# The contractor I want to hire, the contractor I want to be

**sometimes contracting is the best!**

**iftheshoefritz** 8:41 AM

I’m not normally a sweary person but

**iftheshoefritz** 8:41 AM

I’m not normally a sweary person but

F💣⚠ yeah!! 🔥🔥🔥

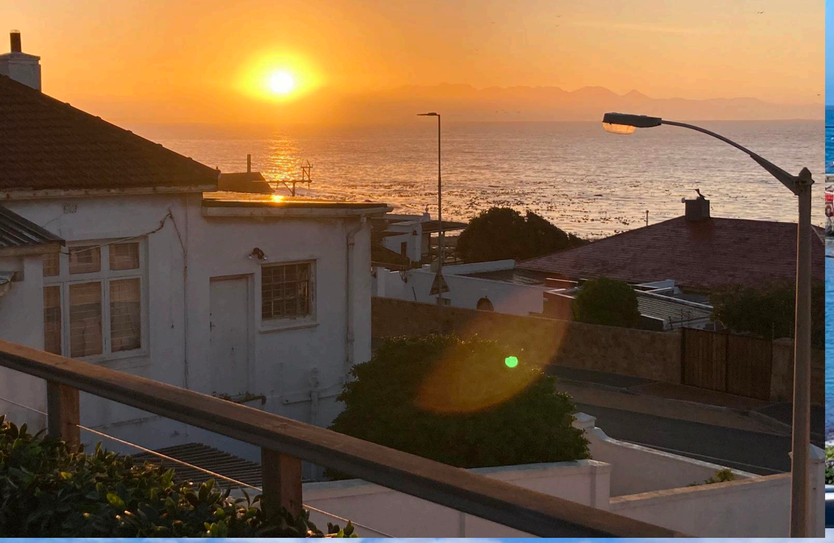
# sometimes contracting is the worst

# The. Worst.

- Frightened contractors
- ... working *really* hard
- ... without the skills they need
- ... getting no useful feedback
- ... building things that no-one understands
- ... that break on Tuesdays
- ... and get thrown away

# hopefully this talk create more of the best 🤞

# whoami



# Cape Town

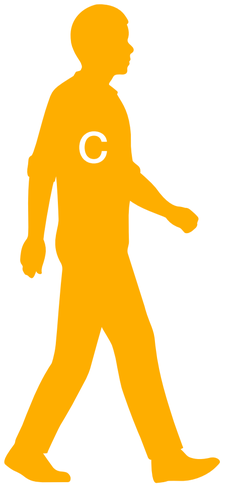
https://pixabay.com/users/mlbay-16623146/

London

# My contracting journey

# Me

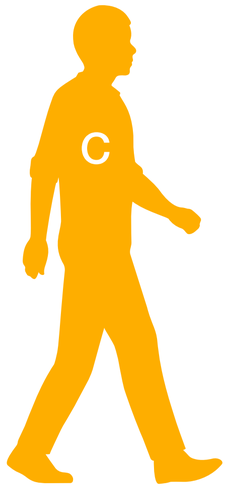
2007 → current




custom software @ bigco

# Me

2007 current




freelancer

# Me

2007 current

full time

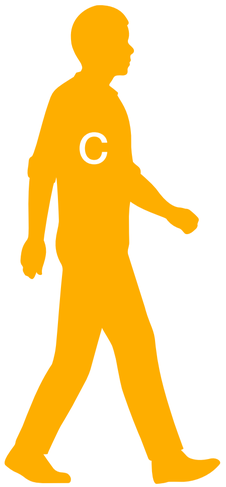
# Me

2007 current

leading contractors

# Me

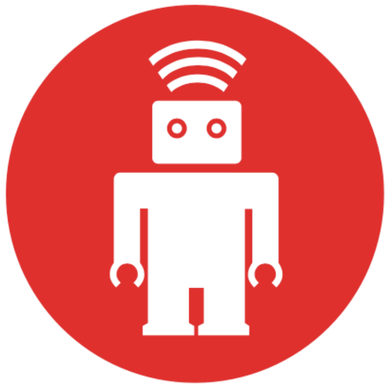
2007 → current




development team lead @ consultancy

# always writing code

# both sides of the table



thoughtbot

# Glossary

# Glossary

- contractors: charge per hour/day, temporarily
- internal/full-time employees: paid a salary, until notice

# Glossary

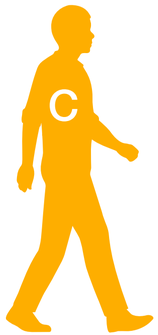
- client: people hiring contractors
- agency:
  - "rents out" staff at contracting rates
  - pays full-time salaries
  - may work inside client
  - may own a project alone

# Glossary

- consultants: subset of contractors
  - title used to raise expectations
  - hired for a specific result
  - hazards and remedies still apply

# Diagrams

- contractors are ORANGE
- in-house, full-time employees are BLUE



# Story time

# Names have been changed

https://www.flickr.com/photos/cdevers/3098268272

# Fred's boss just received an email

"We know that you charge outstanding [expensive] rates ... previously that has been ok because you provided us with outstanding developers"

"In fact, one of your developers on our team, Jesse, is outstanding."

"Fred is not outstanding. In fact, he seems to be less than half as productive as Jesse."

"We will end our contract with you in two weeks' time."

# Oof.
# The. Worst.

Frida

# Frida just got an endorsement on LinkedIn

"Frida's addition to the team lead to an instant increase in transparency"

"constant pairing with the development team helped to sustainably increase the team's velocity"

"... willingness to understand the product ... on a technical but also on a business level."

"This helped not only to bridge the gap between product and business but also lead to better product decisions"

# That feels *good*

# What went wrong for Fred?

# Contractors have different challenges and opportunities

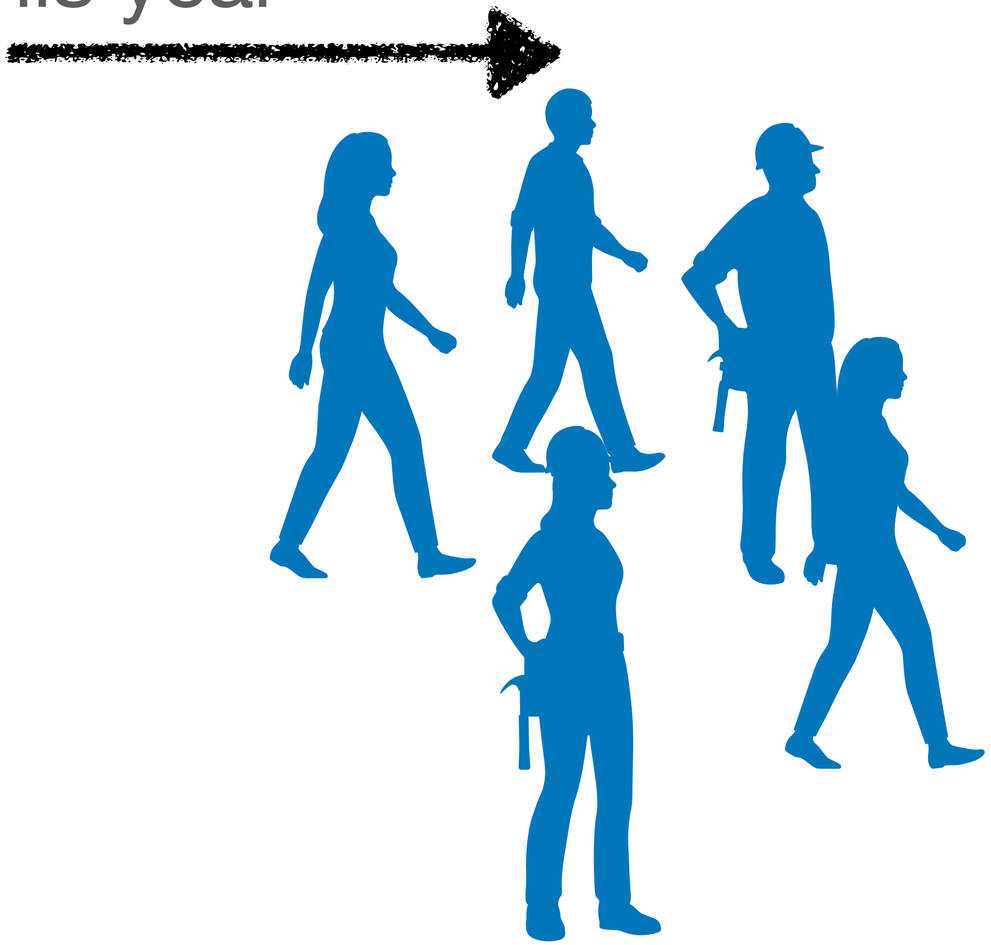
# 5 differences between full time and contract software work

# Difference #1: risk and high stakes

# More money than capacity

this year

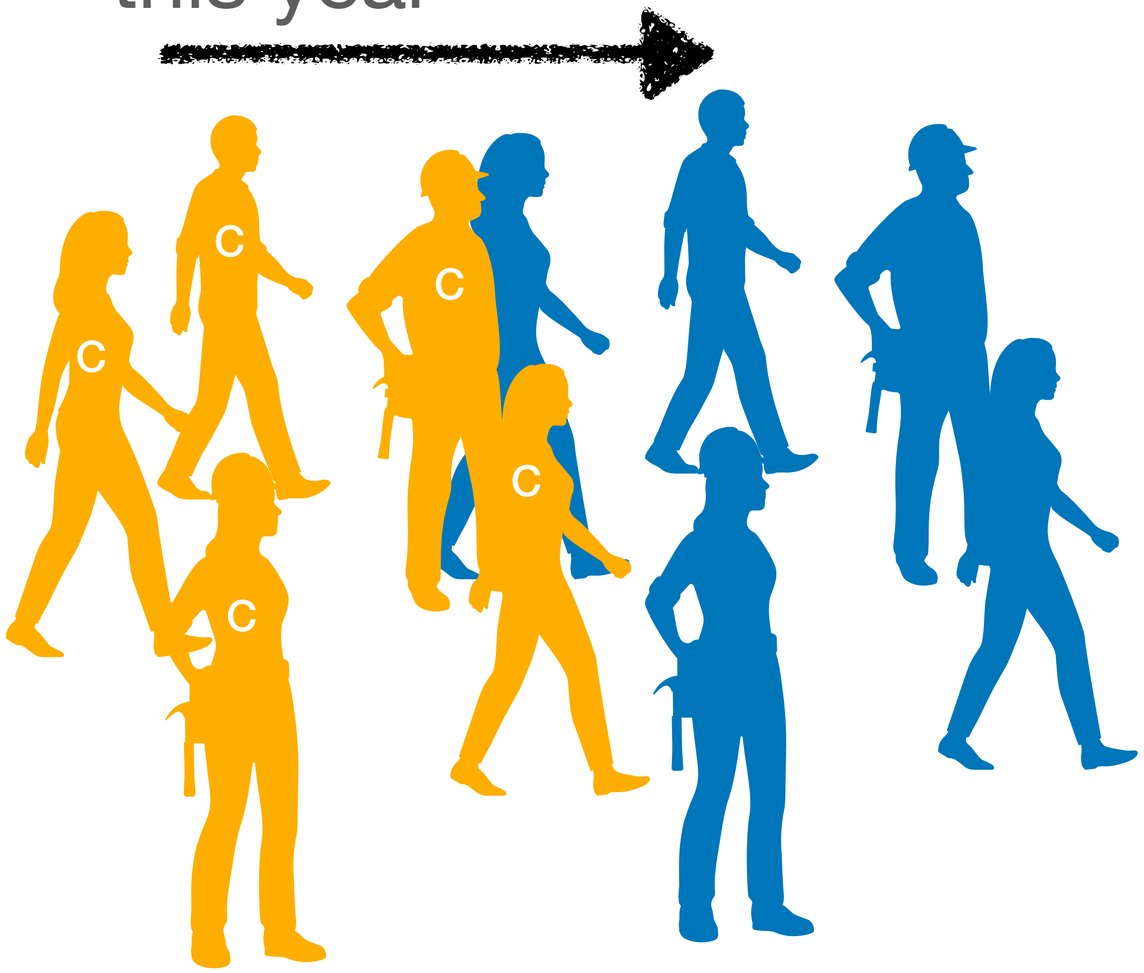
next year



# Temporary capacity increase

this year

next year



# Rapid offboarding

this year

next year

# Someone is still paying salaries

- low risk for client
- contractor takes risk of quick exit

# Economics reality check

- contractors charge 3x-5x full time salary
- expect to not be billing all the time
  - leave, sickness etc
  - clients end the contract
  - clients stop existing

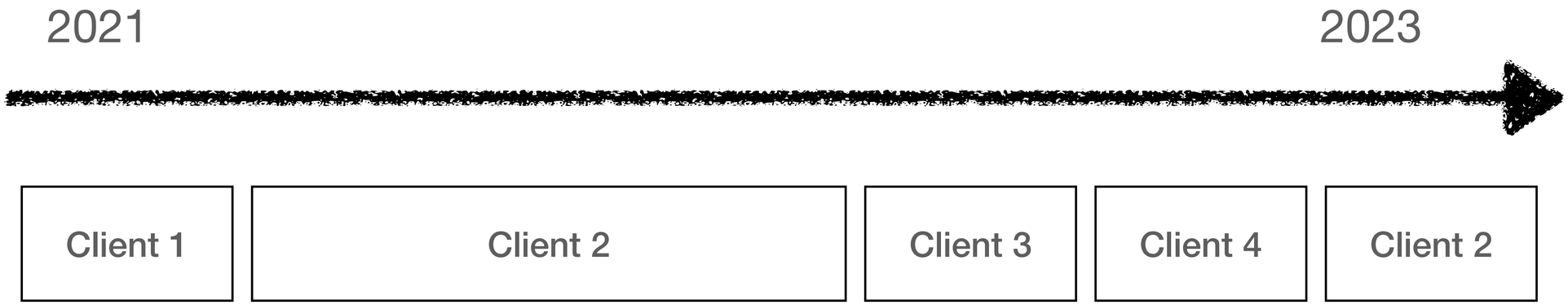
Frida

# Increased cost raises the stakes

# Increased cost raises the stakes

- results now, not later
- comparison with full-time salaries

# Difference #2: variety and learning

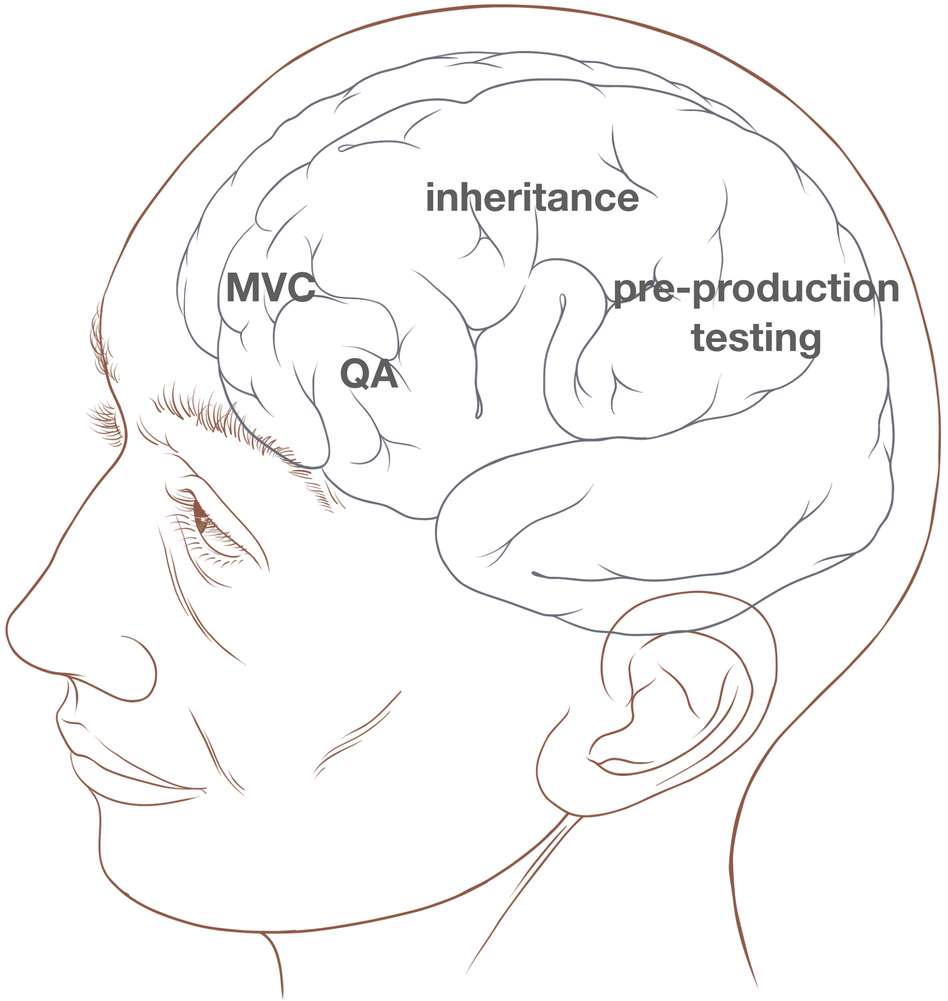

2021
2023
Client 1
Client 2
Client 3
Client 4
Client 2

Year 1
Year 10
1
2
3
4
3
2
5
6
7
8
9
5
10
11
12

Frida

Year 1

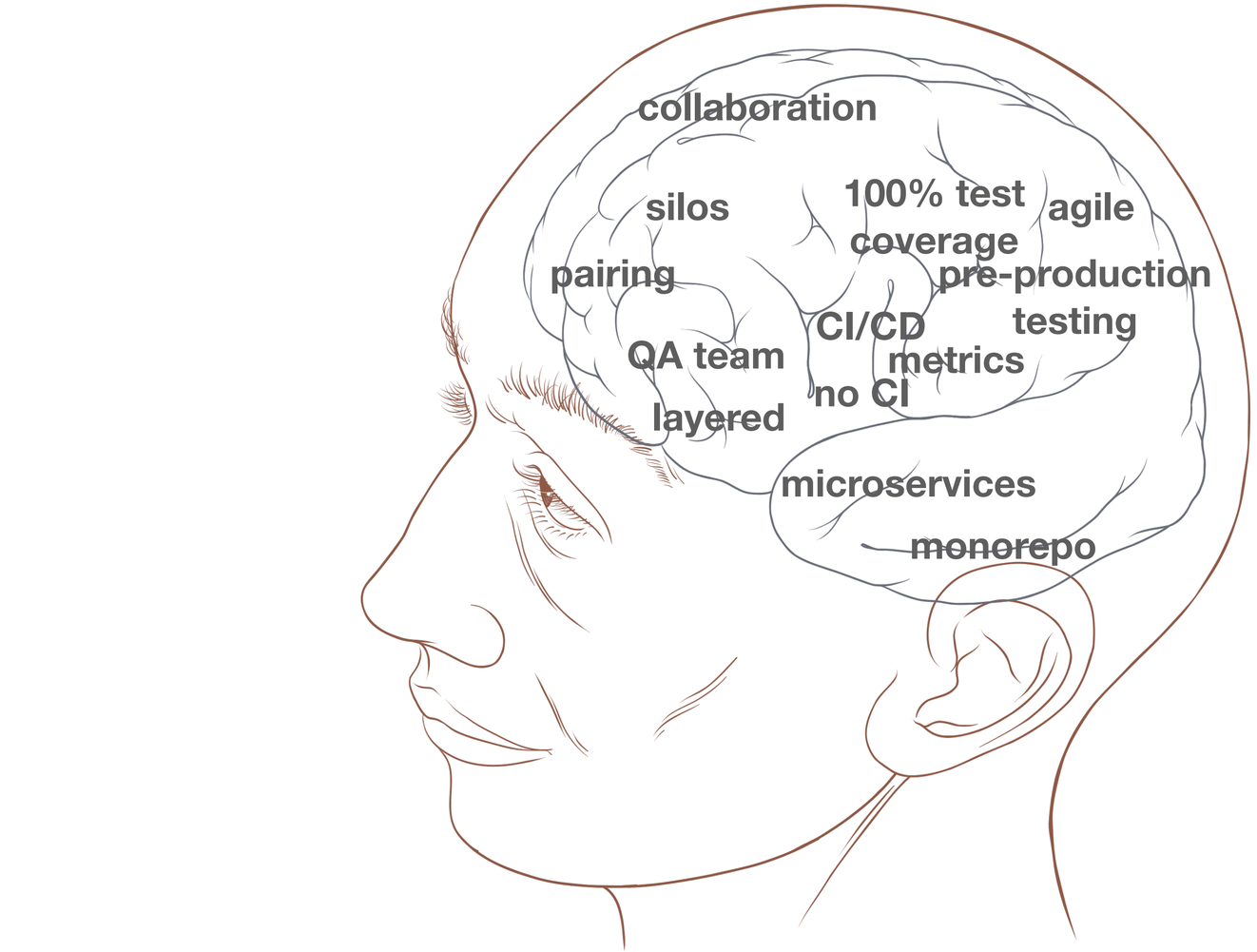
Year 10




Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator

Year 1

Year 10

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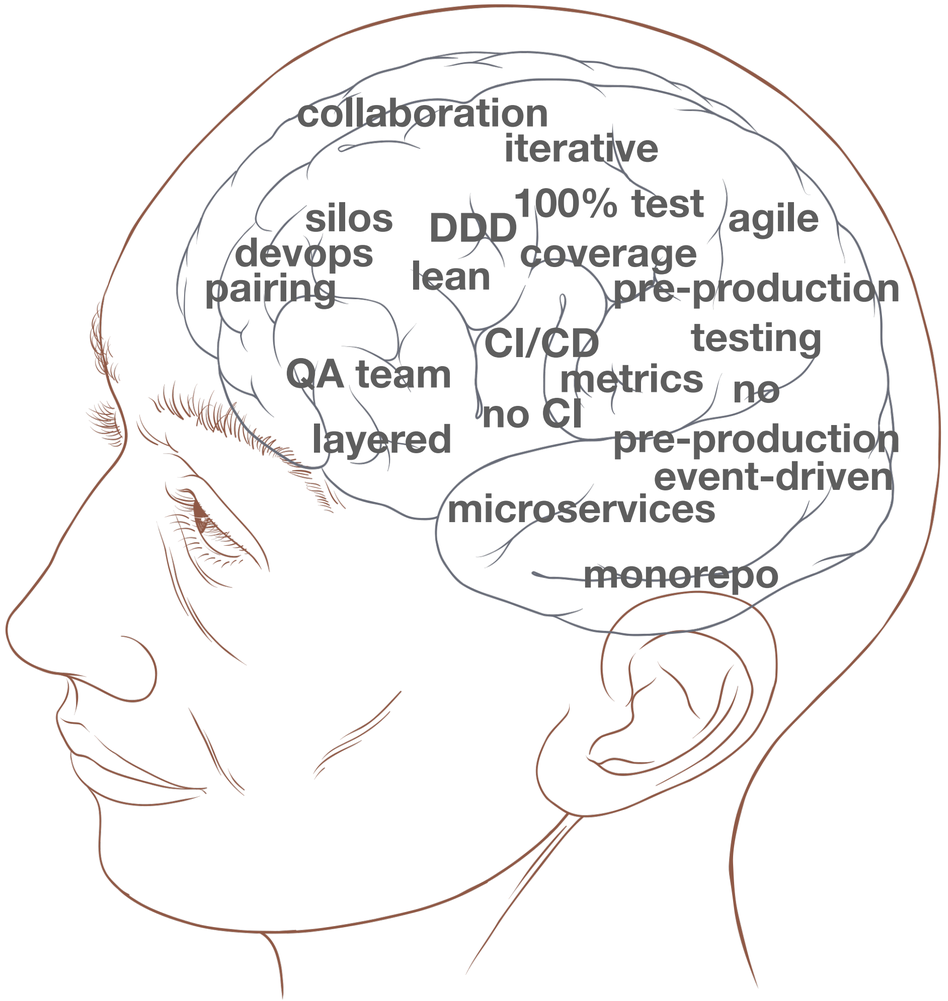
Year 1

Year 10




Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator

# Always learning

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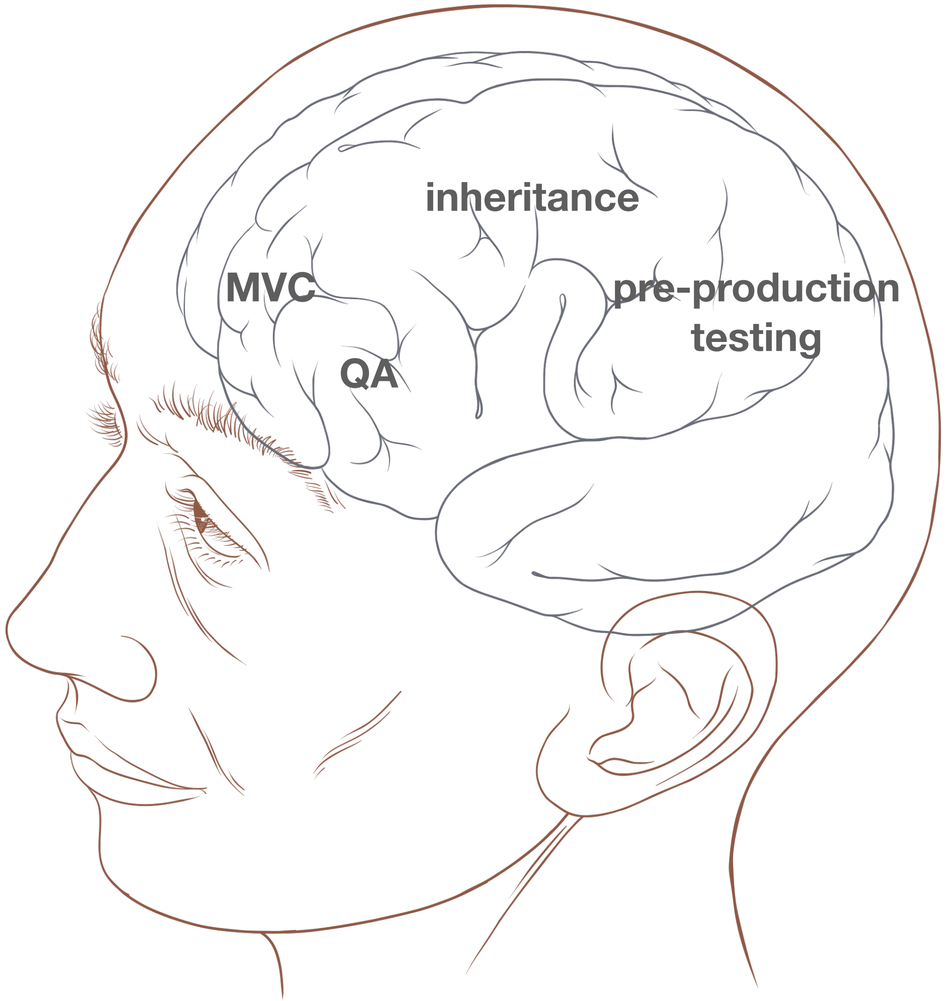
Year 1

Year 10

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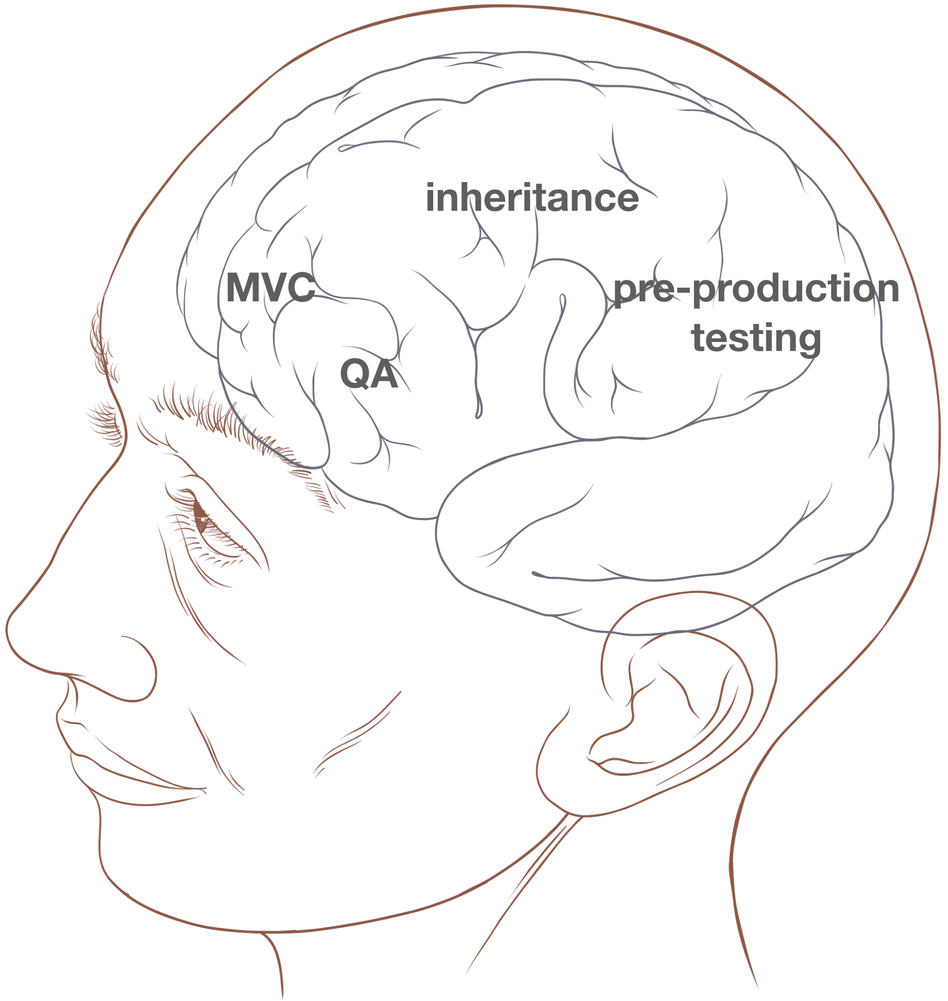
Year 1

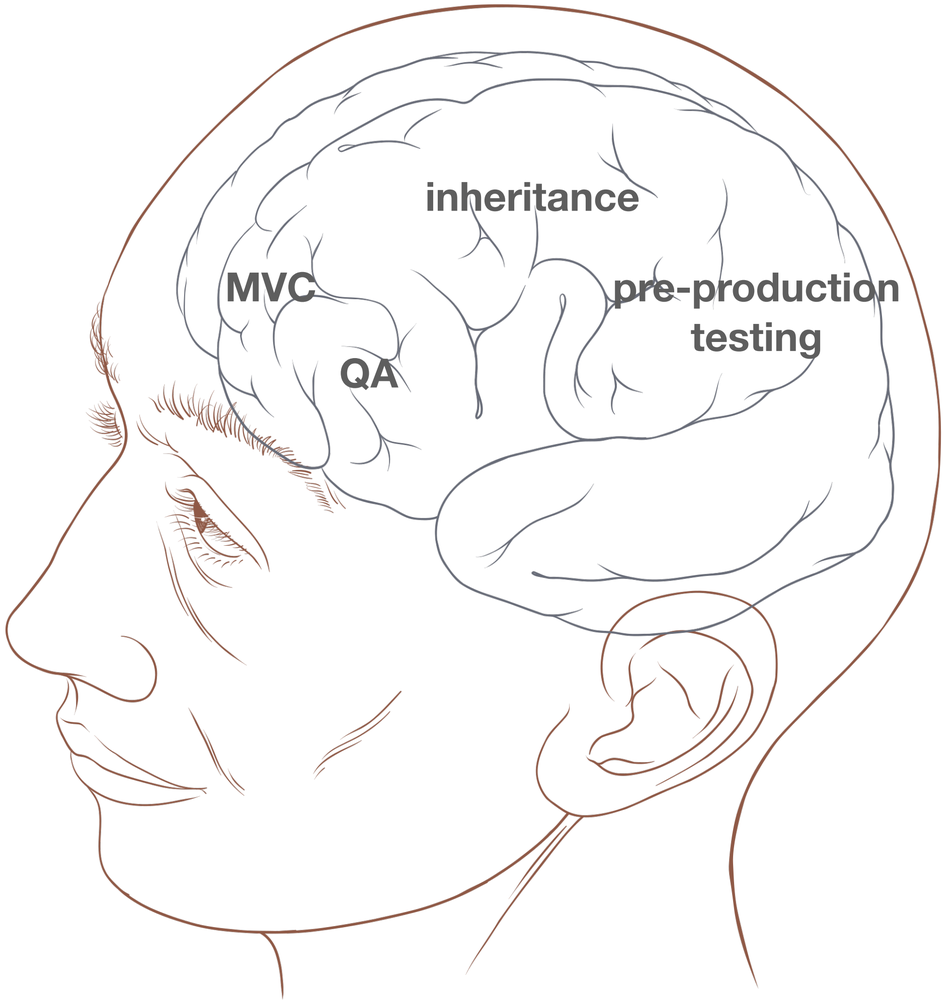
Year 10




Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator

Year 1

Year 10




Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator

**Moving around can increase knowledge, but doesn't guarantee it**

# Difference #3: fresh perspectives

https://www.flickr.com/photos/cdevers/3098268272

# Confusion?

# I guess that's what we do here

Frida

# Something's off

# Have you thought of this?

**New people ask obvious questions.**
**Sometimes no-one has thought of them.**

# Difference #4: potential isolation

# Software delivery requires connection

# Building the right software

- is difficult
- the starting plan is usually wrong
- requires many questions
  - and cross-referencing with other people's answers

# ... and fast!

- cut out the low priority items
- don't build things that already exist
- don't try to manually perform a process that is already automated
- requires more questions

# Success needs

- understanding the existing landscape
- how do the existing code and systems work?
- how does the internal team work?

# Contractors are at a disadvantage

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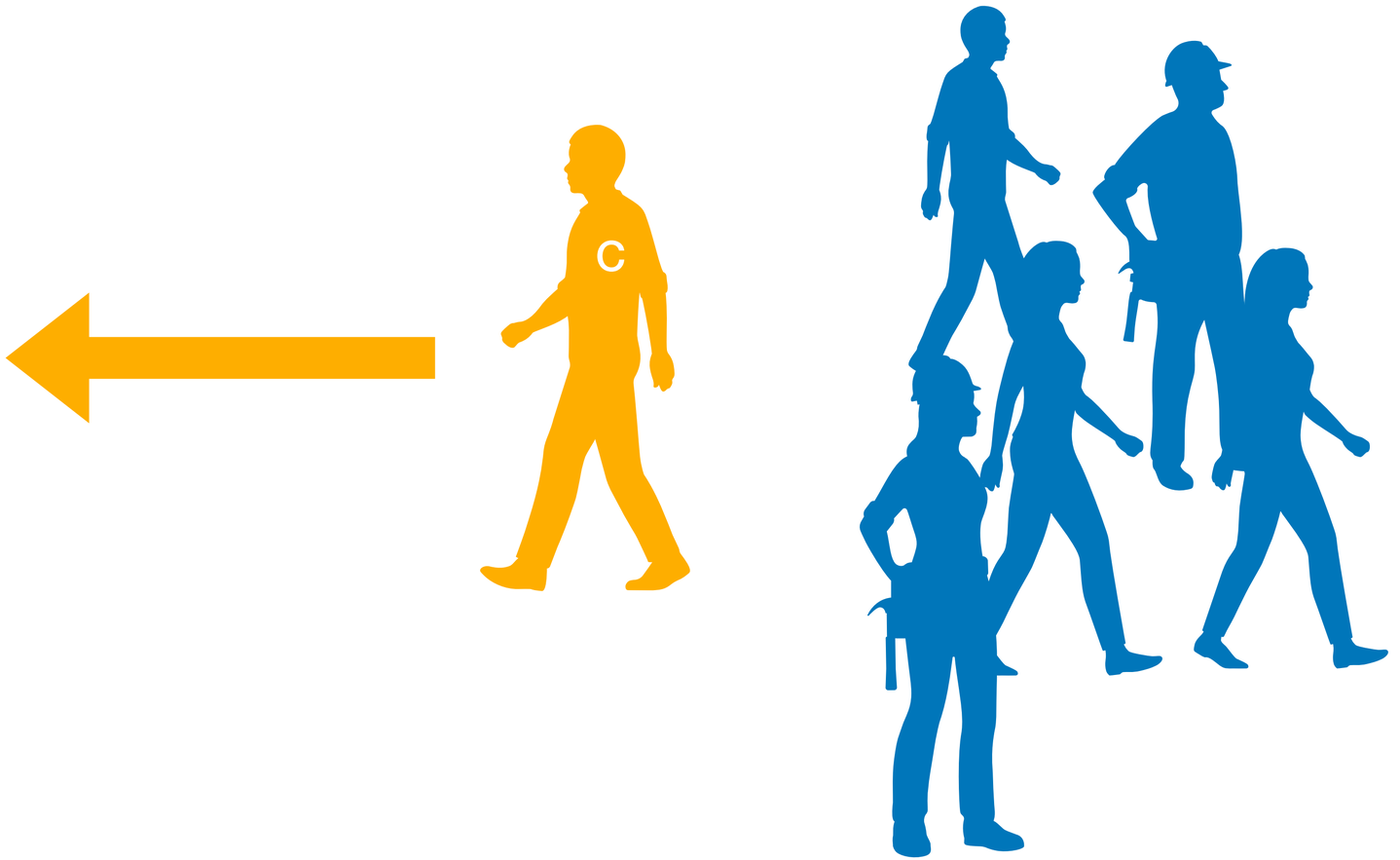
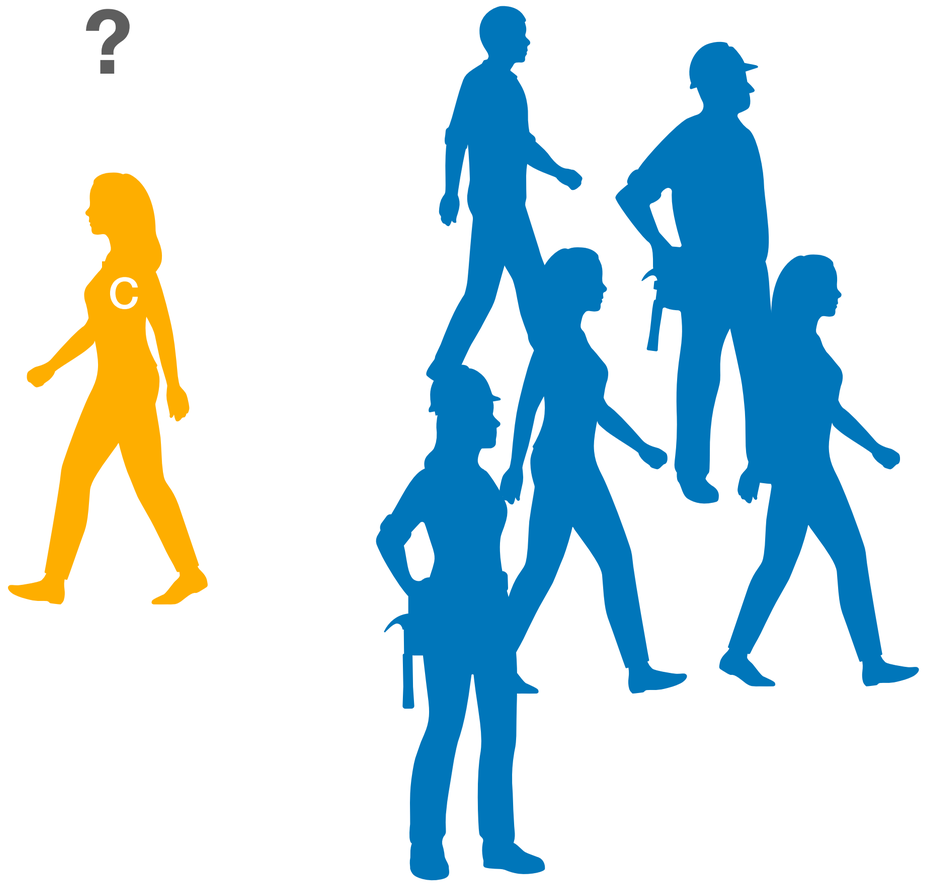
# Got a job to do, keep going

# ... in the wrong direction



Frida

# self-examines



# ... and can reposition herself

**If we feel isolated, we don't trust that we can safely ask for input**

# contractors start out isolated and need to work to get to square one

# Difference #5: disempowerment

# Disempowered

# Disempowered

Frida

# Self-empowers

https://www.flickr.com/photos/cdevers/3098268272

# Didn't notice

# Thanks Fred, thanks Frida!

# Investing for contracting success

# Three investors: clients, contractors, agencies

# Clients can invest

# Techniques for empowerment and connection

- onboarding
  - have the contractors improve the onboarding
- documentation
- technology tricks
  - automating infrastructure
  - self-documenting code

# Be realistic about investment

- onboarding
- documentation
- technology tricks
  - automating infrastructure
  - self-documenting code

# Be realistic about investment

- onboarding
- documentation
- technology tricks
  - ~~automating infrastructure~~ maybe PAAS?
  - self-documenting code

# Evergreen soft skills for software teams

- collaboration
- speed up feedback cycles

# Contractors can invest

# Learn to play before joining the band

# Being ready for the band

- read a book
- take a course
  - bonus points: do this with someone else, at human hours
- open source
- try being a top 10 contributor to a topic on StackOverflow for a month

# Learning on the job

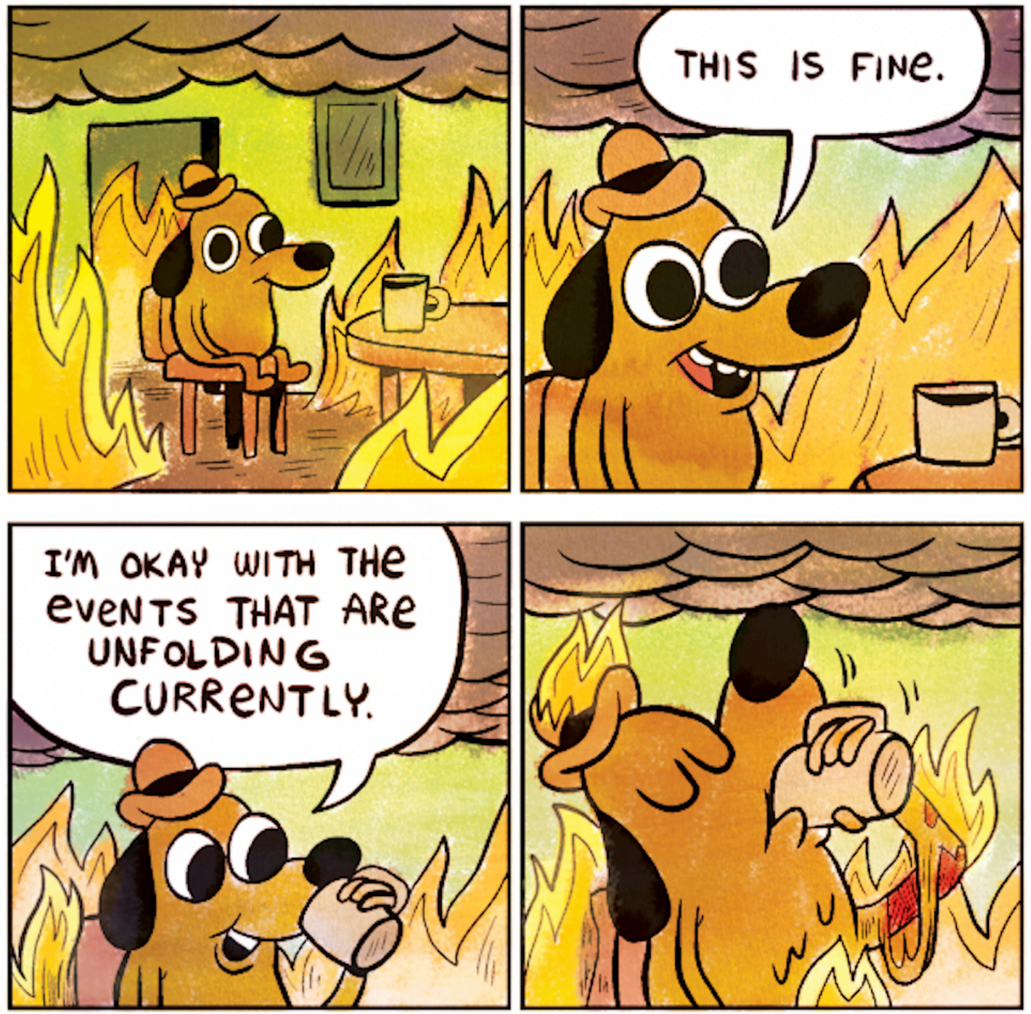
- pairing
- pay attention in team conversations
  - pick something you didn't understand and revisit later
- draw diagrams

# expect to start small

# Reflection for growth

- what makes a good product?
- what does a software team need?
- what caused things to go wrong on previous projects?
- what helped on previous projects when things went wrong?

# Don't sit in silence




https://gunshowcomic.com/648

# Breaking silence as a habit

- retrospectives
- **blameless** or **blame-aware** post mortems
- **conversations**

# Agencies can invest

# Agencies

- create variety, don't keep people stuck
- create teams with diverse strengths, not teams that reinforce weakness
- offer support, not scrutiny and pressure
- see learning as essential, not as awkward overhead

# Clients: please quiz your agency

# Not just about cost

# Agency talk: spotting the nonsense

- "our team members are the best so nothing ever goes wrong!"
- "but if it does go wrong we'll work harder to fix it no matter what!"

# Agency talk you can trust

- "we expect our team members to identify, communicate and mitigate risks so that surprises are not disastrous"
- "it's important that we all ask what has gone wrong and fix the underlying cause so that we don't repeat those mistakes"
- "all plans go wrong sometimes, but we're good at identifying the work that delivers the biggest bang for buck and will help to understand how to maximise the remaining time"

# Questions to ask an agency

- "what do you need from us to ensure success?"
- "how does your agency support your team members?"
- "how do you handle rotations?"
- "when and how do your team members practice their craft and learn?"
- "when do your team members do agency management and admin?"

# Revisiting Fred and Frida

# be kind to Fred

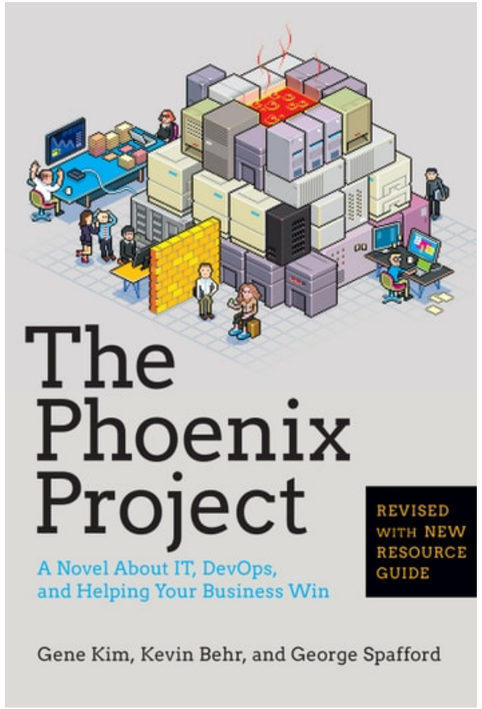
# kindness != enabling

# help Fred be more like Frida

# Freds turn into Fridas

# Fred = Frida = Me!

# Further reading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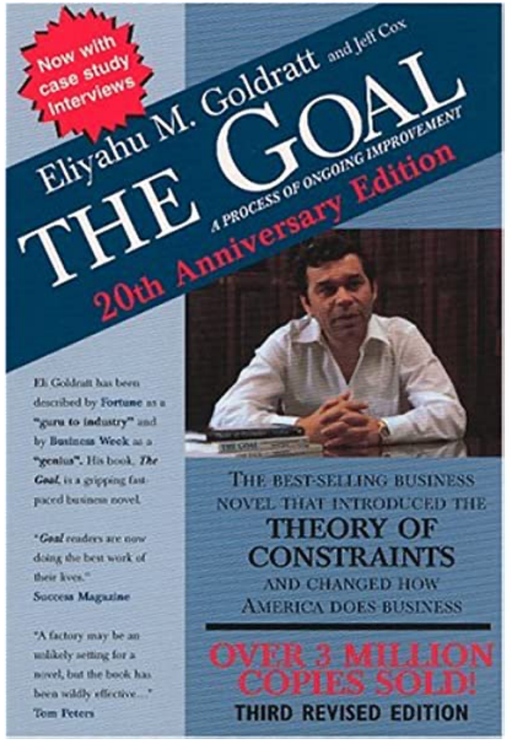
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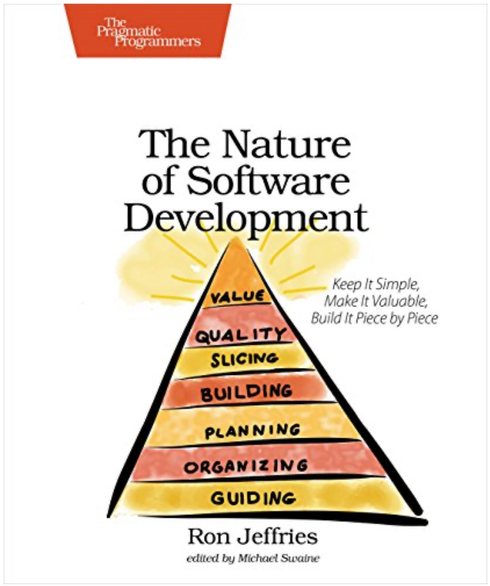
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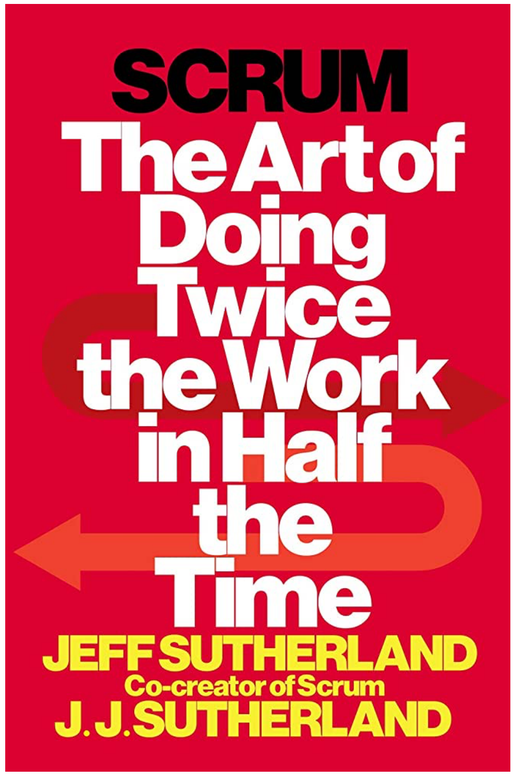
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# Thank you!

# Questions?