Beyond transparency

Next-gen communication strategies

Elizabeth Ayer

Agile Cambridge 2024

Image: Fractal Frost by Jack Hunter

Transparency

Giving information access to a whole group

“Why pick on transparency? Why now???”

“Why pick on transparency? Why now???”

Transparency is at best inadequate, and now is the time to move past it.

About me

My whole adult life I've benefited from the open sharing of information.

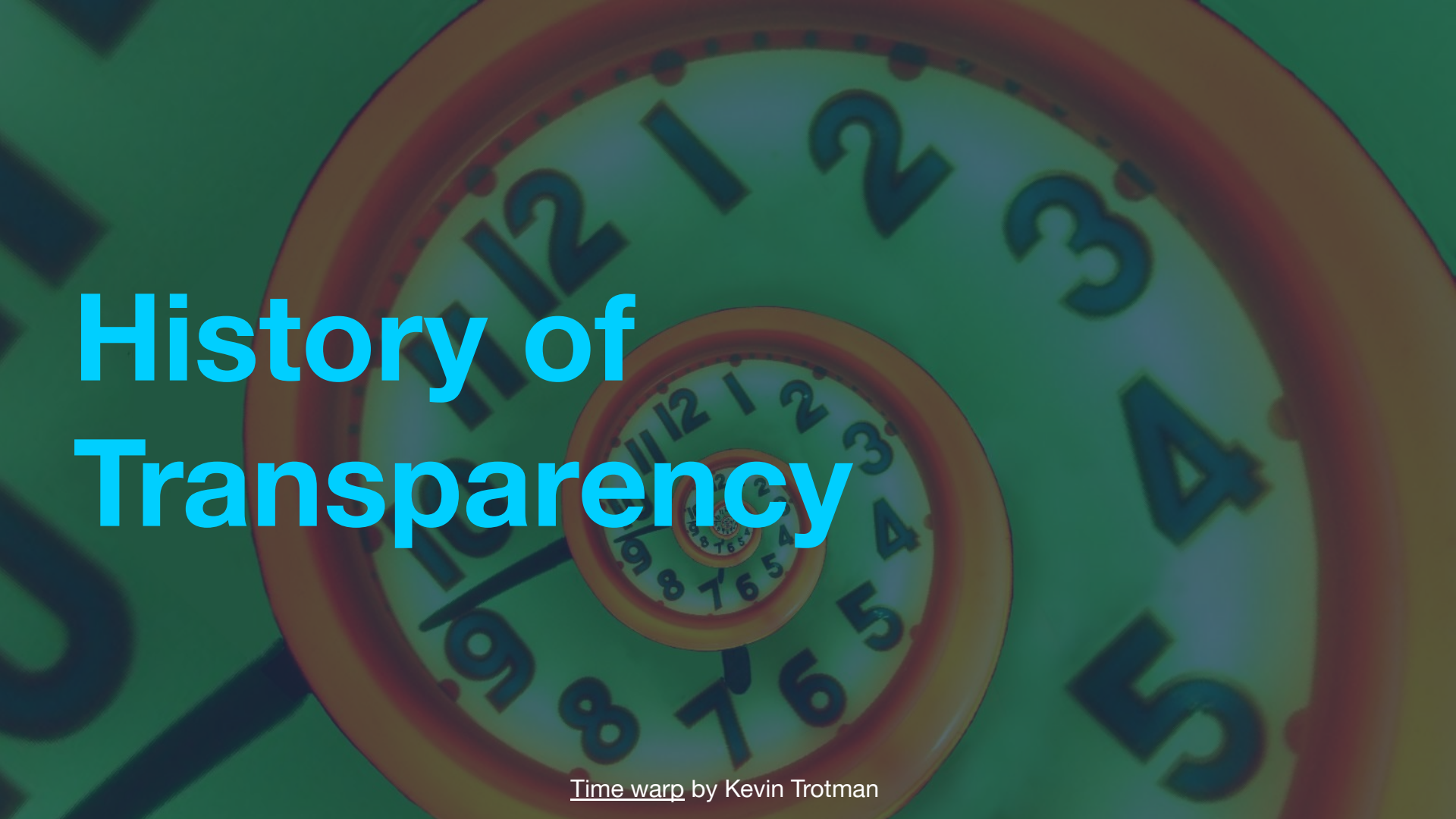
Siemens PLM Software

SIEMENS

redgate

conflux

History of Transparency



Time warp by Kevin Trotman

History of Transparency

First wave: progressive reform

"**Publicity** is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases.

Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman"

- Louis Brandeis, *Other People's Money* (1914)

Illustration from **Other People's Money and How Bankers Use it**

AMERICANS.....

DON'T PATRONIZE REDS!!!!

YOU CAN DRIVE THE REDS OUT OF TELEVISION, RADIO AND HOLLYWOOD.....

THIS TRACT WILL TELL YOU HOW.

WHY WE MUST DRIVE THEM OUT:

1) The REDS have made our Screen, Radio and TV Moscow's most effective Fifth Column in America . . . 2) The REDS of Hollywood and Broadway have always been the chief financial support of Communist propaganda in America . . . 3) OUR OWN FILMS, made by RED Producers, Directors, Writers and STARS, are being used by Moscow in ASIA, Africa, the Balkans and throughout Europe to create hatred of America . . . 4) RIGHT NOW films are being made to craftily glorify MARXISM, UNESCO and ONE-WORLDISM . . . **and via your TV Set** they are being piped into your Living Room—**and are poisoning the minds of your children under your very eyes ! ! !**

So REMEMBER — If you patronize a Film made by RED Producers, Writers, Stars and STUDIOS you are aiding and abetting COMMUNISM . . . every time you permit REDS to come into your Living Room VIA YOUR TV SET you are helping MOSCOW and the INTERNATIONALISTS to destroy America ! ! !

History of Transparency

End of the first wave: McCarthyism

From 1950-1954 Senator Joe McCarthy turned the spotlight of transparency on communist sympathizers in government and media, wrecking lives.

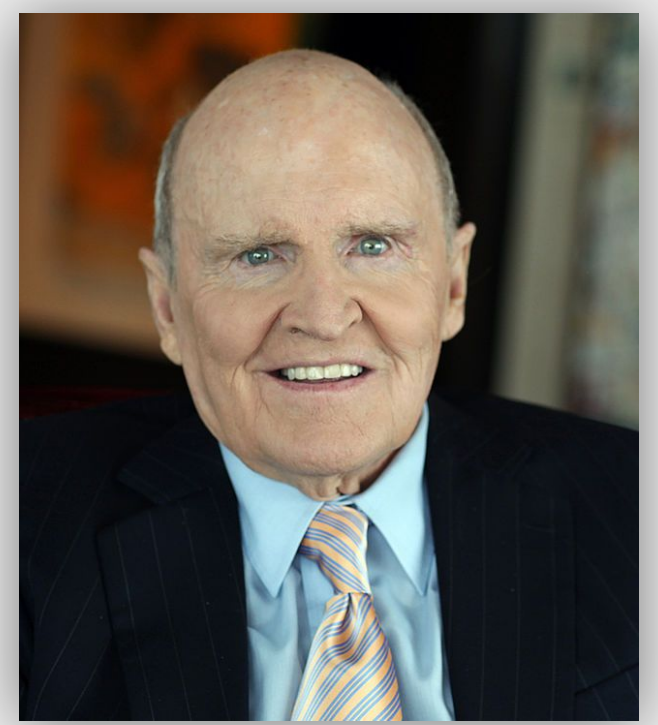
Second wave: the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 1967 / 2000

- To promote democratic **accountability** and public **trust**
- Coalition of journalists, scientists, consumer advocates, and Congress

Transparency's Ideological Drift, D Pozen, 2018

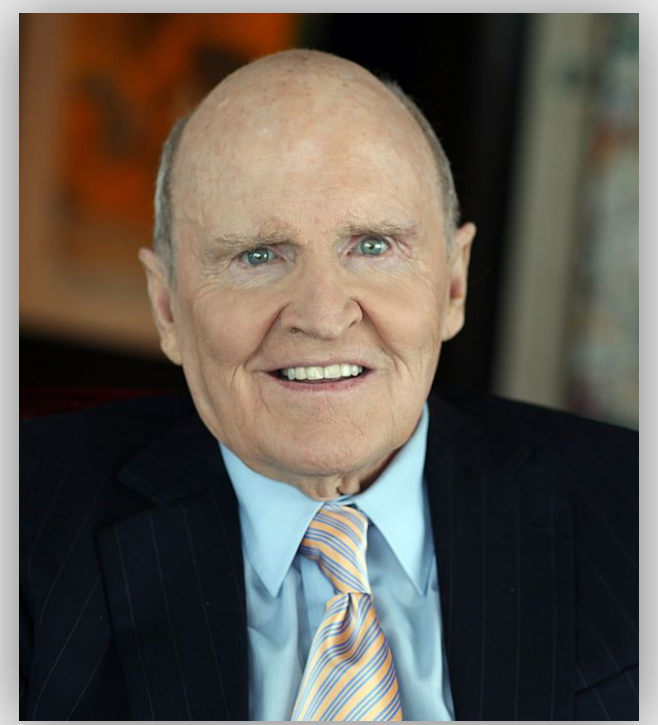
FOIA button by *Insercorp LTD*

Transparency in management



Jack Welch

Image: Wikimedia CC BY-SA3

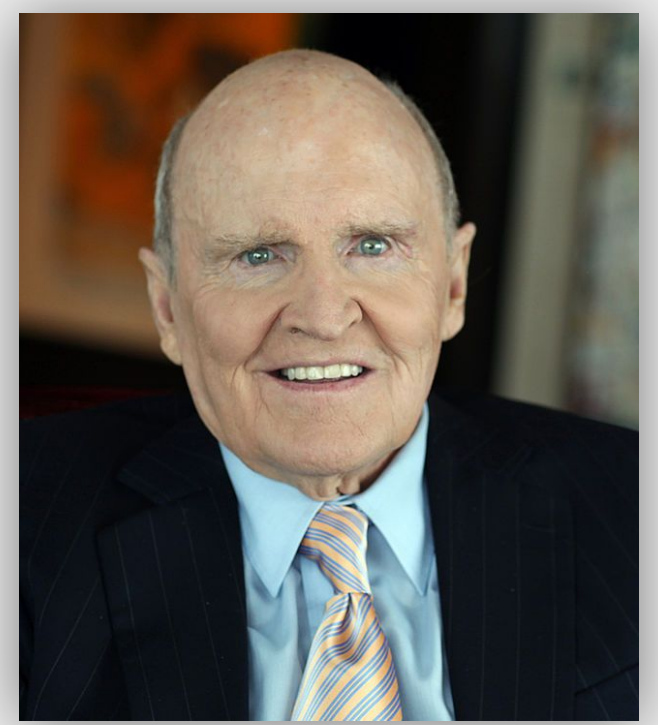


Jack Welch
Image: Wikimedia CC BY-SA3

Transparency in management

“Above all else, though, good leaders are open. They go up, down, and around their organization to reach people. They don’t stick to the established channels…. They never get bored telling their story.”

- Jack Welch, Harvard Business Review



Jack Welch

Image: Wikimedia CC BY-SA3

Transparency in management

“They never get bored telling their story.”

Welch’s story? We must maximize shareholder value.

“Transparency” implies neutrality and symmetry, but information transparency has many asymmetries….

Transparency asymmetries

What is the **power dynamic** between the parties?

Who is the information **supplier** and who is the **observer**?

Is the information being **pushed** or **pulled**?

Transparency asymmetries

Example: Jack Welch, the **high-power** party, **supplied** information to low-power staff via **push**.

This can be genuinely helpful….

Transparency asymmetries

Example: Jack Welch, the **high-power** party, **supplied** information to low-power staff via **push**.

This can be genuinely helpful…. It can also be **gaslighting**.

Transparency asymmetries

Example: Brandeis espoused publicity, the **pull** of information by **lower-power** members of the public.

This *can* provide **accountability**. It can also lend credence to **unfounded narratives**.

Transparency asymmetries

Example: Joe McCarthy, as a member of a **high-power** Senate Committee, **pulled** information from **lower-power** public figures.

This can provide **key insights** to decision-makers. It can also be **surveillance.**

TALES FROM THE NEAR FUTURE —

Omnipresent AI cameras will ensure good behavior, says Larry Ellison

"We're going to have supervision," says billionaire Oracle co-founder Ellison.

BENJ EDWARDS - 9/16/2024, 8:22 AM

Benj Edwards / Mike Kemp via Getty Images

Transparency has a completely different meaning when it’s consolidating power vs redistributing power.

Image: broken dreams by waferboard

In cases of journalism and civic governance, transparency hasn’t reliably given the desired results.

In theory…

Transparency ➡ **trust**

Transparency of bad things ➡ **accountability**

Transparency in journalism

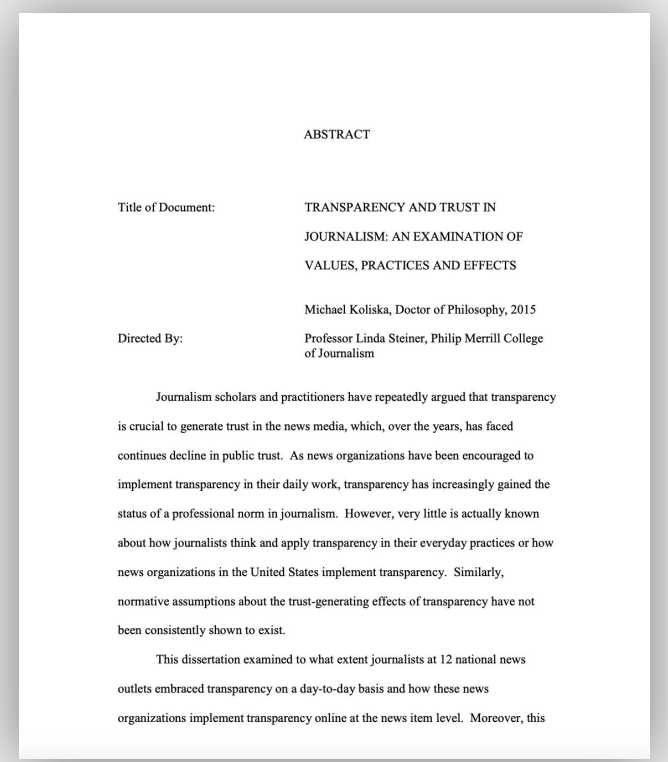
“Transparency is the new objectivity”

— D. Weinberger, 2009

Does transparency in journalism build trust?

"Audiences' **trust perceptions did not differ between** a text/website that had no transparency features and a text/website that had **hyperlinks to original documents**, **corrections**, **time stamps**, **reader comments**, **call for reader participation**, and an **editorial text explaining the production** of the news article."

- M. Koliska, 2015



ABSTRACT

Title of Document: TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST IN JOURNALISM: AN EXAMINATION OF VALUES, PRACTICES AND EFFECTS

Michael Koliska, Doctor of Philosophy, 2015

Directed By: Professor Linda Steiner, Philip Merrill College of Journalism

Journalism scholars and practitioners have repeatedly argued that transparency is crucial to generate trust in the news media, which, over the years, has faced continues decline in public trust. As news organizations have been encouraged to implement transparency in their daily work, transparency has increasingly gained the status of a professional norm in journalism. However, very little is actually known about how journalists think and apply transparency in their everyday practices or how news organizations in the United States implement transparency. Similarly, normative assumptions about the trust-generating effects of transparency have not been consistently shown to exist.

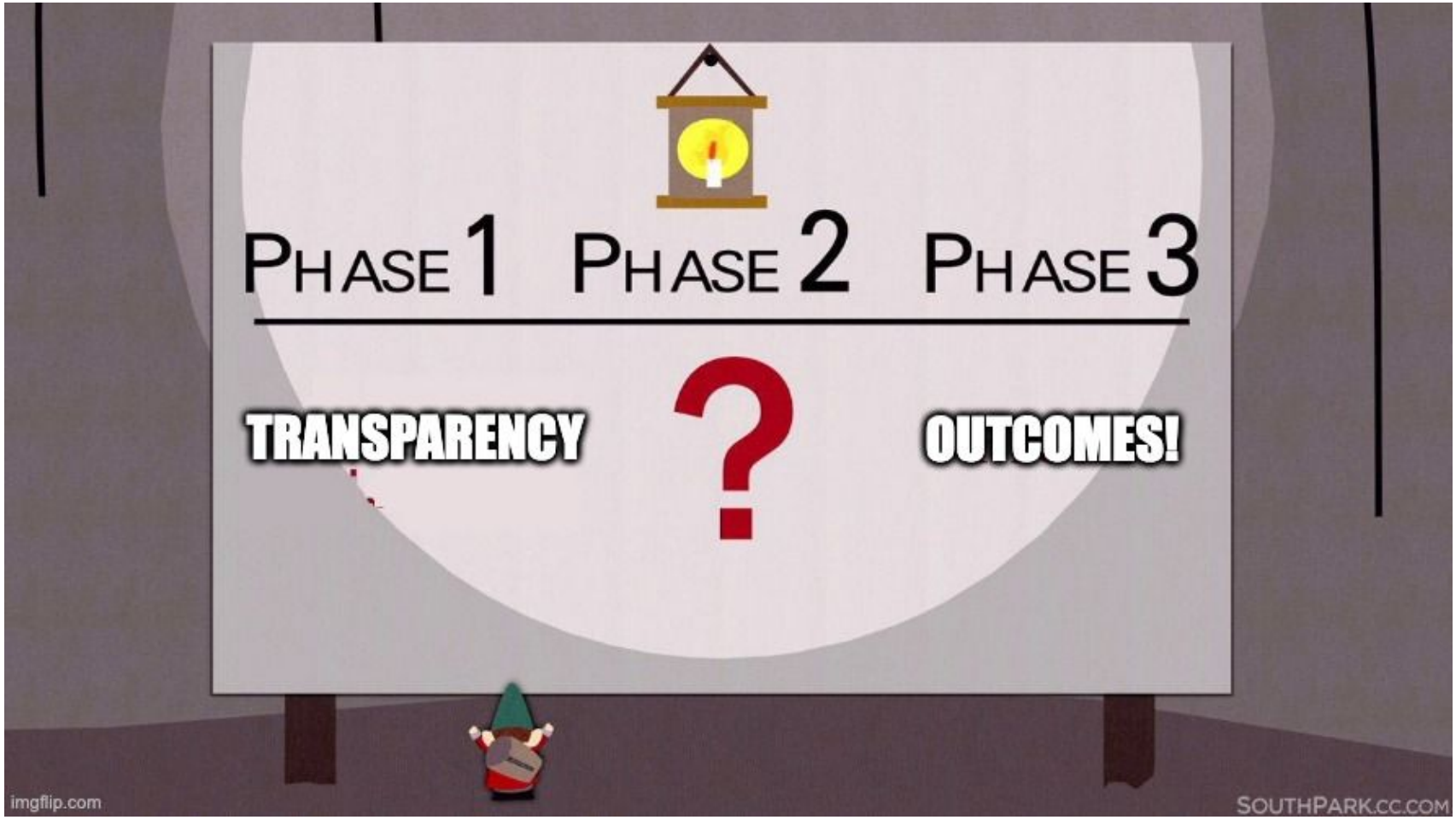
This dissertation examined to what extent journalists at 12 national news outlets embraced transparency on a day-to-day basis and how these news organizations implement transparency online at the news item level. Moreover, this

Transparency and trust in journalism: an examination of values, practices and effects, M. Koliska, 2015

Fox news and a closed world

Consistency leads to trust

Around 35% of Americans believe the 2016 election was stolen.


PHASE 1
PHASE 2
PHASE 3
TRANSPARENCY
?
OUTCOMES!
imgflip.com
SOUTHPARK.CC.COM

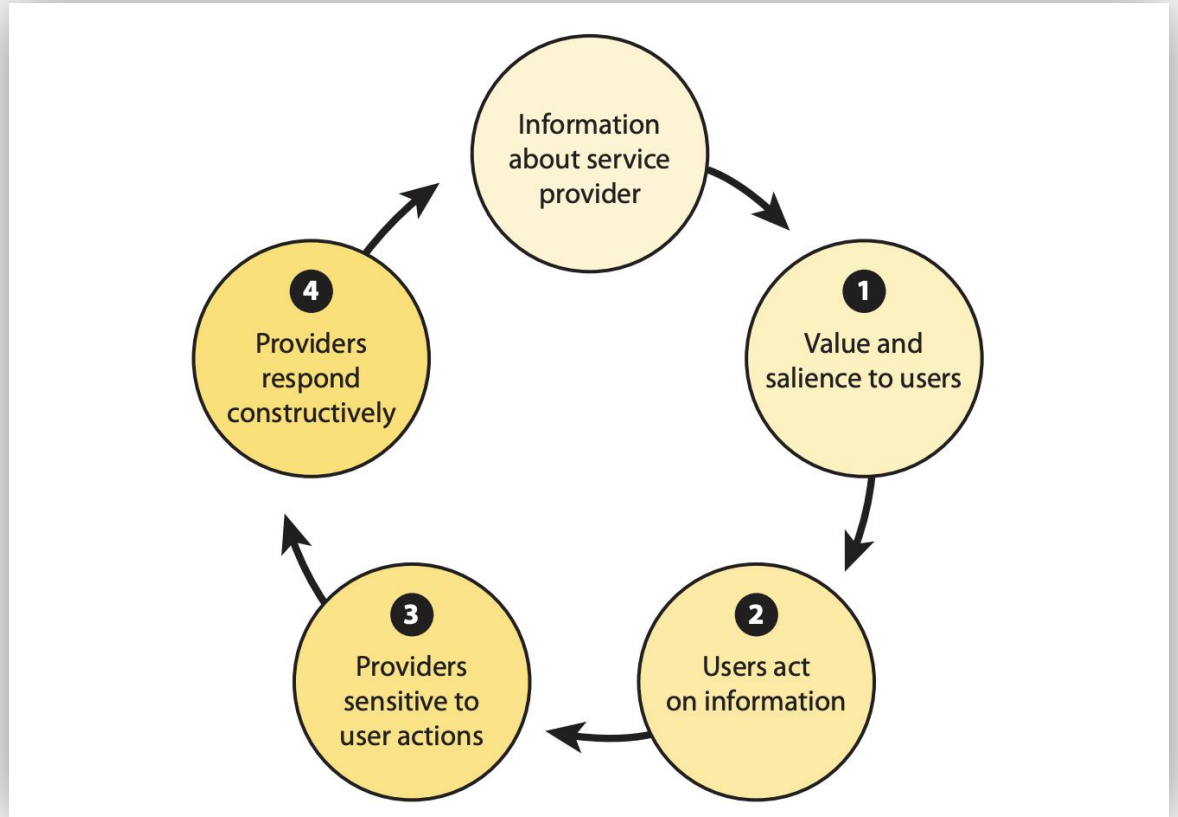
Transparency for governance

> “[T]here is **no consensus about whether transparency improves concrete outcomes**. The answer, as with so many other questions in political science, seems to be that ‘it depends.’”
>
> — Does Transparency Improve Governance?
> Kosack and Fung, 2014

Transparency for accountability: Report cards in Ugandan health care

- Ugandan health services underwent a sudden loss of funding and infrastructure
- During rebuilding, a “transparency intervention” tried
  - Collecting service data, e.g. equipment usage, waiting times
  - Hosting meetings: staff, citizens, interface
  - Designing action steps
  - Checking back in
- Saw marked improvement in health outcomes and staff engagement

How transparency can improve governance



Does Transparency Improve Governance? Kosack and Fung, 2014

Transparency for civic outcomes: Citizen's report cards in Uganda

- Ugandan health services underwent a sudden loss of funding and infrastructure
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The meta-story here is how much *work* it took.

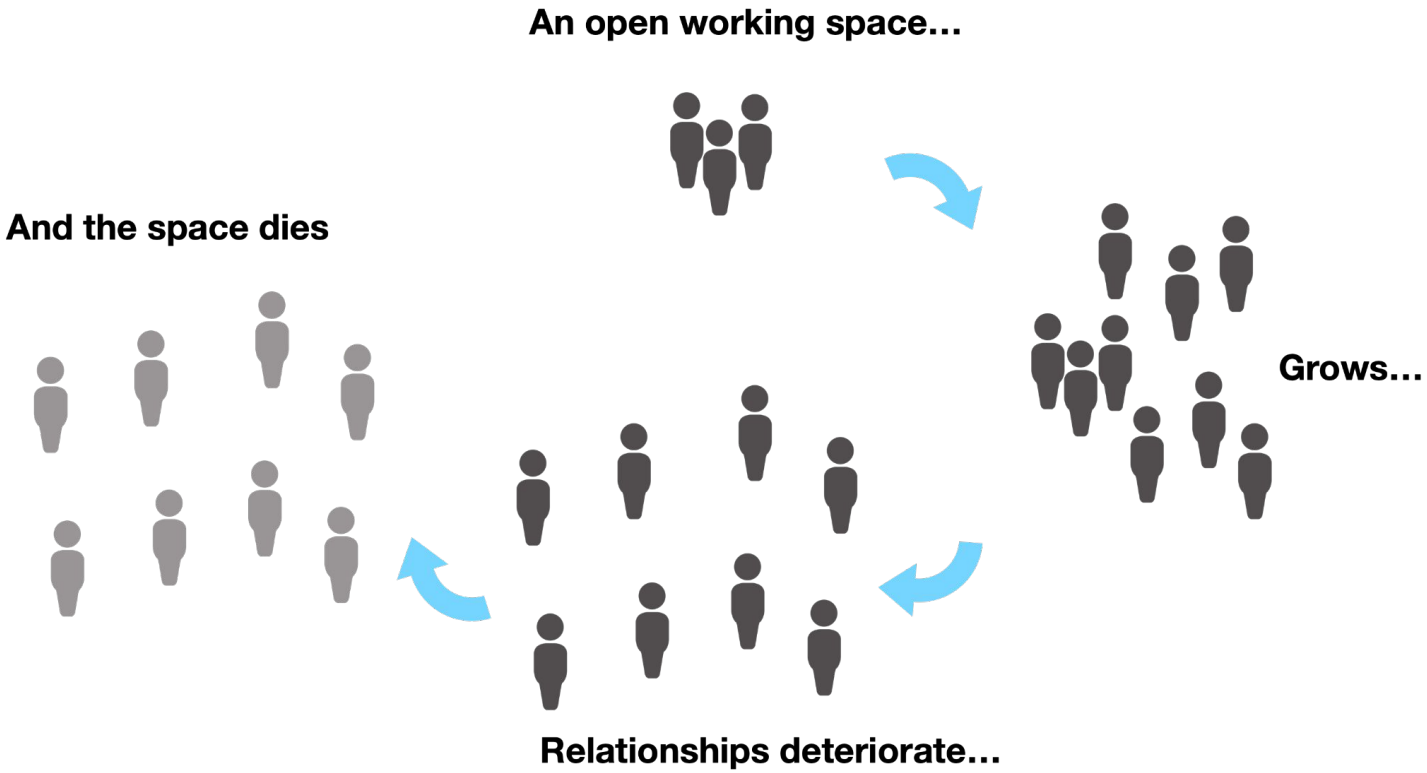
“It costs a lot of money
to look this cheap.”
- Dolly Parton

It also takes a lot of work
to be “transparent.”

Dolly Parton, 2005

In agile orgs, transparency has also had mixed results.

The cycle of transparency



Losing confidentiality via transparency

“You idiot. You naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it.”

-Tony Blair on the Freedom of Information Act, 2000

Tony Blair in 2022

Objections to “transparency”

- Erases asymmetries: high power/low power, info provider/receiver, pull/push
- Assumes that the viewer has the tools to interpret what they see
- Used to give veneer of objectivity to judgements and interpretations
- Implies low effort for the information provider
- Denies the importance of interpretation
- Leads to feelings of surveillance inside previously safe spaces
- Easily weaponized

Reframing transparency

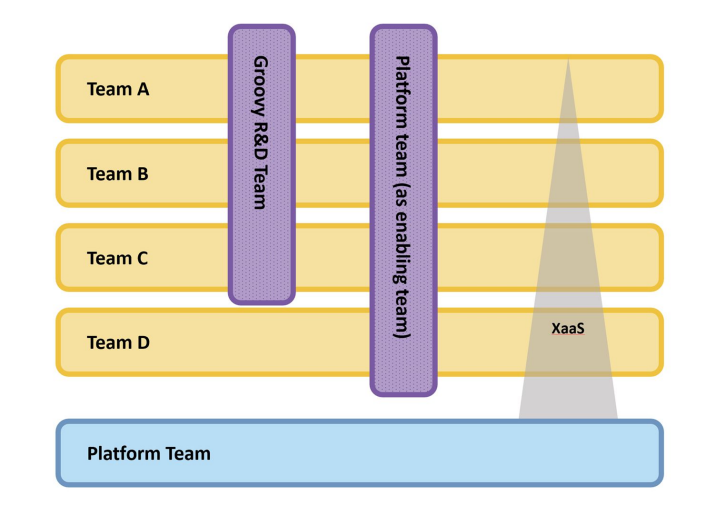
Image: Technicolor by Chris (a.k.a. MoiVous)

We’re aiming for an approach that embraces differences in perspective and the need for active communication.

We’re here at an agile conference. It’s time we talk teams.

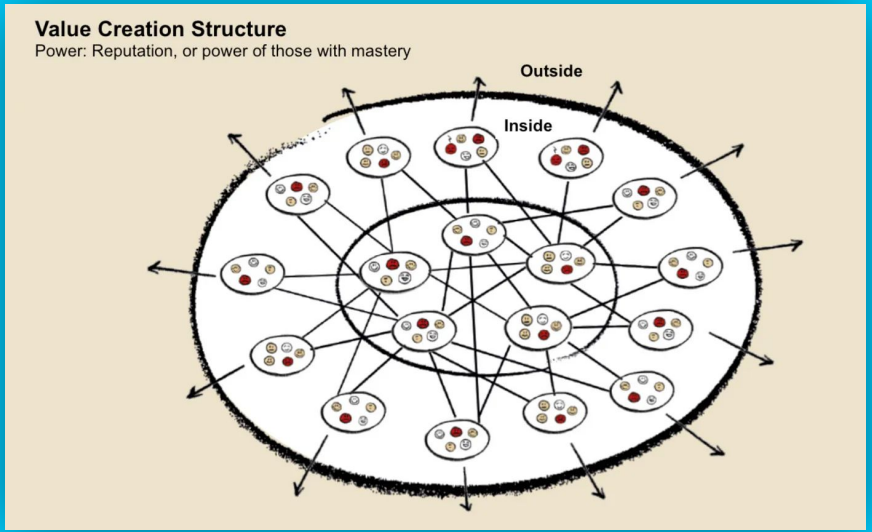
Assumption: the most effective configuration for value delivery is loosely-coupled teams of 4-14.

Team Topologies



https://teamtopologies.com/industry-examples/building-a-successful-platform-team-at-croz

Beta Codex

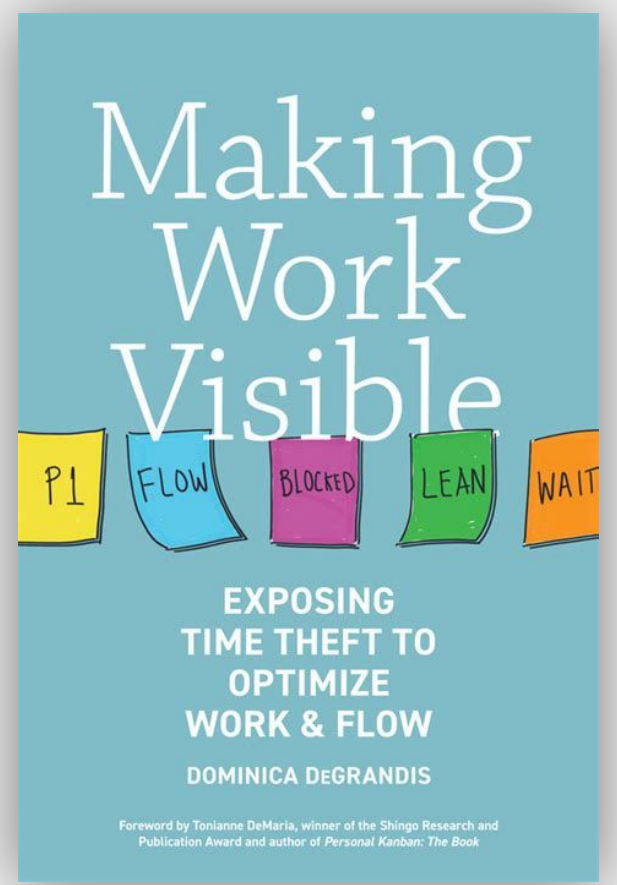


https://nielspflaeging.medium.com/org-physics-the-3-faces-of-every-company-df16025f65f8

Communication inside teams ✅

Inside teams, we have years of experience now in visualizing work.

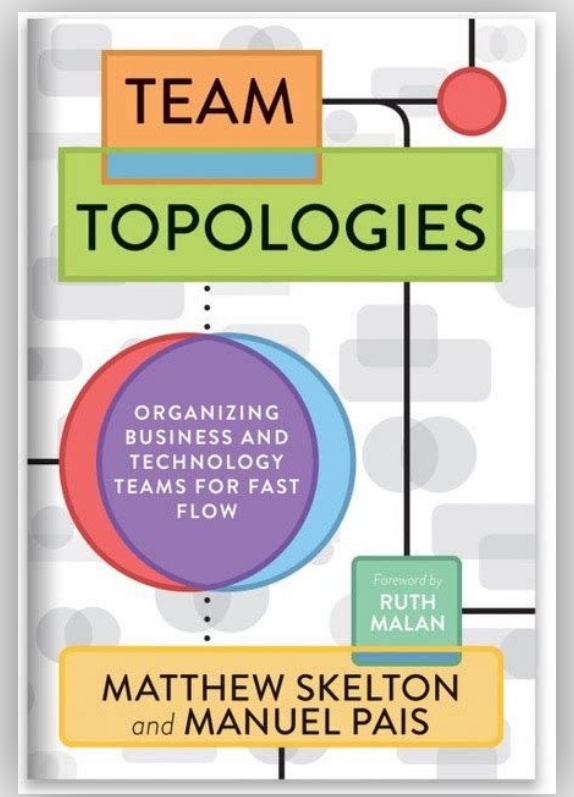
Also, deep literature on psychological safety.



Communication between peer teams

✅

Team Topologies provides framing to evolve inter-team relationships, e.g. Team APIs and the collaboration-to-XaaS pipeline.



But this isn’t where we’re struggling with transparency

Where transparency approaches often fail

- Up and down levels of the org
- Across disciplines
- In heterogeneous or diverse environments

= *Anywhere we have to communicate across worldviews!*

Image: Frugal by TaxCredits.net

Struggling business area: two worlds, two answers

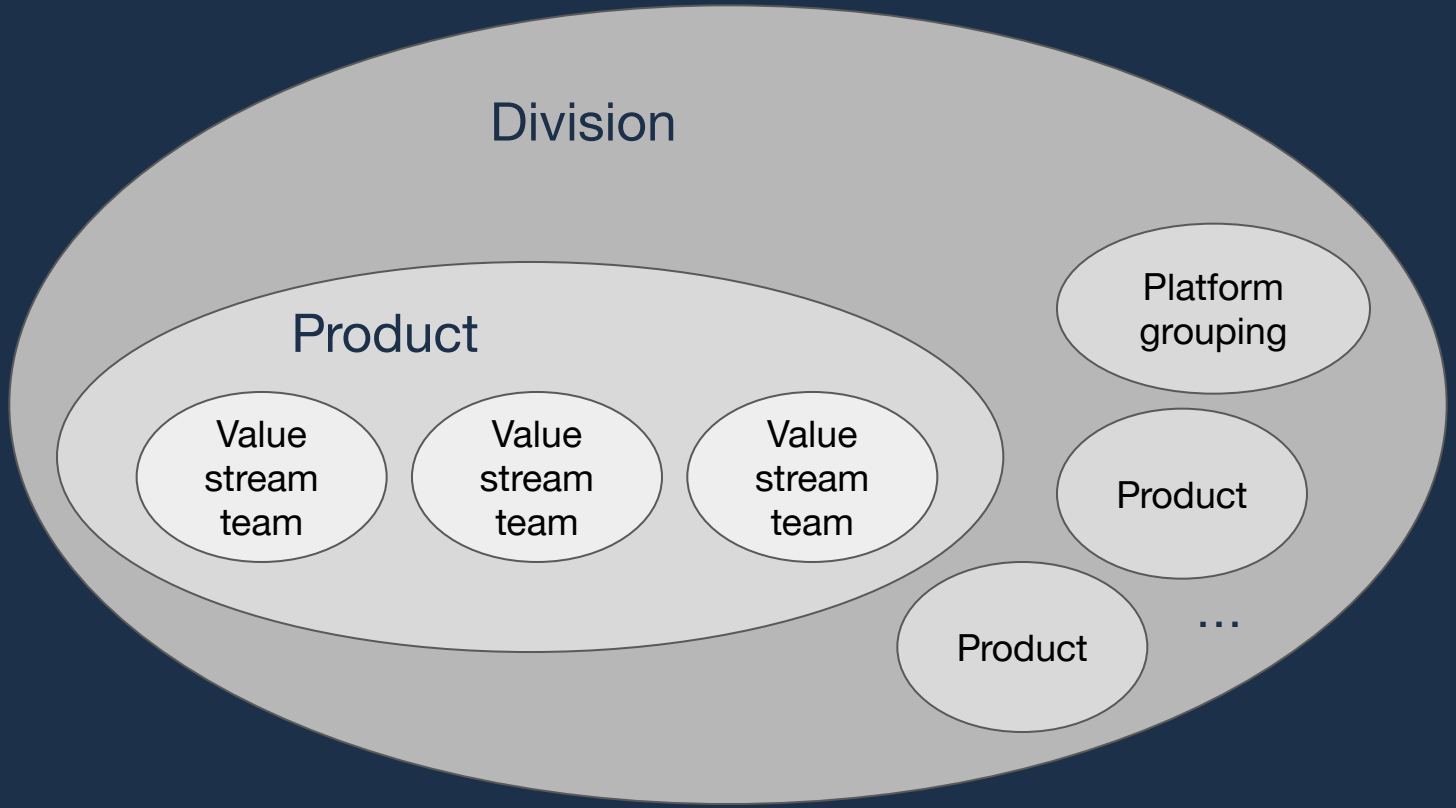
Leadership

- **If** an area of the business isn't working well,
- **Then** the org should slim it and improve effectiveness, while investing in areas with solid fundamentals

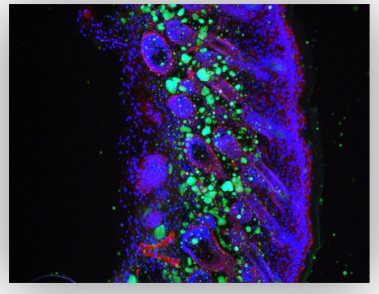
Team

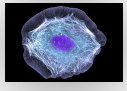
- **If** you want better results,
- **Then** the org should invest to stabilize, then explore options

Organisational zoom levels



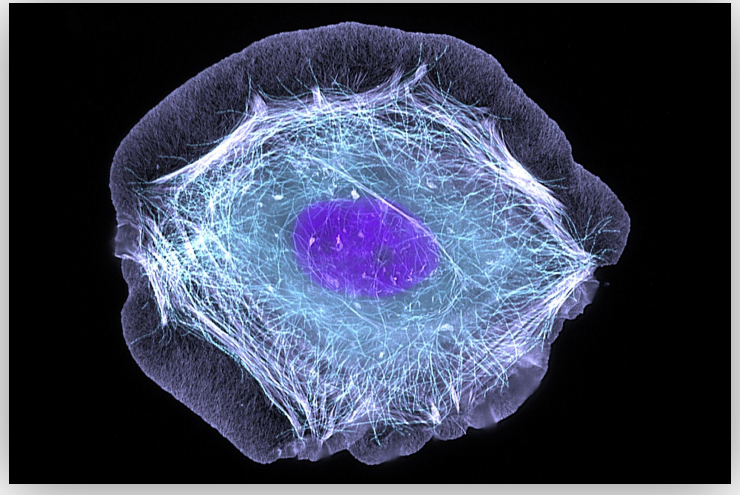
Scale example: skin





Scale example: a cell

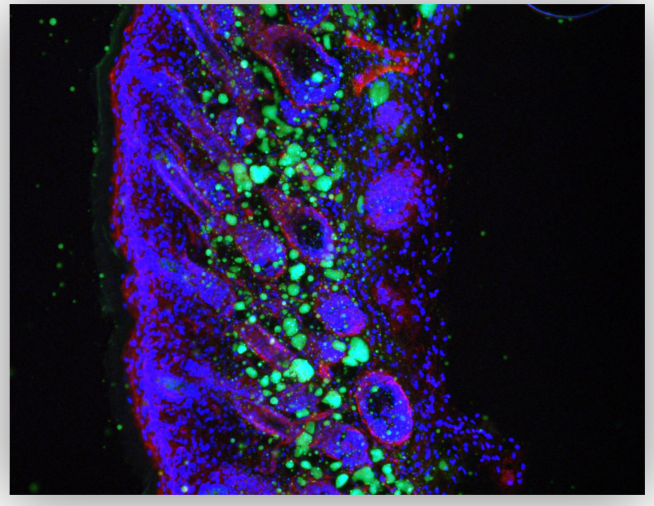
“I want to take in nutrients, keep out toxins, and make energy”



Skin cell (keratinocyte), NIH Image Gallery

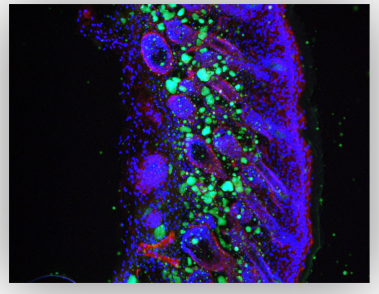
Scale example: skin cell / fat cell structure

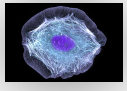
“I want to act as a barrier to keep out harmful bacteria”



Skin and fat cells, NIH Image Gallery

Scale example: skin





Different zoom levels in an organisation also have different dynamics.

Common zoom level differences

Zoomed out
(e.g. division leaders)

- Change is slower
- Impact is over longer horizon
- More people affected by decisions
- Aggregated information

Zoomed in:
(e.g. a stream-aligned team)

- Change is faster
- Impact is either fast or untraceable
- Small number of people
- Direct, granular information

Our communication, especially across zoom levels, must account for different worldviews.

Communication beyond transparency

Communication beyond transparency

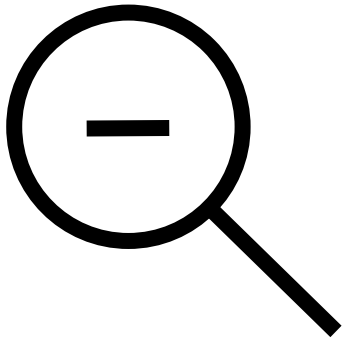
1. Send out information others need

The goal is not just for the information to exist, but *stick in stakeholders' heads*

Narrative is critical. Important to be clear, relevant, and interesting.

Communication beyond transparency

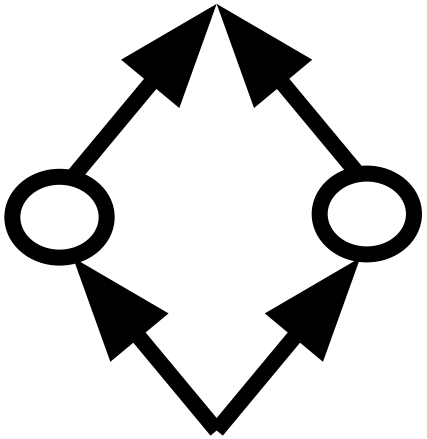
2. Assume everyone else is zoomed out from your work



Your information is probably not their top priority. What's the right level of fidelity?

Communication beyond transparency

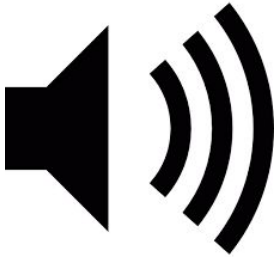
3. Information flowing through the org should still be consistent when it meets up again



Two stakeholders who talk about your project should not surprise each other. This is important for trust.

Communication beyond transparency

4. Every venue is a good venue for storytelling



That townhall everyone hates? Those reports you think nobody reads? Often beneficial to build awareness

Case study: product initiation in an enterprise

A pair of changemakers who were given a remit to bring existing technology to market as a new product.

They methodically built bridges to

- HR
- Contracting
- Legal
- Marketing
- Security
- Finance

Case study: product initiation in an enterprise

They connected each group into their coalition

1. Started with individual introduction
2. Connected to wider team, if appropriate
3. Sought examples of what had gone before
4. Defaulted to accepting other group's interpretations and constraints
5. Checked for impact on the rest of the network

Case study: product initiation in an enterprise

They finely tuned ongoing communications.

The pair established rhythms: infrequent enough that there was news, but frequent enough to keep channel warm.

They took every opportunity for communication and maintained very high communication standards.

Techniques for collaborative reasoning

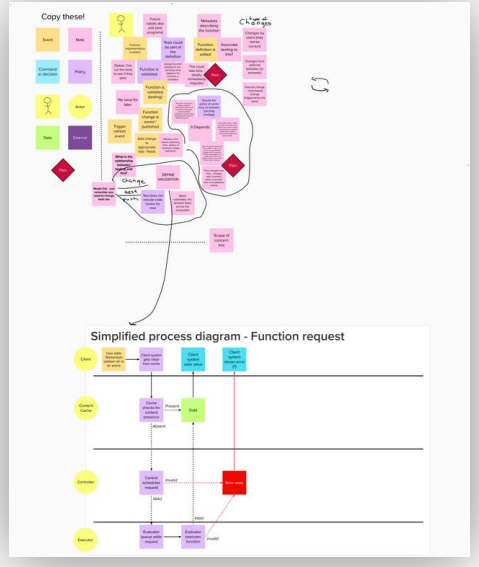
Image: psychedelic by mini-malist

“Reasonable people exposed to the same information generally come to the same conclusions.”

“Reasonable people exposed to the same information generally come to the same conclusions.”

Reasonable people **regularly disagree**.

Tools for collaborative reasoning: Mapping

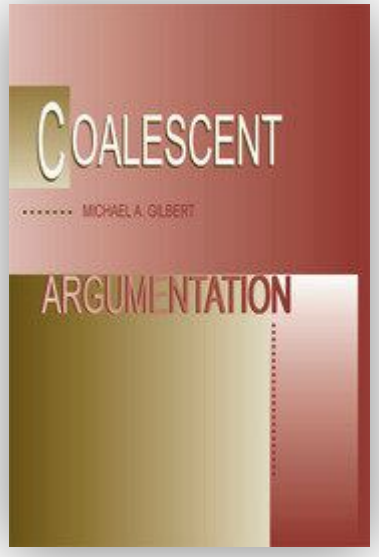


Mapping works to provide safe ways to explore revealed perspectives and preferences.

The value is in the conversation, not the map!

MSchottlender-WMF,
CC BY-SA4

Tools for collaborative reasoning: Coalescent argumentation

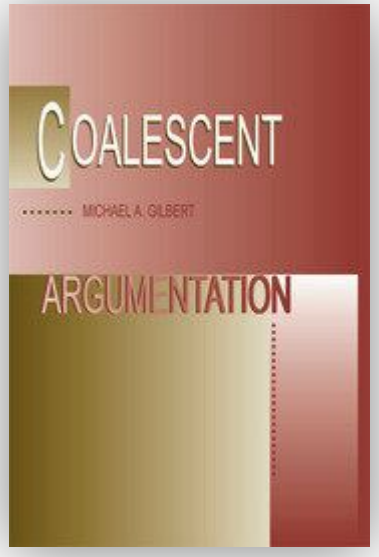


Coalescent Argumentation,
Michael Gilbert, 1997

"[M]ost arguments are not about facts, but about values or how to use and/or choose facts."

— Michael Gilbert

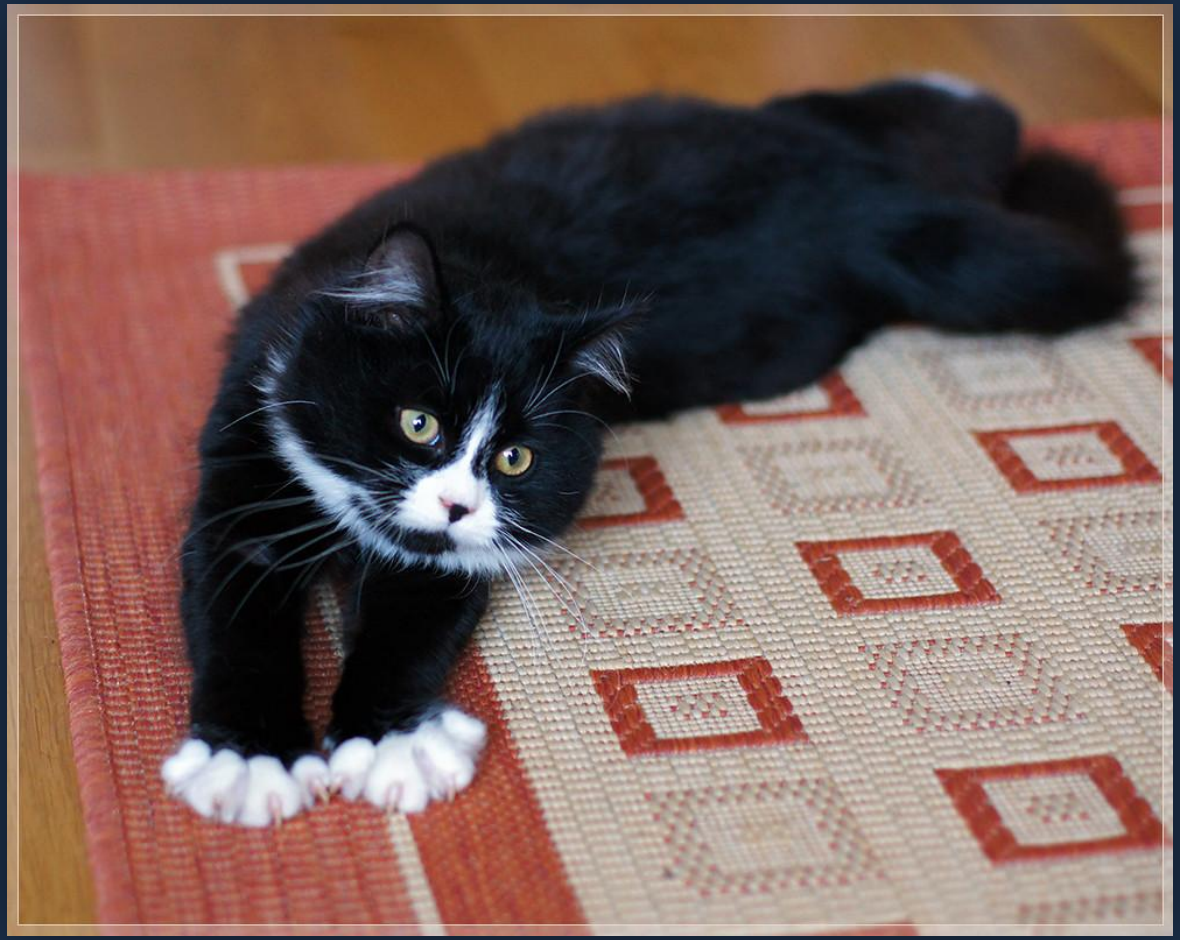
Tools for collaborative reasoning: Coalescent argumentation



Coalescent Argumentation,
Michael Gilbert, 1997

Situate logic amongst the different types of reasoning humans do:

- Logical
- Emotional
- Visceral
- Kisceral



Lucy by hehaden

Tools for collaborative reasoning: Reflection

In order to understand other people's positions, you need to understand your own.

What are my prior beliefs? What biases do I bring? What are my values? What will I not compromise?

A collaborative reasoning toolkit, aka a “social epistemology and metacognition” toolkit

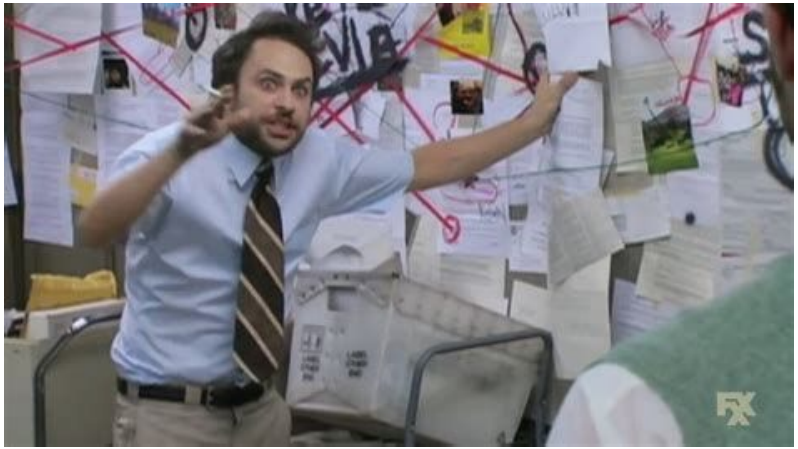
Transparency approaches help us solve the easiest problems, not necessarily the most important.

Key takeaways

- Move away from “transparency”
- Communicate actively
- Think zoom levels, not hierarchy
- Recognize different ways of reasoning as valid
- Give yourself the space for social reasoning and reflection
- And yes, it takes a lot of work

Thanks to…

Nikki Lee, Alex Soble, Alex Bielen, Tadgh O’Higgins, John Cutler, Christian Crumlish, Sean Blanchflower and all the people who helped mature this talk beyond its original Charlie Day rant.



One last thing…

Please don’t use LLMs for this.

Thank you!

@ElizAyer