Heart of Agile Teams at 10Pines

Tom de Marco coined the term ‘Jelled Teams’ to define those teams that just feel good. Members are energized and motivated. They work hard and in a very disciplined way. They collaborate effectively, ending each day tired, but happy for what has been accomplished. Have you developed software in such teams? Is there anything more enjoyable?

What makes these teams great? What are their values? As leaders in our organization, what can we do, to create them? I will describe our recipe using Alistair Cockburn’s Heart of Agile’s format. In this case, as I am focusing on the collaborate section of his, I am calling it ‘The Heart of Agile Teams at 10Pines’. I believe **great teams are made out its people, the heart, that work in a great environment, with a clear vision, self-organized and well communicated**. The heart, made with these ingredients, looks like this:

![Heart Diagram](image)

**People**: at the heart, there’s the people. There cannot be great teams without motivated and capable developers.

**Great environment**: these people need an innovative environment where they can thrive, feel safe and be energized.

**Vision**: teams focus on what needs to be accomplished. Having a shared vision enables our teams to be aligned and collaborate better.
Self-organization: starting from this shared vision, we self-organize to devise a plan and work together towards it. Empowerment is the best, for both the products we create and ourselves, as it is the best intrinsic motivator.

Communication: last but not least, we need to communicate efficiently. Our Methodology maximizes the bandwidth working in an open-space, shortening feedback cycles and using all available digital tools.

When I was thinking about our heart, I had an epiphany: I realized that our teams work just like 10 Pines. There is no friction between the company and the teams that self-organize to work on projects. They share the same values, do the same things and organize the same way.

Let’s talk about each of these ‘ingredients’ and what we do to enable and enforce each of them.

People

At the heart, there’s the people. Teams are their people and companies as well. It’s not possible to develop software with unmotivated people you can’t rely on. Therefore, we put great effort in the hiring process. We don’t search for experienced Java developers for an important project. This would be too ephemeral. We search for developers that are interested in developing their professional careers at 10Pines.

Based on these objectives, we have designed our hiring process. We want to see how they code, how they solve a problem, the process they use (Test Driven Development), the abstractions they chose, and the way they test their code. We don’t pay attention to programming language details, but we are very thorough in discussing the way they design and test it. Getting to know the human side is both really important and really difficult in such a short period of time. We maximize the time between us and the candidate, having a group interview where everyone participates. It’s important to get to know someone you’ll be spending so many hours with!

After the candidate becomes a pine, as we call ourselves, we need to set a path for growing. This is crucial for us, knowledge workers that care about self-fulfillment as well as 10Pines which needs competent crafters that stay for a long time. Would it be possible to do this if there was no way to grow inside 10Pines? We have put great effort to create our career path, which we call the 'pine’s path,' and that takes us from being padawans, to knights and
then masters, after many years of programming practice. Our path has something peculiar compared to other companies I’ve been part of in the past: We are a self-managed company. Our participation and responsibilities impact on our career paths.

Great Environment

I believe we work better when we feel good. And we feel good when there is a great environment, when we trust the company, we feel safe and we have the freedom to do our work the best way we can.

How can we have such an environment? What do we, leaders, need to do to accomplish this? When 10Pines was starting, we did a group activity that had the objective of answering the following question: what does your perfect job need to have? We arrived at the conclusion that we value the human aspect (the way we treat each other), empowerment (being able to participate), having interesting and challenging projects where we learn and grow professionally, getting paid accordingly and, last but not least, work comfortably.

These core values drive the way we work, our day to day decisions. We have a horizontal structure where we are empowered. We have open numbers. We do company standups weekly, and we use that space to give kudos. We choose the most interesting projects where we can get paid fairly. And we take care of our comfort, having a great office with everything we need to feel well.

Each year, in our yearly strategic retirement, we measure how we are doing for each attribute using the radar retrospective. A lot of honest and valuable discussions have arisen by this activity.

Vision

People empowered, working in a great environment and having a shared vision is what gives rise to the collective intelligence. We all need to understand the objectives because this allows us to take better decisions.
For each new development project, we start with a phase that we call Product Discovery where all team members participate. We build a shared vision for the project, we get aligned and set up a basis of collaboration.

At 10Pines, we share a vision that all pines build and review each year in our yearly strategic retirement. We imagine the company’s future and ourselves in it. We talk and dream.

Self-Organization

We manage the company and therefore we have lots of things to decide, organize and work on. We self-organize teams for all new projects and we self-organize within the teams as well. The synergy reached by self-organized teams leads to better results and it makes us feel better. It intrinsically motivates and energizes us. It contributes to creating a great environment. This is what Mary tells us in ‘Empower the Team’\(^1\), Jim in ‘Team versus Tasks’\(^2\) and Jurgen with the ‘Darkness Principle’\(^3\).

The teams at 10Pines are very disciplined. They are rigorous in their technical practices because everyone enforces them. There is also strong leadership which is not given by a position, but for the knowledge and experience.

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Communication

Few of us are in the high tech business. Most of us are in the human communications business.” said Tom De Marco. I agree. The better teams communicate, the better they will work. Each team is different, so each team needs to have its own communication strategy that broadens the bandwidth and makes it as efficient as possible.

At 10Pines, we start by creating a shared vision among everyone involved. We work closely with business members. We use an iterative and incremental process that shortens feedback cycles. We work in open spaces to improve osmotic communication⁴ and we use all available tools (google hangouts/slack).

We understand the importance of communication and therefore we actively work to make it as effective as possible.

Conclusion

Great teams start by their people, energized and empowered to give their best. There should be an environment that provides safety and encourages collaboration. It should also be an innovative place where people can grow professionally. Teams need to have a shared vision, to promote empathy and to activate collective intelligence. Members self-organize towards this vision. The synergy achieved because of the combination of multiple talents ensures the best results and motivates us intrinsically. Teams need a process that shortens feedback cycles and broadens the communication bandwidth.

10Pines is a great team, with its people, empowered and motivated at the heart, a great environment that all of us together co-create, a shared vision and a communication strategy that maximizes it.