

Agile **Conversations**

Transform Your Conversations,
Transform Your Culture

DOUGLAS SQUIRREL
and **JEFFREY FREDRICK**

IT Revolution
Independent Publisher Since 2013
Portland, Oregon



25 NW 23rd Pl, Suite 6314
Portland, OR 97210

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25 NW 23rd Pl, Suite 6314, Portland, OR 97210

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America
25 24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Cover and book design by Devon Smith

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication Data

Names: Squirrel, Douglas, author. | Fredrick, Jeffrey, author.

Title: Agile conversations : transform your conversations, transform your
culture / by Douglas Squirrel and Jeffrey Fredrick.

Description: First edition. | Portland, Oregon : IT Revolution, [2020] |
Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019045822 (print) | LCCN 2019045823 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781942788973 (paperback) | ISBN 9781942788669 (epub) |
ISBN 9781942788676 (kindle edition) | ISBN 9781942788683 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Communication in management. | Teams in the workplace. |
Information technology—management.

Classification: LCC HD30.3 .S698 2020 (print) | LCC HD30.3 (ebook) |
DDC 658.4/5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019045822>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019045823>

ISBN: 978-1942788973

eBook ISBN: 978-1942788669

Kindle ISBN: 978-1942788676

Web PDF ISBN: 978-1942788683

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Names have been changed in example conversations and stories for privacy.

AGILE CONVERSATIONS

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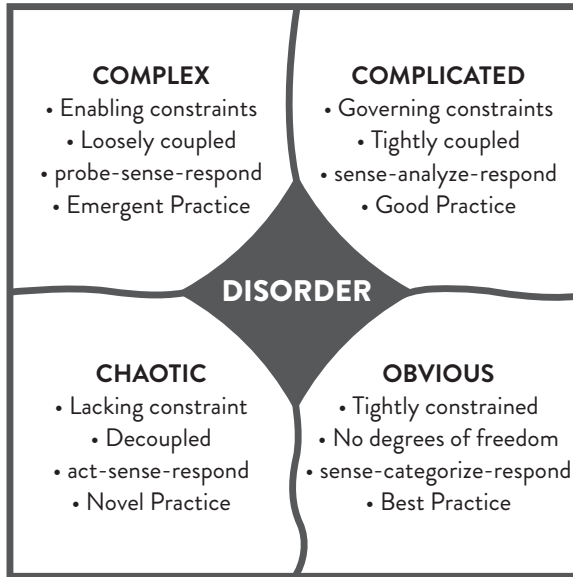


Figure 1.1: The Cynefin Framework

Name	Distortion
Egocentric bias	Give self undue credit for positive outcomes
False consensus effect	Believe that personal views are commonly held
Gambler's fallacy	Believe that a random event is influenced by previous outcomes
Illusion of control	Overestimate control over external events
Loss aversion	Value keeping a possession over gaining something of greater value
Naïve realism	Believe personal view of reality is accurate and without bias
Negativity bias	Recall unpleasant events more readily than positive ones
Normalcy bias	Refuse to plan for a novel catastrophe
Outcome bias	Judge decisions by their results instead of by the quality of the decision-making process

Table 2.1: A Sampling of Cognitive Biases

	Model I	Model II
Governing Values	Define and achieve the goal Win; do not lose Suppress negative feelings Be rational	Valid information Free and informed choice Internal commitment
Strategies	Act unilaterally Own the task Protect self Unilaterally protect others	Share control Design tasks jointly Test theories publicly
Useful When...	Data is easily observed Situation is well understood	Data is conflicting or hidden Situation is complex

Based on Argyris, Putnam, and McLain Smith¹³

Table 2.1: Model I and Model II Theories of Action Compared

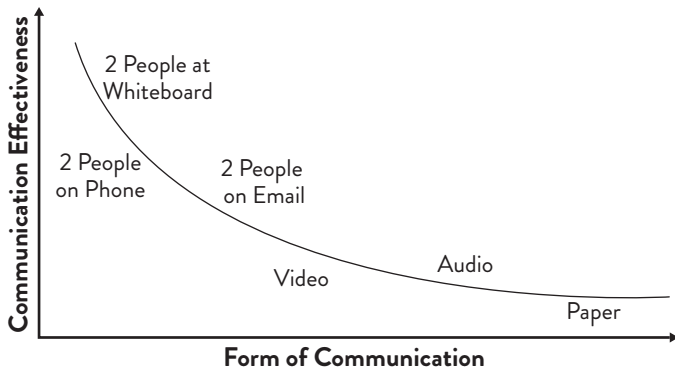


Figure 2.1: Effectiveness of Different Modes of Communication

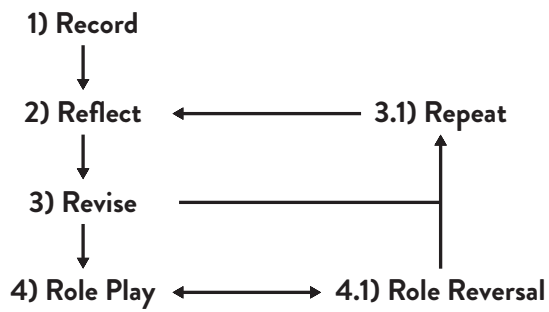


Figure 2.2: The Four Rs

Jeffrey and Squirrel's Conversation

What Squirrel thought and felt	What Jeffrey and Squirrel said
<p><i>Ouch! Jeffrey usually sets up the phone and software connection. What do we do now?</i></p>	<p><i>Jeffrey: I'll be out of the country for our next scheduled online training.</i></p>
<p><i>Seems doomed. I think we'll just have to give up.</i></p>	<p><i>Squirrel: Okay, that means we can't do it at your office, I guess. Should we cancel?</i></p>
<p><i>Sure, but how will I get the technology to work? It always seems fiddly when Jeffrey does it.</i></p>	<p><i>Jeffrey: Oh no, I'm sure I can dial in. Then you can stay at home and won't have to come to the office.</i></p>
<p><i>That's a good point—I'll save on the commute stress.</i></p>	<p><i>Squirrel: Yes, I guess you can join on the phone, and that would mean less travel for me. But I've never done the software and phone setup.</i></p>
<p><i>I'm far less confident than Jeffrey is about this.</i></p>	<p><i>Jeffrey: Don't worry. The organizer sent us a link to a very helpful tutorial. You won't have any trouble.</i></p>
<p><i>What will I do if I screw it up? Hundreds of attendees will be furious with me for delaying the session they've paid for. I suppose I'll just have to give it a go.</i></p>	<p><i>Squirrel: Well, I guess I can give it a try.</i></p>

Norbert and Quinn's Actual Conversation

What Norbert thought and felt	What Norbert and Quinn said
<i>Open source is obviously the way to go.</i>	<i>Norbert: I think we should go with KVM here. It's the most flexible and fits our needs best.</i>
<i>Only if you count "waiting on hold for support" as an efficient use of my time.</i>	<i>Quinn: It's not our standard, though. Virt-App is working efficiently on all our existing projects.</i>
<i>Why are you always pushing closed-source solutions?</i>	<i>Norbert: Okay, but we wait for fixes from them all the time, and it's awful. Wouldn't you rather be in control, so we can address problems ourselves?</i>
<i>Nonsense! They all know KVM already, at least the basics.</i>	<i>Quinn: Yes, but think about the retraining costs. I don't think I could get additional budget for everyone to learn a new tool.</i>
<i>Not much training needed in fact—everyone's already using it on their side projects.</i>	<i>Norbert: Why don't we ask the team? I'm sure they'd be willing to self-train.</i>
<i>Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? What a hypocrite you are!</i>	<i>Quinn: Unfortunately I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.</i>
<i>Typical manager, not willing to take any risks. There's no point arguing against a decision that you've already made.</i>	<i>Norbert: Okay, but I think you're missing a real opportunity here.</i>

What Norbert thought and felt	What Norbert and Quinn said
<p>Open-source is obviously the way to go.</p>	<p>Norbert: I think we should go with KVM here. It's the most flexible and fits our needs best. $\frac{0}{2}$</p>
<p>Only if you count "waiting on hold for support" as an efficient use of my time.</p>	<p>Quinn: It's not our standard, though. Virt-App is working efficiently on all our existing projects.</p>
<p><u>Why are you always pushing closed-source solutions?</u></p>	<p>Tell</p> <p>Norbert: <u>Okay</u>, but we wait for fixes from them all the time, and it's awful. Wouldn't you rather be in control, so we can address problems ourselves?</p>
<p><u>Nonsense! They all know KVM already, at least the basics.</u></p>	<p>Quinn: Yes, but think about the retraining costs. I don't think I could get additional budget for everyone to learn a new tool.</p>
<p><u>Not much training needed in fact—everyone's already using it on their side projects.</u></p>	<p>Norbert: Why don't we ask the team? I'm sure they'd be willing to self-train.</p>
<p><u>Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? What a hypocrite you are!</u></p>	<p>Trigger!</p> <p>Quinn: Unfortunately I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.</p>
<p><u>Typical manager, not willing to take any risks. There's no point arguing against a decision that you've already made.</u></p>	<p>Tell</p> <p>Norbert: <u>Okay</u>, but I think you're missing a real opportunity here.</p>

Figure 2.3: Norbert's Annotated Conversation

Norbert and Quinn's Revised Discussion

What Norbert thought and felt

Open source seems like the way to go, but I'd also like to hear Quinn's ideas.

That's a challenging answer. I don't count "waiting on hold for support" as an efficient use of my time!

Caught my tell! Does Quinn agree that we're overdependent on vendors?

Training is something to think about, but we have this covered.

Not much training needed in fact—everyone's already using it on their side projects.

Weren't you just saying you wanted us to have more autonomy?? This is one of my triggers, so I'll try raising the issue of autonomy directly.

I'm hopeful that we can have a meaningful discussion about increasing self-organization.

What Norbert and Quinn said

Norbert: I think we should go with KVM here because it's so flexible. What do you think?

Quinn: It sure is flexible but isn't our standard. Virt-App is working efficiently on all our existing projects.

Norbert: Okay—well, actually, it's not okay, because Virt-App is so inefficient at responding to our requests. I feel really frustrated by the amount of time I spend on hold for their support. I also worry about our level of vendor dependence; does it concern you?

Quinn: That's a good point. I didn't know about their poor response time. But what about the retraining costs? I don't think I could get additional budget for everyone to learn a new tool.

Norbert: Actually, almost everyone already knows KVM. I can check with them to be sure. Do you think that's a good next step?

Quinn: It's certainly good to get the information. But don't let them think the choice has been made; unfortunately, I can't leave budget-critical decisions like this up to the team.

Norbert: You know, that doesn't sit well with me, because I think we need more autonomy, not less. Can we talk more about how we make decisions?

Tanya and Kay's Actual Conversation

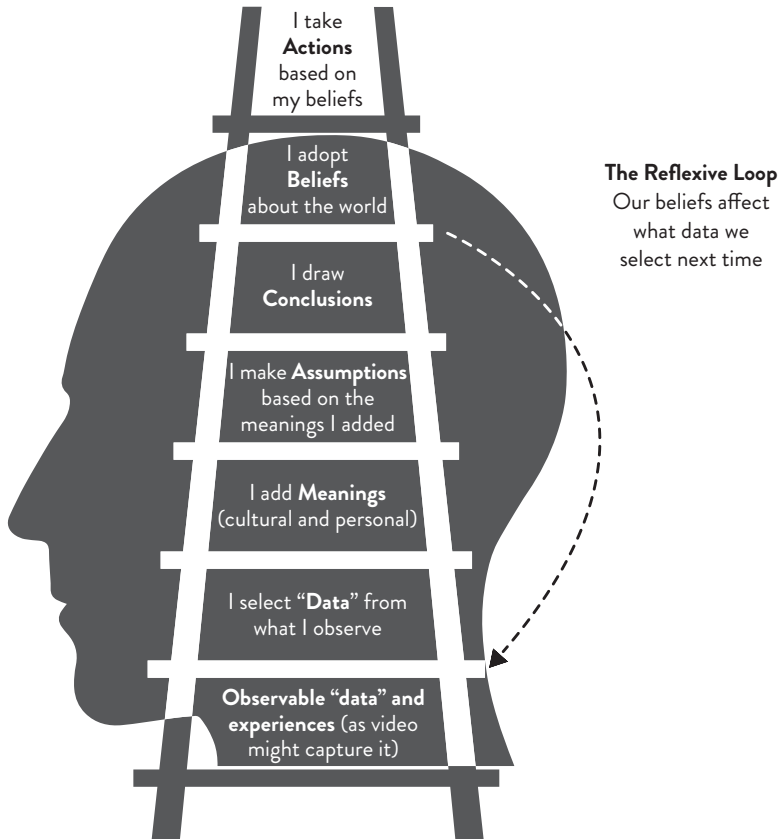
What Tanya thought and felt	What Tanya and Kay said
<p>Kay is really going to like this!</p>	<p>Tanya: I have a solution for you! We can finally stop pressuring you all the time to finish your testing before the sprint release.</p>
<p>Adding capacity at the bottleneck isn't scalable, and we don't have budget anyway. I'll just explain.</p>	<p>Kay: Great! Are we hiring another tester? We clearly need one.</p>
<p>Kay will be able to see the benefit, I'm sure. I just can't tell where we should set the WIP limit to start.</p>	<p>Tanya: Well, it's actually better than hiring. What we'll do is limit the number of tickets that go into the "Ready for QA" column. Would three be about right?</p>
<p>Hmm, she needs more explanation.</p>	<p>Kay: Hang on. Isn't that just going to annoy the engineers more? They'll have changes piling up earlier in the process.</p>
<p>We saw a great diagram in the course that should make it clear.</p>	<p>Tanya: No, that's the beauty of it. They'll do fewer tickets to start with because of this thing called "pull." Let me show you.</p>
<p>I'm so disappointed! She's got the wrong end of the stick. Why won't she let me explain how much easier her job would be with a WIP limit?</p>	<p>Kay: I'm very skeptical. The execs keep saying we need to get more done, not less. Maybe you can show me later—I have a test to finish for tomorrow's release.</p>
<p>I don't get it—what went wrong here?</p>	<p>Tanya: Okay, maybe after tomorrow's standup?</p>

Tanya and Kay's Revised Conversation

What Tanya thought and felt	What Tanya and Kay said
<p>Let's see whether Kay is interested in hearing about WIP limits. I think they'd really help her.</p>	<p>Tanya: I just came back from the Lean Startup course and I have a new idea I think you'll like. Can I describe it and see what you think?</p>
<p>Great!</p>	<p>Kay: Sure. But I do have a test to finish.</p>
<p>Let's start slowly. Does she see the problem as I do?</p>	<p>Tanya: Yes, about that—it actually seems like engineers are always waiting for your tests at the end of the sprint. Do you agree that's inefficient, or do you see it differently?</p>
<p>Well, fifty-fifty here. She's proposing hiring, but we don't have the budget.</p>	<p>Kay: Of course. That's why I keep saying we need another tester.</p>
<p>I'd like to explain this, but I'm trying to learn not to jump to an explanation. Let's check first—is she open to another solution?</p>	<p>Tanya: I understand, but I think there might be a different solution besides hiring. I could explain the new idea—would that be interesting?</p>
<p>Whoa! I didn't realize what an emotional issue this is for Kay.</p>	<p>Kay: Frankly, no. I don't think any crazy new plan is going to help with the stack of tests I got dumped on me every sprint at the last minute.</p>
<p>Kay's emotions are more important than WIP limits. I'd like to talk about those first, if she's willing.</p>	<p>Tanya: It sounds like you're feeling unhappy with your workload and how you get assigned tests to do. That worries me more than the workload itself right now. Would you like to talk about that instead?</p>

Nell and Ian's Conversation

What Nell thought and felt	What Nell and Ian said
<p>Not this again. Why can't you leave us alone?</p>	<p>Ian: I've had it with our payment provider. We have to replace them.</p>
<p>They're the best in the business. Any alternative will be much worse.</p>	<p>Nell: Why would we do that? We've only been using them for three months. There were some teething problems, but everything's running smoothly now.</p>
<p>The income would be categorized right if they'd put in the correct data like we've trained them to do. Garbage in, garbage out.</p>	<p>Ian: Smoothly? No way. They've messed up our invoices every single month. Finance is having to manually reconcile. Again.</p>
<p>We aren't going to annoy our customers and my entire team just because the accountants can't read basic instructions.</p>	<p>Nell: Argh. I've told you before, they haven't set up the reporting correctly. The payments integration has been very reliable, and customer complaints are way down. If we just get the right product metadata—</p>
<p>Pulling rank, again! Why employ me when you're going to decide everything yourself?</p>	<p>Ian: Totally unacceptable. Finance is the lifeblood of this company, and if they're not happy, we have to replace the vendor. That's final.</p>
<p>Another payments integration three months after the first one. How am I going to explain this to the team?</p>	<p>Nell: Okay, if you insist.</p>



Adapted from Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline.

Figure 3.1: The Ladder of Inference

Nell and Ian's Revised Conversation

What Nell thought and felt	What Nell and Ian said
<p>Let's get the facts straight first—stay at the bottom of the Ladder.</p>	<p>Nell: I see that the Blaze team is coming in on Wednesday, is that right?</p>
<p>What a waste of time! Their references were terrible. Wait, I'm racing ahead and starting to get frustrated—I should stay focused on the next rung.</p>	<p>Ian: Yes, it is. I thought we should have a look at the system in person.</p>
<p>Okay, he did invite them. Let's find out what that means while sharing the meaning it has for me.</p>	<p>Nell: That means they're still in the running to become our new provider, right?</p>
<p>At least he read my report.</p>	<p>Ian: Well, not really. Their current users told you their support was useless, didn't they?</p>
<p>This doesn't make any sense. Is he up to something?</p>	<p>Nell: Yes, but now I'm really confused. Why did you book the visit if I'd eliminated them?</p>
<p>I never heard of using a vendor as a practice target before. Can you do that??</p>	<p>Ian: Well, I want to make sure we have a solid filtering process for the next few candidates, and I thought we could practice with Blaze.</p>
<p>Hmm, this isn't what I feared. The meaning he has is different from what I thought it would be.</p>	<p>Nell: I get it—kind of a dry run.</p>
<p>That would definitely be good for my team—some of them have never done any software selection before.</p>	<p>Ian: Exactly. The other vendors can't visit in person, and I thought it would be easier for our team to try out their questions with someone in the room before doing it over the phone.</p>

Continued on next page

How is Blaze going to feel about this?

Boy, do I feel better having clarified Ian's thinking. He wasn't overruling me after all!

Nell: That makes sense. Seems unfair to the vendor, though.

Ian: Maybe, but the reps do have the chance to wow us during the visit and turn us around. I'll be surprised if they do, though.

Nell: Me too!

Ursula and the Developers' Conversation

What Ursula thought and felt	What Ursula and the developers said
Best get it all out to start.	Ursula: I've decided to hire Zeb as our new CTO. I know that won't be popular, but I want to explain why I've made this decision.
Ouch. AI's no diplomat—but what if he's right about Zeb?	AI: You're nuts. He told us our main product was crap and has to be rebuilt.
Can't hide from the truth.	Ursula: I know Zeb's approach in the interviews was terrible. Are you willing to hear about how I made this decision despite that?
A skeptical crowd, as I expected.	Betsy: Okay, but this better be good.
Let's start with observable data. Am I missing anything here?	Ursula: Great. I see Zeb as extremely experienced and very opinionated. Do you see him that way or differently?
Glad Zeb's skills did come through.	Carlos: Sure, he knows his stuff all right.
We really need expertise—most of the team have never built anything like our product before.	Ursula: And to me, that means he has a lot to bring an inexperienced team like ours.
An excellent question.	Betsy: Yes, but how can he teach us anything when he's being a jerk all the time?
I'm certain I can get Zeb to soften his approach, but I wonder if the team shares my confidence.	Ursula: My assumption is that he can learn to build relationships and manage well, if I coach him personally. Do you think that's possible?
No surprise AI is opposed; he took the brunt of the criticism from Zeb.	AI: You're a great coach, Ursula, but Zeb is beyond hope, even for you.

Continued on next page

Can we agree to disagree here?

Glad Al is willing to give me a chance.

How about the others?

There we go.

Ready to move ahead now that we have shared reasoning.

Ursula: I respect your view, Al; but I've coached many difficult people, and I see huge potential for learning in Zeb. Are you willing to let me try?

Al: I'll be amazed if you pull it off, but okay.

Ursula: And of course you may turn out to be right, Al. How about the rest of you? Do you share my conclusion that Zeb is worth a shot, if I give him frequent, personal guidance? I'll lengthen his probation period to three months to allow us all to see how he performs.

Carlos: Sure.

Betsy: I'm willing to try.

Ursula: Great, thank you. My belief is that we can find out in short order whether Zeb is right for us. I'll check back every few weeks on how you're feeling, okay?

Issac and Erin's Conversation

What Isaac thought and felt	What Isaac and Erin said
<p>I'd like to help. She needs to know how hard it is to approach her.</p>	<p>Erin: Thanks for helping me with feedback, Isaac. Where should I look to improve?</p>
<p>I'll soften the blow—in fact, most of us don't even try asking for more detail any more.</p>	<p>Isaac: Well, you could help your team file clearer bugs and feature requests. And as you probably know, some of us avoid asking you for clarification because you can be a bit intimidating.</p>
<p>Whoa! Why such a strong reaction? She did ask for the feedback, so what did she expect?</p>	<p>Erin: Intimidating?! Where does that come from?</p>
<p>She's living up to her reputation, all right. I'll stay at the bottom of the ladder to start.</p>	<p>Isaac: I notice that you're looking red in the face and speaking louder. Is that—</p>
<p>At least I'm not alone in seeing this pattern.</p>	<p>Erin: Of course I am! I keep hearing that I'm "scary," but I bend over backward to stay accessible and get feedback.</p>
<p>Okay, instead of guessing, I'll find out explicitly what her reaction means.</p>	<p>Isaac: It sounds like hearing this really concerns you. Is that right? How are you feeling?</p>
<p>How can she not see how she's scaring others off?</p>	<p>Erin: Annoyed and depressed—I can't shake this undeserved reputation. It's the opposite of what I want and what I observe. Is there a single real example of me frightening someone?</p>
<p>This conversation is a great example!</p>	<p>Isaac: Well, I'm feeling a little intimidated right now by your reaction.</p>
<p>Hmm, I actually can't come up with another example. What does that mean?</p>	<p>Erin: That's fair, and I'm sorry. The feedback is really hard to hear. But this doesn't happen when someone asks me to clarify a bug report.</p>

Continued on next page

I hadn't thought about it, but we actually never ask Erin directly. It's always Maria who tells us to buzz off.

A fair question.

She does put the responsibility on Erin.

That was surprisingly helpful.

Isaac: Actually, you're right. Come to think of it, it's normally Maria in your team who has the most dismissive reactions.

Erin: So why do you see me as the intimidating one?

Isaac: I guess because she says you are telling her not to spend time helping us.

Erin: I think we may have found the problem—I haven't been clear in my direction to Maria and the rest of my team. Thanks for thinking this through with me.

Tara and Matt's Conversation

What Tara thought and felt	What Tara and Matt said
<p>What a catastrophe!</p>	<p>Matt: <i>We can't get to sorting or filtering in the new report this sprint.</i></p>
<p>We have to get these features in—users are demanding them.</p>	<p>Tara: <i>What?! Don't you want people to use it? The user research told us very clearly that users expect to be able to sort, at least.</i></p>
<p>This is just a way of saying that you don't care enough to get it done.</p>	<p>Matt: <i>Of course I do. But what we can deliver is limited by time and skill. A static report is what we've estimated as deliverable by Friday.</i></p>
<p>What's really happening is that you aren't pushing hard enough.</p>	<p>Tara: <i>Why? Can't the team work harder? Are they not motivated enough?</i></p>
<p>This is nonsense. The engineers are lazy, and you're enabling them.</p>	<p>Matt: <i>That's not the problem, Tara. Working harder would, in fact, be counterproductive—they'd make silly mistakes and go slower. We just have to accept the estimates.</i></p>
<p>If our developers can't get off their butts, maybe someone from the outside will be able to show them how it's done.</p>	<p>Tara: <i>Okay, so maybe we should hire a contractor. Would that get the report done?</i></p>
<p>You shoot down everything I propose. You've obviously just made up your mind that this isn't happening.</p>	<p>Matt: <i>No. Remember the last contractor? She took weeks to get up to speed. A new joiner would slow us down this sprint, not speed us up.</i></p>
<p>I had two blog posts and a webinar lined up to promote this feature. I'll have to delay them all, just when we desperately need a new sales angle. I'm completely deflated.</p>	<p>Tara: <i>I guess there's no way out. We'll just have to wait before starting to promote the new report.</i></p>

Symptom	Espoused Norm	Norm-In-Use
Obvious bugs in production	Pass tests consistently	Tests can fail sometimes
System alerts hourly	Clear alerts promptly	Ignore known harmless alerts
Sprint end date extended	End sprint cleanly and on time	Lengthen sprint to cram in more
Long standups	Keep standups crisp and speedy	Give lengthy status reports
Low code quality	Refactor frequently	Take shortcuts often
Too many bugs	Full test coverage	Tests are optional
Minimal iteration	Release frequently	Release only when certain
Too many admins	Grant permissions only where needed	Grant admin rights on request
Improvement actions not done	Use retrospectives effectively	Too busy to do the actions
Users confused and frustrated	Involve customers/users in the design	Skip user research

Table 4.1: Examples of Normalized Deviance

If you think:	Consider these alternatives:
<p>My team is too lazy to write tests.</p>	<p>The CEO ordered all teams to stop testing. The team writes perfect code, so tests are superfluous. Someone told them tests are useless. They tried tests before and found them difficult.</p>
<p>Sales staff don't care about quality, only deadlines.</p>	<p>The Sales team is running a betting pool to see how ridiculous it can make the development targets. Salespeople believe code is always buggy, so quality doesn't matter. Deadlines are agreed to by executives, and Sales has no control over them.</p>
<p>Our database vendor knows we can't switch providers and is milking us for every penny it can.</p>	<p>A rogue executive is trying to destroy the company by driving away customers with ridiculous pricing. The pricing matrix has a typo in it, and we're actually due a substantial discount. Our account manager, knowing we're cash-strapped, negotiated a 50% reduction in the global rate increase.</p>

Table 4.2: Coherence Busting in Action

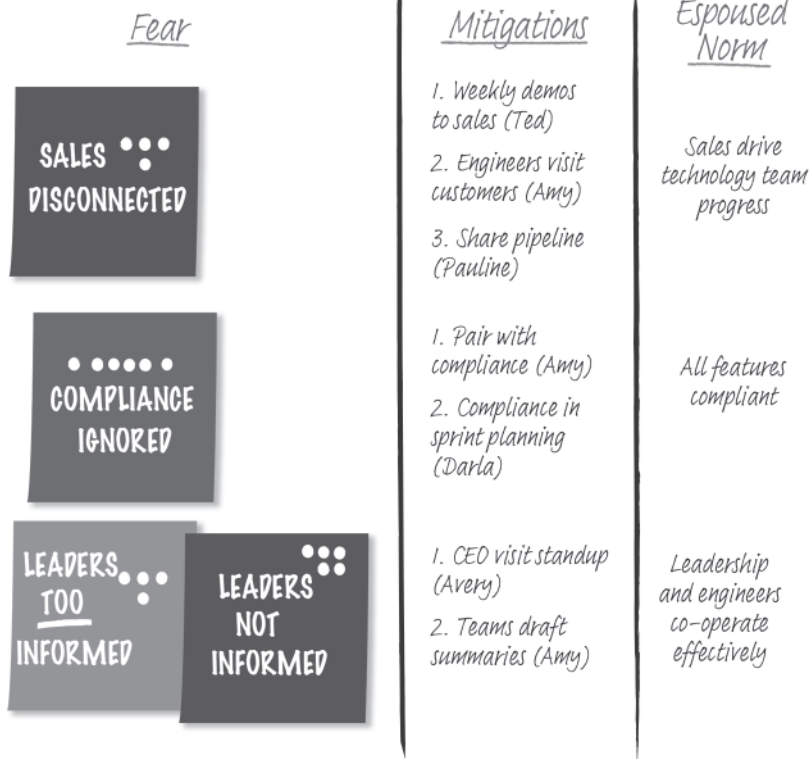


Figure 4.1: The Fear Chart

Tara and Matt's Revised Conversation

What Tara thought and felt	What Tara and Matt said
<p>Here we go again—another shortcut that we'll have to explain away.</p>	<p>Tara: Come on, you know that feature's only half of the story. Users can't even save their project at the end of the workflow!</p>
<p>I feel my chest pounding. What am I afraid of? I think it's that we'll have to postpone sales calls yet again, losing out on revenue.</p>	<p>Matt: Of course, but that's what we can do this sprint. We'll do the rest, including saving progress, in the next release.</p>
<p>We'll run out of money soon if we don't sell. And we can't sell like this. Why is this happening?</p>	<p>Tara: But we can't sell it as it is. Why do we say that we build valuable features when we never actually do?</p>
<p>We always proclaim we give "value every sprint," but I think we've normalized our deviance from this principle.</p>	<p>Matt: I'm confused. I thought we built something useful every sprint. Identifying the value and building it is the purpose of these planning sessions, isn't it?</p>
<p>Our team is larger than it used to be, but they're not working hard enough; or they have been hypnotized into working slowly, or they don't understand the features, or they need more training. Hmm, it seems there are lots of possible explanations for what I'm observing. I'll ask Matt's opinion to help us resolve this.</p>	<p>Tara: Well, they're not serving that purpose for me. I think we say we're building valuable increments, but for some reason, we keep making half-assed features that we can't sell. Why do you think that is?</p>
<p>Hmm, when I think about Matt's question, I keep coming back to the database project that consumed everyone's time for the whole summer. Maybe that's what's really scaring me.</p>	<p>Matt: That's tough to hear, Tara. Why haven't you said anything before now? I didn't know we were hurting sales by leaving out features. If you'd told me that, we could have made adjustments to get to at least some of them.</p>

Continued on next page

Hmm, when I think about Matt's question, I keep coming back to the database project that consumed everyone's time for the whole summer. Maybe that's what's really scaring me.

I feel enough trust in Matt to share my fear, now that I understand it myself.

This is what I wanted to discuss—trade-offs to increase the value.

This meeting could be productive after all.

Matt: That's tough to hear, Tara. Why haven't you said anything before now? I didn't know we were hurting sales by leaving out features. If you'd told me that, we could have made adjustments to get to at least some of them.

Tara: That's a fair question. I think that I'm afraid that if I do, your team will go underground, like when they rebuilt the database and didn't release anything for months.

Matt: I didn't know that you felt that fear. We've learned a lot since the database build, and I'm sure we could do better now. For instance, could we skip step 7 and put in a working Save button instead? That would fit in the sprint.

Tara: Definitely!

Tom, Ken, and the Engineers' Conversation

What Tom thought and felt	What Tom, Ken, and the engineers said
Let's make the current situation visible and discussable.	Tom: Okay, I think we've captured the release process on the board now. Are we missing anything?
I'm suspicious of the phrase "supposed to."	Dean: Yep, that's the process we're supposed to follow.
What do these important words mean?	Tom: What do you mean by "supposed to"?
More problematic words—"of course"??	Ellie: Well, of course Ken doesn't follow it. Tom: Why "of course"?
Ah, this could be why everyone tiptoes around the problems with releases.	Ken: Ellie's right. I sometimes skip the code review and QA steps, and release straight to live.
Let's see if we can get to the underlying emotions.	Tom: Why is that? Is there a fear you can share that's driving this?
Good for you, Ken! When you told me about this fear yesterday, I hoped you'd be able to share it here.	Ken: There's lots of scary old code that only I understand. I guess I'm afraid that other people will get confused by it and make mistakes.
I can't argue with Frank here. But he hasn't told me or the others about this concern before.	Frank: That's unfair to us, Ken. We deserve to know how the whole app works. And besides, your unchecked releases cause bugs anyway.
Once again, an emotive phrase with many interpretations: "his code." I'm glad Frank can talk about this fear, though.	Tom: Frank, you haven't shared that opinion before—why is that? Frank: My fear is that Ken won't like it if we ask to look at his code.

Continued on next page

Does Ken agree?

I think I may see a way to mitigate both fears.

Aha, this looks promising.

On the right track now!

Tom: "His code," you said. Ken, do you see it as yours?

Ken: Not at all. I'd like to share it, but I assumed everyone else wouldn't want to.

Tom: I think it's fair to say Frank would like to share code ownership, right? Do others agree? I see lots of nodding.

Ken: I'd be happy to work with others on the legacy code.

Tom: And would that mitigate your fear of mistakes?

Ken: For sure. I'll book a code review with Frank this afternoon.

Bobby and Darius's Conversation

What Bobby thought and felt	What Bobby and Darius said
<p><i>Surely, you'll see the benefits of increasing communication.</i></p>	<p><i>Bobby: We've got to get more overlap between the teams. Would you be willing to start and finish later to make that work?</i></p>
<p><i>Well, stonewalling isn't going to get us anywhere.</i></p>	<p><i>Darius: No, that won't be possible.</i></p>
<p><i>I don't think Santa Claus is going to shift his delivery date for us. Our mission is to make kids happy and smart; missing Christmas would achieve neither!</i></p>	<p><i>Bobby: Huh?! But our communication has to improve. The product has to be ready on time for Christmas, and the delays are killing our plan.</i></p>
<p><i>I can't believe this. Our documents are perfectly clear! His engineers just don't want to read them.</i></p>	<p><i>Darius: You don't understand. Staying late won't fix the delays when the problem is bad documentation.</i></p>
<p><i>I'll try again to make the case.</i></p>	<p><i>Bobby: If it is documentation that's at fault—and I don't think it is—how can we ever find out where it's wrong if we don't talk more?</i></p>
<p><i>I agree, talking to you won't help. You make a brick wall look transparent!</i></p>	<p><i>Darius: It won't help. If we get good specs, we can build to them. That's the only way.</i></p>
<p><i>I'm out of options. I can't do anything when you're digging in your heels.</i></p>	<p><i>Bobby: I give up. If you won't move your working hours voluntarily, I'll have to ask our CEO to make you do it.</i></p>

Position	Possible Corresponding Interests
We must release feature X this quarter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeping up with competitors Delivering on customer promises Protecting reputation for on-time delivery
We must eliminate our technical debt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering quality products Keeping developers happy Recruiting new technical staff
We have to stop buffering incoming feature requests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing delivery predictability Improving team throughput Keeping up with industry practices
We need to use containers to deploy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing deployment failures Diagnosing production problems faster Learning about new technology
We need a system of salary grades.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring equitable employee treatment Avoiding lawsuits Retaining staff
We have to fire Jane.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resolving performance issues quickly Reinforcing our culture and values Reducing the staff budget

Table 5.1: Positions and Possible Interests

NEW PRODUCTS	Land & Expand	New Frontier
EXISTING PRODUCTS	More Usage	Proven Solutions
	EXISTING CUSTOMERS	NEW CUSTOMERS

Sergiusz and Jeffrey's Conversation

Note: read the center column first.

What Sergiusz thought and felt	What Sergiusz and Jeffrey actually said	What Jeffrey thought and felt
I think we should have a follow-up meeting with Rob, but I don't think it is useful to pursue others.	Sergiusz: I think we should send the analysis to Rob. His comments will tell us whether we're building the right thing.	I'm not sure about that. I think he's got a lot of interest in the topic, but he's just one stakeholder among many.
Hmm, okay. Let's see where this is going.	Jeffrey: What makes you say that?	Maybe there's something I don't know. I wasn't part of earlier meetings with Rob's team.
I think he manages the users who are going to read the report.	Sergiusz: Because I got the impression that his team runs similar reports, and he'll know what they should look like.	I don't think he is a manager; just an interested and vocal user.
This is turning into a duel, not a discussion. I don't think these are genuine questions.	Jeffrey: Well, there are others who are interested too. Who is the report for?	I suspect there's an executive above Rob who makes the real decisions. I'm not sure you have enough understanding to start building. I'll test my understanding and make sure we are aligned on the customer and the goal first.
I really don't think this is the issue we should be discussing. We just need to get feedback, not relitigate the purpose of the report.	Sergiusz: It's for operational managers, the ones keeping the system running smoothly.	I'm confused and a bit concerned. What problem do you think they are solving?

Continued on next page

I don't agree. But maybe if you score this point, we can get on with deciding how to get feedback.

This is really going off the rails. Why are you cross-examining me? Are you trying to make me look bad? I wish I could escape to a meeting, or a root canal or something.

Jeffrey: Nope, it's for the business sponsor, the one who controls the budget. What will she do as a result of getting the report? Why are we building it in the first place?

Serguisz: I'm not sure. It might not lead her to do anything differently.

Are you just making stuff up? You don't seem to understand the customer need at all.

She'd do nothing differently? Why would we build it then?? I think we are really misaligned here. This is a great chance to make sure we're on the same page. Good thing I can spend some more time with you on this.

Bobby and Darius's Revised Conversation

<i>What Bobby thought and felt</i>	<i>What Bobby and Darius said</i>
<i>This seems pretty obvious to me, but let's be sure Darius sees the problem as I do.</i>	<i>Bobby: Darius, would you agree we've had some problems coordinating hardware and software?</i>
<i>Okay, we agree something isn't right.</i>	<i>Darius: Certainly—we still haven't been able to release the new product after three months.</i>
<i>I'm going to share my position so we can discuss it.</i>	<i>Bobby: Indeed. For a long time my position has been that we need to talk more.</i>
<i>That's what I keep hearing from everyone over here. Why on earth is it difficult?</i>	<i>Darius: I know, but you don't seem to understand that this is very difficult for us.</i>
<i>Ah. I didn't realize the team sees language as the barrier. He's right that their English is poor, but I thought they wanted to improve. I bet this is why he didn't have them come along to this meeting.</i>	<i>Bobby: Is it the time difference that makes it tough?</i>
<i>Let's be sure I've got Darius's position clear.</i>	<i>Darius: Not really. We can and often do work to your schedule. But most of us, except me, speak very little English.</i>
<i>Not the first time I've heard this.</i>	<i>Bobby: So your position is that we should avoid in-person discussions? Does that include bringing others to this meeting?</i>
	<i>Darius: Yes. There's no point in us trying to talk more if we can't understand you. Just send us the detailed specifications and we'll build them.</i>

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Let's try to get to the interest behind Darius's position.

Great, I definitely share that interest.

She sure is efficiency focused—it was her idea to hire in this country, so hardware designers would be near the factory.

I have a sneaky idea. Would it work for Darius?

Sounds like better specs would indeed be more efficient.

We might have to stick to written communication, but with a translator, we could eliminate a big barrier to understanding.

Oh, that sounds promising for my interests too.

Bobby: That's what we've been trying, but it doesn't seem to be working. Tell me, why do you say "send the specs"? What good result would come from doing that?

Darius: We could get on with our hardware build, as efficiently as possible.

Bobby: I can't argue with that. It seems like we both have a strong interest in efficiency. Is that right?

Darius: Certainly. Our CEO talks about nothing else, it seems.

Bobby: Hmm. Would it be more efficient if the specs were easier to read?

Darius: Of course. We waste a lot of time over here debating what the requirements mean. But how would we do that?

Bobby: Well, I was thinking of hiring a technical translator to convert the documents into your language.

Darius: I like that! The translator could help us understand you on video calls too.

Bobby: I hadn't thought of that, but it's a great idea. Shall we write a job ad together?

Theresa and the Tech Team's Conversation

What Theresa thought and felt	What Theresa and the team said
<p>I'll lay out the ground rules to start: I need information flow from everyone, and a clear decision at the end.</p>	<p>Theresa: Thanks for coming, everyone. We're going to spend the next hour setting our team direction. I expect everyone to participate and propose ideas, but I may step in to make a decision if needed. At the end of the hour, whatever is on this whiteboard will be our direction for the next month. Everyone got that?</p> <p>Engineers: Yes, we've got it.</p> <p>PMs: Okay.</p>
<p>Let's get the team involved from the start in setting the topics.</p>	<p>Theresa: Okay, working with the PMs, I've prepared these sticky notes describing various items we might work on. First, have a look at all of them and tell me if any are not worth even examining. And if any important ones are missing, add your own sticky note.</p>
<p>Good point. Glad he's participating.</p>	<p>Patrick: We forgot single sign-on.</p> <p>Theresa: Go ahead and add it. Any others?</p>
<p>I agree, but I might be missing something, especially since I'm new to the team.</p>	<p>Quentin: Test automation is up there, but shouldn't it be a routine part of coding, not a project?</p>

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Advocacy and inquiry seem to be working here.

Nice observation. Glad she's engaging.

Let's move on to categorization.

No more than three areas with this small team—that's a limit that I want to set clearly. It sure seems to me that we need usability improvements to stop customer churn, but I'm genuinely interested in other ideas.

I'm curious here. Is there a strong reason for reducing cost that I don't know about?

That's how I see it; I wonder if anyone disagrees?

Hmm. We just raised a million dollars. I'm not sure this is right.

Theresa: I tend to agree, but what do others think? I see nods, so I'm removing it. Other thoughts?

Roberta: There are three usability changes that are almost the same.

Theresa: That's a good observation. Let's group them together under the heading "usability." What other categories make sense?

[Over the next few minutes, six categories emerge.].

Theresa: I want to focus on just three of these for the next month, given our limited capacity. I see usability as vital but don't have a strong opinion about the other two. Which three would you pick? I'm especially interested to hear from you if you disagree with me.

Sam: I'd take automation, onboarding imports, and pricing simplification. All three reduce costs for operations.

Roberta: Why not usability?

Sam: Easy—no cost reduction.

Theresa: What do others think? Is cost our driving consideration this month?

Patrick: I don't think so. It's important, sure, but we need revenue more.

Sam: We always need to conserve cash. The company can't run on fumes.

Roberta: The CEO said yesterday that we need to land prospects, and we all know prospects convert when they aren't frustrated by poor usability and too many clicks.

Continued on next page

Time to make a ruling and keep us on track.

Theresa: This is a good debate, and I'm glad we are having it. I'm going to step in and say—sorry Sam!—that pure cost-reduction initiatives like automation have to be out this month.

[I removed the automation sticky notes.] We're after new sales first, and we're willing to put up with some uncomfortable costs to get them.

Quentin: What about imports? Those help convert customers, and at the same time, they make setup a lot smoother for operators.

Theresa: Very good point! What do you think, Sam?

Terrence, Barry, and Victor's Conversation

What Terrence thought and felt	What Terrence, Barry, and Victor said
<p>I thought you told me to make the process simpler!</p>	<p>Victor: We shouldn't be automating the process of developing new games!</p>
<p>I didn't expect Barry to agree. This is serious.</p>	<p>Barry: Yes, your plan is going to endanger playability and quality.</p>
<p>I'm going to try to find my feet here by advocating while inquiring.</p>	<p>Terrence: Slow down—I'm confused. I thought a simpler product-design experience would help us iterate better. Am I missing something?</p>
<p>I'll keep inquiring. What is their interest?</p>	<p>Victor: Of course we want a better design process, but not a button that deploys the whole game in one go.</p>
<p>Aha, that's the issue.</p>	<p>Terrence: I'm still confused. The games don't go live to real customers, only internally. Doesn't that help us test and improve faster?</p>
<p>I didn't realize the designers wanted to work offline.</p>	<p>Barry: Yes, but part of the process that's important to us is storyboarding and experimenting offline. Your button is going to encourage the artists and coders to commit to code and designs too early.</p>
<p></p>	<p>Terrence: I get it. So the current process is slower than it could be, but you value that slowness.</p>
<p></p>	<p>Victor: Right. In the early stages we need to get the feel of the game.</p>
<p></p>	<p>Barry: Once we've approved it creatively, then we can speed up and automate.</p>

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Let me check my new understanding. They do want automation but for operators, not designers—right?

That's it. I missed the need for offline work, but I was right about the value of automation.

Okay, let me try out a solution here. Does this match our new alignment on where automation makes sense?

Barry gets it—cost savings without compromising quality.

Terrence: I think I see. We share an interest in eliminating the rote work involved in deploying a new game, but the initial creative steps need to remain offline and reflective.

Victor: Exactly. What differentiates us is that we take time to design, unlike the competition, who slam out two or three crappy games a week.

Barry: I'll be the first to say that we should be reducing cost and delay. But not by cutting out fun and originality.

Terrence: I definitely agree about emphasizing quality over quantity. Could we use the new deployment mechanism, but only in Operations, not Creative?

Victor: Fine with me. Just don't let the designers anywhere near it.

Barry: The automation would save a lot of wasted effort by system administrators running scripts, right?

Terrence: Exactly. I'll have a revised plan to you this afternoon.

Mandy and the Developers' Conversation

What Mandy thought and felt	What Mandy and the developers said
Everyone's waiting for this one—version 1 is really showing its age.	Mandy: Okay! Our next item to estimate is version 2 of the API.
That doesn't sound good.	Zeke: Yeah, right. How long is a piece of string?
I was counting on having this well ahead of the marketing campaign. Is it at risk?	Mandy: Really? I thought we were planning to have it done this sprint.
This doesn't make any sense.	Xavier: That's very unlikely. We just found out that the underlying data won't pass the validations, for a start.
The data has to be good if all our customers are using it.	Mandy: Really? So how is version 1 working then?
I'm not so sure customers really need us to provide completely valid data in the new API. A lot of them already have cleanup scripts.	Walter: It doesn't guarantee validity, but v2 is supposed to.
I thought version 2 was just an overdue tidy-up. Why would it be more complex?	Xavier: There are a lot of complex test cases too. No way we can give you an estimate on those until we try a few.
Maybe I can get some kind of commitment out of them anyway, even if it does take longer than we'd like.	Mandy: So when do you think we can actually have it ready?
There's no way that's acceptable.	Zeke: No way to know. There are just too many uncertainties.
I've got a real problem here. Nobody is going to want to hear this.	Mandy: Really? I don't think that our friends in Marketing are going to like that.

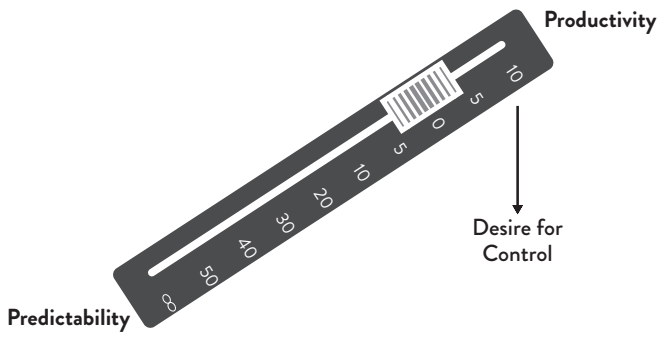


Figure 6.1: The Tilted Slider

Mandy and David's Improved Conversation

<i>What Mandy thought and felt</i>	<i>What Mandy and David said</i>
<p>Yep, I wasn't dreaming. Something is wrong here.</p>	<p>Mandy: I was really surprised by the reaction of the team to estimating for the new API.</p> <p>David: Yeah, I got that too. And it's not the first time they've expressed those concerns.</p>
<p>I especially value David's view. Does he think we have a problem?</p>	<p>Mandy: Can you tell me more about the concerns? And what do you think yourself?</p>
<p>How odd. Where did March 4th come from?</p>	<p>David: It's much harder than we thought. And Marketing says it wants it by the 4th of March, no exceptions. The team doesn't see how to finish by then, and frankly, I don't either.</p>
<p>Can David tell me more about this?</p>	<p>Mandy: That's news to me—and an oddly specific date.</p>
<p>Ah, I get it. No one has asked me to get a commitment for early March yet, but I bet a request like that is on the way.</p>	<p>David: I thought so too, until I saw them laying out seating plans. They've rented a hall and invited all our customers for lunch to see the all-new, all-singing, all-dancing API!</p>
<p>I'll remind Dave that features aren't committed until we've agreed to them as a team. I wonder how far off we really are from Marketing's target?</p>	<p>Mandy: Well, the good news is that we haven't actually committed to anything yet, though it sounds like Marketing has. What delivery date might the team accept as reasonable?</p>

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Ouch. That's a long time. But I don't understand the meaning of that final phrase.

I think "client-ready" isn't needed here, just "good enough to demo."

Ah, we have the same understanding of the word but a different understanding of the commitment.

The distinction is important—I bet he can suggest ways to simplify the scope if we can align on what's needed.

Yes, now he's got it.

I need to share the constraint: we have to protect client data from inadvertent disclosure, or the regulator will come down on us hard.

Ah, I really like that, especially the dummy data.

Let's see if we've cleared the commitment obstacle.

That sounds very promising!

David: Definitely not before June; July would be better. The data needs a lot of filtering before it's client-ready.

Mandy: Wait, "client-ready"? What do you mean by that?

David: Well, obviously all the validations have to be in place, and all the tests for edge cases. We can't give bad data to clients.

Mandy: I'm not sure we're talking about the same thing. The commitment we need is for something we can demonstrate during a sales pitch, like at this lunch you mentioned, or on a prospect visit. Does that match your understanding?

David: I think I see what you're getting at. We just have to be able to show the basic workflow, not the whole working integration.

Mandy: Exactly. Does that reduced constraint help at all? We can take reasonable shortcuts, just so long as we don't put real data at risk.

David: Well, we could skip the validations for a start. And we could even use dummy data that we know would be simple to display.

Mandy: Both of those scope changes would be fine. Would that help the team to make a confident commitment to March 4th?

David: I'm pretty sure we can find a way to deliver without validations or real data. I'll ask the team this afternoon and let you know by tomorrow morning what I hear.

Nash and Sysadmin's Conversation

What Nash thought and felt	What Nash and the Sysadmins said
<i>Let's get the issue on the table. I want to check my information is right first.</i>	Nash: The engineering leads tell me the earliest date we can get the seven new sites up is in February. Is that right?
<i>Okay, confirmed the bad news.</i>	Becca: Yes, that's our best estimate. We're confident about committing to provisioning all the servers then.
<i>It's so annoying that we can't go faster. Surely it's technically possible?</i>	Nash: Argh, how frustrating! The problem is, February is about three months late. We need the sites by November at the latest, for Christmas. What options do we have to meet that target?
<i>I'm glad Molly trusts my motives at least.</i>	Molly: I believe you, and I'd love to say we can do it, but it's just not possible. Even getting backups in place takes many weeks.
<i>That sure sounds inefficient. I wonder why they haven't done anything about this.</i>	Abdul: Not to mention all the manual config. The process is clunky, but we know it works.
<i>I'm assuming there's some way around this. I should verify that I'm right.</i>	Nash: I'm no techie, but those sound like things we could automate. Am I missing something?
<i>That's what I thought. Why are the internal barriers so high?</i>	Becca: Sure! There are lots of tools that let you stand up servers quickly and repeatably. But IT Risk and InfoSec haven't approved them.

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This might be a way to get a Walking Skeleton going.

A series of small commitments, each met, should build a lot of confidence.

Molly's right, but I may be able to help.

Better than I thought!

Great! Becca gets it too. A plan like this would help me find optimizations elsewhere in tech and get marketing underway too.

I think we're aligned now. Time for a final check on the plan and the commitment.

Nash: That's true but only for live sites, right? Could we get internal services up faster, and then add patch management, backups and so on later, with the normal approvals?

Abdul: Sure, but how would that help?

Nash: Well, if the sites are up, the developers can start coding and deploying much sooner, and we can show real progress to Marketing.

Molly: But that doesn't get us to your deadline. We'll be live internally faster but will still have to jump through all the hoops to make the servers production-ready.

Nash: Let me worry about that. I suspect that showing regular, visible progress will smooth the way for approvals. Using the new tools, can we get bare-bones machines deployed this week, for example?

Abdul: Yes; in fact we can do it in all seven countries.

Becca: Agreed. What's more, I'm sure we can whip up a roadmap showing our planned weekly progress for the next two months using the new tools for incremental setup. I'm not sure about anything beyond that, though, and I don't think we'll be done by that point.

Nash: We don't have to be; we can replan as we go, and we'll learn more as we start to use the new setup. Am I right you'd all be comfortable committing to a two-month partial roadmap with weekly deliveries?

Continued on next page

Well, I didn't get certain delivery by Christmas, but a clearly committed team with a clear plan to execute is a pretty good alternative.

All: Yes!

Julie and Erik's Conversation

What Julie thought and felt	What Julie and Erik said
This is a good start!	Julie: Did you have a chance to read the decision document? Erik: I did, and I like it! I made a few edits. I'm glad you're working on it.
Let's check our alignment on the basic idea first.	Julie: Super! I'll look at those changes later. More fundamentally, did the idea of a decision process seem valuable to you?
Ouch. That's true, but I think he missed the point.	Erik: Sure. It should help me keep us on track and aligned. I can read all the details and feedback to you on each decision you make.
Deep breath—a little apprehensive about challenging him like this.	Julie: I'm glad you said that, because I'm not sure I agree. Erik: Really? What do you mean?
Let me slow down here with a question. Are we agreeing about the underlying assumptions?	Julie: Well, the greatest value in this process for me is that it will help me know whether to involve you in a particular decision at all. Do you agree that it's good for me to make some decisions without you?
A few months ago I wouldn't have trusted this answer, but our stories are better aligned now. I really do think he wants to delegate.	Erik: Yes, of course. As the company grows, I can't do everything; and I have to let other people take the reins sometimes.
This is my key point.	Julie: Okay, we're aligned there for sure. So the part I'm most keen to agree on is how we'll use the decision document in cases where I don't need to involve you.

Continued on next page

I'm glad I probed and clarified. Now I'm much more confident that we're aligned.

Final check—are we committing now?

Sounds like a commitment to me!

Erik: Hmm, I don't follow. In that case, why would you need to fill it in?

Julie: Well, this section at the top describes when to use the document. If a decision doesn't meet these criteria, we stop and don't use the document at all.

Erik: Aha, because it's low enough level that I don't need to be involved. I didn't quite follow that section, but I get it now.

Julie: So you're okay if I, and others, use those criteria as a filter?

Erik: Sure, though some of them need a little tweaking. The budget limit can be higher, for example. But I'm definitely keen to start using this now.

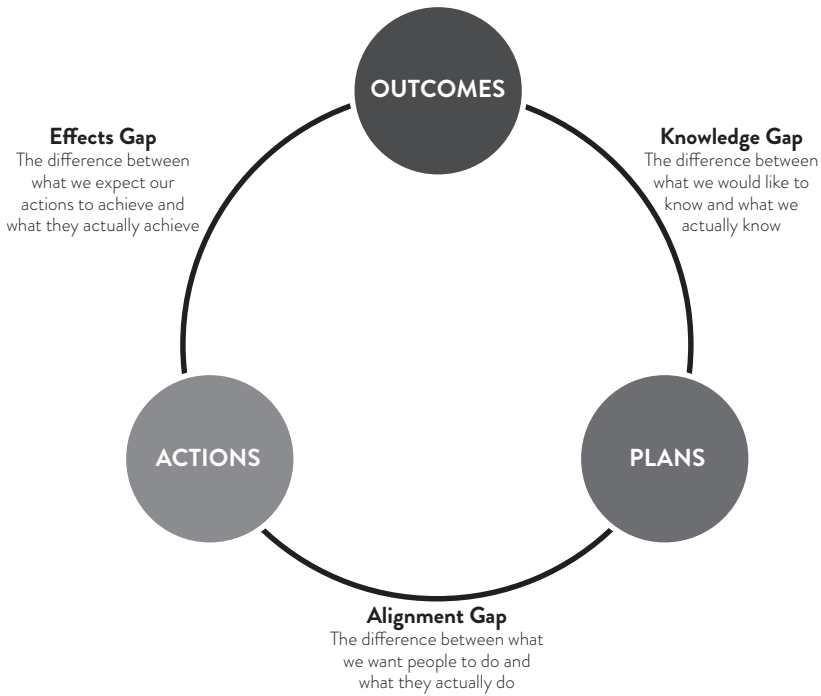
Nicole and Bobby's Conversation

<i>What Nicole thought and felt</i>	<i>What Nicole and Bobby actually said</i>
<i>I hope this makes sense to you.</i>	<i>Nicole: Here's the mockup of the new cash-flow report.</i>
<i>Good question!</i>	<i>Bobby: Okay. How is it different from the one we have today?</i>
	<i>Nicole: Well, for one thing, it's to be updated daily. And it's broken down according to our new global regions, instead of being aggregated.</i>
	<i>Bobby: Got it.</i>
<i>Is that all you need to know? I guess the mockup is fairly self-explanatory.</i>	<i>Nicole: When do you think you can have it ready?</i>
<i>Wow, that's quick! Finance will be really pleased. I just hope you won't miss anything like last time.</i>	<i>Bobby: I'll have to check with the team, but I expect we can finish it in the next sprint.</i>
	<i>Nicole: That would be great!</i>

THEORY X	THEORY Y
Attitude	
People dislike work, find it boring, and will avoid it if they can.	People need to work and want to take an interest in it. Under the right conditions, they enjoy it.
Direction	
People must be forced or bribed to make the right effort.	People will direct themselves toward a target that they accept.
Responsibility	
People would rather be directed than accept responsibility (which they avoid).	People will seek and accept responsibility, under the right conditions.
Motivation	
People are motivated mainly by money and fears about their job security.	Under the right conditions, people are motivated by the desire to realize their own potential.
Creativity	
Most people have little creativity—except when it comes to getting around rules.	Creativity and ingenuity are widely distributed and grossly underused.

Niels Pflaeging, "Why We Cannot Learn a Damn Thing from Toyota, or Semco."

Table 7.1: Theory X and Theory Y



Adapted from "Executing Strategy: Some Propositions," Stephen Bungay.com, accessed October 3, 2019, <https://www.stephenbungay.com/ExecutingStrategy>.

Table 7.1: Theory X and Theory Y

Nicole and Bobby's Improved Conversation

What Nicole thought and felt	What Nicole and Bobby said
<p>I wonder what he's prioritizing.</p>	<p>Nicole: You've got a lot of different projects in flight. Where do you plan to focus this week?</p>
<p>He's made a lot more progress than I realized. Um, wait—that's my twitch firing. I should check this out further.</p>	<p>Bobby: I'm thinking we're ready to finish the work on simplified configuration. I think I can get that done by Friday.</p>
<p>We haven't discussed how he'd present the findings from this investigation.</p>	<p>Nicole: Great! So how do you plan to present the results?</p>
<p>What?! It sounds like he's already moved on to implementation, and I haven't even seen the proposal yet.</p>	<p>Bobby: Last week I reviewed all the current config options, and the team has removed most of them. I expect I'll be able to demonstrate the new page with just five or six options.</p>
<p>Maybe he published his analysis and I missed it?</p>	<p>Nicole: Wait a minute—I'm confused. I was expecting you to examine and explain the need for each option, and I don't remember seeing a review document from you. Have you already done the analysis and moved onto implementation?</p>
<p>Oh dear! I thought I had been clear.</p>	<p>Bobby: What? I thought you wanted me to get rid of as many options as possible. We decided that Monday, when we said we'd simplify the config.</p>
<p>I don't want to be making arbitrary decisions.</p>	<p>Nicole: No, not really. What I wanted was to get your opinion on each option. Which of them do customers actually need and use?</p>

Continued on next page

This sounds more like what I was expecting to hear.

I'm glad we had this conversation—we dodged a bullet here. We might have released the new page prematurely if we hadn't checked in.

Bobby: Oh! Okay, well, that changes my plans for the week. We can pause the changes to the page, and I can focus on talking to more customers. We won't have the new page ready this week, though.

Nicole: That's not a problem. It will be good to have greater confidence in our decision to keep, drop, or change the options, whichever we decide on.

Grace and Lisa's Conversation

What Grace thought and felt

I know Lisa has been concerned about engagement for a while. I expect she'll be happy with this, so I'll just explain what we're doing and why.

What?! You've complained to me about engagement again and again. I thought you'd be grateful.

Weird, no other customer has objected to the emails. I'm pretty sure engagement is still a problem for you, but I should check.

Wow, sounds awful. No wonder she doesn't want us emailing users directly. And I'm glad she has an idea about what might work for them instead.

What Grace and Lisa said

Grace: Hi Lisa, thanks for taking the time to hear about a change we are planning to implement. We are going to start sending an email on Mondays to any users who didn't log in the previous week. We are doing this in response to clients who are worried that end-users aren't always as engaged with the system as they'd like.

Lisa: Ugh, please don't do that!

Grace: Oh, that's surprising! I've spoken with several other clients, and you are the first person with that reaction. Looking at the latest usage report, I can see that 40% of your users are inactive. Do you see that as a problem?

Lisa: Engagement is definitely something we want to improve. It's just that we already get so many emails sent from internal systems that it is impossible to keep up; and the last thing I want are complaints about getting even more. Could you send me a weekly report on inactive users instead? That would allow us to follow up internally.

Continued on next page

This could be a good experiment. If it works, it might be something we can offer to other clients.

Me too!

Grace: Absolutely. I can tell our team that you'd rather receive the information on inactive users instead of emailing the users directly. In our next quarterly review, we can talk about how those reports are working and if there's anything else we can do in the system to help.

Lisa: That's great. I'm really glad you contacted me ahead of time rather than unleashing a flood of emails onto our users!

Andy and Wayne's Conversation

What Andy thought and felt	What Andy and Wayne said
<p>We have a normal process for restoring data. Why didn't they just use that?</p>	<p>Andy: Okay, that table was deleted and the service was offline. Why was it that you didn't use the normal documented backup procedure?</p>
<p>That's a good point. I'm sure we never expect this kind of partial failure.</p>	<p>Wayne: Well, that process assumes the entire database has been lost or corrupted. In our situation it was only one table, and as a result, most of the services were still operating normally. If we'd performed the normal disaster recovery process, it would have worked; but it also would have meant all the services would be offline for a day or more.</p>
<p>It must have been very stressful to realize none of the processes we'd practiced would apply.</p>	<p>Andy: I see, so you were in uncharted territory here.</p>
<p>I agree—that would have made the problem much worse.</p>	<p>Wayne: That's right! Of course we could have just followed the book, but that would have made things worse. It didn't seem like the right thing to do even though it was the documented process.</p>
<p>I'm not sure I would have taken their approach, but they got their priorities right.</p>	<p>Andy: So how did you figure out how to proceed?</p> <p>Wayne: Our first goal was to keep all the other services operating normally, and our second goal was to recover the lost table and restore the service that depends on it. We thought of multiple options for recovering the data, and not knowing which would be fastest, we started down several of those paths in parallel, with different people working on each one.</p>

Continued on next page

I'm glad Wayne was thinking creatively here. Playing it by the book would have meant hours of downtime and a much bigger headache.

Andy: That was sharp thinking! We should consider adding "try multiple solutions" to the runbook.



Conversation Scoring: A Handy Guide

Once you've recorded your conversation in the two-column format, follow these steps to Reflect on your curiosity, transparency, conversational patterns, and use of key skills we describe in the book.

1. *Curiosity*: Determine your Question Fraction.
 - a. Circle all the question marks in the right-hand column.
 - b. Count the number of questions that were *genuine*.
 - c. Write a fraction: $\frac{\text{Genuine Questions}}{\text{Total Questions}}$.
 - d. For maximum curiosity, you want to see lots of questions (a large denominator), with most of them genuine (a large numerator).
2. *Transparency*: Find unexpressed ideas.
 - a. Underline thoughts and feelings in the left-hand column that do not appear in the right-hand column.
 - b. You have been very transparent if you have expressed most of your thinking and your emotions (that is, if you have few underlined sentences in the left-hand column).
3. *Patterns*: Find triggers, tells, and twitches.
 - a. Circle and label *triggers* that cause you to react strongly, *tells* that signal a lack of transparency or curiosity, and *twitches* that represent default responses.

- b. You probably can't avoid the automatic responses you identify here, but you can learn to detect them as they happen. You are doing well if you note your patterns in real time, either in your left-hand column or in your dialogue.
4. *Skills*: Test for specific skills you are trying to improve (choose from the list of skills below, and only work on one at a time).
- a. *TDD for People*: Label your statements and questions in either column with the rung from the Ladder of Inference to which they belong. You're doing well if you're establishing a shared understanding of the lower rungs of the Ladder before debating items near the top of the Ladder.
 - b. *Coherence Busting*: Count the unsupported conclusions in the left-hand column. Aim for a low score—ideally, none!
 - c. *Joint Design*: Award a point for each of the five elements of Joint Design that you observe: inclusivity, asking genuine questions, inviting opposing views, timeboxing, and using a decision-making rule. Aim for five out of five.
 - d. *Agreeing on Meaning*: Circle the important words in both columns, then count the number that have confirmed, shared meanings. Create a fraction: $\frac{\text{Words with Confirmed, Shared Meanings}}{\text{Important Words}}$. Ideally, this fraction will be equal to 1 (the numerator equals the denominator).
 - e. *Briefing and Back Briefing*: As appropriate, score yourself out of three: for a briefing, look for outcome, constraints, and freedoms; for a back briefing, watch for action, reasoning, and confirmation. Your goal should be a score of $\frac{3}{3}$.



Further Reading and Resources

There is a lot of rich literature about communication; and we share some of our favorite sources below.

Articles

The following articles describe tools for analyzing conversations, only some of which were included in this book.

- *Eight Behaviours for Smarter Teams* by Roger Schwarz (https://www.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/917018/Eight-Behaviors-for-Smarter-Teams-2.pdf)
- “Putting the ‘Relational’ Back in Human Relationships” by Diana McLain Smith (<https://thesystemsthinker.com/putting-the-relational-back-in-human-relationships/>)
- “To the Rescue” by Roger Martin from the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (https://ssir.org/articles/entry/to_the_rescue)
- “Skilled Incompetence” by Chris Argyris from the *Harvard Business Review* (<https://hbr.org/1986/09/skilled-incompetence>)

Books

Difficult Conversations by Bruce Patton, Douglas Stone, and Sheila Heen is a gentle introduction to the techniques we describe in *Agile Conversations*.

The Skilled Facilitator by Roger Schwarz and *Discussing the Undiscussable* by Bill Noonan are more advanced guides to conversational analysis, covering many applications and including real-world examples.

The Elephant in the Room by Diana McLain Smith and *The Responsibility Virus* by Roger Martin cover specific applications of conversational techniques to complex business relationships, such as those burdened with a long history of poor interaction or with confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Action Science by Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, and Diana McLain Smith is the seminal work on the Action Science methods that provided the bedrock for this book and several of the other resources in this list. It is more academic and theoretical than other writings cited here, and has the additional virtue of being freely available online.

I'm Right, You're Wrong, Now What?: Break the Impasse and Get What You Need by Dr. Xavier Amador describes the model he developed while providing therapy for people in denial to the general public: LEAP (Listen-Empathize-Agree-Partner). This approach is conversational and, we believe, is both similar to and applicable for the methods we describe in this book.

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD, is more than an approach to communication; it is a philosophy for living. However, even people skeptical of this philosophy can find some very useful exercises to reflect on their communication and their mind-set.

Video and Audio

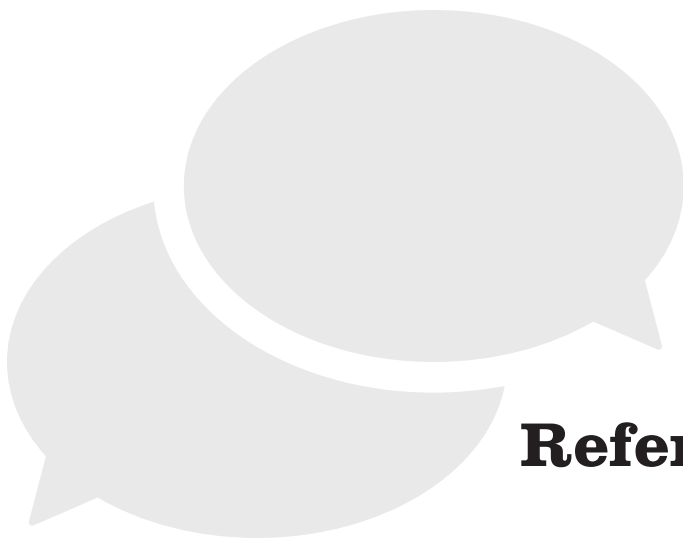
Every week on the *Troubleshooting Agile* podcast (<https://troubleshoot-ingagile.com>), we discuss relevant, current topics in Agile, Lean, and DevOps teams, offering ideas and solutions for improving delivery and communication in software teams.

The weekly *Feeling Good* podcast by Dr. David Burns (<https://feeling-good.com/list-of-feeling-good-podcasts/>) regularly provides excellent real-life examples of how changing conversations changes relationships. Particularly relevant are the episodes covering The Five Secrets of Communication and the Interpersonal Model.

The companion website for this book, ConversationalTransformation.com, has follow-up materials, videos, a mailing list to join, and much more.

In Person

The London Organisational Learning Meetup, (<https://www.meetup.com/London-Action-Science-Meetup>) meets monthly in London. It is run by Jeffrey Fredrick, and is an excellent opportunity to practice and improve your conversations with others who are interested in changing culture.



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Acknowledgments

This book is built on a foundation formed of many conversations—some joyful, some painful, and *all* sources of learning. Here are some of the people whose conversations with us have helped us grow and learn so far, and for whom we are very grateful:

Benjamin Mitchell, who introduced us to the work of Chris Argyris, and patiently worked with us as we learned conversational analysis and much more. Waseem Taj, Andy Parker, Jamie Mill, and Lisa Miller, who joined us in learning how to analyze conversations and to lose our fear of difficult interactions. Rich Koppel and Colin Berthoud, the founders of TIM Group, and the many employees there who worked with us (especially with Jeffrey), to experiment with growing a learning organization based on transparency and curiosity. Steve Freeman, who encouraged us to tell the story of the changes at TIM Group (this book doesn't tell that story, but it does share the conversations behind those changes).

The participants in our CTO Mentoring Circles and the London Organisational Learning Meetup, which served as testbeds for many of the concepts herein.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, whose theories underpin so much of this book. Also those who developed their ideas, including Philip McArthur, Robert Putnam, and Diana McLain Smith of Action Design, and Roger Schwarz, whose Eight Behaviors helped us greatly in our early conversations.

Patrick Lencioni, whose model of hierarchical dysfunctions informed the order of our conversations. Amy Edmondson, who brought “psychological safety” to our vocabulary. Simon Sinek, who explained the value of Why. Stephen Bungay, who showed the value of briefing and back briefing. Brené Brown, who helped us to put the story we were telling ourselves into words. Dr. David Burns, who helped us understand the fractal nature of conversations—that we create our interpersonal reality.

Alistair Cockburn, Kent Beck, and others of the early Agile software development community who pioneered the radical idea that relationships matter, back when both of us were still trapped in the software factory. Mary Poppendieck, Tom Poppendieck, Eric Ries, and others who helped bring Lean thinking to the software world. Patrick Debois, John Allspaw, and Paul Hammond, who helped shatter the silo that remained at the last mile, and who ensured that DevOps was about culture and not just tools.

Geckoboard (including Paul Joyce and Leo Cassarani), Unmade Ltd., and Arachnys, each of whom kindly allowed us to include the details of their work with us.

Anna Shipman, whose insightful blog post became a case study.

Sofar Sounds, who kindly allowed us to include a story about them.

Sergiusz Bleja, who allowed us to include a case study we created with him.

The Belgian Federal Pensions Service, Thierry de Pauw, and Tom Jans, who kindly allowed us to include details from one of their projects as a case study.

Elisabeth Hendrickson, whose excitement about this material led her to introduce us to IT Revolution, and who additionally suggested we add “twitch” to our analysis repertoire.

Mark Coleman, who provided very useful advice at crucial stages and gave us the concept of “difficult emotional work.”

Eric Minick, whose perspective on how far we’ve come was very helpful.

Chris Matts and Cirilo Wortel, who shared stories and ideas while the book was taking shape.

Ian Ozsvald, who gave us invaluable advice and contacts at a very early stage.

Gojko Adžić, who shared much information and advice about his publishing and consulting experience, and whose joyful approach to testing and product management has been a pleasure to observe.

Paul Julius, whose suggestion that we create a conference led to Squirrel and Jeffrey meeting (and so much more). And the attendees of that conference,

the Continuous Integration and Testing Conference (CITCON), to whom we have been promising this book for many years.

Alan Weiss and Gerald Weinberg, whose writings on publishing and promoting books were inspirational for us throughout.

Laurel Ruma and Melissa Duffield, who helped us solidify our very loose initial ideas for what became this book.

Anna Noak, whose patient feedback throughout the proposal and writing stages was vital to creating the finished product, and the many others at IT Revolution who contributed to this book in a plentitude of ways.

Listeners to our podcast, *Troubleshooting Agile*, who provided stories, advice, and a sounding board for many of our ideas; and Michelle Choi and Laura Stack, who make sure the podcast engine is always running.

The many people and teams who allowed us to coach them and learn from them over the last two decades.

Jerry Shurman and Joe Buhler, who taught Squirrel to take joy in intellectual endeavors.

Pat Yanez, Ron Fredrick, and Marilyn Fredrick, who gave Jeffrey the background to attempt the difficult.

Thanks to Robert Schuessler for keen eyes and a quick turnaround.

And finally, our families—Andreas, Anton, Eliana, Emeline, Leanne, Lisa, and Star—whose patience was tested, who never stopped believing in us, and whose support was invaluable.



About the Authors

Douglas Squirrel has been coding for forty years and has led software teams for twenty. He uses the power of conversations to create dramatic productivity gains in technology organizations of all sizes. Squirrel's experience includes growing software teams as a CTO in startups, from fintech to e-commerce; consulting on product improvement at over sixty organizations in the UK, US, and Europe; and coaching a wide variety of leaders in improving their conversations, aligning to business goals, and creating productive conflict. He lives in Frogholt, England, in a timber-framed cottage built in the year 1450.

Jeffrey Fredrick is an internationally recognized expert in software development and has over twenty-five years' experience covering both sides of the business/technology divide. An early adopter of XP and Agile practices, Jeffrey has been a conference speaker in the US, Europe, India, and Japan. Through his work on the pioneering open-source project CruiseControl, and through his role as co-organizer of the Continuous Integration and Testing Conference (CITCON), he has had a global impact on software development. Jeffrey's Silicon Valley experience includes roles as Vice President of Product Management, Vice President of Engineering, and Chief Evangelist. He has also worked as an independent consultant on topics including corporate strategy, product management, marketing, and interaction design. Jeffrey is based in London and is currently Managing Director of TIM Group, an Acuris Company. He also runs the London Organisational Learning Meetup and is a CTO mentor through CTO Craft.