BlinkPAPER

The Responsiveness Paradox

Avoid habits, challenge teams

A collaboration between Achmea and BlinkLane Consulting

Sten Reijnen (Achmea)
Fayette Bosch (BlinkLane)
Anneleen Doornebal (BlinkLane)
Andres Jansen (BlinkLane)

IN A BLINK

In order to remain relevant, organizations attempt to respond more swiftly to change. They break with existing habits and adopt an agile way of working. The agile mindset inspires organizations to continuously search for ways to innovate, to be adaptive and to stretch flexibility. One of the benefits of an agile way of working is that it builds on transparent processes and routines, this reduces complexity and politics, and supports teams in their effort to become predictable in their output. However, when proven new agile routines turn into habits again, in behavior with little conscious thought, you risk losing the critical level of responsiveness. How can you, as a Release Train Engineer, Scrum Master or Agile Coach, break this vicious circle? Add a 'continuous disruption flavor' to your improvement-mindset; relentlessly challenging the status quo of your teams!

Table of content

BlinkPAPER: The Responsiveness Paradox

1. Responsiveness of organization

The digital era is characterized by demanding customers, a competitive pressure to innovate, and the need to shorten time-to-market. Organizations respond to this complex and dynamic marketplace by reinventing their ways of working. Often realized through the adoption of the agile mindset principles. Agility can be seen as a quality, a status to be reached and maintained if you want to succeed. Characteristic for organizations that reached this – often so desired - status is that requirements and solutions are developed through the collaborative effort of self-organizing, cross-functional, multi-skilled teams. These teams deliver incremental chunks of value in short iterations. Next to that, they create a high level of transparency through fast feedback loops, enabling fast decision-making. Agile advocates adaptive planning, evolutionary development, early delivery, continuous improvement, and encourages rapid and flexible response to change.

2. The need for continuous re-challenge

Consider a video game. When you first start playing, you are trying to figure out how it works. Once you get the hang of it, your character needs to improve in order to level-up. You try and try, and get better and better. Every time the level becomes harder, you are stimulated to improve your skills. It is essential that the levels become harder. If not, you will stop playing this game as it lost it's challenging magical power. The game has become too easy and boring because you will switch to the auto-pilot-mode.

Organizations are like video games. In agile, especially when practicing methods and scaling frameworks like Scrum and SAFe, continuous improvement is stimulated through the routines that characterize the way of working. This is a process-oriented approach including incremental and iterative work. The strength of routinized processes lies in the continues repetition of the same routine. A standardized approach helps to confront challenges, to break them down and to crush the hard nuts step by step. Overcoming challenges in this way helps teams grow and to stay adaptive. But, there is another side to routines as well. When teams are too familiar with the routines, they turn into habits. This means that teams start to do things with little to no conscious thought and they risk that they

lose their adaptiveness. To prevent their work from becoming a routine, in a way that decreases their adaptiveness, employees should be continuously re-challenged.

3. The Responsiveness Paradox

It is easier to find new ways to improve when organizations just started working agile than when they have been working agile for a while. A possible explanation for this is that when transitioning to agile, companies move towards new processes, ways of working and self-organized and autonomous teams. As this can be challenging, it is easier for teams to search for improvements. The agile routines enable them to deal with challenges and teams move forward step by step (figure 1, point A). At a certain point, teams enter a phase where being challenged is no longer common (figure 1, point B). They have mastered various challenges and it becomes harder to find new ways to improve. This is the moment when routines can turn into habits, and teams risk sliding into the land of boredom (figure 1, point C). We call this the responsiveness paradox.
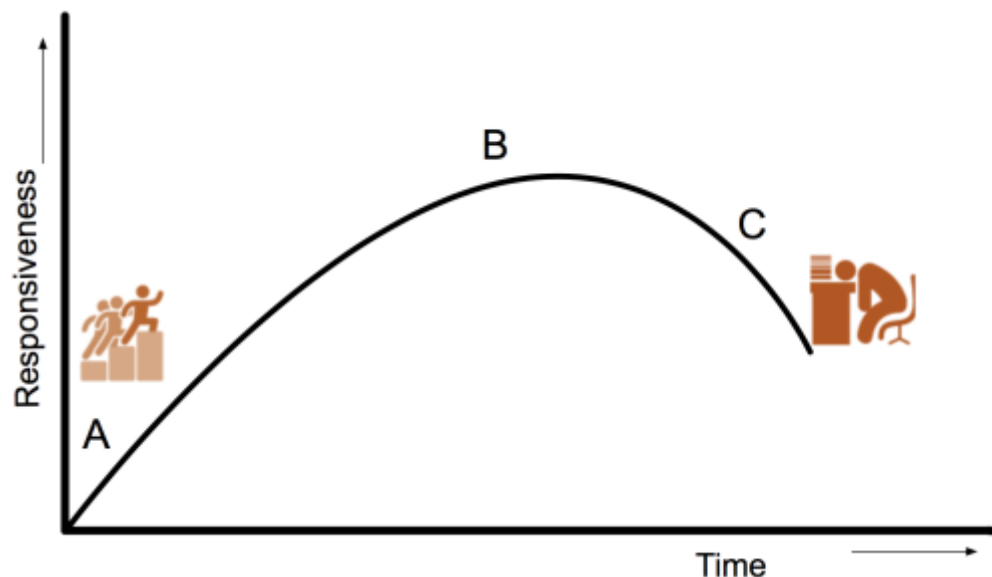

Figure 1: The Responsiveness Paradox

We try new ways of working in order to stay responsive, however the more familiar you get with them, the more you risk losing the critical level of responsiveness. Thus, once you have mastered the new ways of working, they turn into habits and become counteractive. This vicious cycle is known as the responsiveness paradox. One way to deal with the responsiveness paradox is to

introduce something disruptive over and over again so teams are continuously re-challenged (figure 2, point A').
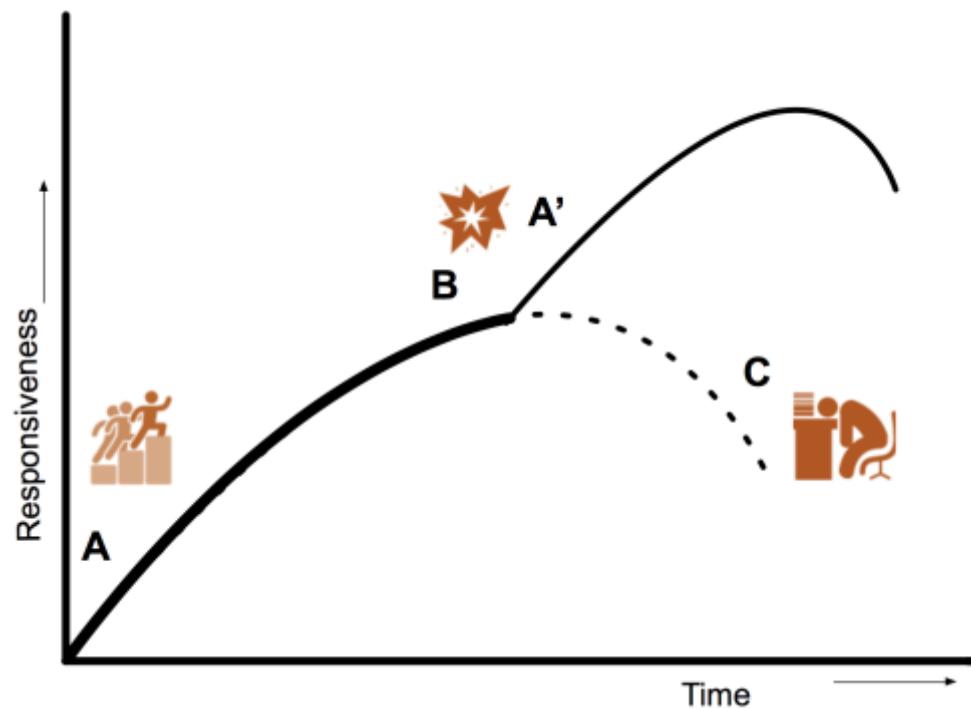

Figure 2: Breaking the Responsiveness Paradox

As a Release Train Engineer (a super Scrum Master of more teams within the scaling framework SAFe), Scrum Master or Agile Coach, you can help teams to prevent them from moving towards the land of boredom. This can be done by creating small disruptions of their work environment so they won't get too comfortable within their routines. Try changing the "rules" of the game slightly; alter their work context and introduce new things. We think it is best to intervene before they slide into the land of boredom and lose the critical level of responsiveness. Our suggestion is to add a 'continuous disruption flavor' to the improvement-mindset and relentlessly challenge the status quo of your teams!

4. Dealing with the responsiveness paradox: Achmea

Sten Reijnen is a Release Train Engineer of one of the Agile Release Trains (a group of collaborative teams working on a product) at Achmea. The agile transformation at Achmea started a year ago. Since then, Sten has proven to be

highly successful in challenging his teams to improve. What is his experience in dealing with the responsiveness paradox? He shares his story below.

> **_"Shift goals and create challenges for your teams" – Sten Reijnen (2017)_**
>
> Sten has experienced the effects of the responsiveness paradox firsthand. His solution is that the teams should never be too comfortable in their position. He shifts goals and brings them to the teams, time and again. Sten focusses on things that work and gets rid of the things that don't work. He creates challenges that are just disruptive enough to keep his teams on their tippy toes. These challenges prevent people from becoming set in their routines.
>
> In this case, Sten noticed that the "regression test & acceptance team" was getting more and more work. This made sense because they were doing more releases than before and were introducing software on a frequent basis. Sten noticed that something had to change as the team was about to blow. He came up with a disruptive intervention as a solution to this problem: he decided to dismantle the team and divided their work amongst the other scrum teams.
>
> In the beginning this lead to a lot of panic and frustration amongst the teams. It was just too much work, teams were unexperienced in performing their new tasks. For a full sprint, every team had to work on the regression tests. However, once they got through it, there were fewer dependencies within testing due to pair-work within the teams. The quality of tests increased and there was a reduction of the lead time by 50%, without having to compromise the quality or adjust our standards. Thus, changing the setting of the teams kept them improving and responsive.

5. Conclusion

Most organizations that aim to quickly respond to change will eventually face the responsiveness paradox. The agile way of working builds on transparent processes and routines, however when proven new agile routines turn into habits again, you risk losing the critical level of adaptiveness. Individuals, teams and organizations should keep re-challenge themselves to be able to improve constantly and stay responsive. As a Release Train Engineer, Scrum Master or Agile Coach, you can help teams to avoid routines becoming habits by re-challenging them over and over again. You should help them break the vicious

circle of the responsiveness paradox by adding a 'continuous disruption flavor' and by relentlessly challenging the status quo of your teams!

Over BlinkLane Consulting

BlinkLane Consulting is an advisory firm founded in 2007. In our 10-year lifespan, we have evolved together with our clients. We continuously innovate our services to keep delivering the value our clients need in order to deal with today's challenges. We help our clients increasing business value from IT investments, act more agile and innovate and transform their organization for the future. For 2017, we focus on the following themes:

- Strategic Sourcing
- Innovation & Growth
- Scaling Agile
- Digital Transformation

The authors

Fayette Bosch is consultant at BlinkLane Consulting. She completed her master's degree in Business Administration with a specialization in Management Consultancy. Fayette is result-driven, well-organized and skilled in structuring processes. She is experienced in coaching Agile teams in working together and delivering results. She knows how to motivate people and how to coach them in coping with setbacks.

Andres Jansen is senior consultant at BlinkLane Consulting. He has 15+ years experience as a consultant, specialized in innovation and IT. Recent years he focused on organizational transformation, making international operating corporates more agile and action-oriented, without losing "grip".

Anneleen Doornebal is a consultant at BlinkLane Consulting. She holds a master's degree in Research in Public Administration and Organizational Science. She has experience in identifying stakeholders' interests and help them to create a common language. Anneleen's every positive attitude, firm believe that there is a solution to every problem and her enthusiasm are inspiring and motivate people to adapt to change.

Sten Reijnen is IT manager and release train engineer at Achmea. He has more than 15 years of experience within IT organizations in various positions. Sten is a result-driven, enthusiastic and energetic leader who drives change by inspiring people. He knows how to make things simple in a complex environment and focusses on the things that create value for the business.

BlinkLane Consulting
Capability drives Performance

Spaces Zuidas – Barbara Strozzilaan 201 – 1083 HN Amsterdam – Nederland

T +31 204 080 860 – info@blinklane.com – www.blinklane.com