Authentic Leadership

TRANSFORMATION OF TECHNICAL TEAMS

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Speaker Introduction

- **Kire Simonovski –** Technical Engineering Lead at Miller Insurance

- Leading an **autonomous, self-organising** team, fostering **trust, honesty, and creative freedom**

- Former **Engineering Lead at Evoke**; extensive experience across **FMCG, Retail, Aviation, and Lloyd's Market Insurance**

- Academic background in **Organisational Psychology**; Associate Member of the **BPS Faculty for Leadership & Management**

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Agenda of the talk

- Transformation and resistance to change

- Foundations of authentic leadership

- Balancing culture, productivity, and team cohesion

- Trust & psychological safety as game-changers

- Transitioning from control to empowerment and delegation

- True agility through adaptability

- Delegation as a core leadership skill

- Influencing cultural change within your organisation

Evolving Teams Beyond "Transformation"

▶ **Transformation sounds dramatic** – like a forced change, a corporate metamorphosis

▶ But here's the truth: **People don't change because they're told to. People change when they want to.**

▶ Instead of "transforming" teams, let's focus on **evolution**—helping engineers grow as **professionals, leaders, and culture-builders.**

▶ The goal? **Transcend roles. Drive real impact.**

The Psychology of Change: Why Teams Resist Transformation

▶ **Change is hard**—especially for highly skilled professionals who value autonomy

▶ Ever told a developer their workflow is changing? Cue the **five stages of grief**

▶ **Psychology tells us:** We resist imposed change because we want to feel in **control**.

▶ The key? **Involve your team in the change**—through **balance, trust, leadership, and direction.**

Balance: The Art of Sustainable Productivity

▶ An **overworked team** moves like NPCs—running on **caffeine & muscle memory** instead of creativity.

▶ **Constant firefighting = No growth and burnout.** Your job as a leader isn't just **driving** results, it's **creating the right environment.**

▶ The key to **sustainable high performance**:
   - **Protect deep work time**
   - **Cut pointless meetings**
   - **Reframe downtime as fuel for innovation**

▶ Without balance, **productivity isn't sustainable**—it's just **burnout waiting to happen.**

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Trust embedded in Culture: Creating Psychological Safety

- A team **afraid to say "I don't know"** isn't evolving—it's just **surviving**.

- **Psychological safety** drives innovation by allowing teams to **experiment, fail, and challenge ideas** without fear.

- **Google's research**: **Trust** is the **#1 factor** in high-performing teams.

  - Trust isn't built through motivational speeches.
  - Trust isn't something you can demand.
  - Trust is something you earn.

The best way to build trust? **"I don't know, but let's figure it out together."**

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True Leadership: From Control to Empowerment

▶ Great leadership isn't control—it's empowerment.

▶ Your role isn't to **dictate solutions** but to **ask the right questions** that guide your team.

▶ **Trust your team**—they may do things differently than you, but still brilliantly.

Sense of Direction – The "Why" Behind the Work

▶ **Great code isn't written just for the sake of it.** Teams thrive on **purpose.**

▶ "Because it's in the sprint" is **NOT** an inspiring reason.

▶ The best teams understand **why their work matters**—whether it's:
 - **Building software that changes lives**
 - **Making an existing system 10x better**

▶ **Vision unites teams.** If you want your team to evolve, **make sure they see the bigger picture—and get excited about it.**

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What is Authentic Leadership?

► It's about **being real**, aligning with your core values, and creating an environment where others thrive.

► **Great leaders build trust** by being honest—especially when times are tough.

► **"Walking the walk" matters**—because leading in tech means working with **brilliant, skeptical, caffeine-fueled minds.**

► **Authenticity in leadership** means:
- **Self-awareness**
- **Transparency**
- **Integrity**

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Two Types of Leaders in Tech

▶ **Hands-on technical leaders** – Deeply involved in the code and engineering decisions.

▶ **Hands-off leaders from other disciplines** – Focus on strategy, people, and processes.

▶ **Both can be highly effective**—but they lead in **very different ways**

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Leadership vs Management

➤ **Leadership and management are NOT the same.**

• **Managers** → Focus on **processes & efficiency** (keeping things on track).

• **Leaders** → Focus on **inspiration & empowerment** (unlocking potential).

➤ **A great team needs both—as only managing isn't enough.**

Team Autonomy: The Power of Trust

▶ Technical teams thrive on autonomy and trust.

▶ **Micromanagement kills creativity**—but trust **fuels investment and engagement.**

▶ **Authentic leadership** empowers teams to take ownership, driving **innovation.**

Delegation as a Leader

► **Start slow** – Don't just offload work; guide and support.

► **Engage in discussions** – Provide feedback, challenge ideas, and collaborate.

► **Show vulnerability** – Admit when you don't have all the answers.

► **Celebrate small wins** – Recognize creativity and initiative.

► **When you trust your team, they exceed expectations.**

► **Delegation fuels team growth—and makes you a better leader.**

Empowering Self-Organising Teams

- A **self-organizing team** means the work continues even when you're not around.

- **Leaders may fear autonomy**, but the **best leaders** are measured by how **independent** and **self-sufficient** their teams are.

- **True leadership** is about empowering your team to thrive **without constant oversight**.

- ▶ **Remember:** The true test of leadership is **how well your team performs without you.**

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Setting Vision as Leaders (The Why)

▶ **Leaders set the vision** and provide **guardrails**, but the team decides **how to execute**.

▶ In our team, we **align on outcomes**—but the team determines the best approach.

▶ When they find a **better way**, we embrace the conversation to discuss and improve.

▶ **Result: Better innovation, Stronger collaboration, Increased ownership**

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What About The Leaders? (The what's in it for me)

- The **autonomy of your team**, **self-organising structure**, and a culture built on **trust** don't just benefit the team—they **help you grow as a leader** too.

- This setup allows you to evolve from a **servant leader** to an **executive-level executor**.

- The **time freed from day-to-day involvement** becomes an opportunity to:

  - Engage with **other leaders, heads, and directors**

  - Shift focus to a **strategic, high-level vision** beyond just your team

- ▶ **Ultimately, empowering your team elevates your leadership** and drives the bigger picture.

Teams Grow Through Your Growth as a Leader

- **Your growth as a leader** directly impacts your team's development.

- **When you evolve**, your team evolves with you.

- ▶ **Lead by example**—as you grow, your team grows stronger, more capable, and more empowered.

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Practical Strategies for Authentic Leadership

▶ **Self-reflection is key**: use your team as a mirror to assess your leadership style. What is your team saying about you as a leader? How can you improve and grow?

▶ **Watch out for overconfidence:**

- Closed conversations

- Taking on **technical tasks** instead of providing **direction**

- Not engaging with the team in **meaningful discussions**

- Failing to rely on your team for **scoping roadmaps**

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Self-Reflection & Growth as a Leader

- Have **regular 1-1s with your team**—even if you don't manage them directly.

- Use these conversations to:

  - Provide feedback

  - Give the floor to your team:

    - **How do you feel about my leadership?**

    - **What can I do better?**

    - **How can I improve and grow as a leader?**

- ▶ **This approach keeps you grounded and ensures you're evolving alongside your team.**

Focus on What You Can Control

- Sometimes your team will ask for things **outside your direct control—** like **more people**.

- As a leader, you might not have control over that decision, but you **do have influence**.

► **Focus on what you can control:**

- Adjust workloads to prevent burnout.

- Reframe goals to ensure they are **achievable**.

- **Provide mentorship** and **upskilling opportunities**.

Leverage these aspects to improve your team's experience and performance.

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Building a Culture of Open Communication

- **Building a culture of open communication is about the tone you set:** In **daily standups**, **workshops**, **sprint ceremonies**, and **1-1s**.

- **When things don't go as planned**, openly discuss:
  - What went wrong
  - Why it happened
  - How to improve

- **Be transparent about your own experiences, challenges, and lessons learned.**

- This fosters **trust** and encourages your team to share openly.

Creating Career Growth Opportunities

▶ **Align tasks** with team members' **interests** and **aspirations**.

▶ Help engineers **transition to leadership roles** if they choose.

▶ **Encourage upskilling**, **mentoring**, and **networking**.

▶ **Guide** each team member toward **personal and professional development**.

How to Deal with Differences in Your Team

- **Understand individual differences** in how team members handle stress, tasks, and problem-solving.

- **Exploratory tasks** for those who thrive in solving **unknown problems**—encourage documentation and solution generation.

- **Well-defined tasks** for those who prefer clear direction—provide specific requirements and clear goals.

- **Adapt your leadership approach** to each individual to create a **harmonious, high-performing team**.

- **There's no one-size-fits-all** when it comes to leadership.

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True Agility Comes with Adaptability

- **True agility** isn't about rigid frameworks (like Scrum) or strict methodologies

- It's about **adapting** to your team's unique environment and needs.

- **Adjust your processes** to work **for you**—not the other way around.

- **Adaptability** is the core of true agility.

Manifesto for Agile Software Development

▶ **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools

▶ **Working software** over comprehensive documentation

▶ **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation

▶ **Responding to change** over following a plan

You Shape the Direction and the Processes

- **Collaborative Decision-Making**: Use retrospectives and feedback sessions to identify what's working and what's not.

- **Experimentation & Feedback Loops**: Introduce small changes, observe impact, and refine.

- **Flexibility in Methodologies**: Adapt methodologies (Agile, Kanban, etc.) to suit your team's strengths.

- **Clear but Adaptive Goals**: Maintain structure but allow teams to adjust approaches for creativity and problem-solving.

- **Involve your team** in shaping the direction and processes for a **dynamic, continuously improving environment**.

Your Team or Product Manager/Head is Your Best Friend

- **The relationship with your team manager** or head is one of the most important to foster

- Great managers act as **mentors, advocates, and partners in success**—not just authority figures.

- **Product managers** should focus on team outcomes and well-being, not micromanaging processes

- Regular check-ins and alignment with leadership empower you to shape team processes.

- Use this relationship to **secure resources** and support for growth, innovation, and long-term initiatives.

Managing Up and Influencing Culture

- **Strategic Influence**: Help those in charge understand the realities on the ground.

- **Protecting Leadership from Misguided Ideas**: Sometimes, it's about steering leadership away from harmful decisions.

- **Advocacy**: Ensure your team's needs are heard at higher levels.

- It's about **strategic influence** to drive positive change and advocate for your team.

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Aligning Leadership Principles with Company Goals

- **Speak the company's language**: Align your ideas with organisational priorities (growth, innovation, cost-cutting, compliance, etc.).

- **Make your case**: Frame ideas in terms of business impact

- **Shift from problem-focused to opportunity-focused**: Demonstrate how your ideas contribute to the broader company vision.

- **Aligning leadership principles** with company goals helps **create value and opportunities**—and turns your proposals into impactful business solutions.

Influencing Change Without a Leadership Title

▶ **Influence through credibility**: It's about trust in your expertise and the value of your insights, not your title.

Two Key Approaches:

   - Be a Solution-Oriented Thinker: Present solutions, not just problems.

   - Build Strategic Alliances: Collaborate with like-minded colleagues across teams to amplify your impact.

Key Takeaway: Influence grows when you focus on solutions and build supportive networks to drive collective change.

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Conclusion: Leadership is a journey, not a Destination

▶ **Create an Inspiring Environment**: Lead with authenticity, integrity, and a commitment to growth to build a culture of collaboration and autonomy.

▶ **Reflect on Your Leadership**: How are you shaping your team and company culture? How are you inspiring ownership, innovation, and growth?

▶ **Great Leaders Ask the Right Questions**: Leadership is about listening deeply and creating space for others to shine.

▶ **Final Thought**: Leadership is a continuous journey. With every step, you influence change and shape the future for yourself and your team.

Call to Action

▶ Lead with purpose, authenticity, and vision.

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Q&A Session

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