

Original article

Discipline in Disguise: A Foucauldian Perspective on Agile at Scale

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Abstract

This study critically examines the transformation of Agile methodologies when scaled within large organizations, focusing on frameworks such as SAFe® and LeSS. Originally intended to foster flexibility, autonomy, and collaboration, Agile in its scaled form often reintroduces hierarchical controls, creating what is termed a paradox of “discipline in disguise.” While these frameworks claim to enhance empowerment and adaptability, they frequently institutionalize mechanisms of surveillance and normalization through rituals, metrics, and digital tools. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concepts of disciplinary power, panopticism, and governmentality, this research analyzes how practices such as daily stand-ups, Agile boards, and coaching roles serve as instruments of subtle control. Findings suggest that transparency mechanisms—such as dashboards and progress metrics—promote self-monitoring and conformity, reducing psychological safety and innovation. Agile coaches further reinforce organizational norms under the guise of facilitation, creating decentralized yet pervasive governance. This paper contributes to critical management studies by reframing scaled Agile as both enabling and constraining. It argues for reflexive implementations that maintain Agile’s core values while mitigating disciplinary tendencies embedded in its structures. The analysis highlights the tension between autonomy and control, urging organizations to preserve adaptability without reinforcing bureaucratic practices.

Keywords. Agile at Scale, Safe®, Less, Disciplined Agile Delivery, Software Engineering.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Agile methodologies have promised a radical transformation in how organizations build software and manage teams. Initially conceived as a rebellion against bureaucratic rigidity and hierarchical control, Agile emerged from the fringes of developer communities, advocating flexibility, autonomy, and human-centric values. Yet, in a curious historical reversal, Agile has itself become institutionalized [1]. Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in scaled Agile frameworks such as SAFe®, LeSS, or Disciplined Agile Delivery. These scaling frameworks, often imposed top-down, promise to bring agility to the enterprise — but at what cost? The seduction of Agile’s “utopia” has concealed a dystopian undercurrent: a regime of rituals, metrics, certifications, and managerial surveillance that increasingly mirrors the very structures it once opposed. According to recent studies, a significant number of scaled Agile transformations fail to meet their original goals of adaptability and employee engagement due to these inherent contradictions [14]. These failures are not merely operational; they point to deeper contradictions embedded in the scaling paradigm itself [2]. In this paper, we ask: To what extent do scale Agile frameworks reproduce disciplinary power structures under the guise of flexibility and empowerment? How can Foucauldian concepts of surveillance and normalization help us understand the technocratic drift of Agile in practice?

To address these questions, we turn to the philosophical lens of Michel Foucault. His work on discipline, panopticism, and governmentality provides a potent framework for critiquing how power operates through subtle mechanisms — not through overt domination, but through internalized control, visibility, and self-regulation. We argue that Agile scaling, particularly in its codified frameworks, creates a “disciplinary ecology” that channels behavior through rituals of transparency and productivity. The daily stand-up, once a tool for mutual alignment, becomes a performance of compliance. Agile dashboards, intended to visualize progress, mutate into instruments of constant audit. Coaches and Scrum Masters, rather than enabling autonomy, often function as micro-governors of agile orthodoxy [1]. As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework of Agile scaling illustrates the key analytical elements. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of Agile scaling in relation to Foucauldian theory. It maps key mechanisms—disciplinary power, panopticism, and governmentality—onto Agile scaling practices such as ceremonies, dashboards, and coaching. This figure is central to understanding how Agile frameworks embed structures of control under the guise of flexibility.

By applying Foucault’s analytics to Agile scaling, this paper offers not just a critique of managerial practices but an inquiry into the ontological conditions of labor, control, and freedom in contemporary technocratic systems. In doing so, it challenges the dominant narratives of Agile as inherently liberatory and instead reveals its potential complicity in reproducing the very structures of control it set out to dismantle [5].

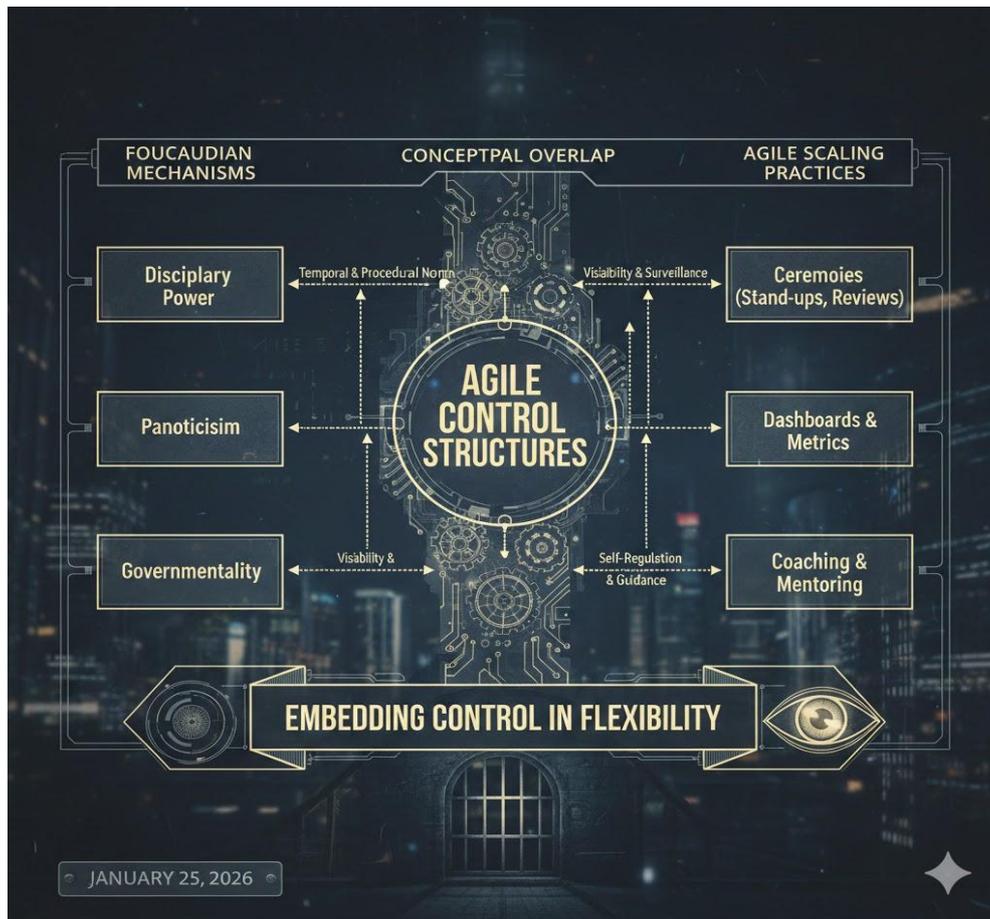


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Agile Scaling

Agile software development has become a dominant methodology in software engineering, offering flexibility, iterative delivery, and customer collaboration. Numerous studies have explored various dimensions of Agile practices, from project management to technical implementation. Agile challenges at scaled often involve coordination complexities that result in the formalization of processes, thereby undermining the initial values of Agile [12]. Coordination in scaled development highlights how structural dependencies generate power imbalances and necessitate monitoring mechanisms [13]. Agile documentation practices have also undergone significant evolution. Studies demonstrate that even minimal documentation requirements can function as disciplinary mechanisms through the visibility of knowledge [21]. Similarly, research in requirements engineering shows that Agile practices may exert normalization pressures on teams [20].

From a technical perspective, continuous integration and delivery (CI/CD) are considered essential yet potentially disciplinary practices, as automation can establish mechanisms of performance surveillance [27]. Automation in testing, while recommended selectively, also creates visibility into individual contribution patterns [8]. Agile project success metrics frequently produce disciplinary effects, with evidence linking metrics to improved outcomes while simultaneously generating pressures on teams [9]. Agile maturity models similarly establish normalization frameworks against which teams are assessed [28]. In the context of organizational transformation, leadership support emerges as critical but is also associated with expectations that create compliance pressures [10]. Remote Agile development further intensifies concerns of surveillance, as distributed teams are increasingly monitored through digital tools [11]. Overall, the literature portrays Agile as multifaceted but increasingly reveals the tension between its empowering rhetoric and its controlling implementations, particularly at scale. These findings collectively suggest that while Agile offers substantial advantages, its adoption often introduces subtle mechanisms of control that merit critical examination [13].

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework forms the intellectual foundation of this study, providing the conceptual basis for understanding how power relations operate within scaled Agile frameworks. This research adopts Michel Foucault's critical concepts of disciplinary power, panopticism, normalization, and governmentality as an analytical lens to explore the paradox of empowerment and control in scaled Agile environments such as SAFe® and LeSS. Foucault's perspective is particularly relevant because it examines power as a diffuse and internalized mechanism rather than as a centralized or coercive force [14, 15]. Within this view, Agile practices such as daily stand-ups, PI Planning, retrospectives, and digital dashboards can be interpreted as

disciplinary techniques that shape behavior, enforce compliance, and normalize organizational norms [13, 20].

Disciplinary Power operates through repetitive ceremonies that establish patterns of accountability, promoting self-regulation among team members [14]. Panopticism, drawn from the metaphor of the Panopticon, is evident in Agile boards and tracking tools, which create a culture of constant visibility and self-surveillance [7]. Governmentality functions through frameworks that encourage decentralized decision-making and self-management, while subtly aligning individual autonomy with organizational objectives [15]. Normalization and Examination manifest in standardized roles, metrics, and maturity models that compel conformity and measure performance against predefined benchmarks [28]. This theoretical lens enriches the academic value of the study in several ways. First, it introduces a poststructuralist critique that challenges the dominant narrative of Agile as inherently liberating [12, 14]. Second, it exposes the hidden mechanisms of power embedded within scaling practices, thus advancing critical discourse in management and software engineering research [13, 20]. Finally, it provides a scientific basis for practical implications, emphasizing the need for reflexivity and contextual adaptation when implementing scaled Agile frameworks [24]. By applying Foucault's concepts, this research highlights the paradox of "utopian dystopia" (UD), where the promise of autonomy coexists with disciplinary control, shaping team behavior under the guise of empowerment [11, 14].

Applying Michel Foucault's Concepts to Agile Scaling

Michel Foucault's critical theories on power, discipline, and surveillance provide a profound lens through which to examine contemporary organizational practices, including the scaling of Agile methodologies. While Agile originally aimed to empower teams and increase flexibility, the large-scale frameworks often incorporate subtle mechanisms of control reminiscent of Foucauldian disciplinary power. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power revolves around shaping individual behavior through surveillance, normalization, and examination. In Agile scaling, rituals such as daily stand-ups, iteration reviews, and PI planning sessions can be understood as disciplinary techniques that produce 'docile bodies'—team members who self-regulate and conform to organizational norms even without overt coercion [14]. Furthermore, Foucault's concept of the panopticon metaphorically explains how visibility functions as a tool of power. Agile boards, dashboards, and reporting tools serve as digital panopticons where every action is observable, creating a culture of continuous self-monitoring. This visibility extends power beyond direct supervision, internalizing control within individuals and teams [7]. Lastly, governmentality, or the art of governing beyond traditional hierarchical authority, is evident in scaled Agile frameworks.

The following image illustrates the connection between Foucauldian concepts and scaled Agile methods, as shown in Figure 2, which demonstrates the interconnection between disciplinary power, panoptic surveillance, and self-governance within scaled Agile environments. It visually emphasizes the paradox of empowerment and control that underpins Agile practices, reinforcing the theoretical argument presented in Section 3. By promoting decentralized decision-making and self-management, these frameworks foster self-discipline aligned with organizational goals, thus diffusing power throughout the system rather than concentrating it at the top [15].



Figure 2. Discipline in Disguise Linking Foucauldian Concepts (Disciplinary Power, Panopticon, Self-Governance).

Synthesis Table: Foucauldian Concepts Applied to Agile Scaling

Table 1 synthesizes Foucauldian concepts and their application in scaled Agile environments. For example, the first column outlines concepts such as “Disciplinary Power,” while the corresponding rows illustrate Agile practices like daily stand-ups, which foster internalized norms. The last column analyzes the effects on team behavior, such as conformity and stress from evaluation.

This theoretical synthesis reveals how Agile scaling frameworks, while promising flexibility and empowerment, embed mechanisms of subtle control and discipline. By applying Foucault’s ideas, we uncover the paradox of UD where freedom and control coexist, challenging the idealized narratives around Agile [15].

Table 1. Foucauldian Concepts Applied to Agile Scaling

Foucauldian Concept	Agile Scaling Application	Effects on Teams and Individuals
Disciplinary Power	Ritualized ceremonies (daily stand-ups, retrospectives, PI Planning)	Internalized norms, behavioral conformity
Panopticism	Agile boards, dashboards, digital tracking tools	Continuous self-surveillance, peer monitoring
Governmentality	Decentralized decision-making, self-management	Diffused control, self-regulation aligned with goals
Normalization	Standardized roles and practices	Pressure to conform, suppression of deviation
Examination	Performance metrics and velocity tracking	Quantification of productivity, stress from evaluation

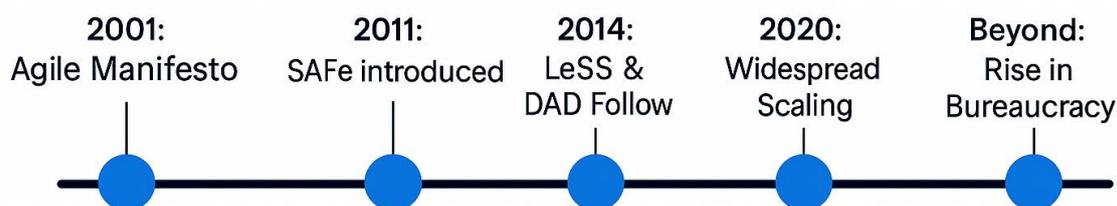
Rituals of Discipline in SAFe®

Daily stand-ups, while marketed as simple coordination rituals, function as powerful disciplinary mechanisms within scaled Agile frameworks such as SAFe®. These meetings compel team members to present their progress, challenges, and plans in front of peers and managers, creating an environment of constant visibility. This visibility acts as a subtle form of surveillance that fosters self-discipline, where individuals regulate their own behavior due to the awareness of being watched—even if no direct supervision is present [1]. This aligns with Foucault’s panoptic model, where the potential for observation is internalized by subjects, turning them into their own monitors. In this way, the stand-up meetings normalize a culture of accountability that extends beyond mere project updates; they produce “docile bodies” that conform through repetitive and ritualized practice.

Furthermore, Program Increment (PI) Planning sessions amplify this disciplinary regime by formalizing collaboration under strict timelines and hierarchical oversight. Though PI Planning is portrayed as a collective effort to align teams and priorities, it also consolidates control by structuring workflows into predictable cycles, imposing deadlines, and standardizing deliverables. This formalization creates a governance system that decentralizes power yet reinforces organizational norms, consistent with Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Through this, power is exercised not just through direct commands but through the shaping of conduct via accepted practices [2].

Figure 3 shows the evolution of Agile from lightweight practices to scaled frameworks, highlighting the bureaucratic layers introduced over time. This figure contextualizes the historical trajectory leading to the institutionalization of Agile.

Evolution of Agile to Scaling Frameworks and Bureaucratization

**Figure 3. Evolution of Agile to Scaling Frameworks and Bureaucratization.**

The ritualization of these events embeds compliance into the everyday rhythm of work, normalizing surveillance and control under the guise of empowerment and flexibility. Rather than freeing teams, these

rituals anchor individuals within tightly regulated temporal and social structures, where autonomy is conditional on adherence to organizational protocols [14]. As digital tools increasingly mediate these rituals—such as virtual stand-ups and online PI planning—disciplinary power extends into the digital realm. The technologies used to facilitate Agile ceremonies become instruments of panopticism, enabling continuous monitoring, tracking, and reporting. Remote or hybrid work setups intensify this effect by replacing physical presence with digital traceability, further embedding self-regulation and peer surveillance [6]. In sum, while scaled Agile frameworks like SAFe® promote ideals of agility and collaboration, their embedded rituals perpetuate bureaucratic control and disciplinary power, where freedom is promised but discipline prevails.

Agile Boards as Digital Panopticons

Agile boards, whether physical or digital, have become central artifacts in scaled Agile frameworks, particularly in SAFe® and LeSS. Tools such as Jira, Trello, and Azure DevOps boards are not merely visual project management aids but function as pervasive mechanisms of surveillance and control within Agile environments.

Figure 4 provides an example of Jira's board creation interface, comparing Scrum and Kanban configurations. This figure supports the argument in Section 4.2 that digital boards act as panoptic tools, enabling constant visibility and control. It shows the Jira board creation options comparing Scrum and Kanban. From a Foucauldian perspective, these boards serve as digital panopticons, where the visibility of tasks, workflows, and progress is constant and comprehensive [7].

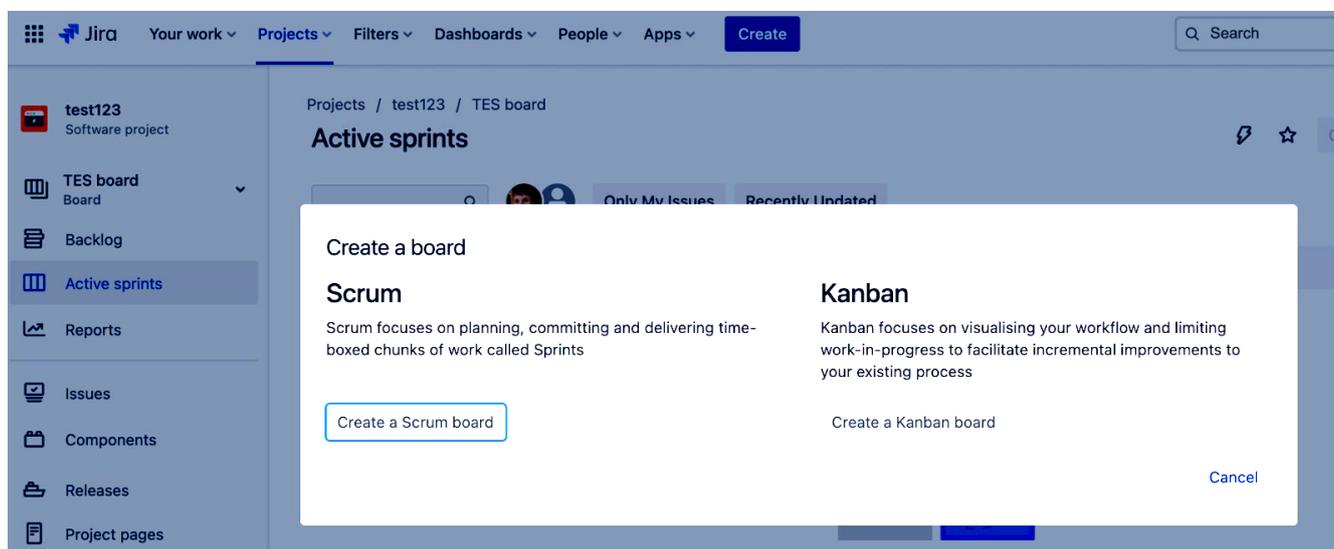


Figure 4. Jira Create Board – Scrum vs. Kanban Selection.

The fundamental principle of the panopticon is the asymmetry of visibility: individuals are constantly aware that they might be observed, which leads to self-regulation [20]. Agile boards extend this logic into the digital realm, where every user action—ticket updates, status changes, comments—is logged and visible to a broad range of stakeholders, including team members, Agile coaches, and management.

Figure 5 displays a Kanban board within Jira Software, illustrating how task visibility and workflow tracking reinforce behavioral conformity through transparency. As shown in Figure 5, an example of a Kanban board for project management in Jira Software is provided. This transparency fosters a culture of self-discipline, where individuals proactively align their work to meet expected norms and timelines to avoid negative scrutiny.

Research highlights that such digital transparency can improve coordination and accountability but simultaneously engenders pressures to conform, reduce experimental risk-taking, and induce stress related to continuous monitoring. In distributed and hybrid work settings, Agile boards become even more critical, substituting physical presence with asynchronous, data-driven visibility. This shift intensifies the panoptic effect as surveillance becomes less about direct observation and more about data analytics and automated reporting [10]. Moreover, the digitization of Agile boards introduces algorithmic governance, where software features—such as automated reminders, priority flags, and performance dashboards—enforce compliance and prioritize work according to organizational objectives. This automation further normalizes control, embedding it into the daily rhythms of team workflows without explicit managerial intervention. Consequently, while Agile boards promise enhanced transparency and collaboration, they also operate as disciplinary technologies that regulate behavior and consolidate power structures within large-scale Agile implementations. This dual function underscores the Foucauldian paradox of Agile scaling: tools designed for empowerment simultaneously serve as instruments of subtle, yet pervasive control [18].

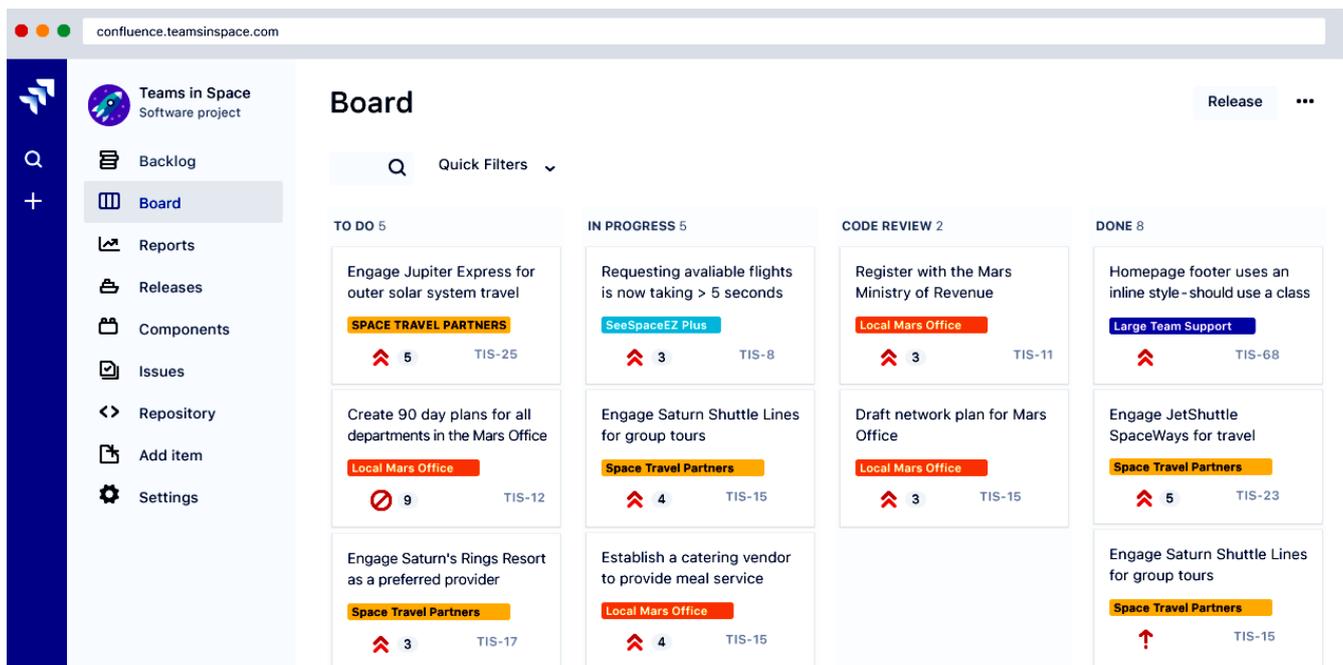


Figure 5. Kanban Board for Project Management in Jira Software.

Agile Coaches as Agents of Governmentality

Agile Coaches, positioned as facilitators and mentors within scaled Agile frameworks, occupy a critical role that extends beyond mere coaching. Their function can be understood through Foucault's concept of governmentality, which refers to the subtle, decentralized forms of power that guide and regulate individuals' behaviors within organizations. Agile Coaches operate as agents of governance, shaping team conduct and reinforcing organizational norms through their interactions and interventions [15]. In practice, Agile Coaches monitor compliance with Agile principles, facilitate rituals, and encourage self-discipline among team members. They often promote practices such as continuous improvement, transparency, and accountability, which align with the Foucauldian notion of "technologies of the self"—mechanisms by which individuals internalize and enact power relations. This internalization encourages self-regulation that reduces the need for overt hierarchical control, making the governance process appear more decentralized and voluntary. Moreover, Agile Coaches influence power dynamics by mediating between management and teams, translating strategic objectives into actionable tasks while ensuring adherence to Agile frameworks. This mediation reinforces the structural power embedded in Agile scaling, ensuring that discipline is maintained across multiple levels of the organization. By embedding themselves within teams, Agile Coaches become instruments of subtle control, facilitating a form of governmentality where power is exercised through normalized, everyday practices rather than through explicit commands [25].

The dual role of Agile Coaches—as supporters of empowerment and enforcers of discipline—highlights the paradox at the heart of scaled Agile frameworks. While these coaches advocate for team autonomy and flexibility, they also perpetuate the bureaucratic mechanisms that regulate and constrain that autonomy. This paradox aligns with findings in recent empirical studies showing that Agile Coaches often enact organizational control under the guise of enabling freedom, thus reinforcing the scale Agile implementation [11]. In sum, Agile Coaches are pivotal in maintaining the disciplinary regime within scaled Agile frameworks. They embody governmentality by facilitating self-surveillance, reinforcing norms, and sustaining power relations that underlie Agile scaling practices. This nuanced role demonstrates how power circulates invisibly, shaping behaviors and organizational cultures in ways that are often overlooked in mainstream Agile discourse.

Digital Surveillance and Data-Driven Governance in Agile Scaling

In addition to human agents like Agile Coaches, scaled Agile frameworks increasingly rely on digital tools and data analytics to govern teams and projects. Platforms such as Jira, Azure DevOps, and Rally provide real-time tracking of tasks, progress, and performance metrics, creating a comprehensive digital footprint of work activities. From a Foucauldian perspective, this reliance on digital surveillance represents a shift toward what some scholars term "algorithmic governmentality," where power is exercised through data-driven processes and automated monitoring systems. These tools not only enable transparency but also normalize continuous surveillance, making employees aware that their contributions, delays, and even communication patterns are constantly recorded and analyzed. This phenomenon aligns with the panopticon principle, where visibility becomes a disciplinary mechanism that encourages self-regulation. The data generated serves managerial interests by producing measurable evidence of productivity and compliance, which in turn justifies further control and standardization [19]. Moreover, the integration of AI and machine

learning in some Agile tools introduces predictive analytics and automated recommendations. While presented as efficiency enhancers, these features embed subtle forms of control by nudging teams toward behaviors deemed optimal by organizational algorithms. This raises concerns about the erosion of human autonomy, as decisions become increasingly influenced by algorithmic governance rather than human discretion.

Empirical research highlights the paradox inherent in such digital governance: while it promises agility through enhanced coordination and responsiveness, it also intensifies control by embedding disciplinary power into technological infrastructures. Agile practitioners may feel empowered by the availability of data but simultaneously constrained by the expectations and norms enforced through digital oversight [9]. Thus, digital tools in Agile scaling do not merely support project management; they function as instruments of power that shape organizational culture and individual behavior. The datafication of work exemplifies how scaled Agile frameworks extend Foucauldian disciplinary mechanisms into the digital realm, reinforcing the UD where freedom and control are in constant tension.

Agile Coaches as Agents of Governance and Resistance

Agile Coaches occupy a paradoxical position within scaled Agile frameworks. On one hand, they are portrayed as facilitators of team empowerment, culture change, and agile values. On the other hand, from a Foucauldian lens, they function as key agents in enforcing organizational norms, discipline, and power structures.

Coaches are responsible for ensuring adherence to Agile rituals, processes, and performance metrics. By guiding teams to conform to standardized practices, they act as intermediaries of disciplinary power, translating abstract organizational goals into everyday behaviors. This aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality, where power is decentralized but enacted through local actors who discipline others under the guise of support and guidance. Research suggests that Agile Coaches often monitor and correct "deviant" behaviors—those that fall outside expected norms of collaboration, communication, or productivity. Through feedback sessions, coaching workshops, and one-on-one interventions, they shape not only work practices but also team identities and attitudes toward control [6]. However, the role of Agile Coaches is not purely repressive. Some studies indicate that coaches can act as mediators who resist or negotiate the intensity of control, advocating for flexibility, psychological safety, and genuine empowerment. This dual role highlights the complexity of power dynamics in Agile scaling—where resistance and compliance coexist in a delicate balance [18]. Moreover, the coaches' effectiveness depends on their positionality within the organization. Coaches embedded within hierarchical management structures may prioritize control and standardization, while those with more autonomy may foster experimentation and critical reflection on power relations. Ultimately, Agile Coaches exemplify the Foucauldian insight that power is relational and productive; it circulates through social roles and practices, producing both domination and possibilities for agency. Understanding their role helps unpack how large-scale Agile frameworks simultaneously enable and constrain teams within the UD of scaled agility [24].

Practical Implications: Control, Compliance, and Cultural Shifts in Scaled Agile

The disciplinary rituals, digital surveillance, and governance roles embedded in scaled Agile frameworks produce significant practical effects on organizational culture and employee experience. Firstly, the normalization of constant visibility and reporting can lead to increased stress and anxiety among team members. The pressure to conform to Agile norms and perform under continuous observation may cause "performance fatigue," reducing intrinsic motivation and creativity. The illusion of autonomy—where employees believe they have freedom but are subtly coerced into compliance—can undermine genuine empowerment [28]. Secondly, Agile rituals and tools reinforce a culture of metric-driven accountability. While this can improve transparency and coordination, it also risks reducing complex human work to quantifiable outputs. Employees may prioritize meeting KPIs over meaningful collaboration, leading to "checkbox Agile" where rituals are performed ritualistically without substantive improvement. Thirdly, the interplay of discipline and empowerment creates cultural tensions. Teams may superficially embrace Agile values such as collaboration and flexibility, while internalizing hierarchical control mechanisms. This duality can foster cynicism or disengagement, especially if promises of autonomy are not matched by actual decision-making power [27]. Moreover, the reliance on Agile Coaches and structured frameworks may diminish local experimentation and adaptation. Prescriptive processes may stifle innovation and responsiveness, counteracting Agile's original emphasis on adaptability.

Understanding these practical implications is crucial for organizations seeking to implement scaled Agile effectively. It highlights the need for reflexive practices that recognize and address the power dynamics inherent in Agile scaling, rather than blindly replicating frameworks. In essence, while scaled Agile frameworks aim to create flexible, responsive organizations, the Foucauldian critique reveals how they often produce disciplined, controlled environments—where cultural change is shaped as much by power as by purpose [19].

Agile Coaches as Agents of Governance and Power

Agile Coaches play a pivotal role in scaled Agile implementations, not merely as facilitators but as enforcers of organizational norms and disciplinary power. They act as intermediaries who translate Agile frameworks into everyday practices, ensuring adherence to rituals, tools, and behaviors that align with management's vision. From a Foucauldian perspective, Agile Coaches embody the concept of governmentality, exercising subtle forms of power that govern team conduct without overt coercion. They guide teams toward self-regulation, encouraging internalization of Agile principles that serve organizational control objectives. This creates a paradox where coaches are positioned as empowerment agents while simultaneously sustaining hierarchical oversight.

Coaches monitor performance metrics, enforce meeting rhythms, and mediate conflict resolution, thereby normalizing behaviors consistent with Agile doctrines. Their authority is derived not from formal hierarchy but from expertise and discursive power, reinforcing compliance through persuasion and social pressure [13]. This dynamic can obscure power relations, making disciplinary mechanisms appear voluntary and beneficial. It can also create dependency, where teams rely on coaches for direction and validation, limiting autonomous decision-making. Furthermore, the presence of coaches reflects a bureaucratic layer within Agile that contrasts with the original ethos of lightweight, self-organizing teams. As gatekeepers of Agile orthodoxy, coaches may prioritize framework fidelity over contextual adaptation, reducing flexibility.

Recognizing Agile Coaches as agents of governance invites organizations to critically assess how power operates in Agile transformations. It suggests the importance of balancing discipline with genuine empowerment, fostering reflexivity among coaches to avoid perpetuating control under the guise of support.

The Paradox of Empowerment and Control in Scaled Agile

The analysis of rituals, tools, and roles within scaled Agile frameworks reveals an inherent paradox: while these frameworks promise empowerment, flexibility, and autonomy, they simultaneously embed pervasive control and disciplinary mechanisms. This paradox aligns with Foucault's notion of "power/knowledge," where knowledge systems like Agile frameworks produce power relations that shape behavior under the guise of liberation [11]. Scaled Agile's emphasis on transparency, regular reporting, and accountability can foster a culture of self-discipline, where teams internalize monitoring and regulation. Although this can enhance efficiency and coordination, it risks reducing creativity and spontaneity, core values Agile originally aimed to promote. This dynamic creates what we refer to as a UD, a system presenting an ideal of freedom but enacting subtle forms of domination. The system's success depends on continuous performance surveillance, normalized by rituals and technology, which simultaneously constrain and enable agency [12]. Agile's digital tools, such as dashboards and tracking software, further solidify this control, operating as panoptic devices that extend surveillance beyond physical spaces into virtual environments. This can heighten pressure on teams and individuals to conform, impacting psychological safety and well-being.

To mitigate these tensions, organizations should cultivate epistemic pluralism by encouraging diverse ways of knowing and practicing Agile, allowing adaptation rather than rigid adherence. Reflexive practices among leaders and coaches are essential to recognize and disrupt disciplinary tendencies, fostering genuine empowerment. Ultimately, this Foucauldian critique encourages a more nuanced understanding of Agile transformations, prompting critical reflection on power dynamics and advocating for balanced approaches that honor both structure and freedom [13].

Case Study: Implementing SAFe® at Cisco – Balancing Efficiency and Autonomy

Cisco Systems, a global leader in networking and IT, embarked on implementing the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe®) to enhance productivity and streamline operations. Figure 6 illustrates the impact of implementing SAFe® on productivity and freedom across teams. The adoption of SAFe® led to notable improvements in productivity and efficiency. Teams were able to deliver products more quickly and with higher quality, thanks to the emphasis on continuous integration and delivery practices. Figure 6 compares productivity and autonomy outcomes before and after SAFe® implementation at Cisco, illustrating the dual effects of efficiency gains and reduced team autonomy.



Figure 6 SAFe's Impact on Productivity and Freedom: A Comparative View.

However, this transformation also introduced challenges. The structured nature of SAFe® imposed constraints on team autonomy, limiting feature choice and enforcing refinement processes. This aligns with Foucault's concept of disciplinary mechanisms, where structured practices can lead to self-regulation and conformity. The Cisco case illustrates the dual nature of SAFe® implementation: while it can drive efficiency and alignment, it may also introduce constraints that affect team autonomy and innovation.

Testimonials: Agile Teams on Digital Boards and Surveillance Pressures

The integration of digital boards in Agile practices has been both beneficial and challenging for teams. While tools like Jira and Trello enhance visibility and coordination, they also introduce a sense of constant surveillance. A study published in the *Journal of Product Innovation Management* highlights that peer pressure is common among established Agile teams and negatively influences their innovative output. The visibility provided by digital boards can exacerbate this pressure, leading to stress and reduced creativity. Team members have reported feeling constantly monitored, with every action tracked and analyzed. This environment can lead to self-censorship and a reluctance to take risks, undermining the core Agile principle of fostering innovation through autonomy. These testimonials underscore the importance of balancing transparency with psychological safety. Organizations must be mindful of the potential for digital tools to become instruments of control, rather than enablers of collaboration and innovation [18].

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

This study offers a novel theoretical lens by integrating Michel Foucault's critical concepts—disciplinary power, panopticism, normalization, and governmentality—into the analysis of scaled Agile frameworks such as SAFe®. While Agile methodologies have traditionally been studied through management and software engineering perspectives, few have engaged deeply with poststructuralist critiques. By doing so, this research moves beyond the surface-level celebration or criticism of Agile, instead revealing how power operates subtly through its structures and rituals [12].

One significant contribution lies in the reinterpretation of Agile ceremonies as disciplinary techniques. Rather than merely being collaborative tools, stand-ups, retrospectives, and planning sessions can function as technologies of behavioral regulation. They shape what is sayable and doable, subtly guiding team members to self-correct and align with organizational norms. This reframing challenges the assumption that Agile rituals are inherently liberating and invites a more nuanced understanding of how autonomy is constructed—and often constrained—within Agile culture [20]. Additionally, by invoking Foucault's panopticon metaphor, the research illuminates how Agile tools such as Kanban boards, Jira dashboards, and real-time metrics serve not just as project management aids but as instruments of visibility and surveillance. These platforms enable constant monitoring, fostering what Foucault described as "self-policing subjects." Developers internalize expectations and regulate their own behavior in anticipation of being observed, even when no one is explicitly watching. Theoretically, this repositions Agile not as a post-bureaucratic innovation, but as a reconfiguration of control mechanisms in digital work environments. It challenges the binary between empowerment and oppression, showing how Agile frameworks contain both potentialities. This duality—what we termed the UD of Agile—contributes to broader debates in critical organization studies, particularly those concerned with how freedom and control are co-produced in contemporary workplaces [14].

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this research hold important implications for Agile coaches, managers, and organizations seeking to scaled Agile without undermining its foundational values. As teams adopt frameworks like SAFe® or LeSS, there is a risk of institutionalizing agility into bureaucratic procedures devoid of reflective practice.

As shown in Figure 7, the main practical implications of scaled Agile adoption are summarized. When rituals become mechanical, and tools are weaponized for compliance rather than collaboration, the core spirit of Agile—responsiveness, learning, and team autonomy—is lost [24]. Figure 7 summarizes the practical implications of scaled Agile practices, emphasizing the risks of normalization, stress, and metric-driven compliance within the organizational culture.

First, organizations must be cautious about how Agile metrics are used. While velocity charts, burndown graphs, and throughput reports can provide useful insights, their misuse can lead to anxiety, micromanagement, and a counterproductive fixation on quantification. To counter this, leaders should create spaces where metrics are discussed contextually and qualitatively, not as rigid benchmarks but as tools for growth and dialogue. Second, Agile coaches and Scrum Masters must reexamine their roles not as enforcers of process orthodoxy but as facilitators of psychological safety and reflective engagement. If ceremonies are conducted perfunctorily, they risk becoming empty rituals. Facilitators should be trained not only in Agile mechanics but also in team dynamics, critical questioning, and ethical leadership to preserve the human element at the heart of Agile. Third, there must be greater sensitivity to the normalization pressures that scaled Agile frameworks exert. Standardized roles (e.g., Release Train Engineer, Product Owner) and rigid cadences can suppress creativity and silence dissent. Organizations should allow for local adaptations, enabling teams to co-create processes that reflect their unique contexts. This could involve customizing stand-up formats, experimenting with feedback loops, or decentralizing decision-making even further than what the framework prescribes [21]. Ultimately, to retain its transformative promise, Agile must resist the temptation to become a one-size-fits-all prescription. Teams must reclaim agency, not just over their work but over how they work—engaging with process design as an ongoing, participatory act rather than a prepackaged solution.

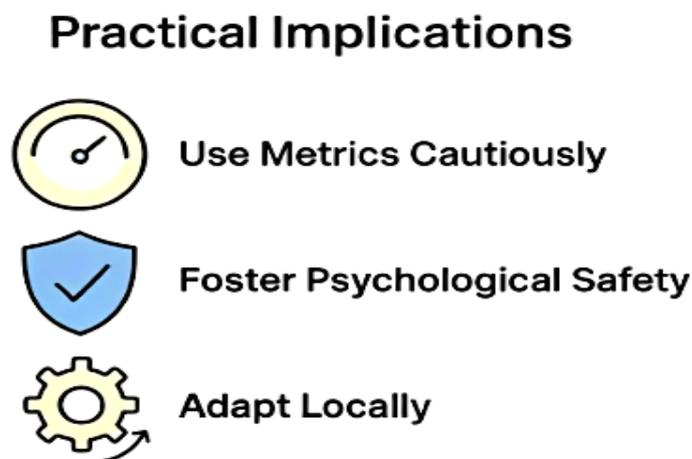


Figure 7. Practical Implications

Conclusion

Agile began as a promise of freedom and collaboration, but this study shows how, once scaled in large enterprises through frameworks like SAFe®, it often turns into something more controlling. Drawing on Foucault's ideas of power and discipline, the research reveals that ceremonies such as PI Planning and stand-ups can become routine performances that enforce conformity, while dashboards and boards act like modern panopticons, keeping teams under constant watch. Agile coaches, meanwhile, guide teams to self-regulate in ways that align with organizational goals, blending empowerment with subtle governance. The narrative highlights a paradox: Agile scaling does not simply liberate teams but also embeds new mechanisms of control. The study calls for organizations to remain self-aware, preserving adaptability and collaboration while resisting the quiet drift toward bureaucracy. It suggests that future research should look closely at how practitioners experience these dynamics and explore ways to restore creativity and psychological safety. In essence, Agile's evolution is not just about speed and flexibility—it is also about navigating the hidden structures of power that shape how teams work together.

Conflict of interest. Nil

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