

STORIES YOUR BOSS NEEDS TO HEAR

Four Case Studies From Outside Your Organization

Every story below illustrates the same truth: team performance is determined primarily by structural design decisions — not individual talent, mindset, or Agile framework choice. These organizations learned that the hard way, or the smart way. Share these with a leader who needs context before a structural conversation.

[THE WARNING]**SPOTIFY**

The Model Everyone Copies — That Spotify Abandoned

What actually happened inside the world's most imitated organizational design

In 2012, Spotify published a blog post and two videos about how it organized its engineering teams into 'squads,' 'tribes,' 'chapters,' and 'guilds.' The content went viral. Within three years, the 'Spotify model' became the most widely copied organizational framework in tech.

There was one problem: Spotify never actually implemented it. Jeremiah Lee, a former Spotify product manager who joined the company after it had tripled in size to 3,000 people in 18 months, documented what he found: the famed squad model was only ever aspirational and was never fully implemented. He witnessed organizational chaos as the company's leaders incrementally transitioned to more traditional management structures.

The model had an elegant structure — autonomous squads, self-organizing tribes, cross-cutting guilds. But it made a critical error: it focused on naming and organizing structures without designing the conditions inside those structures. Squads grew to absorb more functionality to avoid dependencies. Chapters became ineffective because they didn't serve the squad's core objective.

Spotify's model failed because the conditions inside the squads — Psychological Safety, Trust, Shared Vision, Equal Voice — were never intentionally built. Structure without conditions is just a different org chart.

**THE LESSON FOR
YOUR TEAM:**

Stop asking 'what should we call our teams?' Start asking 'what conditions do our teams need to perform?' Labels don't create agility. Design does.

[THE SUCCESS]

ING BANK

3,500 People. 350 Squads. What Actually Made It Work.

The agile transformation that McKinsey and Harvard Business School both studied

In the summer of 2015, ING Netherlands restructured its entire Dutch headquarters — 3,500 employees — into approximately 350 nine-person squads organized into 13 tribes. Unlike most transformations, there was no burning platform: ING was performing adequately. The change was proactive, structural, and deliberately designed.

What made ING succeed where so many transformations fail was behavioral design: they mapped the forces keeping people in old patterns before designing the intervention. They removed anxieties by creating Chapter Lead roles for career development. They replaced old status signals with new ones based on customer outcomes and squad impact.

Most strikingly: all 3,500 employees were placed on 'mobility' — effectively told they were without a job — and required to reapply for positions in the new structure. Selection weighted culture and mindset over knowledge and experience. Nearly 40% ended up in different roles.

Result: dramatically improved time to market, measurably boosted employee engagement, and increased productivity — documented by McKinsey and studied by Harvard Business School.

THE LESSON FOR YOUR TEAM:

Team design at scale is possible — if it begins with structural conditions, not just structural labels. ING spent as much energy designing the conditions inside their squads as they did designing the squads themselves.

[THE RULE]

AMAZON

The Two-Pizza Rule and the Science Behind It

Why Jeff Bezos turned a productivity principle into a company-wide structural law

Jeff Bezos's two-pizza rule is often treated as a quirky heuristic: if two pizzas can't feed your team, the team is too big. But behind the quip is rigorous mathematics that Bezos understood and enforced as a structural constraint across all of Amazon — no exceptions.

The math: communication channels in a team grow factorially with team size. A team of 5 has 10 communication channels. A team of 10 has 45. A team of 15 has 105. A team of 20 has 190. Each additional person doesn't add one relationship — they add $n-1$ new channels, all requiring maintenance, alignment, and cognitive load.

Bezos called large teams 'communication overhead' problems, not people problems. The solution was structural: hard team size limits enforced before any other consideration. Amazon's small, stable, cross-functional teams with clear ownership became one of the company's most significant competitive advantages in speed, accountability, and innovation velocity.

THE LESSON FOR YOUR TEAM:

Check your team size and allocation model before you check your ceremony quality. The math doesn't care about your retrospective format.

[THE PROOF]

GOOGLE PROJECT ARISTOTLE

What \$12M of Research Discovered About Teams

180 teams. 250 attributes. 2 years. One finding that changed everything.

In 2012, Google launched Project Aristotle — a multi-year study of 180 teams using 250 attributes — to answer one question: what makes a team effective? Their hypothesis: the right combination of smart, experienced people with the right skills. They were wrong.

After two years of analysis, the finding was clear: who is on the team matters far less than how the team works together. The single strongest predictor of team performance — across every metric measured — was psychological safety: the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

Teams with high psychological safety were more likely to admit mistakes, learn from them, collaborate effectively, and produce innovative solutions. Teams where one person dominated conversation, or where mistakes were punished, performed significantly worse — regardless of individual talent levels.

Google's response: they trained all managers on creating psychologically safe environments, built self-assessment tools for teams, and restructured management practices company-wide. This wasn't a culture initiative — it was a structural decision.

THE LESSON FOR YOUR TEAM:

Google spent millions discovering what Hackman already knew and what your team already feels: psychological safety is designed in — or out — by structural decisions made before the first standup.