

Spontaneous Squads – A Tool for Transformational Change

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In 2020, we called for volunteers to assist with transformation to create business agility. We thought we needed about twenty. We received over 200 offers of help, to be precise: 228. We were unprepared and needed to consider how we would align the volunteers' efforts. The consequence was a missed opportunity and some demoralised volunteers.

This paper outlines how we subsequently aligned and mobilised squads of volunteers. Why spontaneous? Because the volunteers decide which team to join, we referred to them as spontaneous squads.

We knew that mobilising the volunteer army was the right thing to do. The Harvard Business School professor and entrepreneur Dr. John Kotter has studied successful organisational change efforts for decades. He distilled his insights into a robust framework known as the 8 Steps for Leading Change.

Kotter's fourth step is to **Enlist A Volunteer Army**. Imagine this step as the rallying cry—when you gather your troops, wave the banner of change, and inspire a movement. Here's what Kotter says it's all about:

1. **The Urgency of Numbers:** Large-scale change doesn't happen in isolation. It requires a critical mass of willing and eager contributors, who form what Kotter calls the **volunteer army**. They're not conscripts; they're passionate believers in the cause.
2. **Who Are They?** Your volunteer army comprises folks from all parts of the organisation and from all levels who are transforming.
3. **Born from Within:** The volunteer army comprises individuals from within the organisation who are passionate about change. They are not external consultants or temporary hires but existing employees who believe in the vision and are motivated to contribute. They have peers and networks that span the organisation at all levels—this network is important when dealing with resistance and embedding the changes.
4. **It's Not a Project; It's a Movement:** Think beyond project management. This isn't about ticking boxes or meeting deadlines. It's about creating a groundswell—a shared purpose that unites people. As we said in the call for volunteers, "Join us and leave your mark."

So, when we made the call for volunteers, our intent was well-founded. We had established a quarterly big-room planning event, where transformational themes were discussed, and the plan for the next quarter was outlined. Each theme had a core working group with some full-time individuals assigned. These full-time assignees were what Kotter referred to as the **Guiding Coalition**.

However, when we initially called for volunteers, we had to rapidly adjust our approach to capitalise on this sudden surge in transformative effort. We were lucky to have some bedrock principles and an established quarterly approach. What we didn't have were enough predefined transformational themes.

Equal voice. Our organisation was relatively new to the idea that a volunteer was simply a volunteer, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. However, this approach aimed to enhance teamwork, foster creativity, and promote participation. Both senior leaders and other employees volunteered, with some senior leaders also serving on the Guiding Coalition. Feedback indicated that both groups found the transformation to be a highly educational and rewarding experience.

As the first step in mobilisation, we expanded our big room planning event to include all our volunteers. We had previously established regular quarterly transformation planning sessions and monthly transformation review meetings. The volunteers participate in monthly and quarterly transformation review sessions. During quarterly and monthly planning, themes are identified that specify activities suitable for volunteers to complete, and a crewing call is held. The crewing call asks for volunteers to assist with specific activities.

Once volunteers assemble around an activity, we ask them to form spontaneous teams. Spontaneous teams utilised events similar to those in Scrum to refine their plans and complete their assignments. For example, most teams hold stand-ups but just two or three times per week. These teams are purpose-built, existing as a crew until they achieve their goal, which sometimes takes six months or so. They divide their activities into timeboxes and use a Kanban to visualise their work. In addition to impacted volunteers, subject matter expertise is provided by the permanent members of the transformation team or a delegated business leader.

We were not strict about the size of the theme team, leaving the theme to self-regulate unless we had too few members. I found that most themes had approximately twenty members, with about six being particularly active contributors. However, when challenges arose, I was always surprised by how many volunteers stepped up to help resolve them.

I attended the stand-ups for several of the theme teams throughout the activity. The meetings were not typical scrum meetings. They were more aligned with a Scrum-of-Scrums approach in that individuals discussed their challenges in progressing towards their monthly planning goal. The essence of the meetings was collective problem-solving and adjustment of their plans. Another feature of these stand-up meetings was to call out regression. With cultural change activities, you think you have made a change, but then something happens, and the situation you originally changed reverts to its original state. Sometimes, the stand-up meeting recorded going backwards and adding items to the backlog rather than taking work off the to-do list. Fortunately, this didn't happen very often, but it was a regular occurrence.

The stand-ups were also not time boxed as fiercely as in Scrum. Some teams took 30 minutes, others 45. We attempted to identify volunteers who only attended the stand-ups and avoided participating in the transformational activities.

Few of the squad's estimated activities were used; instead, they relied on flow and work-in-progress limits to decide when to pull and start activities from their backlog. The volunteers provided forecast completion information during the daily standup. Based on this data, the theme could add more momentum to the transformation, either by improving the expected end date or by adapting to business circumstances. Transformation at all costs was not the goal; however, continuing operations and serving customers were.

We held two monthly review meetings and a review before quarterly planning each quarter. Each review was held as an open house, where anyone, whether working on transformation or not, could attend. The reviews allowed each theme team to share its challenges and progress. We felt this sharing actively built cohesion across the transformation and a sense of "we are all in this together". Having an open house review increased our transparency and encouraged further volunteers.

Quarterly planning employed the "World Café" technique to prioritise activities for the next quarter. It also allowed volunteers to stand down, change theme teams, and recruit new volunteers to join the transformation.

Using this approach, we created an evolving target operating model, prioritising changes for those involved. We delivered at a pace that the organisation could absorb while improving operational efficiency and customer experience.

For further information regarding Enterprise Agility, please get in touch with Beneficial Consulting.

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