Breaking the hierarchy
How Spotify enables engineer decision making

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Introduction
"Our employees are our most valued resource"
So where does it go wrong?
Let’s do this!
Yes… or maybe that!

Let’s do this!
Oh no...
3 ways to break the hierarchy

1. Slice the pie and give people a piece of it
2. Don’t tell people what to do
3. Be intentional about how to distribute decisions
#1
Slice the pie and give people a piece of it
"We need teams of missionaries, not teams of mercenaries"
- John Doerr
App Integrations
Home consumer electronics

Team X
Team Y

PPX TRIBE
Deepen relationships between artists and fans by extending Spotify into their favorite apps
Filling homes with music that inspires every moment

CORE EXPERIENCE TRIBE
Define and evolve Spotify’s core experience

CONSUMER EXPERIENCE MISSION
Create the most delightful music experience
Tailor the Spotify experience to platforms and partners
Principle #1

Build the org around autonomous mini-startups and enable them to align effectively.
#2
Don’t tell the organisation what to do, tell them what you want
Why didn’t people follow the plan?

Why didn’t the plan work?

Why can’t we plan better?

Give people/teams freedom to adjust actions in line with intent

Allow people/teams to define HOW to do it

Create alignment on intent: what & why
I take Actions based on my beliefs.

I adopt Beliefs about the world.

I draw Conclusions.

I make Assumptions based on the meanings I add.

I add Meanings (cultural and personal).

I select “Data” from what I observe.

Observable “data” and experiences (as a videotape recorder might capture it).

The reflexive loop (our beliefs affect what data we select next time).

Photo credit: Fifth Discipline Fieldbook by Peter Senge
Spotify uses "DIBBs" to debate and decide.

- **Data**: Objective point or set of points with information about the customer, product, world.
- **Insight**: A learning, theory, or conclusion drawn from one or more data points.
- **Belief**: A hypothesis built on one or more insights that offers direction to a team or teams.
- **Bet**: A decision to test a belief or set of related beliefs in practice by establishing it as a goal and dedicating resources to it.
Example: Mobile free tier

- Mobile sales increasing
- Mobile streaming increasing
- Mobile staffing low
- Mobile is overtaking desktop
- Our mobile team is disproportionately small compared to desktop
- We need to become mobile first
- To be competitive, we need a free tier on mobile
- Launch a new product, mobile free tier
- Ramp up the mobile team
RFCs: Common tool at Spotify to clarify intent, and debate your proposed solution

RFC: <title>

- Responsible: <Team or individual assigned to do the work>
- Accountable: <Team or individual that makes the final decision and has ultimate ownership>
- Consulted: <Groups or individuals consulted before a decision or action is taken>
- Informed: <Groups or individuals informed that a decision has been made or an action has been taken>
- States: <Open (open for comments) Closed (closed for comments, RFC no longer maintained. Does not reflect the implementation status for the RFC)>
- JIRA URL: <URL to JIRA issue in RFC process>

Need

- Why are we proposing this change? What's the background? Why is this the problem we're trying to address? What impact would this change have?

Approach

- The approach: this contains the proposal - ideally try to come up with more than one option; this helps reviewers come up with better feedback and you may find yourself changing your preferred option

Benefit

- What benefits do we expect to get from doing this? Different options may have different benefits. Also consider drawbacks and tradeoffs.

Competition

- What other things happening could conflict or compete (for example for resources) with the proposal? What risk are there and how do we handle them?
Principle #2

Express intent, not actions. And get really good at arguing about what to do.
#3

Be intentional about how to distribute decisions
Decision making power

Brain power utilization
Decision making power

Brain Power utilization
Ideas on how to distribute decision making
Should I be pairing on this task?

Can I merge this pull request?

Shall we hire this person?

Shall I introduce a new data processing framework?

Should I be pairing on this task?
High consequence decision

Example 1
Crafting strategy
High consequence decision

Example 2
Large scale reorg
High consequence decision

Example 3
What technologies should we use at Spotify?
Spotify tech radar

Java
Principle #3

Isolate and move fast on low consequence, distribute high consequence decisions.
Summary
Optimize for autonomy. Enable alignment across the organisation.
Don’t tell people what to do, tell them what you need.
Be intentional about how you make decisions and invest in the ones that matter.
Thank you!

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