How Huawei Addressed Large-Scale Agile Challenges Through a Scalable Approach

PROBLEM

Huawei faced significant challenges in effectively adopting large-scale agile practices across a vast organization with tens of thousands of product development personnel. Previous attempts at “agility” resulted in superficial changes, such as renaming iterative processes while retaining traditional waterfall practices. These efforts led to inefficiencies, poor collaboration, and minimal real-world benefits. Misaligned organizational structures and the absence of cross-functional teams further exacerbated the situation, hindering scalability and adaptability.

AGITATION

The implications of these challenges were profound:

- **Organizational Inefficiency:** Teams operated in silos with fragmented responsibilities, causing delays and misaligned priorities.
- **Quality Gaps:** Testing and integration were postponed to later stages, increasing the likelihood of defects and rework.
- **Resistance to Change**: Entrenched matrix structures and a limited understanding of agile principles created barriers to genuine transformation.
- **Missed Market Opportunities:** Slow cycles hindered responsiveness to evolving market demands.

Without a robust and scalable agile framework, Huawei risked losing its competitive edge, jeopardizing innovation and market leadership

SOLUTION

Huawei tackled these challenges by implementing **LeSS** —a scalable, organization-first approach to agile transformation. The focus was on deep organizational redesign rather than isolated team-level interventions. This approach adhered to the Three Adoption Principles of LeSS, combining top-down structural changes with bottom-up team empowerment:

1 Deep and narrow: Focus on a few things in depth, rather than many things at a surface level
2 Top-down and bottom-up: Combine top-down and bottom-up approaches
3 Use volunteering: Involve volunteers in the adoption process

KEY ACTIONS:

Huawei further undertook the LeSS-driven following actions to achieve transformation success:

1. ORGANIZATIONAL REDESIGN

- Introduced **feature teams** to replace traditional component teams, enabling end-to-end ownership of work.
- Established a **single Product Backlog** managed by one Product Owner to ensure clear prioritization and alignment.

2. SELF-DESIGNING TEAMS

- Facilitated workshops for team members to restructure into cross-functional, cross-component feature teams.
- Balanced domain specialization with adaptability to optimize throughput and learning.

3. INCREMENTAL DEFINITION OF DONE

- Defined and progressively expanded the **Definition of Done** to reduce undone work and shorten delivery cycles.
- Transitioned integration and regression testing into regular sprints.

4. COACHING AND CAPABILITY BUILDING

- Reframed the role of **Team Leaders** to align with Scrum Master responsibilities, fostering selforganization.
- Integrated effective coaching and facilitation practices to empower teams.

5. CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK AND IMPROVEMENT

- Used Sprint Reviews and Overall Retrospectives to identify and address systemic impediments.
- Enhanced integration with consuming groups to improve real-time feedback loops.

RESULTS

The implementation of LeSS delivered measurable, transformative and impactful outcomes:

- **Efficiency Gains**: Teams reduced cycle times and improved throughput by integrating testing and minimizing handoffs.
- **Quality Improvements:** Built-in quality practices ensured consistently low defect rates even as delivery speeds increased.
- **Scalability**: The adoption of LeSS Huge in larger groups (up to 120 people) demonstrated the framework's ability to handle complex, large-scale environments.
- **Cultural Shift:** Cross-functional collaboration and decentralized coordination enhanced adaptability and responsiveness.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

Compared to traditional agile adoptions that pilot Scrum within existing structures, Huawei's organization-first approach with LeSS proved significantly more effective. Pilot-based approaches often result in fragile alignments and limited scalability due to the lack of structural support for sustained change. In contrast, LeSS's emphasis on deep structural transformation provided a robust foundation, amplifying the impact of coaching and enabling true agility at scale.

RECAP

Huawei's transformation through LeSS highlights the importance of prioritizing organizational redesign over isolated team-level changes. By adopting a deep and scalable approach, the company overcame the inefficiencies and limitations of previous faux-agile efforts. Key actions included forming cross-functional feature teams, implementing a single Product Backlog with a unified Product Owner, and expanding the Definition of "done". These changes resulted in faster cycle times, enhanced product quality, and a cultural shift toward self-organization and adaptability.

This case demonstrates how LeSS provides a robust framework for navigating the complexities of large-scale agile adoption, particularly when structural challenges are addressed early. Huawei's experience offers a valuable blueprint for organizations seeking to scale agility effectively and sustainably.