



**Episode 40: Dean Leffingwell**  
*Episode Transcription*

Mik Kersten (00:06):

Hello, and welcome to the Mik + One podcast where I sit down with industry leaders to discuss the project to product movement.

Mik Kersten (00:16):

I'm Mik Kersten, founder and CEO of Tasktop and bestselling author of Project to Product, How to Survive and Thrive in the Age of Digital Disruption with the Flow Framework. I'm delighted to welcome back one of the world's foremost authorities on Lean-Agile best practices, Dean Leffingwell. Dean is an entrepreneur and software development methodologist best known for creating SAFe, the most widely used framework for business Agility. Dean has authored many bestselling books, including Agile Software Requirements, Scaling Software Agility, and SAFe Distilled. Dean first joined me on the podcast about a year ago in December 2020. We had a great conversation around SAFe 5.0 and the importance of having business Agility, abandoning organizational hierarchies, the importance of focusing on outcome-based metrics and more.

Mik Kersten (00:59):

Since then, I was thrilled to see SAFe 5.1 incorporate the Flow Metrics and witnessing so many organizations succeeding with deploying SAFe and Flow at scale. Dean and I spent a lot of this discussion focused on practices and behaviors of high performing teams and dug into our own experiences on what makes teams thrive. I asked Dean about the concepts of Flow leadership and Flow teams and where he sees the future of Agile models evolving over the course of the next decade, which made for an absolutely fascinating discussion. So with that, let's get started.

Mik Kersten (01:28):

All right, Dean, welcome to the Project to Product podcast. It's great to have you back. I'm always learning and processing everything I hear from you, every conversation that we have, and most recently these conversations have actually come to what the future of Agile, what the future of some of these key roles, what really is happening. As we understand more around product innovation, around Flow, what you see happening to the industry and to the way that we get to business Agility and a faster path to transformation. So... And I know you actually have some questions for me, so this is going to be a slightly different podcast as you've warned me, but why don't you tell us what's been occupying your mind in terms of, again, having seen every Agile model and trying to map out with all this data and information that you have from all these large transformations using SAFe, what you've learned and what you're concerned with and where you think we're headed.

Dean Leffingwell (02:24):

Thanks. Well, I spend most of my time worrying about scale. Right? So we talk about Lean portfolio management and strategic planning and strategic themes. We talk about the Agile release train. But the heart of what we do in SAFe, and I'm confident that the heart of what you do at Tasktop is based upon the nature, the fundamental nature of a high performing Agile team. And I moved to Agile in about 2003 or — 4, I don't remember exactly. When I learned about it, and I got to start coaching some teams and being part of an Agile team is frankly, something that I will never not do. It's what motivates me, the team has my back and vice versa. And high performing teams Agile teams are the heart of Agile and they always were. So in this discussion, as I was thinking about talking to you again, I wanted to get back, really go down to basics and shove aside the veneer a little bit and say, I suspect you have high performing teams because you're performing well in the market.

Dean Leffingwell (03:20):



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And I know you, as we said, we were separated at birth and we've lived these separate lives. I feel that we have some high performing teams, but they don't all behave the same way. And I just want to explore what you're doing and maybe some of what we're doing to try to lay a little groundwork with a little more open mind about Scrum, Kanban, XP, whatever and start thinking about what makes today, in 2021, a high performing Agile team and what we might think they look like in 2025. Because if we lose that, we're going to lose Agility. If SAFe loses that or Shops lose the basic empowerment of what I call the expressive ability of an Agile team, then SAFe's not going to work. And I want to make sure that neither of us lose that and the industry doesn't lose that because that's why I started this company to begin with.

Mik Kersten (04:04):

Wow. Okay. So where do you want to begin?

Dean Leffingwell (04:07):

So I want to ask you some questions. So you've performing well in the market. The tool is well known. We're in the process of putting it to work for us. As you look around your office, and I've talked to you a number of times, both in and out of the offices of COVID times, you've got some high performing Agile teams, and I wonder how they work. I wonder if you can describe them in a way that said, they use a model like this, or a model like this, or they use pure Scrum, or they're really XP like, or they're Flow like. What do they do? Are they all the same? Are they homogenous? How do they behave? How do they think about, for example, events and roles?

Mik Kersten (04:41):

Yeah, Dean. To me, this has been a really interesting evolution, I think, for you. So as a... And I'll just go back to the start of it in terms of my context. And for me, it was '99. I was on an Agile team who was not calling itself an Agile team. We were just calling ourselves an open-source team. We were an open-source team at Xerox PARC and then our team leader at that time read Ken Beck's book and got a chance to talk to Ken Beck. And then we all later quickly read Ken Beck's book. And I got to learn about the theory of constraints. And then we were applying those... And we started calling ourselves an XP team. Right? Back then.

Dean Leffingwell (05:14):

Because that was the best label.

Mik Kersten (05:16):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (05:16):

That you could associate.

Mik Kersten (05:17):

Yeah. Exactly, that was the best label. And then, fast forward and we stopped using that label and we started adapting to some of those practices in our own way. And we learned. And over the next... It was really over the course of four years that I was working with this team and we've evolved a lot of our own practices. And then of course we started seeing Agile come in and learning more from that. But the fascinating thing for me is that we've had this maturing collection of practices where SAFe as I think... By far the best body of work of effective practices. And of course, we've seen what's happening with Scrum and with Kanban, and just philosophically from the start, the way we've approached it as Tasktop has grown and as Tasktop has scaled, as well as, for me what the experiences are with our customers, with



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our partners and just always being interested in what they do. I've found it effective to just allow the teams to choose their own ways of working. Right? And they choose their practices. Right?

Mik Kersten (06:11):

So the practices of PI planning, I think you didn't say not to use them. You need that or something, or have reinvented it with different words. It's critical to aligning business planning and strategy to Agile planning and delivery. And of course, making sure that you've got this feedback loop that's based on outcomes, not just based on connectivities. So where we are... Just fast forward to where we are today, we've taken that approach of learning, of adapting these things. And our integration product, Tasktop Hub, that's using Scrum at the T level. Right? But our very fast moving Tasktop Vizproduct, which really that team... Those teams started forming three years ago now, or they're about maybe three and a half. Well, it was three years ago. They don't. So they actually still have someone called a, for example, just there's a very concrete example.

Mik Kersten (06:58):

There's someone in a Scrum master role on that team, but what they do is just completely different than their goal here. I'll just read it straight from the documentation here, but their role is to be a facilitator of the standard conversation and to ask what happens during block Flow and to help basically facilitate the conversation of improving and accelerating Flow. So that's very different than what some of our product that's OEMed by many vendors and has this other structure and fundamentally has just much larger base of legacy is doing. So it's just been a fascinating thing to me as these practice,s like Scrum, we've seen them in a lot of technology companies. We've seen them, not even in place, yet the concepts of Agility are there.

Dean Leffingwell (07:41):

Let's explore a little bit further because at the heart of Scrum is the Scrum Master and I'll share my own experiences on that. But in the teams that are running the Scrum model, that's defined, I would guess that role is kind of defined the way Scrum defines it, but in the teams that are running a more Flow based paradigm, you're using some of the same skills. You didn't just say they're off on their own and they don't need any facilitative processes to worry about, whether it be entertain conflict or coordinating with others or simply understanding the impediments. So you've taken some of the aspects of the Scrum master role and instilled or inserted those in the teams that aren't per se running Scrum.

Mik Kersten (08:25):

That's right. Have we done it exactly the right way? I don't know. It'd be great to get a sense for it, but that's our factual current state today.

Dean Leffingwell (08:34):

It's kind of similar to my discovery. So maybe, I don't know, 10 years or so ago, we looked at the Scrum master role and the product owner role. And we were rolling Scrum out at big companies, companies that you're well aware of and one had maybe a thousand or so, very highly technical people. It was a basic operating system business. And we were faced with a problem of, okay, we want to adopt Agile and we want to use Scrum because frankly, I like it. I think it's an incredible invention, the notion of the product backlog, facilitative leadership, those things are great, but it's, okay, so we're going to divide into teams of 10 or less. There's going to be a hundred of them and we need a Scrum master and a product owner for each and you get this blank stare. It's...

Mik Kersten (09:15):

Yeah.



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Dean Leffingwell (09:16):

What are those people doing now? They're cutting code. They're writing tests. So I wasn't convinced at the time that the role of Scrum master was a permanent role. So as we adopted Scrum and Agile and evolved our own skills both prior to, and in the context of scaled Agile, we experimented with it. We tried for a while, simply passing the hat amongst our team because...

Mik Kersten (09:38):

Oh yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (09:39):

In theory, people couldn't do this. And you even see.

Mik Kersten (09:42):

We still do that.

Dean Leffingwell (09:42):

Bright folks, bright folks like Mike Cohen write about that. It ended up with Inbar, who is one of my teammates, and I competing for the title of the worst Scrum master ever. We simply did not have the skills. I can't tell if it was skills, interest, attitude, or aptitude, but we were terrible at it. At the same time, we, at one point, did a very structured implementation of project management tooling with stories and task and we found it was too much overhead. So we kind of bailed on both for a while and we got very much more kind of Flow oriented, but as we did that, we started missing some of the add backs and, make a long story short of this piece, we added a Scrum master and she's been invaluable.

Dean Leffingwell (10:27):

But I would say that her role is more oriented towards the work that we do in the art and the coordination of dependencies and impediments with other teams than it is for our team. Now, she absolutely, ably assists our team, but I think her value proposition is much broader than that. So we kind of, in a way, threw in the towel and said, we need that leadership role in our group and we came to the same conclusion is that we want somebody to do that, and their specialty skills, and they're good facilitators and they're trained. And they learn about great techniques for keeping teams dynamic and making meetings good. And they practice icebreakers and they bring fun to PI planning. Invaluable. But at the same time, wouldn't say that we applied the Scrum master role the way it was defined. What about in your world then? And let's just say in the Scrum team, the events are well defined. How do the events look like on the Viz side? Did they do weekly planning? Did they even iterate?

Mik Kersten (11:22):

Yeah, no, I think the iterations are there. The demos are there. It's just, it's a faster cadence, but there's still sprints. Right? The two-week sprint cadence is absolutely there. And I think Dean... But you mentioned the key thing, what's interesting? What's hard about that cadence, right? Let's just take a concrete example. With Tasktop Wiz that talk to all the Agile DevOps and product and project management tools and the like. So you've got this very significant dependency on our connector code base, right? On that separate value stream. That release strain. And then you, you actually said some of these words, which is exactly how, where we've landed today, which is that Scrum master role, of course, is one of the key things is not, and it's not just helping the teams or that this, and it's multiple teams, but the key role that they have is actually understanding those dependencies.

Mik Kersten (12:08):

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And as part of our planning process, of course, making sure that we're managing those dependencies and there's that feedback loop around them. And there's the communication and collaboration happening. So with that, and it's interesting. Right? Because I think you've probably seen this a lot in a lot of these organizations. You'll have dependencies between faster moving teams or teams with more staff and then slower moving teams. Right? As well. So the key thing is just such a great... When you've got someone good at this, that communication is very effective. And so again, in this role... And by the way, for us, of course, the way we look at it, I think the way you look at it is, it's all about accelerating Flow, which means easing burden and removing bottlenecks, removing those dependencies, what a great role for that. But it is interesting to see that it's the way we think about it is probably a bit different than the way we thought about what a Scrum master was a few years ago.

Dean Leffingwell (13:03):

You mentioned, or I did, we both did mention the word increment and iteration. Right? So an iteration has started to be more of an abstract thing for me and I... By the way, I think it is in Scrum as well. Right? So there was certainly a time where the goal of a sprint was a potentially shippable increment and new product functionality, but that tended to make short waterfalls. I think it's clear in the Scrum back guide now that you can ship any time. What we discovered in our team is that we run SAFe with two-week iterations. And that really is a great clock cycle for the company. That plus PI planning, we know how we work, but for the framework team, we decided that that was too slow. And we moved to one-week iterations.

Dean Leffingwell (13:51):

And because they have nothing to do with when you release anything. It was arbitrary. And because it's a subset, it's a sub harmonic of two weeks. We did that. Now we did that for a couple reasons. One is, maybe it's silly. In two weeks sprints I can never remember which week I'm in. I'm always confused. Are we doing planning or not? So we went to one week and we run Monday to Friday, but interesting enough, we don't have a sprint review. We just deliver incrementally.

Mik Kersten (14:19):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (14:19):

But we do planning absolutely rigorously...

Mik Kersten (14:22):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (14:22):

Every single Monday. And because it's generally not a travel day back in the old days when we used to jump on the plane.

Mik Kersten (14:27):

Yep.

Dean Leffingwell (14:28):

You would often jump on the plane Monday afternoon, not Monday morning. So we move to one week and sometimes we feed a lot of other teams. We feed the learning team with content. So sometimes we're like a faster clock cycle.



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Mik Kersten (14:41):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (14:42):  
Which is kind of good. But we align on the two. Now in that, one of the other reasons we went to that, is that the daily standup has not generally worked for us. Lots of reasons. We teach, we're on the road, we're in the air and it got to be, there was two people here, not five, and we couldn't keep the discipline up. And we then moved to say, well, if we met more frequently, if we planned more frequently we'd have higher integration, we'd have higher frequency communication points. So we went... We just evolved this interesting pattern. We do our planning every Monday. It's a 90 minute time box. That's important sync point. But on Thursday we do a sync point and that's again, 90 minutes and Thursday is not about planning.

Dean Leffingwell (15:26):  
And we don't even do story reviews. We talk about, did this get done? We release things, articles, stories, every day, pretty much. And we just do that by a Slack and says, Hey, this is here. Now when we did that, we didn't really need the DSU anymore because we sync on Monday and Thursday. And by the way, if some people can't make it on Thursday, and that's often the case, you're only two days away from a sync point.

Mik Kersten (15:51):  
Right?

Dean Leffingwell (15:51):  
So when we shortened that cycle, we didn't have the rigor of the daily standup. And yet other teams in our company, including teams that develop real assets like multimedia are rigorous about the standup, because they don't have the same travel requirements.

Mik Kersten (16:07):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (16:07):  
They're not necessarily teaching in a class. And they use it, not for what did I do yesterday? They use it for demos.

Mik Kersten (16:13):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (16:13):  
So they're kind of demoing output.

Mik Kersten (16:15):  
Yep.

Dean Leffingwell (16:15):  
So it's almost like a story release party every single day. So for us, when we made it shorter, our life got easier and it means that we're quicker to adapt if we need to. We're less worried about missing a Thursday. We don't have to go, Hey, it's Wednesday I've got, I'm on an airplane or I'm just getting out of bed. Our team is across, I think, six time zones. We know how we work. We work effective though, and





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we have two incredibly important sync points per week. So consequently, we don't need the DSU. Well, if you're not doing a daily standup, you're not really following Scrum. So again, is that not Scrum or is it meeting the intent of Scrum with a slightly different structure?

Mik Kersten (16:56):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (16:56):

So if you ask our team, do you do DSU? The answer would be no. If you ask our team, do you constantly synchronize your work in constant communication, address impediments and blocks? The answer would be absolutely yes. So I don't even know, as a quasi methodologist, if that's Scrum or not, what I know is that works for us in a way that the off the shelf writing, including by the way, probably in our own articles and certainly in the Scrum world, it doesn't describe what we do. What we do meets the intent of what's described, but it's not the same.

Mik Kersten (17:27):

It's interesting. You just reminded me, the highest performing and output team I've been on... This is sadly a long time ago, but I've been directly on as a coder. And this was partly commercial, partly open source, but weekly iterations, no DSUs. Basically Monday, exactly as you say, the sync point for the whole team, and then Friday evening, it was at late evenings in this case, we would... And back then, this was... Today the teams all do continuous delivery. Like you said, it's the kind of the shipping and the planning are decoupled in this interesting way. So just different.

Mik Kersten (18:00):

We would actually do daily delivery back then, and this is early two thousands. No, this is, sorry, this is 2008, but... And then on Friday we would actually do a broader release. And this was working on Eclipse by the way, the Eclipse tools. So that we'd have people consuming it and the feedback on for Monday. But it was just so much more similar to what you're describing right now. That was actually the highest throughput team I was personally a member of. Development team.

Dean Leffingwell (18:26):

Yeah. I think we have common experiences there, and yet if you're starting a team out and you're introducing them to Agile and say, be a high performing team, work your stuff out, figure out how to communicate, deliver every day. Okay. Where do you, how do you start with that? So I think you've got to provide some structure for people to get started and we still feel very structured, honestly, but we're disciplined in our structure. But it's not a model that you could say, they run Kanban, they run Scrum, they run XP. We have aspects of all of that. Even XP, while there's not much bloom on the marketing rows now, the principles around pair programming and peer review, we don't pair program, but we pair frequently.

Mik Kersten (19:07):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (19:07):

So when we want to work on something, we'll do kind of spontaneous pairing. The fact that we have standards, we have quality standards for our work. We use tools, simple tools like Grammarly to make sure we can automate some things. So the principles of XP are definitely with us. No story goes into the baseline without being reviewed. Nothing ever goes into the framework. I won't write a sentence that hasn't had some level of peer review.



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Dean Leffingwell (19:31):

So the learnings from XP are here, but I don't, like you, maybe 10 years ago, there are places like, the company Menlo Park, where that was exactly their business model and they were really good at it. But I don't see that as much anymore, but the learnings from there are also incorporated. So, like you, I learned XP first and found it to be incredibly disciplined. Because if you write the test first or you write it right away, let's be honest, you're going to have good code. So I really like that. And I learned that first, but Scrum kind of won that war in terms of the Scrum Alliance, I think did a fantastic job of making available a routine model that people would adapt and get to Agile really, really, really well.

Mik Kersten (20:16):

Yeah. I've had sense for where this is headed. Right? Because we've seen the technology practices at companies like tech giants or the unicorns and the like. And there is something more I think of what... The way that you're describing working to the way that they're actually implementing and scaling Agility. So where do you think this is all headed?

Dean Leffingwell (20:34):

So, I think people that predict the future are either, clairvoyants or charlatans. And I like to think I'm neither. But the reality is there's no question about more frequent delivery of smaller batch sizes rules. So if I can use Scrum to do that, and for example, the team that I just said, demos their work every day and they have a good rigorous planning model. That's great. If, for example, some of the structures around Scrum, like the DSU, doesn't work for a team, the thing is, are you delivering frequently in small, batch sizes. Honestly, I think it's the theory of Lean and the theory of Flow that is the biggest gift that we have. So I think teams are going to move towards a more Flow like paradigm. But that's not to say that Scrum doesn't play a role.

Dean Leffingwell (21:22):

As we've seen the Scrum masters certainly are super valuable. They're inherently part of the structure in a SAFe shop or somebody fulfilling that role. And I also see Scrum evolving at the same time, but I think... Scrum is great in some ways, because it has a very lightweight definition, but it's also rigorous. And the Scrum guide says, if you're not doing this, you're not doing Scrum. So we're probably not doing Scrum and yet we've learned so much from Scrum and XP that we're beholden to it for much of what we do. So there no question that more frequent releases in every... In virtually every environment. Now is SAP Hana putting out a release every day? I kind of doubt it. I think that would freak everybody out. But I'll bet they're driving towards more frequent updates to that code baseline than they did before.

Dean Leffingwell (22:11):

We're all moving that same direction. Now I also don't believe that a two pizza team could build a banking system that works across 27 nations or a satellite or an F22. So I think we have to have the strength of the small team. Though I think the new Scrum guide is just 10 and under. That's a great rule. It has to be a very high performing team. And then they're going to need to cooperate. So I think as people look at SAFe and Complexa, they say, well, Mik, you just said that you coordinate dependencies. Well, don't you know you shouldn't have them? You should have... What the heck are you doing? You have dependencies? What kind of Luddite are you? Well, the reality is cooperation is required to build large scale systems.

Dean Leffingwell (22:57):

It's a team sport and it's not a one team sport. In our case it's a many team sport and some of our customers have a hundred arts that they consider as team.





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Mik Kersten (23:06):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (23:06):  
So we're talking a thousand team sport and that requires coordination and synchronization. So I think we'll continue to get better at kind of the team dynamic with whatever label goes from that. I have no idea. And we'll continue to coordinate and find lighter ways of decreasing dependencies. I think Team Topologies is a good.

Mik Kersten (23:24):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (23:25):  
A good clue for that. That really helps. We'll continue to evolve ways to decrease the dependencies. At the same time, every large system is a system and it is more than a set of components that accidentally inter operate. I think we'll see both, I think we'll see higher velocity at the team level and we'll see better and better ways to coordinate with lighter and lighter overhead at the system level.

Mik Kersten (23:47):  
Yeah, Dean. So I just want to dig into that a bit, cause I think I love how you think and articulate, basically the entire organization as the system. Right? How you think of SAFe as an operating system for the organization. And I think that... I know my operating system as an activity monitor here and I can look at my network traffic. I see exactly how much megabits I'm streaming up right now. And you've, I think that one of the most important, especially for the kinds of things I care about, which is measuring systems and finding bottlenecks and constraints in systems, that approach you now launched in the past year, was just a few months ago, on metrics in SAFe. And the fact...

Dean Leffingwell (24:22):  
Yes.

Mik Kersten (24:22):  
That you've now got these, what I think are the way of now measuring the system and understanding... You mentioned getting better. Right? To make the system better.

Dean Leffingwell (24:33):  
Yes, absolutely.

Mik Kersten (24:33):  
To make defenses better, to have better alignment between the software architecture, our release strains and our team structure. And then of course the business value streams. We need to be able to measure the system. So could you just speak... And of course where you end up with is we've got the competency metrics, the outcome metrics, which again is, I think, where organizations fail is by ignoring the outcome metrics and over focusing on activities. But you've got the competency metrics, which are key, the outcome metrics, and of course, I'm thrilled to see the Flow Metrics addition here as well.

Mik Kersten (25:02):  
So tell us how... And I do want to make sure you go into this as well and then we can get back to what you've taken away from this in terms of your own learnings of using SAFe for the framework team, as well



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as continually improving the system, which is, I think one of the key things here that these measurements actually make sense that at the different domains in organizations. Right? That we need to be able to understand, expect the system, then feed that back into an improvement loop.

Mik Kersten (25:28):

But tell us a little about... Bit about this journey because I feel like this is such a key part of where the future is.

Dean Leffingwell (25:33):

I'll go back to... Oh my it's 10 or so years or so ago when I was in front of a CEO of a highly technical company, he was not a technical person. Most times that's a struggle. He was really good and he recognized what he could do well and what he didn't do. And he basically said, you folks, and there were about a thousand of us, can run the development process however you like, but we will establish measures and will know that we're progressing towards the measures. But it's not for me to say you should measure this. You have to decide and tell me what those are. I thought that was really insightful. Now over the course of years we've had a lot of metrics in SAFe and we called it a collage. There were many things you could measure, including Flow, and you could measure competencies and there were KPIs and there was key results associated with strategic themes, but there was no comprehensive way to think about the problem.

Dean Leffingwell (26:25):

So back in January we met with the fellows for Virtual Offsite and we threw this out as a problem. And they brainstormed and they worked in a forum for a while and they came up some ideas and some of them were input ideas and some of them were measuring competency ideas, but one of the most important ideas was also how do you measure outcomes? So we started thinking about it in those brackets and said the things that are important to me as an executive, to you as an executive and to other business owners who don't run R and D are, are we getting the outcomes we need? Are we growing our skills and is the process working? So those are the three main areas. So at some point we had different labels for these. I think outcomes started as KPIs.

Dean Leffingwell (27:12):

I think Flow Metrics might have started someplace else. I honestly don't remember. But we resolved at that point that there's these categories that are different. Measuring outcomes is different than measuring your competency. Competency is not an outcome. Even measuring Flow, that's not an outcome. That's a measure of the process that will produce outcomes. So as you know, and we had great discussions about that. We just didn't take your book and your word for granted. We went out and we looked at all the metrics associated with Flow, and we came to conclusion that what you had written now... What you had written was a excellent synthesis that modular a couple things, like the ability to make sure that we're predictable because that's important to us in the SAFe world and competency was really good. So we said, that's a great set of metrics for Flow, and we've implemented those.

Dean Leffingwell (28:01):

And we're in the process... And my team, in terms of where we're in terms of our growth, that's one of the things we're doing now, is we're trying to establish better measures for Flow and figuring out by the way, what states are necessary to determine that. Right? If we decide to hold a thing for a while, that thing is a story. Is that story blocked or is it in a holding pattern called delayed? Well, they're different things. So we have to sort out those rules, but having said that, that's kind of next for us to get that part right? So when it comes to outcomes, all of us, every business wants you and I to help them get the right outcomes. For



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us that's mostly grounded in KPIs. And I think the state of the art is such as that we're trying to understand how Flow can tie to outcomes, how competency improves outcomes.

Dean Leffingwell (28:51):

And we're going through a process right now with a little bit of internal work to try to correlate competencies to business results. Because we know the correlation is there, but you have to prove causality. You have to... You say, not only is the case that they did it, they got better results, but if they didn't do it, they didn't get better results. So we're looking with a bit of, as far as we can go with metric science to figure that out. But those three areas — outcomes, competency, and Flow — you can anchor any enterprise in that, any portfolio in that. And I think you have a unique contribution in looking really, really hard at the Flow Metrics, and coming up with a set of five that have definitions. Every definition everywhere in our space is overloaded and inarguable, but you put down five and said, we're going to go with this.

Dean Leffingwell (29:37):

And we debated those five and said, I think these work, who said, okay, great. And we ask your permission, say, Hey Mik, can we just put these in SAFe? Because it's the best set of organized Flow Metrics we have. So that's how we got here, but it wasn't with great pride that I've had this incredible vision of how we should measure things over time. I honestly didn't know. And I was more concerned about just getting stuff out the door.

Dean Leffingwell (29:59):

And if our customers are getting stuff out the door, their business owners are happy. At the same time it's like well, will they get to outdoor next year? And are they getting better at things getting out the door? So it takes a degree of maturity to worry about this set of metrics, but once you're there and once we kind of look forward and say, well, if delivering value more frequently is important, that's a Flow based statement. We got to be able to measure that. So that's why we kind of ended up in our communication saying that's a really good paradigm. It's a piece of our paradigm. It's not the only piece, but it's a piece of our paradigm that frankly we thought we could borrow with permission and make good, take good advantage of.

Mik Kersten (30:36):

Excellent. And then by the way... so I think it's great to see. And again, I think having it grounded in your body of work, your experiences is also really helpful because I think the thing that you identified Dean that was actually missing, or you and the team, is Flow predictability. Right? That was one I struggled with. I knew it was necessary. I did not have enough data at the time, to compare plan versus actual business value delivered and to understand the amount of unplanned work coming into a value stream and so on and so again, I think such a key addition at that point in time, three years ago, again, my sense was it was necessary and I'm glad that the body of work has been augmented here. So now...

Dean Leffingwell (31:14):

Without rolling over into hubris, predictability is really important to us in our enterprise. And that's a thing that my team is quite good at. We are very predictable. Now in order to do that we have to take certain allowances. We have to say there's things we can't commit to because we're still doing research. But when we make a commitment at the PI boundaries, we always meet it. I think it's fair to say that there's never been one that we didn't agree needed to be changed in the middle because of some change in the business that we haven't met, and when teams do that, it creates a different dynamic. We trust everybody to do what they said they could do in this interval. It's a short interval. It's still research and development.



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Mik Kersten (31:53):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (31:54):  
But people will do this or they'll get back to us right away and say, Hey, we've hit an impediment or obstacle. So predictability isn't, oh, we're predictable. Yeah, it is. We're predictable. That means you can count on us. You can build a business with a set of teams that are predictable. And if they're unpredictable, you might get a great insight, but you might just blow the next release as well. And you never really know. So predictability is a critical factor at scale. And that doesn't say you can't innovate. You can innovate predictably. You can say, in this next interval we're going to explore this thing or we're going to build this MVP, or we're going to do a spike. So that also gets built into the backlog. And it's just part of what you do to make sure that you're constantly exploring, constantly integrated, constantly delivering. It's just part of the good salt of not only an Agile team, but an Agile art or Agile program.

Mik Kersten (32:45):  
Yeah. I could not agree more. And I think Dean back to scaling. Right? I think so many leaders out there are concerned that there's not enough. We're not scaling well, things are not predictable. Things did slip. And I think, again, you're experiencing great predictability, I think that the examples that we've seen and when we see the data, the Flow data in an organization, where there's a lack of predictability, we will often see, for example, things like way too much Flow load on the team. So they have no capacity for unplanned work that comes mid PI or another... By the way, one of the most common ones we see where predictability is adversely effective is mid PI scope changes coming in from business customers and the like. Right? It completely wreaks havoc with a team, especially when they get to a level where everything the team agreed to is now... Has been adversely effective in terms of the current PI plan.

Mik Kersten (33:33):  
The thing I love about adding predictability to it... I do want to actually get to the different levels of team metrics seriously. I want you to talk through that. I thought that was such a powerful concept, in a moment, but if the team is understanding and measuring and owning their Flow predictability, or lack of it, then you're having the right discussion to understand how do we get more predictable. How do we get lower Flow time and the like. So Dean, I'm going to pause there for a second because I think what you've articulated in.... I will, of course link the metrics article from SAFe in the materials, but this way that you've structured it of having basically Flow competency and outcomes at the Agile team level, at the release train level and the solution train level and at the portfolio. And then that's this, I think really profound statement that you make that these are actually self similar. These are fractal. These cascade. Can you just talk us through that a bit?

Dean Leffingwell (34:22):  
Yeah. So we got to be... It's a careful fractal. Right? So here's what does work. We can measure Flow outcomes and competency of any actual release train. We can measure Flow outcomes and competency of any team, but you don't take seven teams and measure competency and add them up to the competency of the release train. They're entirely different things. So the notion that it's a fractal is pure, but it's not a cascading integration. So it's not that they roll up. If we have a couple teams that are not very good at Flow at all. And some that are extraordinary, that doesn't mean you're average.

Mik Kersten (35:04):  
Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (35:04):

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It means that you're probably not getting stuff out the door. So we don't actually coach kind of the roll up or the integration, but we do coach the fact that it is a fractal. I can measure that the portfolio level, for example, there's a portfolio Kanban system.

Dean Leffingwell (35:19):

I can measure Flow through that system. We can measure the competency because we have a competency around lean portfolio management. And do we measure outcomes at the portfolio level? Absolutely. Those are the KPIs. So these three nuggets of Flow competency and outcomes apply at all levels, but they're not in integration. We're not taking the spreadsheets and adding six to nine and coming up with 15, we're saying the answer is whatever the answer is in the context for that team. And I think that's where a lot of people go wrong and I bet you discovered the same thing.

Mik Kersten (35:50):

Oh yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (35:50):

Taking three teams with different Flow Metrics and aggregating them and pretending like that's an answer is not an answer. It obfuscates the real issue and basically says, so you're not addressing the root cause. Right? The root cause is this team needs to improve. But you tell me, I put words in your mouth. I doubt that you add up Flow Metrics team by team and say the Flow through the enterprise is equal to the summation of these.

Mik Kersten (36:13):

This is exactly what we're seeing with the data. Right? And I think you describe the example. I'll give you another one. You've got 10 teams on a value stream. 10 of them actually have a good Flow velocity, the one, and short Flow time. Then you've got one, which is the API team. That's actually needed to get them the data. And it turns out the things that they're delivering have nothing to do with the customer value that was planned for that PI, because they're all blocked on that one team whose velocity is poor. So it's so easy. We've had to be so careful in our... Even our implementation of Flow Metrics, not to hide what's happening with basically the... At the team level, the shape of the Flow. Right? Because again, you could have... The average can look fantastic and obfuscate more.

Mik Kersten (36:52):

What we've seen with the Flow Metrics empirically across our customer base, which is... The majority of them are SAFe shops. Is that the variability in the metrics for teams. And it'd be interesting to see on the competency and the outcome metrics. I bet it's similar. The variability is very high. Which means if you're just doing a simple implementation, adding up all the data on a spreadsheet, or however you're doing it from a data warehouse and these manual ways of... Just these naive ways of adding it, chances are you're hiding the actual information, because we know two things, high variability of Flow data between teams and significant dependencies. And of course then the dependencies tend to be on the bottleneck, which is the team that's having the most trouble that wants the most help. So.

Dean Leffingwell (37:35):

For a fact, the theory of constraints. Right?

Mik Kersten (37:36):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (37:37):



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The dependency around the bottleneck. We've got five teams that could go fast and one that everybody's dependent upon.

Mik Kersten (37:42):

Yeah. And the fast teams will go fast, they'll be doing something. It's just that they won't be doing the thing that was actually planned as part of that PI or is aligned with a strategic theme. So it's just a... We've actually struggled with this a lot because we initially did do too much cascading up without showing enough about the distribution across at the team level. And then again, from the art to the solution level. Right? As well. So.

Dean Leffingwell (38:06):

I think this is rooted in people want to know how we're doing in the whole. Right? So one could argue what system do you need to know all that. The problem is that when you... The average price for the home in your neighborhood is not what you're going to pay for the house you're going to buy. Right?

Mik Kersten (38:21):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (38:21):

You've got to know more detail than that. And I think that it's a really big caution. We can measure these things at the art level. We can measure at the team level, but the summation of the team does not equal the art output because a bottleneck resource... And by the way, in my experience, some of the best teams I've worked with were working on, I guess, what you now described as a complicated subsystem team.

Dean Leffingwell (38:47):

And they were bottlenecks and things needed to go through them. And it always seemed slow. There were some of the fastest, most dedicated and strongest teams ever, but they had the biggest problem.

Mik Kersten (38:57):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (38:58):

Which is everything went through their hands.

Mik Kersten (39:00):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (39:00):

So the fact that there isn't Flow doesn't mean it's a bad team. It says, wow, they may have too much on their plate.

Mik Kersten (39:06):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (39:06):

We need to separate out the APIs differently.

Mik Kersten (39:08):





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Exactly.

Dean Leffingwell (39:09):

We may need just two more people in the team because they're working on the trading system and everything goes through trading. And we're two people short and the whole... We could add two people and double the velocity of the team. So you have to know the solution lies in the details. Right?

Mik Kersten (39:26):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (39:26):

The facts are in the details and has to be addressed in the details. The aggregate, yeah, maybe law of large numbers means something, but it's not what these metrics do. So they're fractal in nature, not additive in nature.

Mik Kersten (39:40):

Yeah, exactly. The visual you just gave me, it's like... And I'm seeing people do this all over the place with these more naive approaches to metrics is, it's as if you're measuring the shipping industry and looks like all the boats are moving pretty fast, but you haven't yet noticed because you're doing the averages that there's something in the Suez Canal that's not moving overly quickly. It's the Evergreen. Right? Yeah. So Dean, now this is... So in terms of, again, my own learnings from you here, how we apply this, the Flow competency outcomes, I think, are exactly the right model for how we should be looking at measuring our teams and driving that improvement.

Mik Kersten (40:12):

The improvement of daily work, which we know is as important as the daily work. So how do you think of... This is a question of, I've been meaning to ask you, who... And this actually maybe relates a little bit to the start of our discussion. Who owns that? Right? Who owns the Flow competency and outcomes? Because we know we need all three. We know high performing teams are always improving all three. So at the team level, right up to the portfolio level, who should own the improvement of those metrics?

Dean Leffingwell (40:38):

Well, obviously the team's the only ones that can improve their own performance, make no mistake about that. But the most interesting question here is the one we haven't talked about is how do you measure outcomes? Right?

Mik Kersten (40:47):

Right.

Dean Leffingwell (40:47):

So if we create a new article or somebody... Or if you put a new feature in Viz, did that change the outcomes? Boy, that's really hard to correlate. And if you try to spend any time tracing from this feature, increase this sales, you're going to spend all your time in analysis, you're not getting anything done.

Mik Kersten (41:04):

Yep.

Dean Leffingwell (41:04):



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So we've tried to elevate that to KPIs. Right? What really matters in this business. And as I think about my team and somebody else asked me the other day about how we think about this, we have KPIs, but they're mostly at the portfolio level.

Dean Leffingwell (41:19):

So the things that we impact are measurable there. Right? Are people attending class? Do the classes get good scores? Are we getting really good feedback from customers? Do we routinely see things in support that are complaints versus supportive? So we see and have those because we're close to the portfolio. We're a key element of it. But I think when you start to think about anything beyond, for example, a key results or team objectives, then you start to worry about whether or not that KPI they're measuring at that solution level is really the right one to aggregate up. And I don't know about that. I think it's highly dependent on what you're building.

Mik Kersten (41:59):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (41:59):

I think my guess is the Viz team has certain types of... The Viz teams have certain kind of outcomes that are important to them, but the Tasktop team also has certain outcomes, but they're not the same type.

Mik Kersten (42:10):

That's right.

Dean Leffingwell (42:11):

One might be market share. One might be efficiency. So you have to know what the solution is you're building and associate KPIs with that. But the nice thing about the solutions in SAFe is they're kind of art based. Now a team can absolutely create a solution, but that's probably... A single team solution is not generally that big a thing. So it's probably combined with other things in the art. So you focus on those solutions, say, what am I trying to get done with the solution? What's the net promoter score for support for that solution?

Mik Kersten (42:39):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (42:39):

Or what's the net promoter score for the class, or is there uptake on the class? Is that class selling? Are people looking at the website? Did anybody click on this new article? Those are the things that we look for, for our outcomes. And they all aggregate up because in the end, the outcomes are success in market share.

Dean Leffingwell (42:54):

And for many cases, that's profitability and nonprofits, it's whether or not they're serving their constituents, in certain governments it's whether or not they're serving the public well. Those get to be pretty lofty and pretty intangible. And it's pretty hard to say that the feature I did just increased our market share. It's hard to get there, but I can say in my solution, we added this new capability and people are actually using that. So given that they're using that, that's pretty good. Market share may or may not go up. Could be other reasons why I'm losing market share. So those get to be intangible and less connected. So you keep your eye on them, but you got to measure the things that you've got some capacity to change.



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Mik Kersten (43:32):

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's exactly how we've approached it. And again, I think what you're saying here as well is that those outcomes are... They're still key at the team level. Right? One of the dysfunctions I've seen is that the outcomes are there at the solution train level, but the teams, they don't even, they don't know who the customer or the outcome is because the work has been thrown over the fence to them still. But pushing the outcomes to the team level, even if it's, did anyone use this feature? Of course then did that then drive by the retention of the customer base? Did that drive a renewal or more success with a customer? More happiness with a customer? Those things we can actually connect if we're looking at this kind of correlation based approach, rather than again, having a perfect line from feature to outcome. So.

Dean Leffingwell (44:09):

Teams and arts build solutions, product and solutions, products in your world solutions and ours. What are those solutions doing? We try to achieve with that and put the measure there.

Mik Kersten (44:18):

Yep.

Dean Leffingwell (44:18):

And then you've got your process measure... You've got your process metrics, whether you're flowing. You've got your ability to improve metrics, which is competency. And then you've got a set of outcomes that are local to you and meaningful, as opposed to, that floats at the... We want more market share. I don't know what a team does about that. It's going to take a lot of teams working very effectively to actually increase market share if that's the goal.

Mik Kersten (44:40):

Exactly. So Dean, I'm going to now have a big question for you. It was your charlatan comment that made me think of this. Because I do not see you as a... I know you're not a charlatan, but Alan Kay, the person behind Smalltalk and just an amazing I think, thinker, he did say, and I remember hearing this, the best way to predict the future is to invent it. So think towards 2025 or that kind of five year timeframe, what do you think? And knowing what you know, which is, I think more than most of us do and the way that you've seen these kind of Agile methodologies, team structures, practices and the like evolve, what do you think will happen to what Agile teams look like in the back half of this decade?

Dean Leffingwell (45:20):

Well, I think they'll be Agile teams. We've been at this almost 20 years now. And probably if you look across the industry, only a small percentage of people, even in development are on Agile teams. It might be a third. I don't really know. But as you start to think about the Agile enterprise, you start to think about, well, this model of empowerment, kind of local backlog management, facilitative leadership, commitment to an objective, cooperating in the larger sense, that's going to be across business. So I think you're going to start to see Agile businesses and we are already working with... We got Agile marketing programs, we've got some people right now trying to understand what's it like to be an Agile sales team. Do you do daily standup? Do you have a backlog? Can you accept new work if it's a new order? Absolutely. So I think you're going to see business Agility grow out of that.

Mik Kersten (46:05):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (46:05):



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I do not foresee a time when a small group of people working together, who trust each other and are committed to an objective, isn't the fundamental building block of success. If that happens well, I'll be past my time for sure. But I just don't see that. I don't see... Is there a replacement for team level Agility on the horizon? I sure don't see it. I think we've got to get better at what we do and whatever evolves will evolve through here. Right? It's going to evolve from our current practices and processes. I don't see what that quantum jump would be. I don't know where you'd go. One of the things I liked about your book is you went back to the first principles of Lean, and those have informed me for decades.

Dean Leffingwell (46:46):

Those are still true. Right? Smaller batch sizes, elimination waste and scrap, focus on the delays. Will there ever be a time that we're not doing that? I kind of doubt it. Is there a time when our systems are going to get less complex. No, they're getting smarter. They got AI and they have to be monitored. They make decisions. We have to be involved in that. I don't think we can ever be less Agile. I don't see a way out of this and I think that we'll continue to have systems that are bigger than us, and they're just... Soon be smarter than us, and we're going to have to be very Agile and be very smart to keep up with them.

Mik Kersten (47:18):

Awesome. And I will venture and say in terms of predicting the future by inventing it, that at each of these levels, outcomes, Flow and competency will be the way that teams measure and improve themselves.

Dean Leffingwell (47:29):

Well, it's a fairly new handle and we're certainly going to give it a shot, both of us. Right?

Mik Kersten (47:33):

Yep. And, yeah. And I think that will last however team structures evolve when they become more Flow oriented, leadership roles change.

Dean Leffingwell (47:40):

Will outcomes ever not matter?

Mik Kersten (47:42):

Yeah.

Dean Leffingwell (47:42):

No.

Mik Kersten (47:43):

No, exactly.

Dean Leffingwell (47:43):

And does the ability to deliver value quickly matter? No. The ability to improve always matter? Yes. So I think those are pretty persistent labels that we could hang onto for a good five years at least.

Mik Kersten (47:54):

Exactly. That's what we need as this stage. So. Okay. Dean. Amazing. Thank you and I think, again, this is actionable today, which is, I think, why it's so important that people take a look at this metrics article, understand how SAFe has evolved, and then anything else that you want us all to pay attention to in terms of a future evolution of the framework and [crosstalk 00:48:12]



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Dean Leffingwell (48:11):

Yeah. A note to leaders. Think back a time when you were, when you, as an individual, a practitioner or a manager were led by somebody who didn't have a fundamental understanding of the space, think about how miserable you were.

Mik Kersten (48:27):

Okay.

Dean Leffingwell (48:27):

Think about yourself as a leader and make sure that we stay ahead of this game and that we don't become ossified where we're always are working. So continuous learning leadership, having leadership lead, which is what we're paid to do is critically important. And that requires continuous learning because this market is moving really fast. So we're all in a race to gain knowledge as fast as the market is changing. So we cannot rest in place. So a note to leaders. Go to Gemba, get out of the office, go back, take an online class, pick up two good books, have a book club, do something to make sure that you're the knowledgeable people that the people who you lead will respect for your knowledge. It's just a lot more fun that way.

Mik Kersten (49:11):

I've got shivers. That is amazing. Could not agree more. Thank you so much, Dean.

Dean Leffingwell (49:15):

Hey, thanks for having me, Mik. I always enjoy these.

Mik Kersten (49:19):

Huge thank you to Dean for joining me on this episode. For more follow me on my journey on LinkedIn, Twitter or using the hashtag MikPlusOne or ProjectToProduct. Dean's Twitter handle is @deanleffingwell. If you want to learn more about the Flow Metrics and SAFe, go to [tasktop.com/solutions/SAFe](https://tasktop.com/solutions/SAFe) or Google SAFe Metrics and that'll actually take you straight to the scale Agile framework website. I have a new episode every two weeks. So hit subscribe to join us again. You can also search for Project to Product to get the book and remember that all of our proceeds go to supporting women and minorities in technology. Thanks, stay safe. And until next time.