

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SCRUM TEAMS AND MANAGEMENT WITH LIBERATING STRUCTURES

USER EXPERIENCE FISHBOWL AT PHILIPS

JULY 2020



CASE STUDY



THE COMPANY

Philips is a leading health technology company focused on improving people's health and enabling better outcomes across the health continuum.

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Philips is a leading health technology company focused on improving people's health and enabling better outcomes across the health continuum from healthy living and prevention, to diagnosis, treatment and home care. Philips leverages advanced technology and deep clinical and consumer insights to deliver integrated solutions. Headquartered in the Netherlands, the company is a leader in diagnostic imaging, image-guided therapy, patient monitoring and health informatics, as well as in consumer health and home care. Philips generated 2019 sales of EUR 19.5 billion and employs approximately 81,000 employees with sales and services in more than 100 countries.

Summary

With their roots in complexity science, Philips used both the Scrum framework and Liberating Structures to help people navigate challenges, from small to complex, by working together effectively. This case study is the first in a series to demonstrate how Scrum Teams (can) use Liberating Structures to deliver more value to their stakeholders. Each case study focuses on how one particular Liberating Structure was used to help Scrum Teams overcome a challenge frequently experienced by many teams.

The Challenge

“I noticed a growing tension between Scrum Teams and management”, said Scrum Master Linda van Sinten when we asked her why she started using Liberating Structures with her team at Philips. “They didn’t understand each other’s world and I hoped using Liberating Structures would help”.



The interview in progress, with Linda (left), Henri (center) and Christiaan (right).

Co-Founder of The Liberators and Scrum.org Professional Scrum Trainer Christiaan Verwijs and Henri Lipmanowicz, one of the two founders of Liberating Structures, recently had the pleasure to talk with Linda van Sinten about how she introduced Liberating Structures to the organization when she worked there as a Scrum Master. After she became a Scrum Master in 2015, she started noticing patterns that many of us can relate to.

- Teams kept raising the same issues during the Sprint Retrospectives, but didn’t know where to go for help.
- Teams worried about code quality as management pushed them to get more done.
- Teams often felt pushed into a corner by decisions made by management. At one point management decided to acquire a new test server without directly involving the teams, while at the same time making them responsible for the configuration. That didn’t go down well.

“I noticed a growing tension between Scrum Teams and management”, said Linda

The perspective of management

While understanding the perspective of the Development Teams, Linda also knew that management had their own stories. The resistance from the teams was surprising to them. Linda clarifies: “Management wanted teams to take charge, but didn’t see that happening”. When Henri

observed that “management” often refers only to a loose group of people, Linda agreed with a firm nod and added, “unlike the Scrum Teams, management wasn’t really a team”. One of the people she was referring to was called team lead, another was the lead architect, and there was a department manager; still Scrum Teams didn’t know where to go for help.

Although some managers sometimes joined the Daily Scrum, there wasn’t enough time and it wasn’t the right place to ask for help. So worries and frustrations were not openly discussed. When asked how that felt, Linda notes “I was slightly annoyed by how people didn’t take their worries to management”.

The Solution

Starting small with Conversation Café

So Linda found herself faced with two groups that were both trying to do something better but didn’t know how. Because she enjoyed taking initiative and trying something new, she decided to give Liberating Structures a try. Linda explained, “I’d experienced them during a [Liberating Structures Immersion Workshop](#) with The Liberators in Amsterdam, and they seemed perfect”. Her first hunch was to start small and use the “[Conversation Café](#)” structure with her team.

“Conversation Café” is one of a repertoire of 33 Liberating Structures. Each structure provides a step by step description that is easy to follow and makes it simple to get everyone fully engaged in achieving a specific objective. With Conversation Café the objective is for small groups to make sense of a challenge by sharing reflections and listening to each other’s experiences in a series of four rounds (a more detailed description is below). What initially drew Linda to Conversation Café was its promise to build understanding as she explains: “Instead of slinging mud, I hoped that this structure would help people listen and appreciate where everyone was coming from”. So she scheduled a Conversation Café with her team and invited management to join. For the topic, she settled on the test server which was a hot potato that kept coming back.

The Conversation Café was a success. Linda observed that after some initial awkwardness, the group started talking about the motivations behind their behavior:

“Management explained that they had been shielding the teams from a lot more work, but they could not avoid buying the test server and giving them the responsibility to maintain it. This was an important insight for the teams who had not been aware of why this had happened. The team members, in turn, were able to explain how much work setting up a new test server actually entailed. “More importantly, the group noticed that it was possible to openly talk about areas of disagreement. And that created safety.”, Linda concludes.

“The group noticed that it was possible [with Conversation Café] to openly talk about areas of disagreement. And that created safety.”

Scaling up with a User Experience Fishbowl

After the success of the Conversation Café with her team, Linda was ready for a larger experiment with more teams. A friend had recommended for her to try a Liberating Structure called “User Experience Fishbowl”. In a User Experience Fishbowl, a small group is seated in a circle and shares their experience with a particular topic while everyone else forms concentric circles around them and listens.

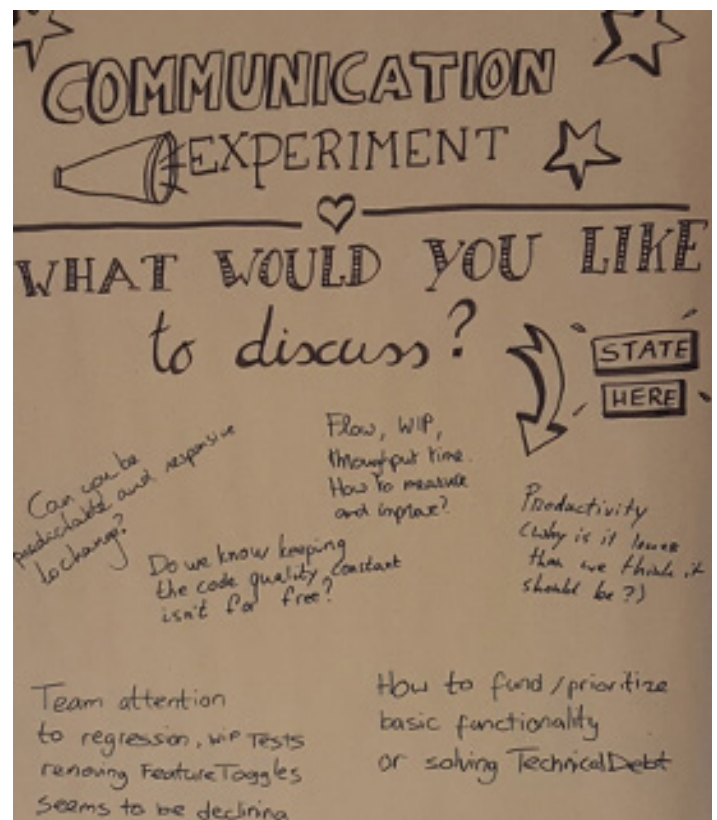
Linda explained, “I liked how the User Experience Fishbowl offered a platform for the conversations that management and the teams needed to have”

In preparation for the User Experience Fishbowl, Linda sent out an open invitation to the seventy people who made up the Scrum Teams. “I presented it as a communication experiment to build bridges between management and the Scrum Team”, she says. When asked why she described it as an experiment, Linda adds “It made it safe to fail for myself and everyone else. And I hoped that it would play into the curiosity of people”. Linda invited the teams to suggest and vote on burning topics. Beforehand, she had checked with management as they would be taking three of the seven seats in the inner circle of the Fishbowl. The participants really liked the idea. Especially the new department manager who was looking for a better way to connect with the teams.

The User Experience Fishbowl was scheduled as an optional event for the second half-hour of lunch. To make it easier on herself, Linda asked several colleagues to

initially volunteer for the inner circle. This was done under the assumption that they could start the conversation and make it safe for others to join.

When the date for the User Experience Fishbowl finally arrived, Linda prepared the Philips auditorium by setting up a circle with seven chairs in the middle. She made sure there was enough space for others to form concentric circles around the inner circle. The topic for the conversation - called the “invitation” in Liberating Structures - would be visible on a large monitor. With 30 minutes scheduled for the Fishbowl, Linda decided to take the highest voted topic as the focus. The topic chosen was, ‘How we can be both predictable and responsive to change at the same time’ as the invitation. When Christiaan and Henri asked Linda how she felt the minutes before the User Experience Fishbowl, she laughed and said “Well, as a complete newbie I was certainly a bit nervous. Aside from management and my own team, I had no idea if more people would show up.”





User Experience Fishbowl in progress at Philips. We've blurred faces at the request of Philips.

But they did. Around thirty participants showed up for the experiment. After a brief introduction, Linda offered three chairs to management and three to volunteers from the teams. Linda kept one chair empty so that someone else could join the conversation if they wanted to. The next 25 minutes were spent on the topic, with a few minutes left at the end for a short retrospective. "People really liked it", Linda says. "Everyone felt included, even when they were listening".

When Henri asked Linda how the teams experienced it, she summarized "They felt heard. The teams realized that management was supporting them, even when they sometimes made decisions that the teams didn't completely agree with". It was the same for management. Afterward, the new department manager came to Linda to tell her how much he appreciated it. "For them, it was

a great way to engage with the teams and openly talk about shared challenges", Linda says, adding "He asked if we could organize more".

"The teams realized that management was supporting them, even when they sometimes made decisions that the teams didn't completely agree with"

Since the success of the first experiment, similar User Experience Fishbowls have been organized every one or two months and have continued even after Linda left Philips. This shows how Liberating Structures are easy to learn and often spread once people see how they work. In fact, the department manager hosted a "goodbye Fishbowl" for Linda where colleagues shared stories about working with her. "Of course I cried", she adds with a smile.



Another User Experience Fishbowl in progress at Philips. We've blurred faces at the request of Philips.

Conclusion

Getting out of bubbles

As Christiaan and Henri recap the story together, two themes stood out. The first is that even in the collaborative environment of Scrum Teams, team members can easily get stuck in bubbles and frame challenges as “us versus them”. Complaining about management and vice versa really is a universal phenomenon.

Through a Conversation Café and a User Experience Fishbowl, Linda created space for people to get out of their bubbles, they were able to listen/hear the good intentions of others. The second theme is that Linda was able to accomplish all of this from the position of a beginner with Liberating Structures. “I jumped in and did it, even though I'd never done it before”, Linda says. “And it worked! It was not difficult, all I needed was to overcome my initial fear”

“I was going to jump in and do it, even though I'd never done it before ... and it worked!”

Follow Linda's example

Now it's your turn! Like Linda, learn by putting in practice new tools that you can use over and over to improve interactions in your team and the wider organization. Choose one of the “communication gaps” that exist in or around your Scrum Team(s) and organize a Conversation Café to provide a safe space for people to listen to one another. Or pick one challenging project and organize a User Experience Fishbowl for people to share their stories

with your Scrum Team(s), management and stakeholders. See below the step by step descriptions of how to facilitate a Cafe and a Fishbowl. You can find potential topics that are on everyone's mind by asking: “What is holding us back?” or “What are people complaining about routinely?”

Share with us how it went so that other members of the Scrum community can benefit from your experiences. What happened? What was surprising? Let us know in the comments. If you have pictures and feel comfortable sharing them, send them to info@theliberators.com. We aim to create for you an open collection of pictures that show what Liberating Structures look like in practice.

Participate in our survey

We'd love to learn about the impact of the Liberating Structures in this post on your team. What was made possible by using them? If you didn't try them, why not?

[Take Survey Now](#)



About Scrum.org

Founded by Ken Schwaber, the co-creator of Scrum, Scrum.org is based on the principles of Scrum and the Agile Manifesto, Scrum.org provides comprehensive training, assessments, and certifications to help people and teams solve complex problems.

Throughout the world, our solutions and community of Professional Scrum Trainers empower people and organizations to achieve agility through Scrum.

Appendix

How to do a Conversation Café

1. Create groups of 5 to 7 participants.
2. State the invitation for the Conversation Café, preferably framed as a question. The invitation for a Café usually starts with “How do you feel about....?” or “What do you think about....?”.
3. Ask each group to select a talking object (like a ring, a cup or a pen).
4. In each group, ask for someone to volunteer as host. Hosts are full participants, but they also gently intervene when people keep going on and on and don't leave space for others.
5. In the first round, each person shares what he or she is thinking, feeling, or doing about the challenge (1 min per person). Only the person with the talking stick speaks and decides who goes next. People have the option to pass.
6. In the second round, each person shares their thoughts and feelings after having listened to everyone in the first round (1 min per person). Only the person with the talking stick speaks and decides who goes next. People have the option to pass.
7. In the third round, the group engages in an open and lively conversation about the challenge (10-30 min). It is up to groups to decide if they want to continue using the talking object;
8. In the final round, each person shares their personal takeaways (1 min per person). Only the person with the talking stick speaks and decides who goes next.
9. Afterward, you can identify action steps with [15% Solutions](#). Potential challenges can be created with structures like [Wicked Questions](#) or [Impromptu Networking](#).

A more detailed description is [available here](#), and includes tips, combinations with other Liberating Structures and more detailed steps.

How to do a User Experience Fishbowl

1. Create an inner circle of chairs (3-7). Ask participants who'd like to share their experiences with a chosen topic to take a seat in the inner circle. The others form concentric circles of small satellite groups (3-4 people) around the inner circle.
2. State the invitation for the Fishbowl. It usually looks like "talk to each other about what it was like to".
3. Invite the inner circle to share their personal experience with each other in an informal manner, as if they're in a bar, sharing a car or at a friend's house. Invite people in the outer circle to observe and listen (10-25 min);
4. Invite the groups in the outer circle to formulate observations and big questions based on what they heard. Collect the questions (5 min).
5. Invite the inner circle to answer the submitted questions in whatever order works for them. Continue until all questions have been answered or the timebox expires (10-25 min);
6. As a follow-up, you can debrief with another Liberating Structure like [1-2-4-ALL](#) or [What, So What, Now What](#). You can also identify action steps with [15% Solutions](#). Potential topics for User Experience Fishbowls can be generated with [25/10 Crowd Sourcing](#) or [Impromptu Networking](#).

A more detailed description is [available here](#), and includes tips, combinations with other Liberating Structures and more detailed steps.