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# Continuous Improvement: Hell on Earth?

Katherine Kirk

6 March 2014

Qcon London

# Intro

- Katherine Kirk
  - Over 10 years contracting and freelancing in a variety of roles within the IT and Media industries
  - Coach, PM, Delivery Improvement Specialist, DBA, Web Admin etc etc
  - Specialise working with really "troubled" projects, where simplistic solutions don't quite cut it

# Why Hell on Earth?

## The Fundamental Issue

“Continuous Improvement is based on two dangerous inbuilt assumptions which **automatically predisposition it to failure**”

# Work in Progress

- No answers – opening discussion
- Who knew: controversial?

# Agenda

- NEW Industry demands: Continuous Improvement is not enough
- People dislike Continuous Improvement Programs
  - 2 common failures
  - Why they occur, using Eastern Philosophy
- A different perspective
- What we can do about it

**CONTEXT**

# ... Sigh ...

- Late 90's/early 2000's management style is no longer the answer
  - 1 big release
  - 1 big star per company to run the show
  - 1 single innovation department
  - A couple main territories worldwide



Its MUCH tougher out there!

Ever changing industry:  
**Innovation** is the norm

# Our response?

Just ALWAYS keep improving:

**Continuous Improvement**

# Improvement

**2006**

Nokia N72



# Improvement... Continuously?

**2006**

Nokia N72



**2007**

Nokia 6555



# Improvement vs Innovation

**2006**

Nokia N72



**2007**

Nokia 6555



**2007**

Apple's First iPhone



# Blackberry



**2006**



**2007**



**2008**



**2009**

# Continually Improving...



**2010**

**2011**



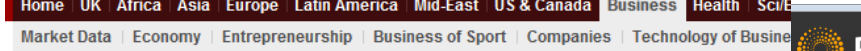
**2012**



**2013**



# Blackberry now



## Blackberry-maker RIM going back to its roots

30 March 2012 Last updated at 06:09 GMT

The company that makes Blackberry smartphones says it will refocus on the corporate market than consumers.

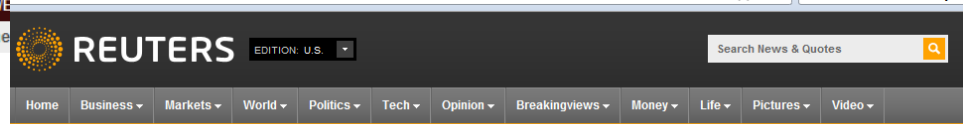
Research In Motion has seen its sales fall behind the competition from Apple's iPhone and devices running Google's Android software.

The Canadian company made a net loss for the three months to 3 March 2012 of \$125m (£78m) compared with a profit of \$934m a year earlier.

Speaking to Wake Up To Money on **BBC Radio 5 live** Larry Magid from CNET said that the company may look at selling the consumer arm of the business.

To listen to other 5 live interviews, please visit the [Best Bits](#) page

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ARTICLE

Big leaps keep your universe expanding

New Stars

Open

S&P DOW JONES INDICES

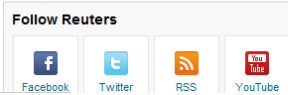
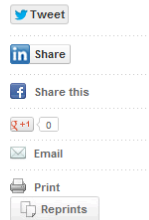
MCDRAW HILL FINANCIAL

The advertisement features a blue background with a white rocket ship launching from the left. The text 'Big leaps keep your universe expanding' is in white, and 'New Stars' is in a blue box. At the bottom, there are logos for 'Open' and 'S&P DOW JONES INDICES' by 'MCDRAW HILL FINANCIAL'.

## BlackBerry Takeover Bid Falls Apart, CEO to Depart

By Benjamin Kabin at [Entrepreneur.com](#)  
Mon Nov 4, 2013 11:12am EST

The \$4.7 billion deal that would have taken BlackBerry Ltd. private has come undone. The Waterloo, Canada-based tech company announced today that Fairfax Financial Holdings, the investment firm that proposed the takeover bid but was unable to raise the necessary funds, will instead invest \$1 billion in BlackBerry.





...

Its just not enough anymore!!!!

# But: even big players are faltering

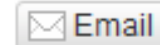
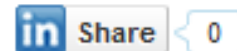
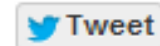
## Come on Apple, think different

The Apple known for thinking big and deep is in danger of becoming the new Microsoft. It needs to innovate to stay cool



**Heidi Moore**

theguardian.com, Thursday 24 January 2013 18.30 GMT



Article history

**Technology**

Apple · Computing ·  
Tablet computers · Steve  
Jobs · iPad · iPhone

World news



com...

# The era we live in now

... its about **consistent innovative thinking**:

“Globalisation + technology = complexity”

– Need for speed

– *We require innovative solutions:*

- *to release, to adapt for a variety of territories, adjust to legislation, interfacing / extending legacy systems, service multiple devices and multiple versions (e.g. mobile, IPTV etc)....*

# Our response?

- Just ALWAYS keep improving
  - We think Continuous Improvement is the answer
- Improvement =
  - Work out what is wrong
  - Change it to what's right
  - Build on what's right with other right things
- Continuous =
  - Do this over and over, indefinitely

# SUPER POWER: Agile/Lean

- Agile/Lean has continuous improvement inbuilt
- So all we have to do is go Agile / Lean, right?

**... RIGHT ... ???**

**PEOPLE DISLIKE CONTINUOUS  
IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS**

# An interesting pattern

- Ask a software engineer (even from an Agile/Lean team)



- Ask an environmental scientist
- Ask an archaeologist



# Whaaa??

- Engineers are discovery junkies
  - Teen years in dark rooms ‘improving’!
  - Isn’t Continuous Improvement always fixed by Agile/Lean?????

# Summary

- So Continuous Improvement
  - isn't cutting it in the industry ?
  - somehow it's messing up morale?
- But, we **NEED** Continuous Improvement
  - We love to improve
  - We **GENUINELY** want to get better and better
  - Industry **DEMANDS** it

So what's going wrong?

# **TWO COMMON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FAILURES**

# Two common failures

- Distilled, exaggerated ‘parables’
- Even in AGILE/LEAN scenarios
  - Story 1: Continuous Improvement Management
  - Story 2: Continuously Improved Application

# We need Continuous Improvement!

- People are gaming management
- Quality is dropping
- Can't deliver what we promised
- No predictability / consistency
- Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)
- Product is degrading (legacy code hell)

# Story 1:

## Continuous Improvement Management

- Philosophy:
  - Agile/Lean initiative
  - Add Continuous Improvement BOOST
    - Give you 50% less (e.g. Time)
    - Expect 100% more (e.g. Output)
- Driver
  - Faster, better
  - Get predictable improvement
  - Get promotion!

# Example

Phase	Will take	Output	Team	Manager
Phase 1	4 weeks	10 items	...	Anger
<i>Request</i>	<i>2 weeks?</i>	<i>20 items?</i>	<i>Permissive</i>	<i>Frustration</i>
<b>Phase 2 - achieved</b>	<b>2 weeks</b>	<b>20 items</b>	Excitement	Pleased
<i>Request</i>	<i>1 week?</i>	<i>40 items?</i>	<i>Trepidation</i>	<i>Determined</i>
<b>Phase 3 – achieved</b>	<b>1 week</b>	<b>40 items</b>	Surprise & Exhausted	Confidence & drive
Request	<b>2.5 days?</b>	<b>80 items?</b>	Anger/Frustration	Convinced



This is CRAP



PROVEN

Yes it works!!!!

(sack those who don't believe it)



# The GREAT divide

- Management confirms
  - I've seen a pattern
    - The team can ALWAYS do more than they say
    - There WAS something wrong with their attitude
    - Ignore the protestations of impossibility
- Team confirms
  - I've seen a pattern
    - Manager is disengaged from our situation
    - To make this work we now need to game the system
    - Trying to make it better never works
    - Best to get left alone just to do our job

# Ouch?

- **They will revert to original behaviour**
  - *People are gaming management*
  - *Quality is dropping*
  - *Can't deliver what we promised*
  - *No predictability / consistency*
  - *Apathy (increase in sick days/everyone wants to work from home)*
  - *Product is degrading (legacy code hell)*

# What's happening here?

**“Punching the puppy won't make it play”**

*Forcing people to improve  
won't make them innovate*

# Story 2:

## Continuously Improved Application

- Philosophy:
  - Make something MUCH better
  - Respond really really quickly
  - Adapt to what is asked
- Driver
  - Make people happy
  - Get it out now
  - Get promotion!

# How it begins....



The completed  
Application

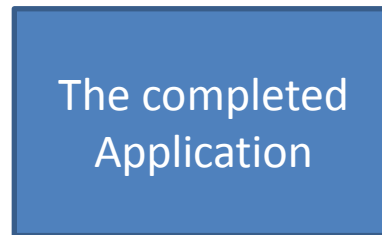
# We improve 'indefinitely'

Make it BETTER! Change this.

Yes! Add this.

Tweak this! Lovely.

Update!



Improve

Adjust

Redo

Revise

Remove

Review

**days**

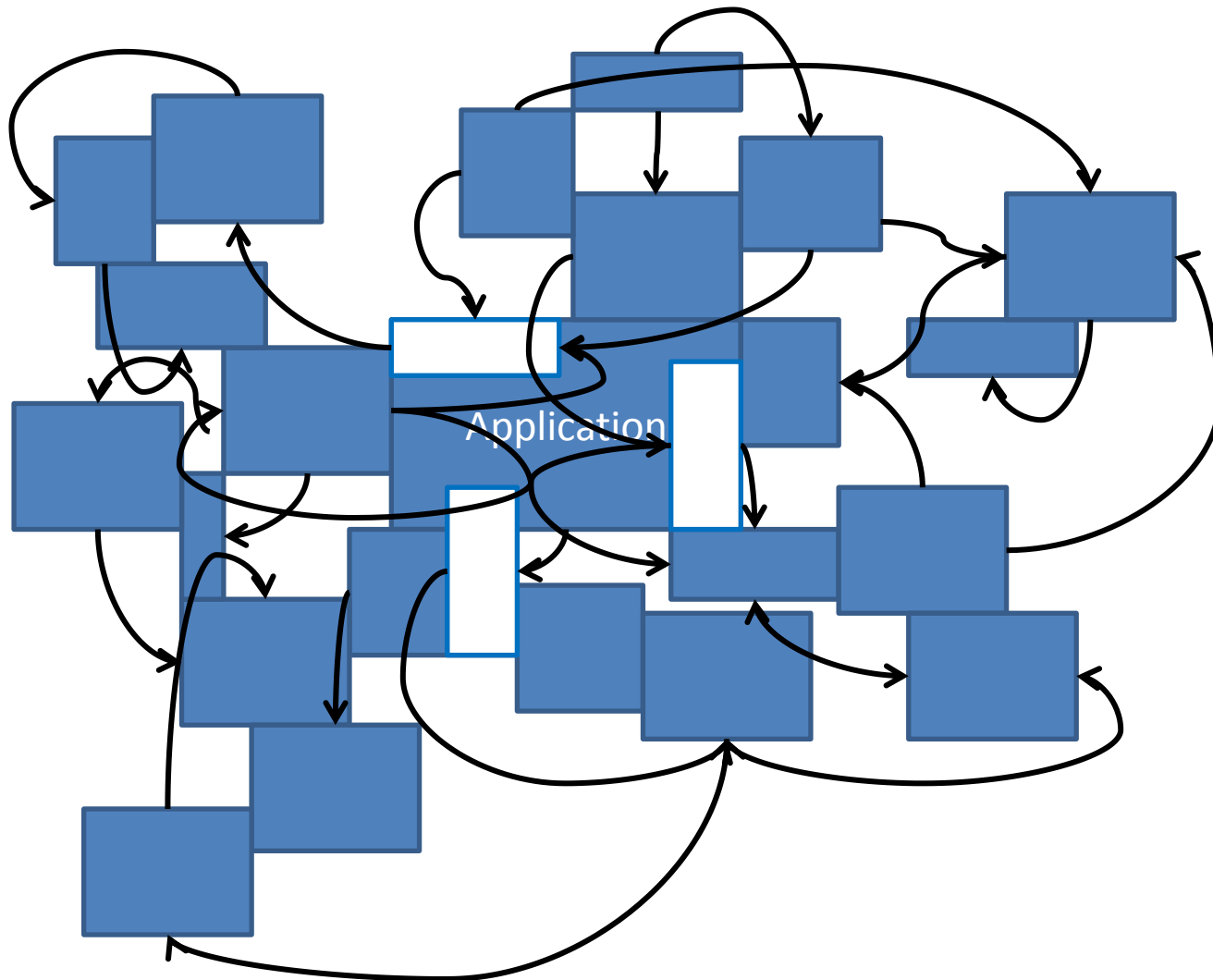


**months**



**years**

# Continuously 'improved' app (Legacy code)



# What's happening here?

**“The influence of idiots”**

Press release driven development (PRDD)?

*Who judges something to be an improvement?*

*Who is judging the judge?*



# Time for....

## **The Fundamental Issue**

“Continuous Improvement is based on two dangerous inbuilt assumptions which **automatically predisposition it to failure**”

# Dangerous Inbuilt Assumptions



## Continuous

- Assumption 1:

**“Infinite improvement  
is possible”**

- *Allows unrealistic  
expectation*

## Improvement

- Assumption 2:

**“Something is wrong  
and must be fixed”**

- *Begins with negative  
judgement*

# Assumptions + expectation + judgement

## Continuous

- Assumption 1:

**“Infinite improvement  
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## Improvement

- Assumption 2:

**“Something is wrong  
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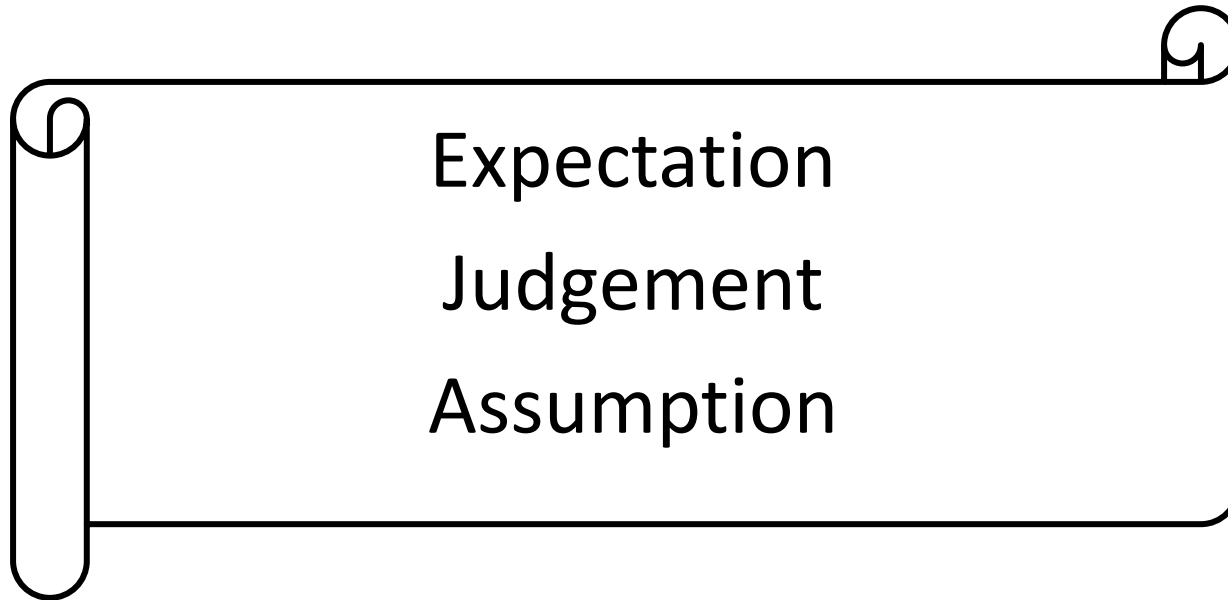
- *Begins with negative  
judgement*

**So how what the hell can we do about it?**

Section 4

# **STEP 1: UNDERSTAND THE FAIL**


# Continuous Improvement can be hampered by



**(Interactions / culture)**

# Unintentional sabotage

<b>Philosophy</b>	Agile, Lean
<b>Processes/Methods</b>	Scrum, Kanban
<b>Practices</b>	e.g. 2-4 week cadence, continuous delivery, retrospectives, daily meetings
<b>Techniques</b>	TDD, BDD
<b>Culture/ interactions</b>	???



# Hmm.... notice... Even in Agile/Lean

- **PEOPLE OVER PROCESS:** Interactions / culture can sabotage even the best process!
- Story 1 & 2: Interactions are HIERARCHICAL
  - Expectation – command/control
  - Assumption – don't really ask/collaborate
  - Judgement – one person's view can override others



If this is the case...

**“How can we see the influence of culture and interactions more clearly?”**

Modeling (e.g. architecture) in different ways

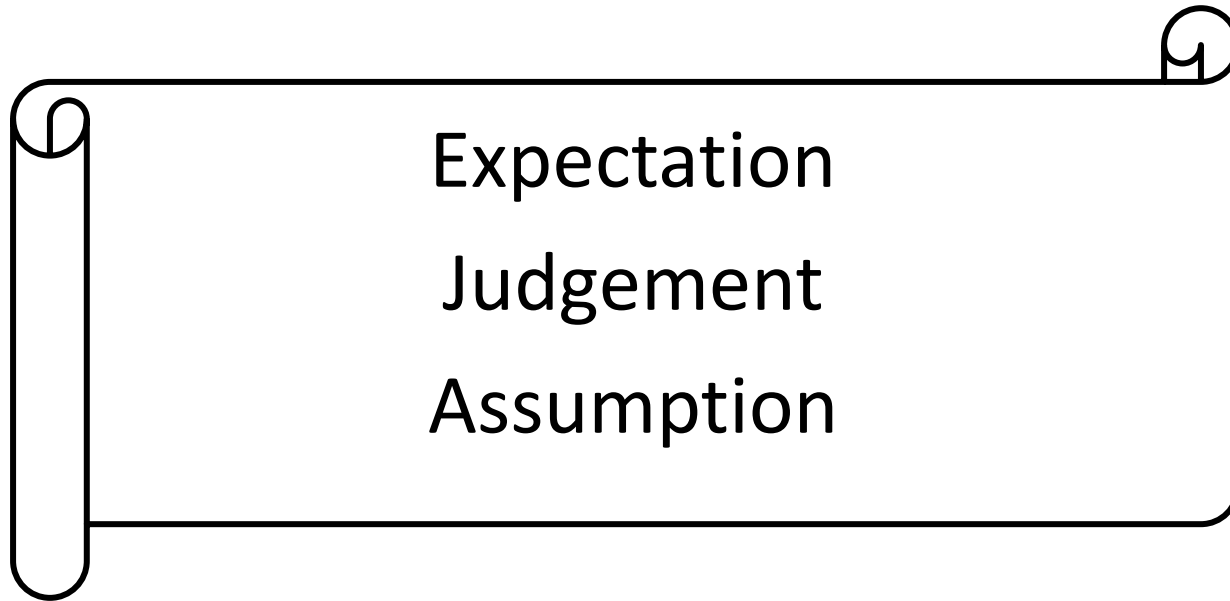
=

Freedom to choose strategy and reaction

# Drawing from eastern philosophy

- This is not a recent technique
  - Steve Jobs
  - Management & Mindfulness Research
- Mindfulness
  - Mahasi Vipassana – a very ‘practical’ strain of Buddhism
    - AIM 1: Reduce Suffering
    - AIM 2: Continually Improve indefinitely till enlightenment

# Back to this...



**(Interactions / culture)**

# Monks say: They're 'poisons'

Assumption	Expectation	Judgement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You're not necessarily working with the REAL data!!</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Breeds apathy</li><li>• Getting what you expect might not be what is best (e.g. not innovative enough)</li><li>• Too much emotional investment: expectation can create morale crashes when it isn't achieved</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Subject to ignorant influence</li><li>• Can be critical, and self-orientated</li></ul>

**STEP 2: AN ALTERNATIVE?**

# Change the *WAY* you interact



# Expectation (Demand)

- “Assumes, presumes, takes for granted. Its a manifestation of arrogance. **Expectation is bound to fail us one way or another for it projects an ideal, a concrete goal on the future whose parameters we don't know.** We simply don't know what is going to happen. So when our expectation fails to materialise we are disappointed, depressed by it. A life that rests on expectation is forever falling into ditches. Consider how many times we've been disappointed in our lives. Such is the measure of expectation.
- Expectation is a dangerous poison. **When we fail to get what we expect, we are disappointed, humiliated, depressed”**

Bhante Bodhidhamma

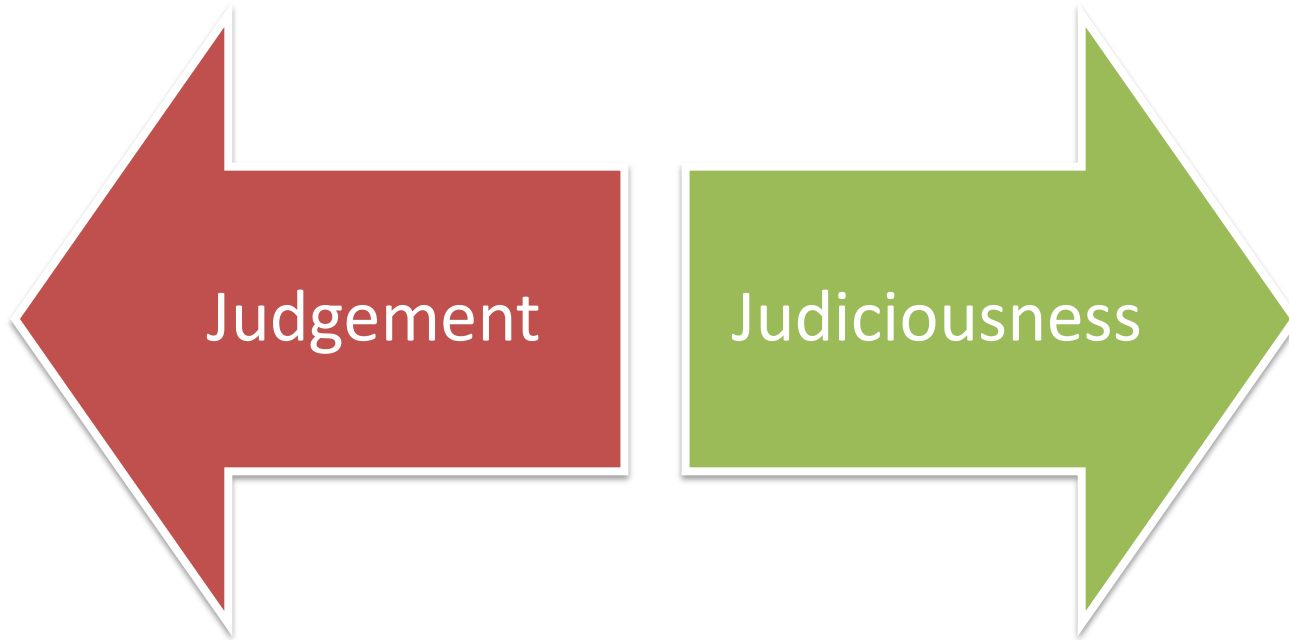
# Aspiration (Aim)

- “Does not expect, assume, presume. It does not have a success time or finishing date. Aspiration does not presume fulfilment, does not presume on others. It is simply a movement in the mind, a desire for the wise, the beautiful and the virtuous. **An inclination towards a goal.** And so aspiration **gathers all the necessary qualities and support to move in that direction.**
- Aspiration is humble. Not the false humility of a prideful self. [Not] a cover to prevent the humiliation of failure in others eyes. Genuine humility is that **groundedness that comes with seeing life not as success and failure, but as trial and error. If things dont work out, well, at least I know** what is not for me. **It clarifies future action”**

Bhante Bodhidhamma



# Change the *WAY* you interact



# Judge vs Judicious

## (Command vs Collaborate)

- **Judging** – to take a position that is critical, and self-righteous.
- **Judicious** – there is a judging that is not judgmental; judicious means to be wise and sensible. To be judicious means **to see the whole situation** even from the other person's or institution's point of view. To do that we must **drop our own little opinion and see it in a wider perspective**. These are the virtues we expect in a judge – **not to be hijacked by a crowd baying for blood or duped by the clever arguments of lawyers**.

Bhante Bodhidhamma

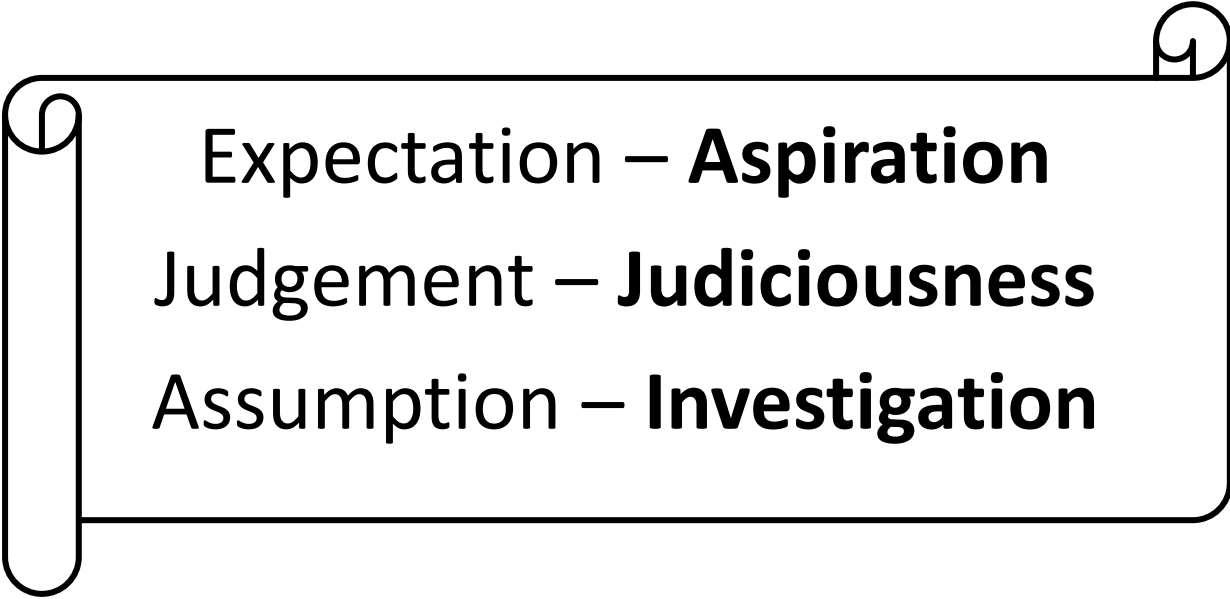
# Change the *WAY* you interact



# Assumption (expect) vs Investigation (ask/inquire)

- Assumption
  - We can (when we can't)
  - We can't (when we might)
- Investigation
  - How interesting: What can we do?
  - How interesting: What can't we do?

# Summary



Expectation – **Aspiration**  
Judgement – **Judiciousness**  
Assumption – **Investigation**

**APPLICATION**

# Armed with the new viewpoint...

... lets revisit why a continuous improvement  
PROCESS might be failing....

# Consider...

- Continuous improvement can only exist via INSIGHT (Aha!)
- Insight needs retrospection, review, learning
- Therefore: **Retrospectives are VITAL**



# But Retrospectives have

- LOTS and LOTS of interaction
- Relies on communication and collaboration
- A highly subjective process, very influenced by
  - the culture
  - and people within it

**Core part of Agile/Lean**

# Caution: be careful

- Dysfunctional retrospectives = highly likely that
  - Continuous Improvement could fail/stagnate
  - Significantly less innovation
- That's why we think they 'don't work' sometimes!!!

**Our culture and the way we interact defines the level of success of the retrospective**

# When a retrospective fails

INTERACTIONS:  
Directive, order,  
silence, demand,  
control, abide by  
plans, rules

**Expectation** – Aspiration

**Judgement** – Judiciousness

**Assumption** – Investigation

# When a retrospective works

## INTERACTIONS:

Aim to do better

Collaborate / vote

Ask, strategise, check

Explore

Expectation – **Aspiration**

Judgement – **Judiciousness**

Assumption – **Investigation**

In other words...

**Aim** instead of Demand

**Ask/Inquire** instead of Expect

**Collaborate** instead of Instruct

- Seems 'too simple'!
- But how we interact can make or break continuous improvement / innovation

# Story 1:

## RETROSPECTIVE: Aspiration/Investigation/Judiciousness

Phase	Will take	Output	Team	Manager
Phase 1	4 weeks	10 items	...	Anger
<i>Request</i>	<i>2 weeks?</i>	<i>20 items?</i>	<i>Permissive</i>	<i>Frustration</i>
<b>Phase 2 - achieved</b>	<b>2 weeks</b>	<b>20 items</b>	Excitement	Pleased
<i>Request</i>	<i>1 week?</i>	<i>40 items?</i>	<i>Sensible</i>	<i>Hopeful</i>
<b>Phase 3 – achieved</b>	<b>3 weeks</b>	<b>25 items</b>	Pleased	Confident
Request	<b>3 weeks</b>	<b>25 items?</b>	Confident	Trusting

*Sustainable pace?  
= resilient innovation?*



*Aspire: 2 weeks,  
20 items, no  
legacy?*




Try new things?  
Learning a lot!



We can predict!  
We get better

# Story 2

Aspiration/Investigation/Judiciousness



We want! We  
want! Then we  
want! And then...  
And then...

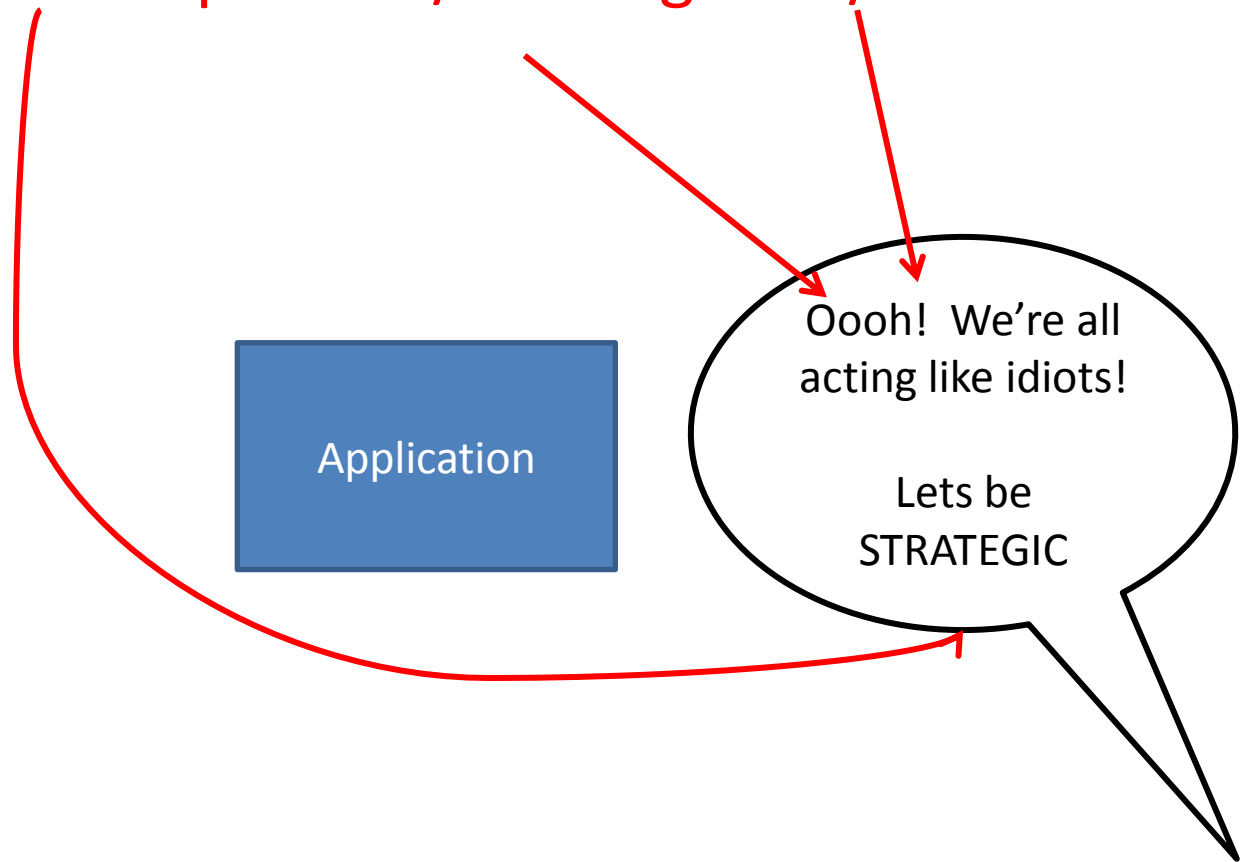


Application



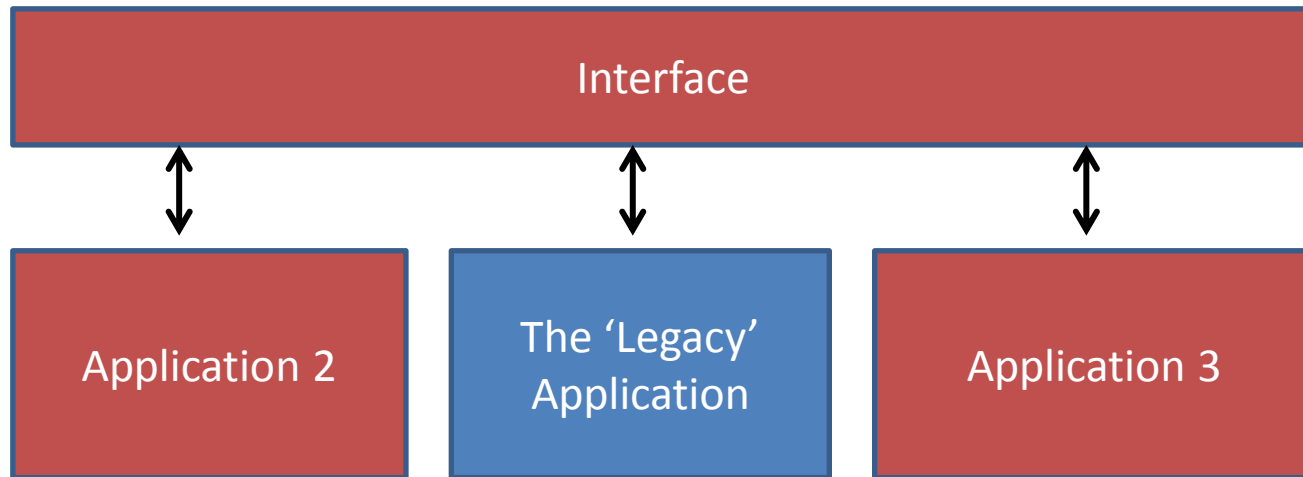
# Story 2

**RETROSPECTIVE: Aspiration/Investigation/Judiciousness**



# Sustainable, innovative solutions

Aspiration/Investigation/Judiciousness



*Less influence of idiocy*

- Healthy interactions in retrospectives turn Continuous Improvement into Consistent Discovery
- **MORE FUN! : Easier to stay in discovery state for longer periods = foundation for innovation**
  - ‘not being good enough’ vs ‘learning a lot’

**REAL LIFE EXAMPLE: JIMDO**

# Jimdo

- An German based WYSIWYG web hosting service
  - Has had significant, rapid expansion across 12 countries
  - Constantly doubled its head count every two years
  - Experiencing significant success in the market
  - Innovation is at its core

**Aim:**

**Consistent INNOVATION not a Continuous  
Improvement 'program'**

# Jimdo

- Dr Roock: Retrospecting 'on steriods'
  - 350 retrospectives thus far
  - Diverse pool of 12 'neutral' moderators that facilitate teams when required
  - All employees (even kitchen staff) retrospect

*More info: Dr Arne Roock presentation at  
LKCE 2013*

# Quick Observation

- A pool of specialist retrospective moderators – not relying on one person, not involved in politics (**judicious**)
- Experiment focussed, without demanding targets so that innovation can be nurtured (**investigation**)
- Concerned about creating a Kaizen culture, without restrictive, definitive goals (**aspiration**)

**Emphasis is on culture NOT program or initiative**



**POINT 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 = ?**

# Review

- Point 1 -** New Industry demands: aggressive competition, relentless innovation
- Point 2 -** Pattern 1: People dislike Continuous Improvement Programs, even in Agile/Lean
- Point 3 -** Pattern 2: Common Continuous Improvement Program failures - Unrealistic management & Legacy code
- Point 4 -** Continuous Improvement Processes can be sabotaged by negative culture and interactions
- Point 5 -** A focus on 'healthy' Retrospectives and keep an 'eagle eye' on HOW you interact can help your team to become truly innovative

**IN CONCLUSION**

# The era we live in now

... its about **consistent innovative thinking**:

“Globalisation + technology = complexity”

– The need for speed

– *We require innovative solutions:*

- *to release, to adapt for a variety of territories, adjust to legislation, interfacing / extending legacy systems, service multiple devices and multiple versions (e.g. mobile, IPTV etc)....*

# We gotta do it all, y'all!



# The pressure...

**2006**

Nokia N72



**2007**

Nokia 6555



**Improvement**

**2007**

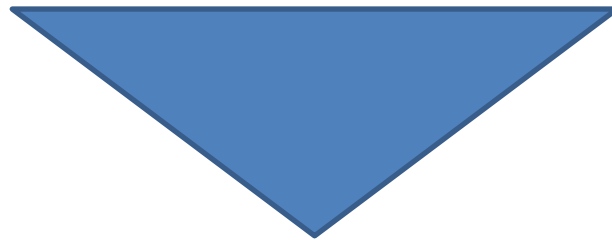
Apple's First iPhone



**Innovation**

# No need for dramatics!

Continuous Improvement




Consistent Innovation

... its 'simple' ...

# Be aware...

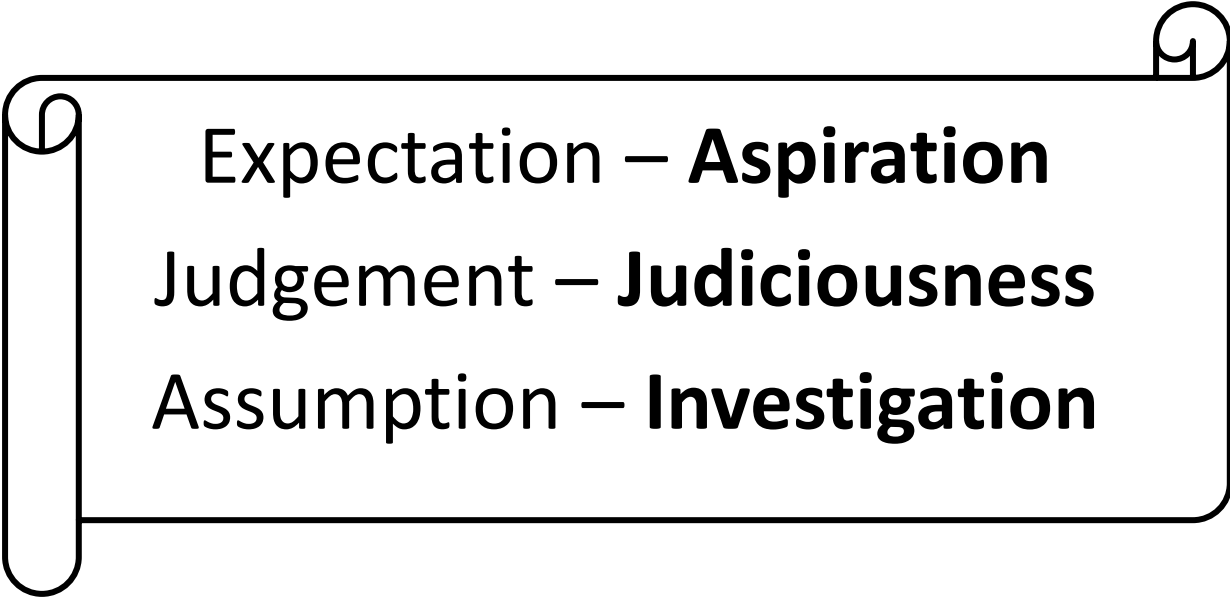
<b>Philosophy</b>	Agile, Lean
<b>Processes/Methods</b>	Scrum, Kanban
<b>Practices</b>	e.g. 2-4 week cadence, continuous delivery, retrospectives, daily meetings
<b>Techniques</b>	TDD, BDD
<b>Culture/ interactions</b>	???





# Find ways to illuminate and increase the quality of your interactions....

Daily meetings, retrospectives, planning sessions, one-to-ones



Expectation – **Aspiration**  
Judgement – **Judiciousness**  
Assumption – **Investigation**

# During the meeting...

- Watch the mood of the room
  - Morale: up or down?
    - Too many 'single opinions'? Time to collaborate...
    - Too many demands? Time to break down 'what we can do' versus 'what we aspire to do'....
    - Too many assumptions? Time to investigate reality...
- Use a model as a collaborative scale
  - E.g. Where are we: expectation / aspiration
- Look at how you deal with others

# People over Process

- Don't rely on 'Continuous Improvement' programs or just 'adhering to the practices of Agile/Lean'
- You need to **focus on your interactions**
- Boost and value your retrospectives
- Really work with your culture and aligning it to your chosen philosophy (e.g. Agile/Lean)

**INTERACTIONS REALLY DO MATTER!**

Please evaluate  
my talk via the  
mobile app!

