

Preface to the Korean edition of Scaling Lean & Agile Development

I was asked if I would write a preface for the Korean edition of “Scaling Lean & Agile Development.” For a month, I pondered on what to tell our Korean audience. This probably delayed the publication and I’m terribly sorry if you had to wait. Though I do hope this small preface is worth the extra waiting.

My first idea was to share with you what I have learned about scaling lean & agile development after the publication of this book. But quickly I realized that I would just stress the concepts discussed in this book. I do realize that implementing these concepts in large organizations is a difficult job that requires enormous courage and persistence.

Thus instead of re-iterating the concepts in this book, I decided to share an insight that I gained from working a fair amount of my time in Japan and Korea. An insight related to cultural differences that affect Scrum adoption. Other ‘Westerners’ are often surprised when they hear about my work in Japan and Korea and ask whether Scrum works in “these cultures.” Usually I reply, “Yeah, why wouldn’t it?” The common reply is “Isn’t the culture so hierarchical that it prevents team empowerment?” This argument seems to make sense... yet I have seen great Scrum teams in these cultures so there **must** be more to it. In addition to my own experience, Toyota also promotes teamwork and team responsibility, while the company originates from the same hierarchical national culture. So, I’d like to explore this question and explain why a hierarchical society does, in fact, not prevent team empowerment but perhaps can even stimulate it.

My interest in differences between national cultures has grown over the years as I have moved around the world to live in China, Finland and now in Singapore. I have dived into the literature and research about cultural differences to better understand my own experiences and how people’s behavior is affected by their national culture. This resulted in a keynote talk at the 2010 Scrum Gathering in Shanghai which was titled “Scrum doesn’t work in China!”¹ The most widely used model for understanding cultural differences is Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. This model consists of five dimensions and one of them -- called Power Distance Index -- relates to the amount of hierarchy in a national culture. This dimension is described as: “the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.”

An underlying assumption of the question “Does Scrum work in these cultures” is that more hierarchy -- a higher power index -- equates to stronger command & control management. This seems a reasonable assumption as they **do** often appear together. After all, when “the less powerful” people accept that “power is distributed unequally” that implies that the powerful use their powers to coerce others by telling them exactly what they **must** do, right? Wrong!

Respect plays a key role in high power distance cultures. A high power distance is defined from the perspective of the “less powerful.” It could be defined as the amount of respect people have for more senior people -- or perhaps how much value they attach to their words. Whereas, command & control management is defined by how the more senior people use their power and act towards the “less powerful” -- the amount of “telling them how to do” they do. Let’s look at this difference.

¹ A video of this talk can be found at: http://www.infoq.com/cn/presentations/bas_scrum_china

As a manager, I can act towards my subordinates in two ways: 1) I tell them exactly what I want them to do, or 2) I give them a clear goal and tell them that I expect them to manage themselves. The second option works exceptionally well in a high power distance culture exactly because of the respect toward superiors. If my manager made my goal and his expectations clear then it would be most disrespectful of me to wait for him to tell me what to do. Instead, it would be more respectful to work with my peers to fulfill that expectation. For this reason, I have come to believe that Scrum, team empowerment and self-management might actually work **better** in high power distance cultures (especially compared to very individual cultures, but that is a different dimension)

To summarize this insight: power distance is about how subordinates respect and act towards their managers whereas command & control management is about how managers act towards their subordinates -- how they use their power. Therefore high power distance cultures (such as Korean culture) are well suited for adopting Scrum, however the behavioral change of management towards their subordinates is essential for successful Scrum adoption.