AGILE - HOW MUCH OF A CULT IS IT?

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THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS I EXPRESS TODAY ARE SOLELY MY OWN AND DO NOT REPRESENT OR REFLECT THE VIEWS, POLICIES, OR POSITIONS OF MY EMPLOYER

CONTENT MIGHT WARRANT TRIGGER WARNINGS OF ALL SORTS. I TRIED TO KEEP IT LIGHTLY AND LEAVE OUT THINGS THAT MIGHT REQUIRE SUCH WARNINGS WHERE POSSIBLE

NOT CULTS IN MY BOOK:
- FEMINISM
- LAST GENERATION / CLIMATE ACTION
- ANTI RACIST MOVEMENT
- PEOPLE USING PRONOUNS
- HAVING A VEGAN DIET

SEBASTIAN SCHÜRMANN …..

Typescript and C#

Works for Maibornwolff GmbH as a 'Principal Architect'

Has a daughter

Unhealthy habit of buying Synthesizers

Member of the 'Sub 7 club' Nordschleife – in Simracing

Contacted best via LinkedIn

HOW I GOT HERE?

- Introduced to XP 2005 (Thank you Plone CMS community)

- Picked up the Ideas of 'Unit Testing' the same year

- In 2006 started doing standups with a business partner

- In 2009 started Scrum with a Team

- 2012 Started to give more XP Trainings (and general Agile)

- In 2013 changed to 'Scrum Master'

- In 2018 Decided against the career path of agile coach and went back to software dev and architecture

HISTORY OF THE TALK I

- 2010 – Attended a 2 day barcamp about agile

- Made new friends, met old ones and was totally excited about it

- My GF at the time asked me afterwards if I joined a cult or was on a business conference – She thought I sounded like the former

- The next year, same barcamp, had a session that was basically hypnosis mixed with waving crystals in the air

HISTORY OF THE TALK II

- 2014 Onwards, I do a lot of freelance scrum mastery in larger orgs
- "Post Agile" concepts go mainstream: SaFE, Management 3.0
- 2019 was in a personal crisis and get approached by several self-help groups

HISTORY OF THE TALK III

- After 2017 I become aware that many toxic Phenomenon are cult like – "Pick up artists", QAnon and Trumpism

- 2020 a follower on social media suggests that agile indeed has a lot of cult like features

- 2020 I find out about Steven Hassans work and research into the topic

HOW MUCH OF A CULT IS AGILE?

PREMISE 1: CORPORATE CULTURE HAS MANY ELEMENTS THAT RESEMBLE CULT LIKE STRUCTURES AND BEHAVIORS

PREMISE II: CORPORATE CULTURE IS ABOUT BEHAVIOR CONTROL AND AGILE NUDGES IT TOWARDS CULT-ISH

CULT VS. CULTURE

CULTURE

- social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies

- knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits

- Acquire culture through the learning processes of enculturation and socialization

- cultural norm codifies acceptable conduct in society…. template for expectations in a social group

CULTURE: EXAMPLES

- Techno Music

- Open Source Software

- Skateboarding

- The company that employs me

CULTS - MYTHS

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth
- Cults are a thing of the past

Fact
- The internet lets cults thrive and has given them various methods for recruitment

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth
- Cults only exist in religious context

Fact
- From Self-Help Groups to MLM Schemes. There are many who qualify

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth
- Cults use violent means to control members

Fact
- Control is exercised mostly through psychological means

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth
- Leaving a cult is easy. Members can do it all the time they want

Fact
- It is an emotionally and physically challenging process that requires coming to terms with fear, guilt, manipulation and loss of community

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth	• People join cults willingly
Fact	• No one joins a cult. They are deceived and recruited by systematical social influence

CULT MYTH OF FACT

Myth
- Cults are easily recognizable from the outside

Fact
- Cults do everything to hide their real agenda. It is not known to even the most senior member of such organizations

TYPES OF CULTS

👥	**Religious Cults**	Scientology Church of Mormon
🏛	**Political Cults**	Aryan Nation Trumpism
🧠	**Psychotherapy- or Educational-Cults**	NXIVM Insta Coaches
🤝	**Commercial Cults**	Multilevel Marketing Enron

AUTHORITARIAN CULT

A social or religious group in which **power is centralized** around a single leader or a small leadership group, and where this leader or leadership wields considerable **control over members**, often through manipulative, coercive, or otherwise negative means.

Members typically show extreme devotion and unquestioning obedience to the leader, and there is often a significant degree of isolation from outsiders or from dissenting views.

AUTHORITARIAN CULT

Charismatic Leadership	Isolation	Control over Information	Manipulative Tactics
Demands for Absolute Loyalty	Us vs. Them Mentality	Exploitation	Fear of Leaving

~~Mind Control~~

Undue Influence

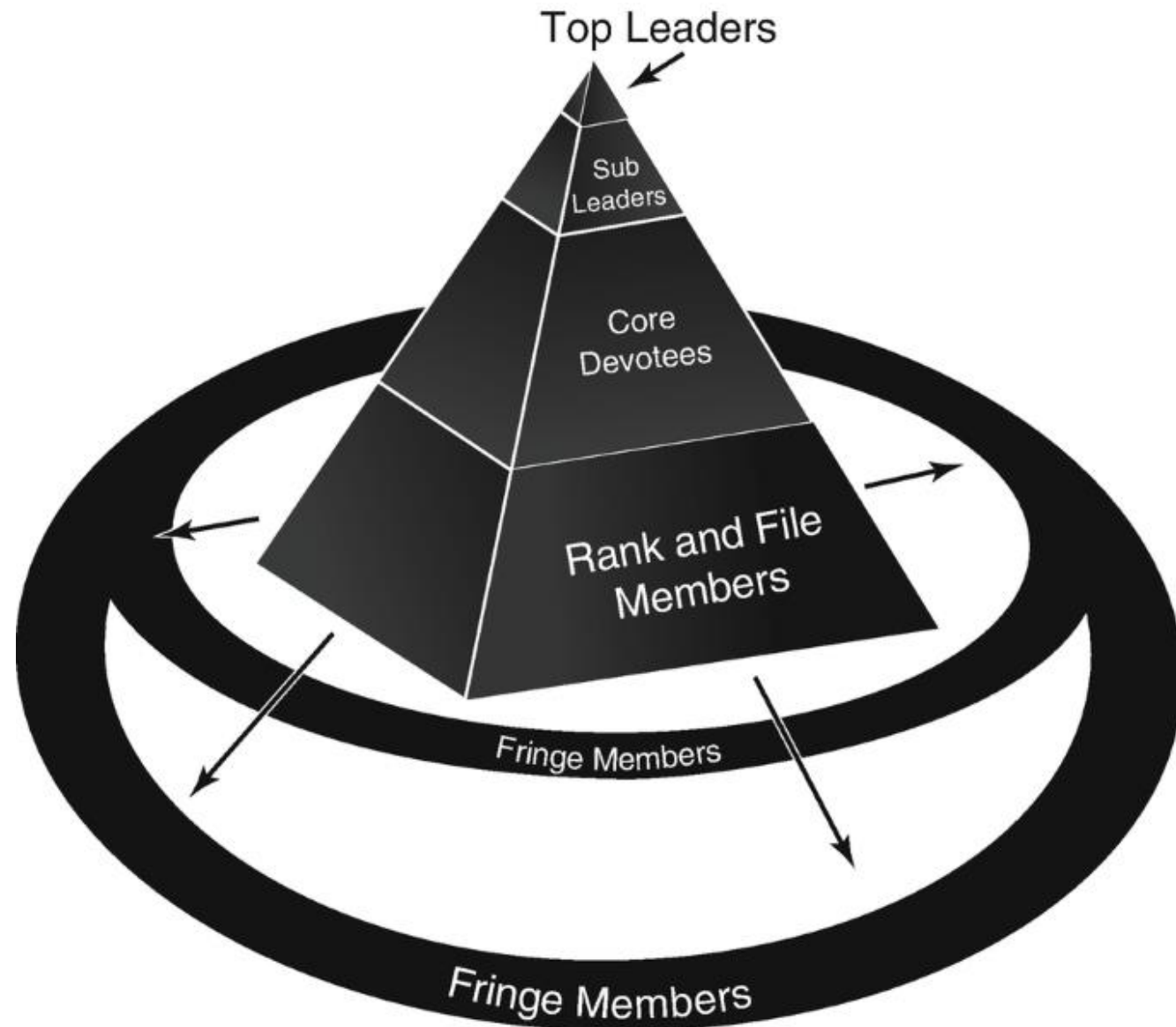| Milieu Control | Mystical Manipulation | The Demand For Purity | Confession |
| Sacred Science | Loading the Language | Doctrine Over Person | Dispensing of Existence |

DR. ROBERT J. LIFTON - EIGHT CRITERIA FOR THOUGHT REFORM

CORPORATE CULTS

COMPANIES AND STARTUPS – A GREAT BREEDING GROUND FOR CULTS

- Charismatic Leadership
- Strong Ideological Belief Systems
- Isolation
- Conformity and Peer Pressure
- Punitive Measures for Dissent
- Restrictive Communication
- High Commitment Demand
- Financial Dependence

CULTS
SOCIAL MEDIA
AGILE

CULTS

SOCIAL MEDIA

AGILE

METHODS OF UNDUE INFLUENCE IN …..

LOVE BOMBING

A manipulative tactic often used in the context of personal relationships. It refers to the act of showering someone with excessive affection, attention, gifts, and praises in order to gain control or influence over them. This overwhelming level of attention and affection is typically not sustainable and is usually followed by a period of devaluation or negative behavior.

Cults
Overwhelming positive attention to recruit members

Social Media: Lots Likes, positive comments, shares from the 'in group'

AGILE
LOVE BOMBING

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Excessive praise for Review contents

Highlighting Success and downplay challenges

Workshop and OpenSpace Ceremonies

Overselling the 'family' or 'tribe' aspect of the team

EXPLOITING CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses.

Exploiting confirmation bias involves manipulating information or situations so that people are more likely to interpret them in a way that aligns with their preexisting beliefs.

Cults: Only presenting confirming views

Social Media: Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

EXPLOITING AGILE CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses.

Exploiting confirmation bias involves manipulating information or situations so that people are more likely to interpret them in a way that aligns with their preexisting beliefs.

Cherry-picking: Authors, Science

Emphasizing on how everyone in the industry is adopting Agile

Suppressing dissenting voices that offer critiques

Labelling any failed sprints as anomalies

LEVERAGING FEAR OF LEAVING

Involves manipulating individuals by playing on their anxieties about departing from a situation or relationship. This tactic makes them feel that leaving would result in significant losses or adverse consequences.

Cults: Creating dependency & fear of isolation

Social Media: FOMO (fear of missing out)

AGILE LEVERAGING FEAR OF LEAVING

Involves manipulating individuals by playing on their anxieties about departing from a situation or relationship. This tactic makes them feel that leaving would result in significant losses or adverse consequences.

Implying job insecurity for those who don't "fit in" with the Agile culture

Portraying non-Agile teams in the company as less successful or backward

Highlighting the lack of demand for non-Agile roles in the job market

Sunk Cost Fallacy vs. Certifications

ABUSING PARTIAL TRUTHS

Presenting fragments of truth mixed with misinformation or taken out of context to deceive or mislead. This tactic exploits the credibility of the truthful elements to make the entire message seem more believable.

Cults: Presenting partial facts as full truth

Social Media: Science Denialism (FLICC), Clickbait, "**Schopenhauering**"

ABUSING PARTIAL TRUTHS ABOUT AGILE

Presenting fragments of truth mixed with misinformation or taken out of context to deceive or mislead. This tactic exploits the credibility of the truthful elements to make the entire message seem more believable.

- Out-of-context quotes from Agile "founders" or "thought leaders"

- Cherry-picking of Conclusions in Research Papers

- Storypoints without a Value assigned

- "It depends" instead of 'I don't know"

RELYING ON LOADED LANGUAGE

Using words or phrases with strong emotional implications to influence an audience's perception or reaction. Such language can evoke powerful feelings, making it easier to sway opinions without relying on logical arguments.

Cults: Using phrases with deeper meaning to members

Social Media: Sexist-, Racist- and Ableist Language, some Memes

RELYING ON AGILE LOADED LANGUAGE

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Overusing Jargon and Neologisms

Terms like "Agile mindset" to shut down critiques

Creating an "us vs. them" narrative

Labeling any critique as "not getting Agile"

Labeling non-believers as "resistant", "old-school", or "not team players"

INCREMENTAL INFLUENCE

The process of gradually shaping or altering someone's beliefs, behaviors, or decisions over time through small, consistent nudges or suggestions. By introducing changes slowly and steadily, the influencer can achieve a desired outcome without the subject noticing the extent of the shift.

Cults: Gradual indoctrination & commitment techniques

Social Media: Gradual increase in platform lock-in & personalized content

INCREMENTAL AGILE INFLUENCE

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Agile Certification Paths

Agile everything in your ~~company~~ life

Consensus without Understanding

Incremental peer pressure to conform to process

C-Level whisperers

WEAPONIZING AWAKENING

Leaders claim to offer profound spiritual or personal insights to lure and control followers, presenting themselves as the sole gatekeepers to "truth" or "enlightenment." Once individuals believe they've "awakened" to this higher knowledge, the cult can exploit this belief, making followers more susceptible to control and less likely to question the group's doctrines or the leader's intentions.

Cults: Offering 'enlightenment' but with manipulation

Social Media: 'awareness' campaigns with hidden agendas

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Portraying past methods and practices in a negative light

Equating questioning of Agile to having the wrong mindset

Elevating Agile coaches to guru-like statuses

Using tales of teams "saved by Agile"

READING MATERIALS

READING MATERIALS

- Steven Hassan (1988) Combating Cult Mind Control

- Steven Hassan (2021) - The Cult of Trump

- Tourish, Pinnington (2002) - Transformational Leadership, Corporate Cultism and the Spirituality Paradigm: An Unholy Trinity in the Workplace?

- Oreilly, Chattman (1996) - Culture and social control: Corporations, cult and commitment

- Dr. Robert J. Lifton (1987) - Eight Criteria for Thought Reform

- Jared Piazza a, Matthew B. Ruby b, Steve Loughnan c, Mischel Luong d, Juliana Kulik b, Hanne M. Watkins d, Mirra Seigerman (2015) – Rationalizing Meat Consumption

Bite Model

Behavior Control

- Promote dependence and obedience
- Modify behavior with rewards and punishments
- Dictate where and with whom you live
- Restrict or control sexuality
- Control clothing and hairstyle
- Regulate what and how much you eat and drink
- Deprive you of seven to nine hours of sleep
- Exploit you financially
- Restrict leisure time and activities
- Require you to seek permission for major decisions

Information Control

- Deliberately withhold and distort information
- Forbid you from speaking with ex-members and critics
- Discourage access to non-cult sources of information
- Divide information into Insider vs. Outsider doctrine
- Generate and use propaganda extensively
- Use information gained in confession sessions against you
- Gaslight to make you doubt your own memory
- Require you to report thoughts, feelings, & activities to superiors
- Encourage you to spy and report on others' "misconduct"

Thought Control

- Instill Black vs. White, Us vs. Them, & Good vs. Evil thinking
- Change your identity, possibly even your name
- Use loaded language and cliches to stop complex thought
- Induce hypnotic or trance states to indoctrinate
- Teach thought-stopping techniques to prevent critical thoughts
- Allow only positive thoughts
- Use excessive meditation, singing, prayer, & chanting to block thoughts
- Reject rational analysis, critical thinking, & doubt

Emotional Control

- Instill irrational fears (phobias) of questioning or leaving the group
- Label some emotions as evil, worldly, sinful, or wrong
- Teach emotion-stopping techniques to prevent anger, homesickness
- Promote feelings of guilt, shame, & unworthiness
- Shower you with praise and attention ("love bombing")
- Threaten your friends and family
- Shun you if you disobey or disbelieve
- Teach that there is no happiness or peace outside the group

FROM COMBATING CULT MIND CONTROL (2018) BY STEVEN HASSAN

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THANKS FOR YOUR TIME!

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