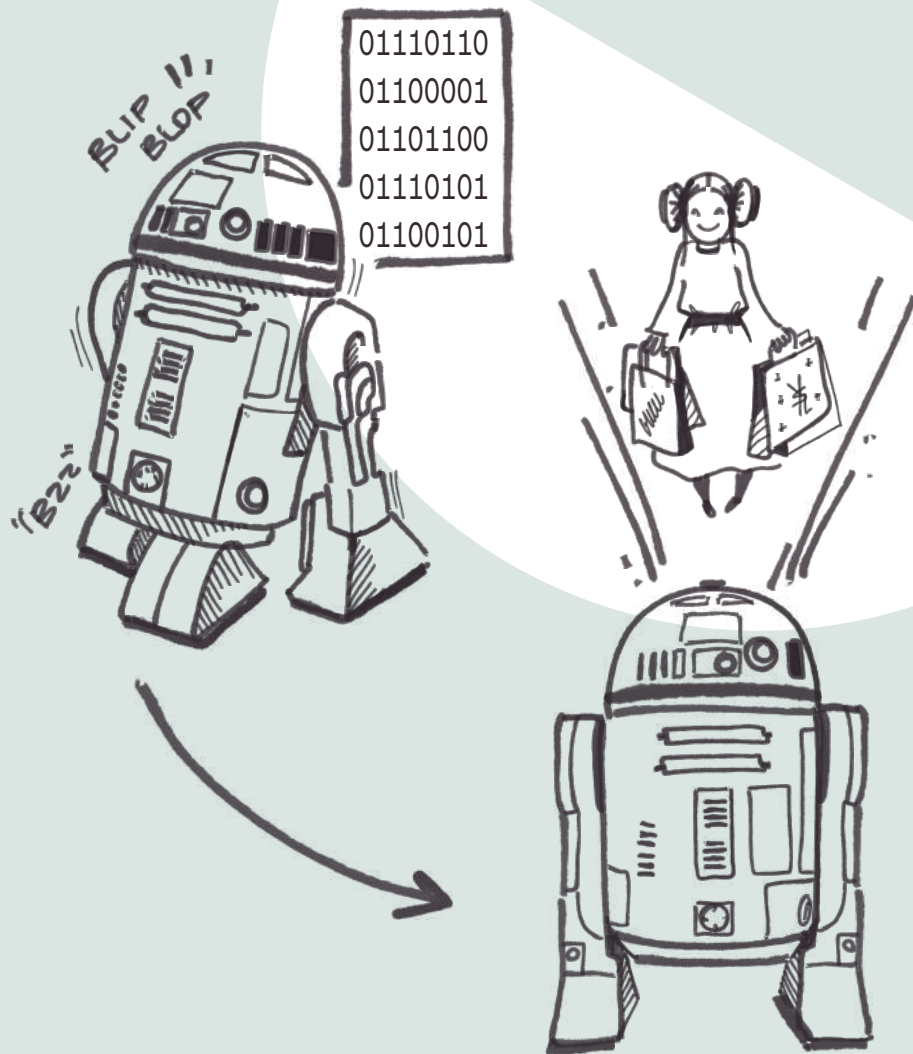


The KPI that kills innovation

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Executives who are frustrated that their business isn't as innovative as smaller, more agile competitors often ask "Why can't we be like them?". They can! Because *their business was once like that*. It's just that they shifted from taking risks in the innovation phase to reducing costs in the execution phase. That's where they are now... and in that phase they measure teams on *saving money*. To get back into the innovation phase, they should allow more small teams to take risks and then measure them on *spending money*. By switching their KPIs 180 degrees, they'll introduce a whole new way of thinking.





Flip your argument

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If you're not getting any love or investment in the things you're doing, change the story. Flip every conversation into a customer value story. Talk in commercial business language, not technology speak, and keep off the operational floor. Execs don't get too excited about operational effectiveness, but they can't ignore the customer.



I'm not paid to fix that

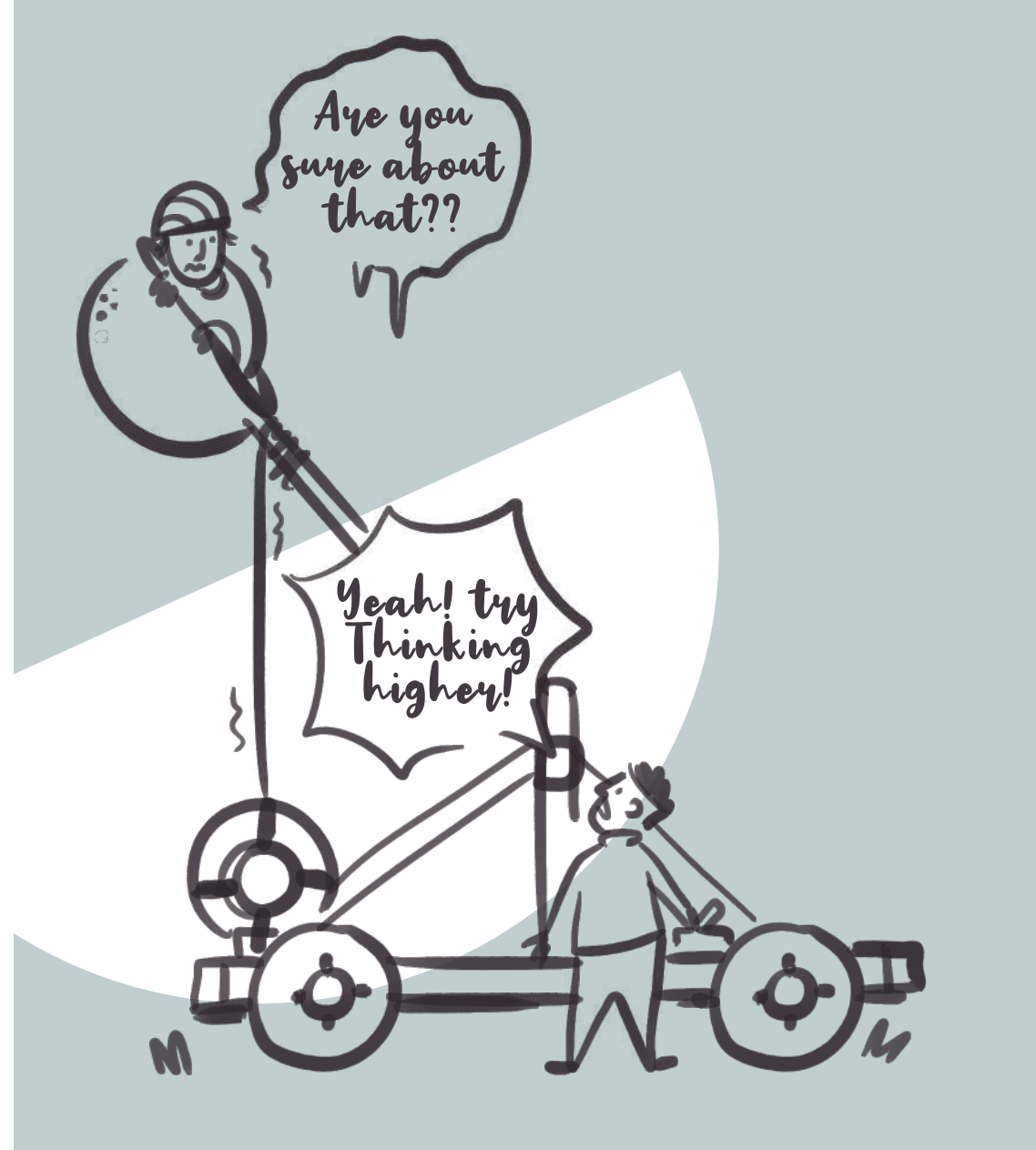
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We might all see the same problem, but the solution often 'lives in the spaces between the boxes'. If some people are remunerated in one box and others in another, who's going to make the fix? It's time to get heads together, shine a torch in those spaces and agree what can be done. Together.

A 100-year-old idea that's finally gaining traction

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The ability to look at a set of disconnected things and figure out the overarching pattern that connects them is a rare skill called 'system thinking'. It's so super-valuable in helping people find better solutions to problems that more people need to learn it. The good news is there's plenty out there to teach us. DevOps, Complexity Theory and Lean are all systemic thinking. All these models are dragging people back to the big picture, the whole system and a better – rather than a new – way of working. After all, it's been around for over a century.

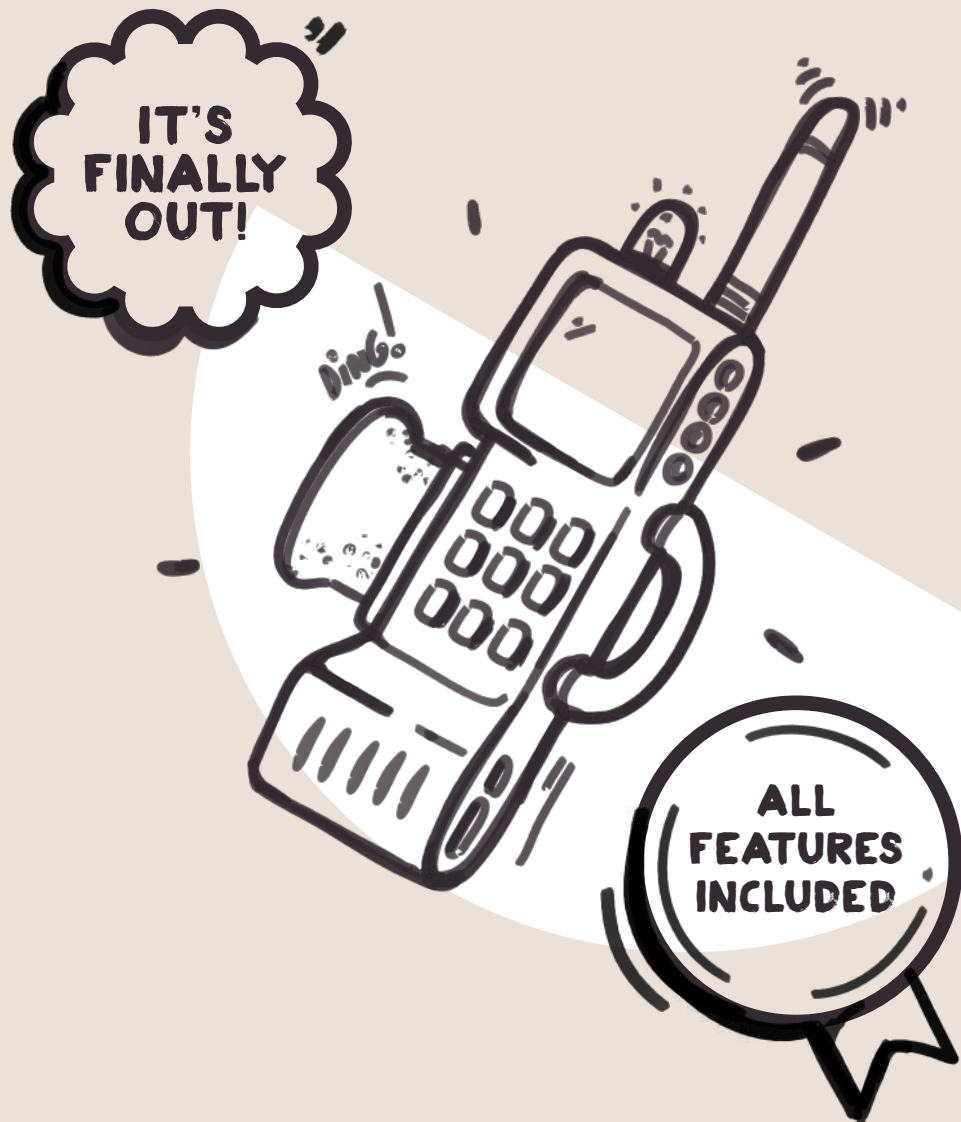


Decision criteria help people make change happen fast

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People at the coalface may see things that can be changed for the better but fear putting them forward. They should be encouraged to make their own decisions by being set simple criteria, such as three simple 'yes' or 'no' questions. If a person gives three 'yes' answers, they can make changes without oversight. If they answer 'no' to all of them, it's obviously a terrible change. If it's a mix of answers, they need to have a conversation. Over time, the backlogs get cleared, processes are re-engineered, people become more engaged. Without wasting anyone's time!





Find the hidden assumption

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A UX team is tasked with improving customer experience but changes are taking too long. An exploration of why reveals that the team is spending too much manual time trying to analyse, predict and maximise the experience they're creating, quietly believing that more effort would lead to the best experience. But time and effort spent is not the measure of an awesome customer experience for the few. The real measure is how many customers you can delight quickly. If there's a delay, check if the team is working on the basis of an incorrect assumption.



It's good to gather

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There are all kinds of reasons for having regular PI planning sessions... but the most valuable thing is that everyone can see what's going on. "I didn't know what to expect" says the executive who'd never been to the Big Room before, "but now I know exactly what's happening". It's good to gather... large and regularly!

When constant change stops delivery

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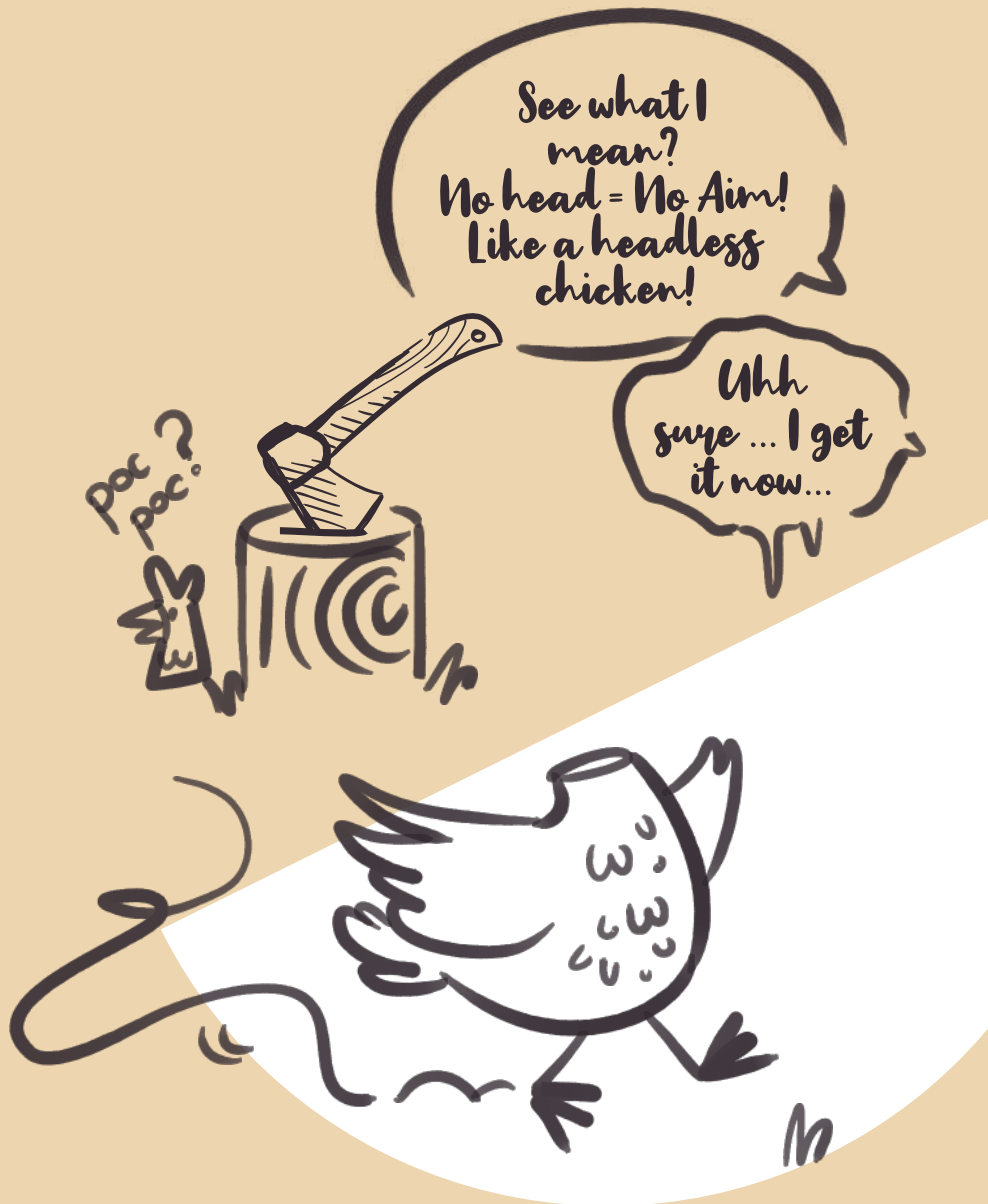
If executives keep changing what they want teams to be working on and some teams never get to deliver much because of it, it's time to break down the stories. The team should break all its user stories into really tiny increments of business value – each of which can be put into production super quickly. That way, executives wouldn't have time to change things right in the middle. Learning how to break stories down should be a priority for any team that finds itself stymied by constant change.



Spin-in. But take care

Spinning off innovation teams to the side of the business is no longer de rigueur. The most enterprising organisations spin inside – into the core. But care needs to be taken that while the innovation vibe can be super-positive for many teams and the business overall, it can be really hard on those working on the BAU. Take care of those people too. They make the wheels go round.

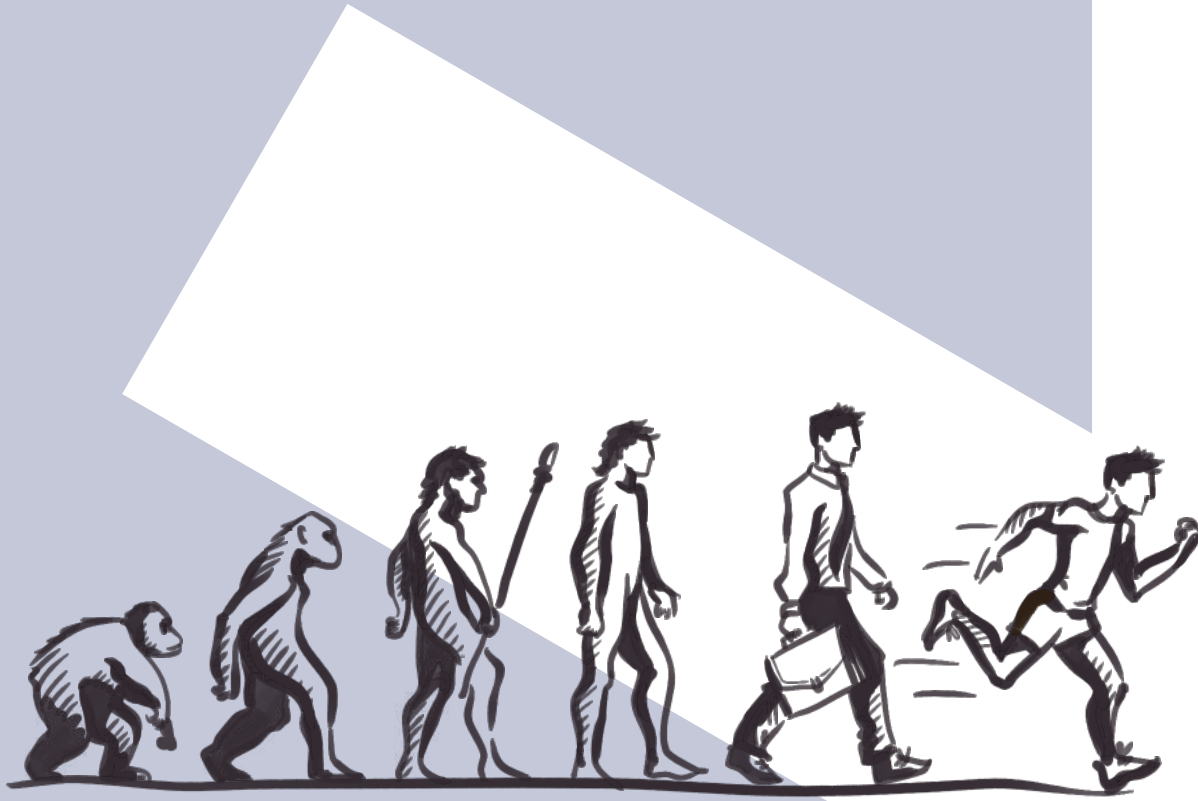




Turn user stories on their head

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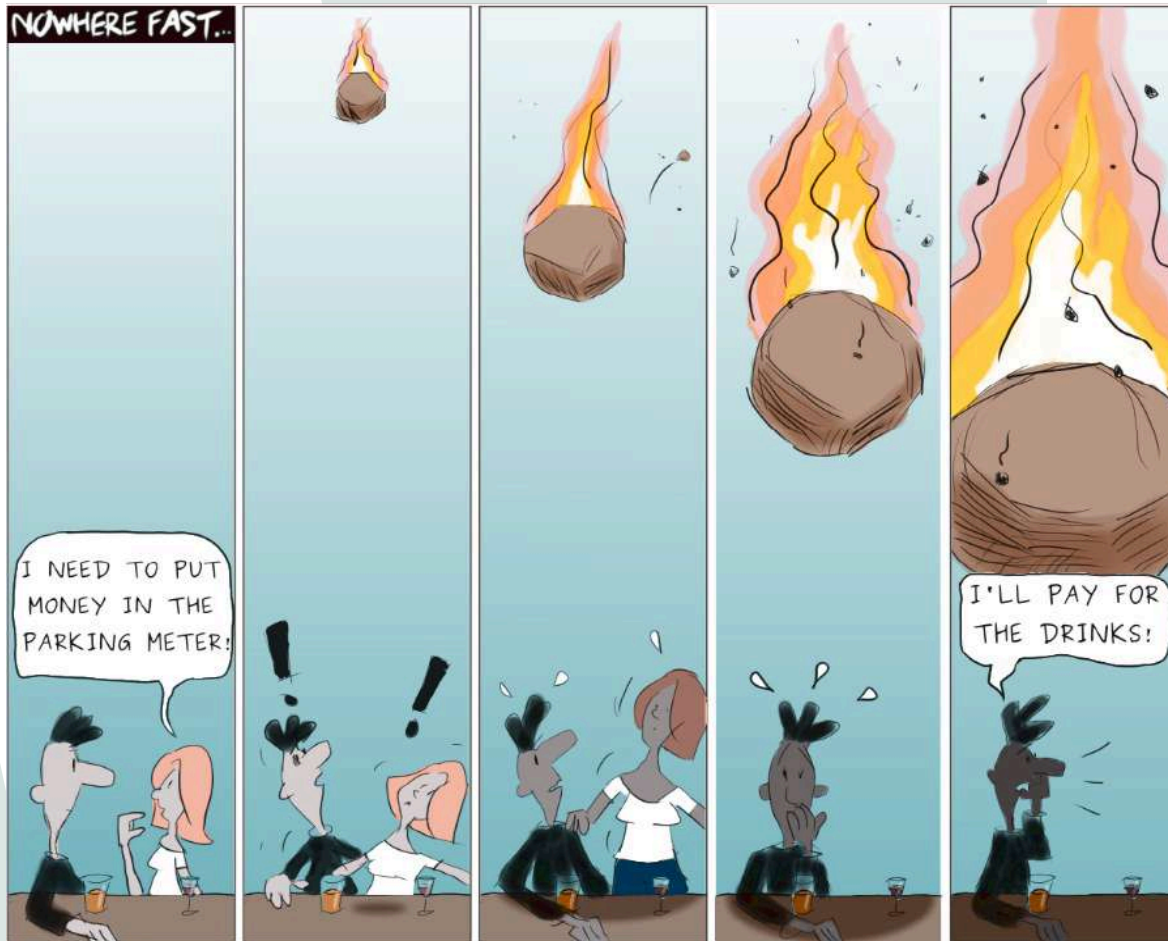
The purpose of a user story is to articulate how a piece of work will deliver a particular value back to the customer. And the traditional way for writing those stories is to describe the user, the functionality they want and the benefit the customer will derive. Most stories however never indicate the one purpose of doing anything – the creation of business value – team members are effectively running round like headless chickens. So turn story writing on its head and start by articulating the business value rather than cutting it right out of the equation from the get-go. Because if you can't articulate that, you don't have a story. And you can stop.



When is code complete?

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‘Make it work. Make it right. Make it fast. Make it right’. This variation in code iteration promotes the idea that the first cut at code doesn’t need to be perfect so long as it actually works. And if it works, it’s done. It can then be iterated to make it right and so on. This might seem a wild idea for any business with a different definition of done, but it’s logical... Because if you can’t evolve the code, it’s just not worth the investment.



What's the problem?

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An asteroid hurtles towards earth but people are still trying figure out where to park their cars. What's really at stake here? The survival of cars or people? Stand back, look up, take in the biggest picture.

For better ways of managing, look to parenthood

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Here's (some of the things) I think about when raising teens – it's so similar to the ideas behind better ways of managing!

- Most teens are fine, give them room
- Have soft and hard bounds for their protection and yours
- Give clear policy and minimal rules
- Let them make decisions because you can't be there all the time
- Let them design their life (it is their life)
- It is a VUCA world. You don't know any better than they do
- Offer advice
- They'll make preventable mistakes but failure is how we learn
- Be there to help clean up, heal and capture learnings
- When things go wrong, get close. Offer love and help and unconditional loyalty

- Empower them and give autonomy if you want them to be confident adults
- Assume goodness. Trust works better than suspicion
- Respect them. You don't own them. They're not chattel or resources
- They're their own person

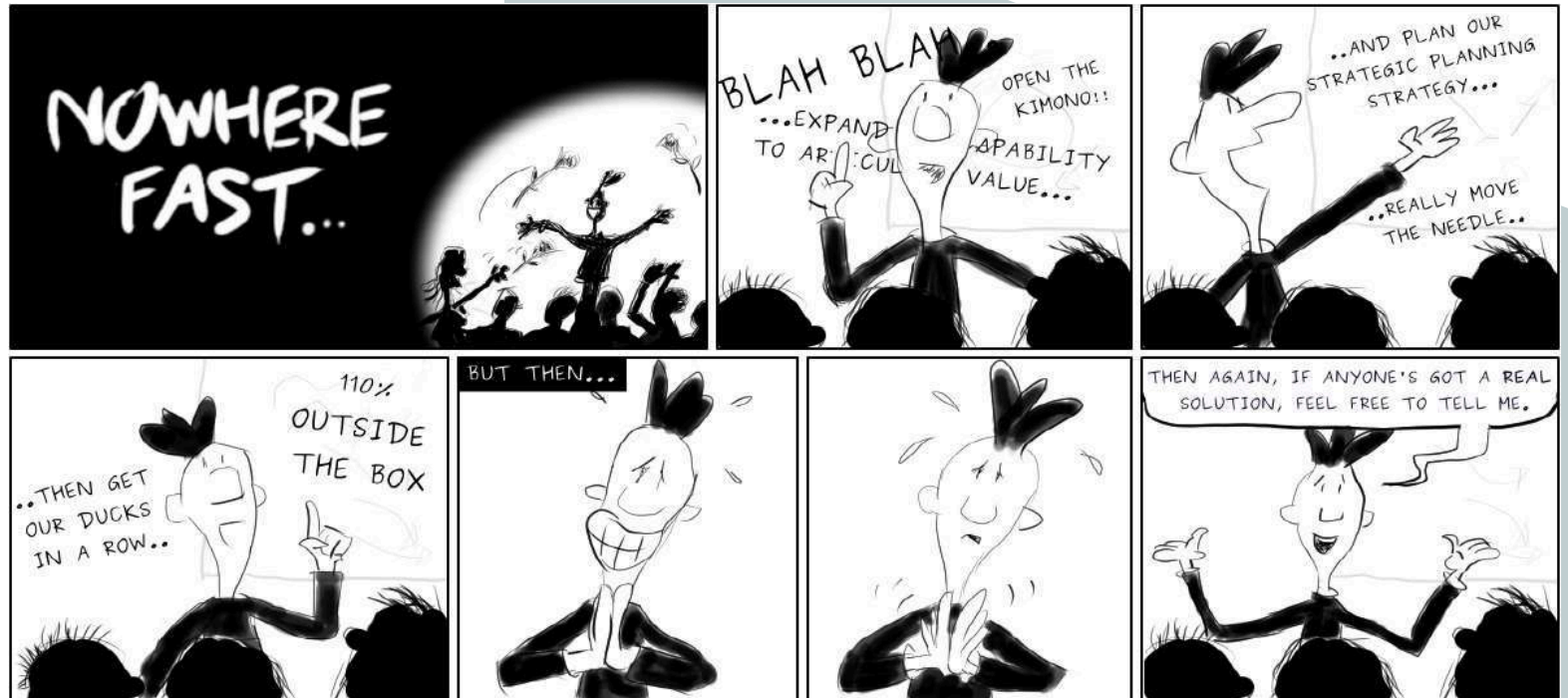
Above all, keep the bond. Don't alienate them or drive them away. As long as they honour you as leader, they'll want approval and they'll care about outcomes. If this works well for teen humans, why would you do anything else with grown adults?



No one has all the answers. What a relief!

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It often comes as a relief to managers to learn that they are no longer expected to have all the answers. Many suffer from imposter syndrome. It's also a relief to many decent people when they're able to shed the Alpha manager persona and become a little more human. Being a dick isn't in the JD. It's ok not to be tough. If the answers come from others, then it's ok to ask for help.



In search of improvement? Understand the system!

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There are two world views of improvement, depending on context.

In a bounded linear flow – a well-behaved system – you can apply mechanistic thinking to analyse the system: Theory of Constraints, Lean, Value Stream Mapping etc.

In a more general case, the world is VUCA. We can't understand mechanistically, we must understand organically. Dance. Play. Experiment. We need different tools: Meadows's 12 points, Case Management, Cynefin, OODA (observe-orient-decide-act), Promise Theory, storytelling.... (I'm still learning).





Try to Good managers play golf

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Management is about thinking
Set an example of self care
You shouldn't need to be there
Show that staff are empowered
Get out of the way

It could be any pastime, of course.



Transformation is crazy

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Big-bang attempts at change are crazy risks. Stop talking about 'transformation' as if a fairy godmother is going to wave a wand and we will all leap in a step change to a target state. That's nonsense. It doesn't matter how important you are or how hard you decree, it won't happen as planned.

Culture is not your property

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We're always amused by those who say they can create or build or control or instil culture in an organisation. Culture is not an input. It is an emergent property of the work system – the operating system – of the organisation. You can't build a culture. It grows (and withers) organically.





CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONTACT

Our Tiny Tales were inspired or written by Rob England, Paul Jacobs, Davin Ryan, Noah Cantor, Ajay Blackshah, Jeff Gibson, Philip Rodrigues and Benji Stephenson. See longer versions of some of these tales on [Rob's blog](#).

Tiny Tales from the Frontline was edited by [Sian Hoskins](#) and Rob England.

Illustration and design by HYPR's Creative Director, Anne-Amelie Berdugo.

The Nowhere Fast cartoon character was created three decades ago by Robbie Kirkpatrick. We're so happy to meet him again through Robbie's (much older) pen.

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