

Spotify: Autonomous Squads Model

How Spotify Achieved Autonomous Coordination at Scale Without Traditional Project Management

Executive Summary

Spotify pioneered an organizational model that has been widely imitated across the technology industry: squads, tribes, chapters, and guilds. The core innovation was deliberately avoiding coordination roles. Spotify didn't want product managers or project managers in the traditional sense—they wanted teams that could coordinate themselves. This case study examines how Spotify achieved autonomous coordination at scale.

The Squad Model

The core unit is the squad—a small, autonomous team (typically 6-12 people) responsible for a specific feature or service area. Squads are cross-functional, containing all the skills needed to design, develop, test, and deploy their product. They operate like mini-startups, with significant autonomy over what they build and how they build it.

Squads

Small, autonomous teams responsible for a specific feature or service. Cross-functional and self-organizing. Anders Ivarsson, one of the architects of the Spotify model, emphasized: 'We deliberately didn't create coordination roles. We didn't want product managers or project managers in the traditional sense. We wanted teams that could coordinate themselves.'

Tribes

Collections of squads working in related areas—typically 40-150 people. They share physical space (when co-located) and have a tribe lead who provides strategic direction, but coordination within the tribe is minimal. Squads align through shared objectives and transparent communication, not through hierarchical coordination.

Chapters

Functional groupings that cut across squads—all the back-end developers, for example, or all the testers. They provide a forum for skill development and knowledge sharing without creating coordination overhead. A chapter lead helps guide career development but doesn't

manage day-to-day work.

Guilds

Communities of interest that anyone can join—informal networks for sharing knowledge across the organization. Guilds enable cross-cutting concerns without creating formal coordination structures.

What's Missing: Project Managers

Notice what's missing: project managers, program managers, coordination roles. Work is organized around stable teams with ongoing responsibilities, not temporary projects with dedicated coordinators. Alignment happens through shared objectives and open communication, not through someone making sure everyone is aligned.

Continuous Sensing

Spotify's engineering organization has built sophisticated sensing capabilities for software development. Teams have real-time visibility into code quality, deployment frequency, performance metrics, and user feedback. Importantly, Spotify doesn't use this sensing for surveillance. The data informs team self-management, not management oversight. Teams see their own metrics and make their own decisions about how to improve.

Anders Ivarsson explained: 'We don't want managers watching dashboards and telling teams what to do. We want teams watching their own dashboards and improving themselves. The sensing is for them, not for us.'

Challenges and Lessons

Spotify is candid that the model isn't perfect—they've written publicly about challenges with coordination across tribes and the difficulty of maintaining culture as the organization scales. The 'Spotify model' has been famously misapplied by organizations that copied the structure without understanding the culture.

But the fundamental principle has proven robust: autonomous teams, aligned by context rather than controlled by process, can coordinate effectively at significant scale.

Key Principles

- Organize around stable teams, not temporary projects
- Eliminate coordination roles—let teams coordinate themselves
- Use shared objectives and transparent communication for alignment
- Provide sensing capabilities for teams, not surveillance for management
- Enable knowledge sharing through informal networks (guilds) without creating overhead
- Accept that structure alone isn't enough—culture and context matter

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