



# Breaking the hierarchy

## How Spotify enables engineer decision making

Kristian Lindwall, Spotify

# Introduction









”Our employees  
are our most  
valued resource”

So where does it go  
wrong?



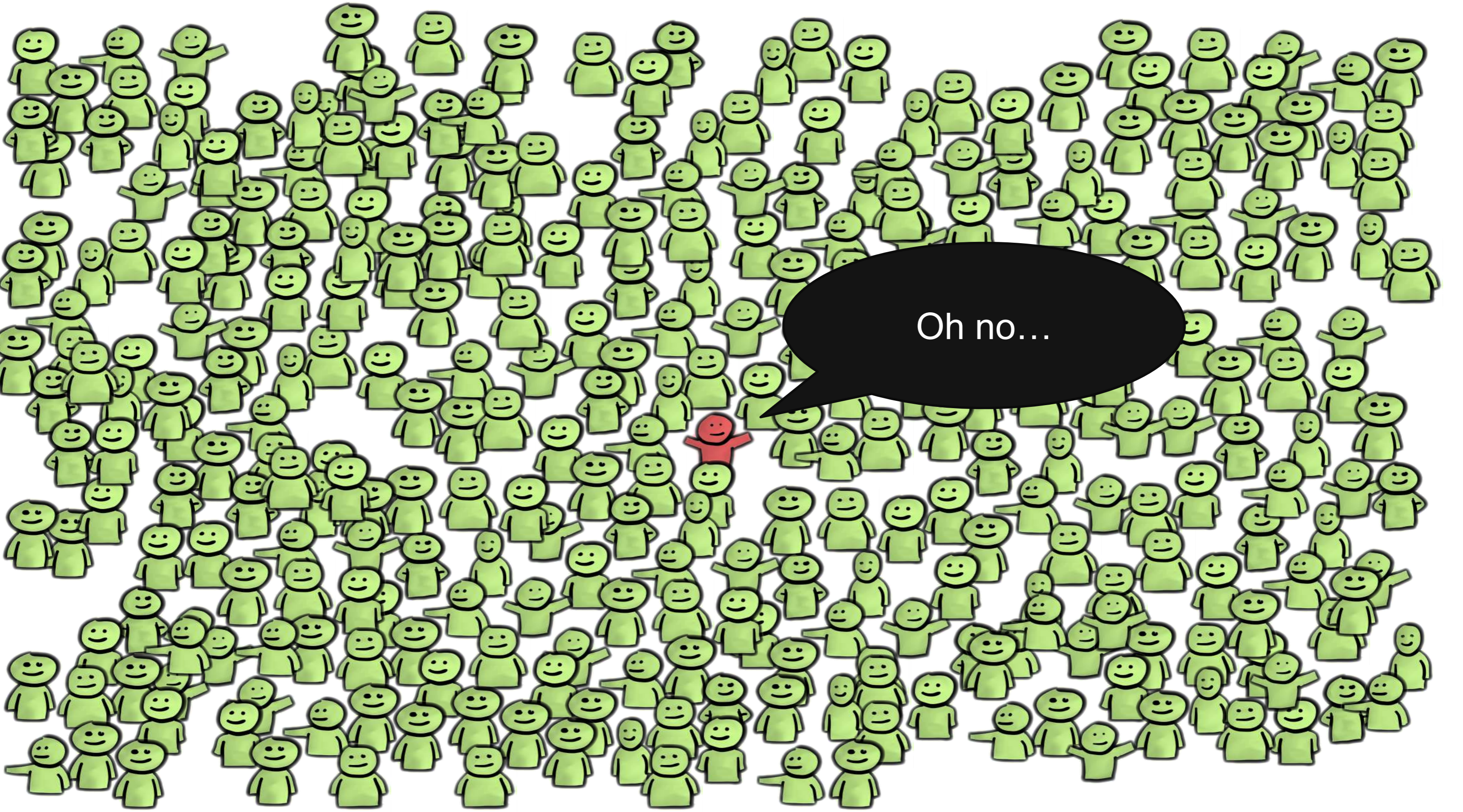
Let's do this!

Yes... or maybe that!



Let's do this!





Oh no...



# 3 ways to break the hierarchy

1. Slice the pie and give people a piece of it
2. Don't tell people what to do
3. Be intentional about how to distribute decisions

#1

Slice the pie and give people a  
piece of it

---

”We need teams of  
missionaries, not teams of  
mercenaries”  
- John Doerr

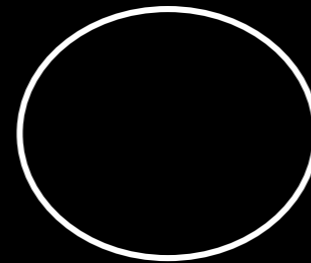
CONSUMER EXPERIENCE MISSION



App Integrations



Home consumer electronics



Team X



Team Y

PPX TRIBE



CORE EXPERIENCE TRIBE

Deepen relationships between artists and fans by extending Spotify into their favorite apps

Filling homes with music that inspires every moment

Create the most delightful music experience

Tailor the Spotify experience to platforms and partners

Define and evolve Spotify's core experience

TECHNOLOGY

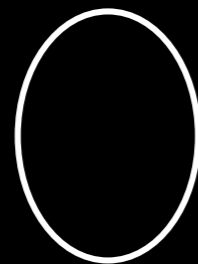
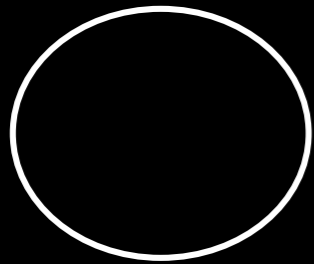
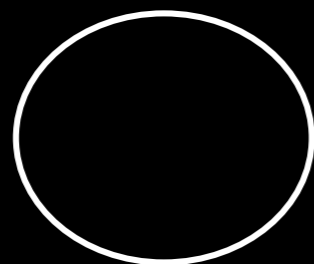
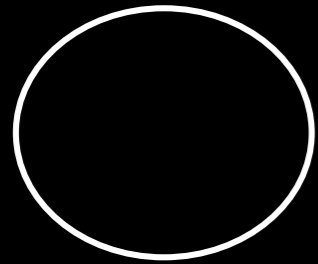
TAG

TSG

TSG

TSG

TSG



Squad

Squad

TRIBE

TRIBE

TRIBE

TRIBE

## Principle #1

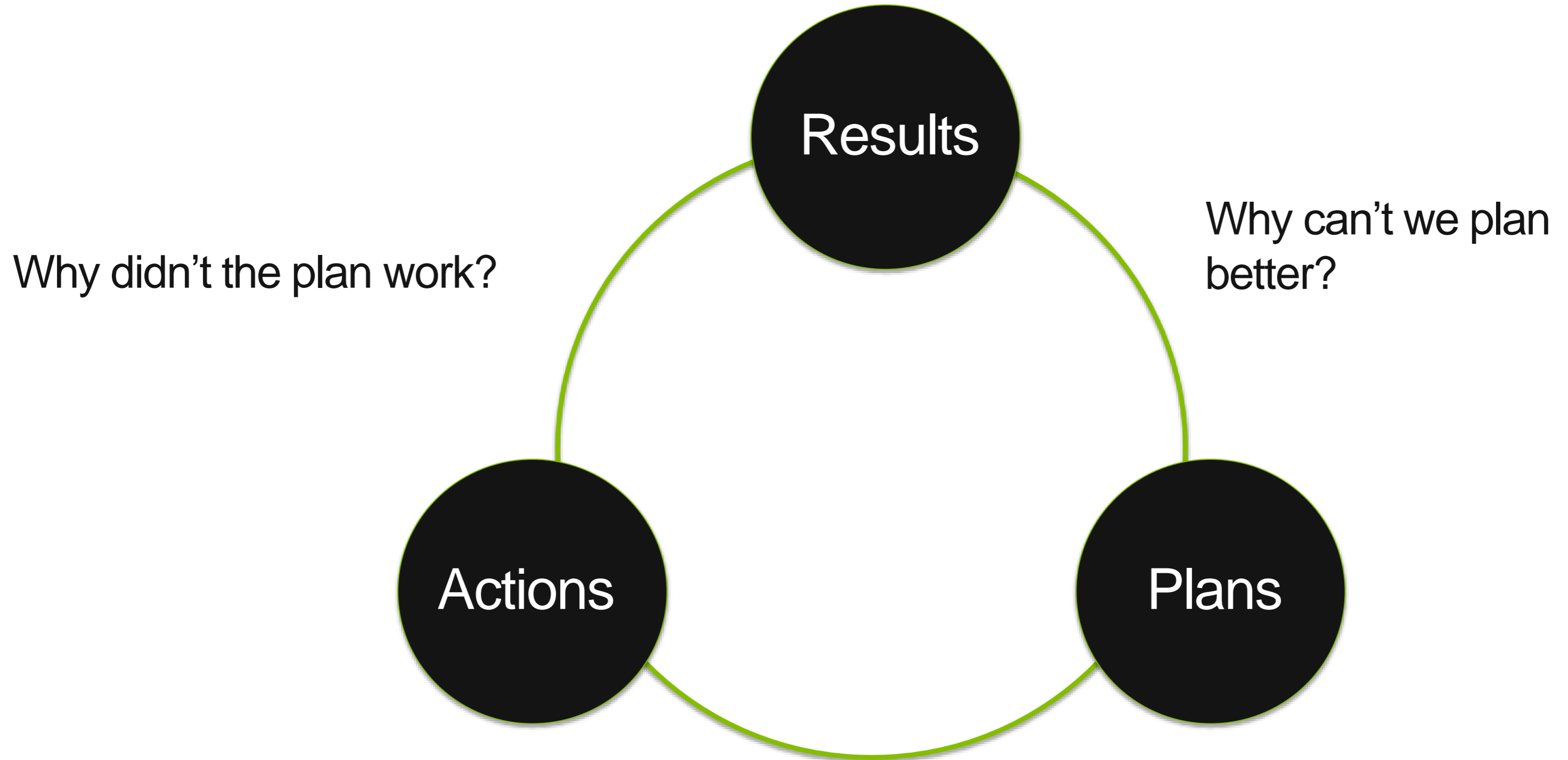
Build the org around autonomous mini-startups and enable them to align effectively



#2

Don't tell the organisation what to  
do, tell them what you want

—



Results

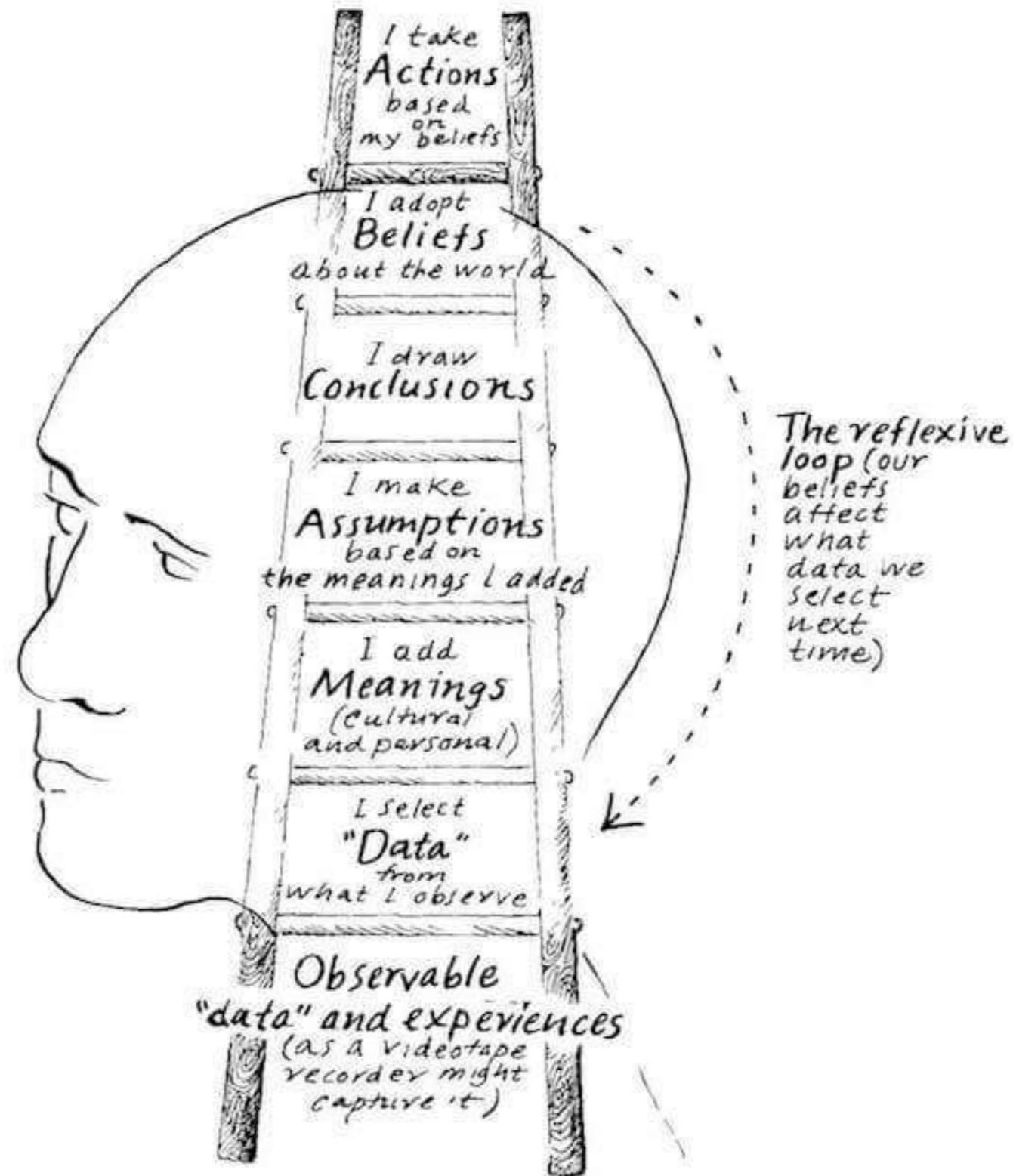
Give people/teams  
freedom to adjust actions  
in line with intent

Create alignment on  
intent: what & why

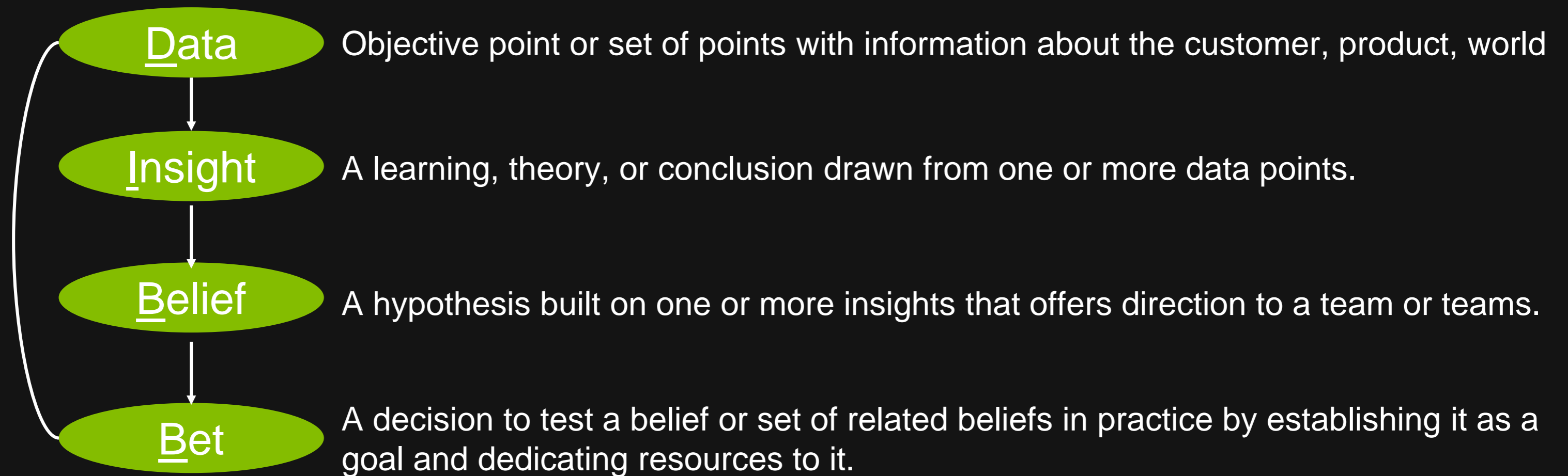
Actions

Plans

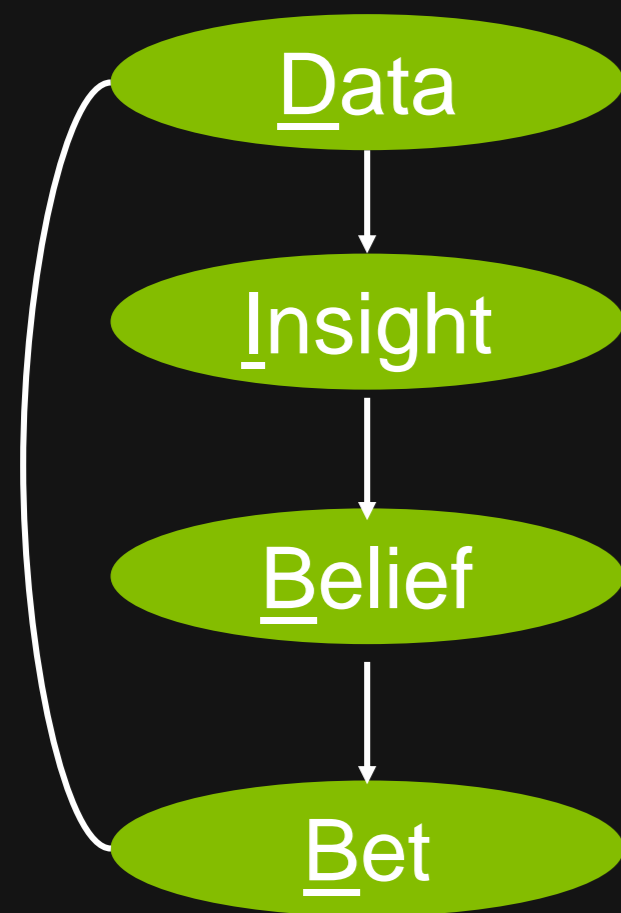
Allow people/teams to  
define HOW to do it



# Spotify use "DIBBs" to debate and decide



# Example: Mobile free tier



- Mobile sales increasing
- Mobile streaming increasing
- Mobile staffing low
- Mobile is overtaking desktop
- Our mobile team is disproportionately small compared to desktop
- We need to become mobile first
- To be competitive, we need a free tier on mobile
- Launch a new product, mobile free tier
- Ramp up the mobile team

# RFCs: Common tool at Spotify to clarify intent, and debate your proposed solution

The image shows a Google Docs interface for a document titled "RFC template". The document is in "View only" mode. The content is a template for writing a Request for Comments (RFC) and includes the following sections:

- RFC: <title>**
- Responsible:** <Team or individual assigned to do the work.>
- Accountable:** <Team or individual that makes the final decision and has ultimate ownership>
- Consulted:** <Groups or individuals consulted before a decision or action is taken>
- Informed:** <Groups or individuals informed that a decision has been made or an action has been taken>
- Status:** <Open (open for comments)|Closed (closed for comments, RFC no longer maintained. Does not reflect the implementation status for the RFC)>
- JIRA URL:** <URL to JIRA issue in [RFC project](#)>
- Need**  
<Why we're proposing this change? What's the background? Why is this the problem we're trying to address? What impact would this change have?>
- Approach**  
<The approach, this contains the proposals - ideally, try to come up with more than one option; this helps reviewers come up with better feedback and you may find yourself changing your preferred option>
- Benefit**  
<What benefits do we expect to get from doing this. Different options may have different benefits. Also consider disadvantages and tradeoffs.>
- Competition**  
<What other things happening could conflict or compete (for example for resources) with the proposal? What risk are there and how do we handle them?>

## Principle #2

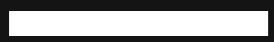
Express intent, not actions.

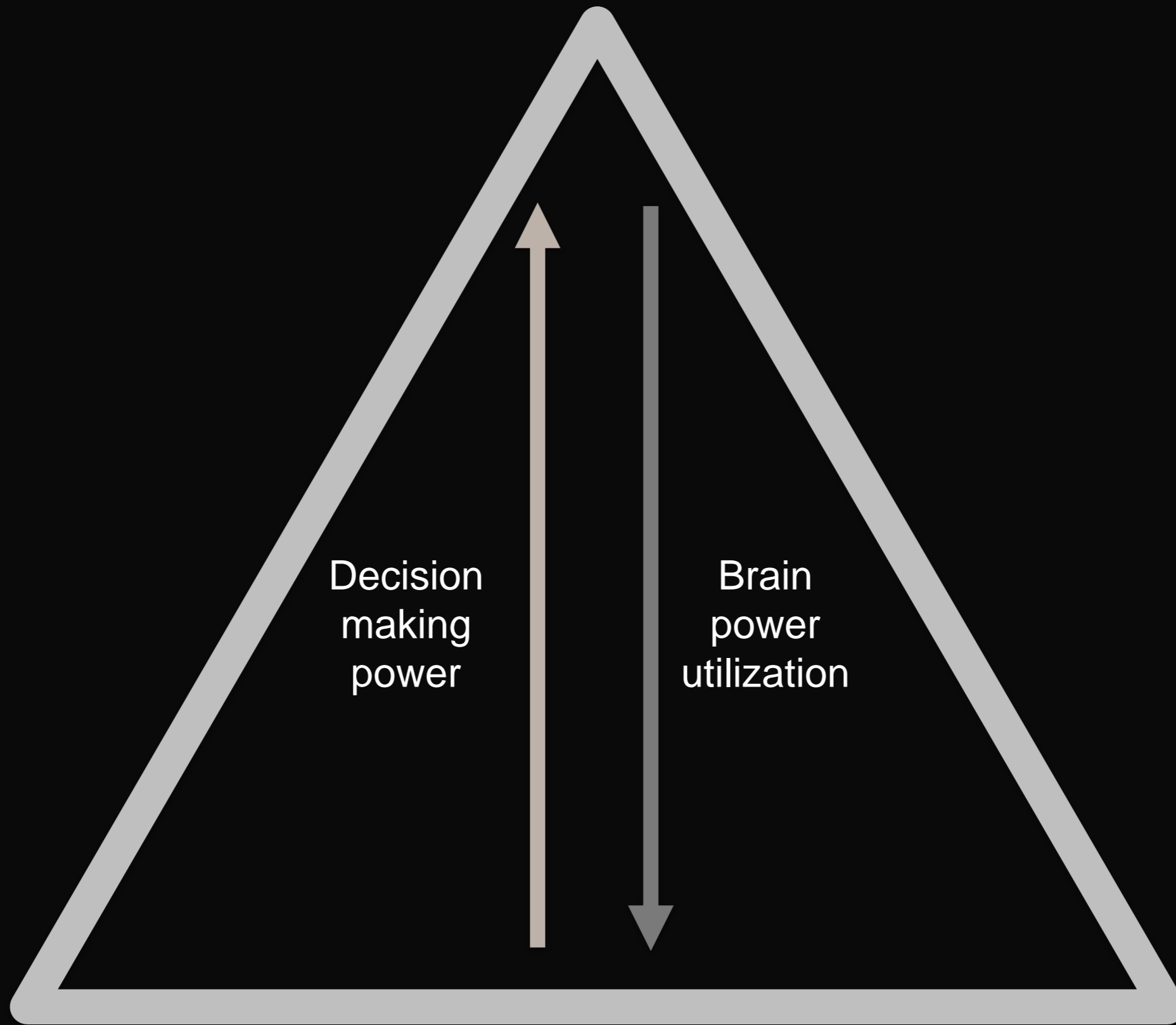
And get really good at arguing  
about what to do.

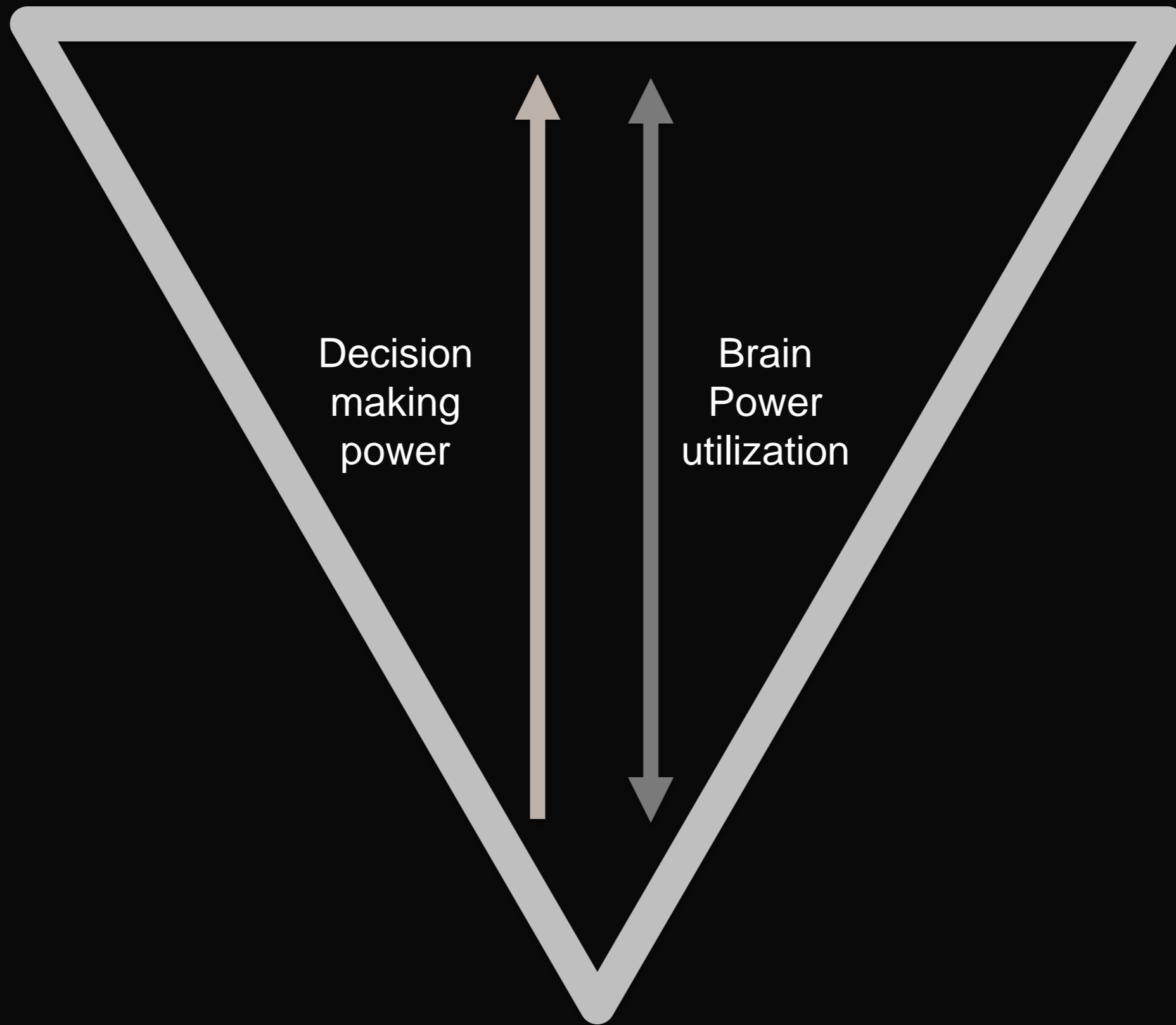


#3

Be intentional about how to  
distribute decisions







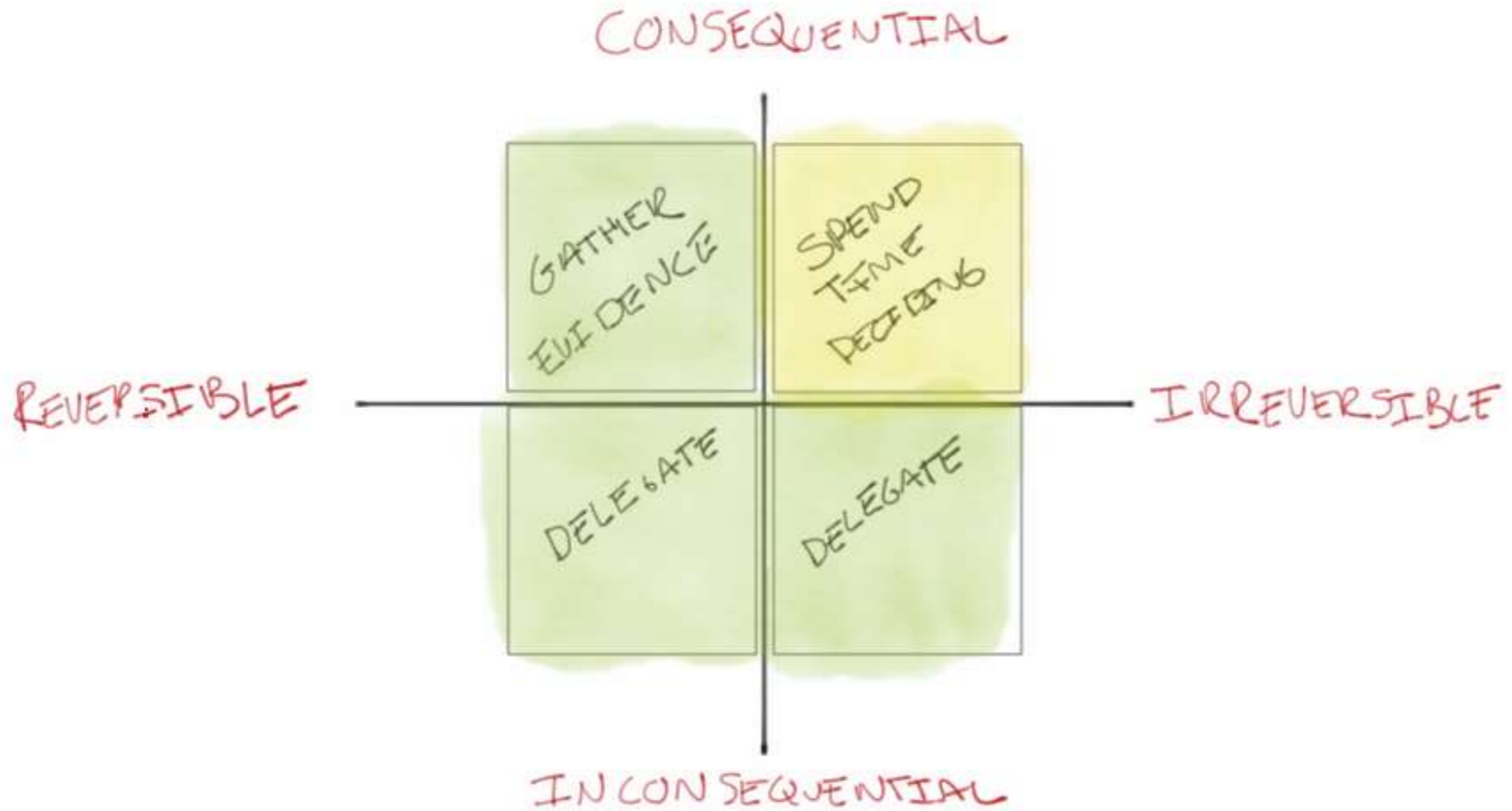
Decision  
making  
power

Brain  
Power  
utilization



Ideas on how to distribute  
decision making





**CONSEQUENTIAL**

- Shall I introduce a new data processing framework?

- Shall we hire this person?

**REVERSIBLE**

**IRREVERSIBLE**

- Can I merge this pull request?

- Should I be pairing on this task?

**INCONSEQUENTIAL**

# High consequence decision

Example 1

Crafting strategy





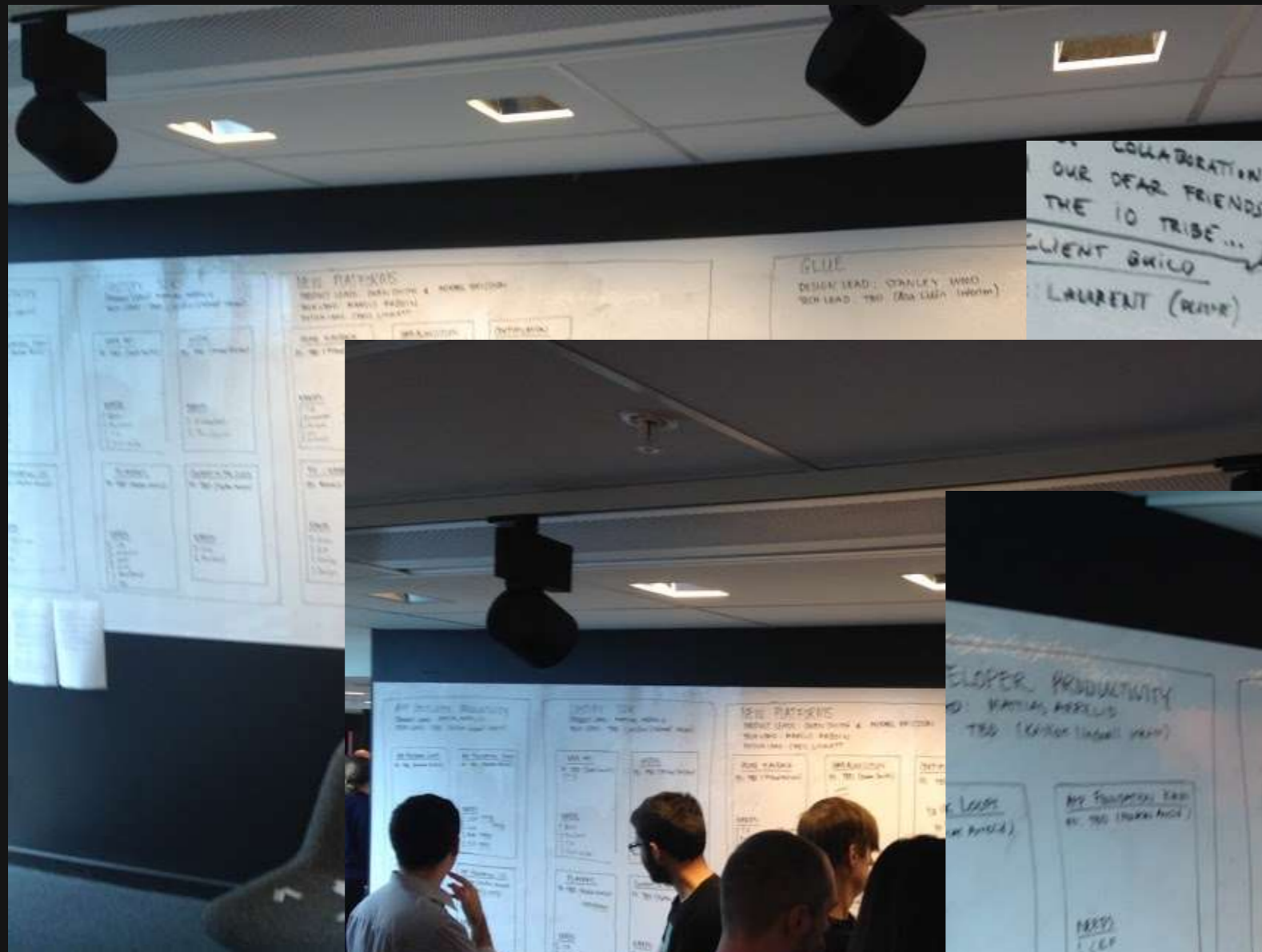
# High consequence decision

## Example 2

Large scale reorg

150 people



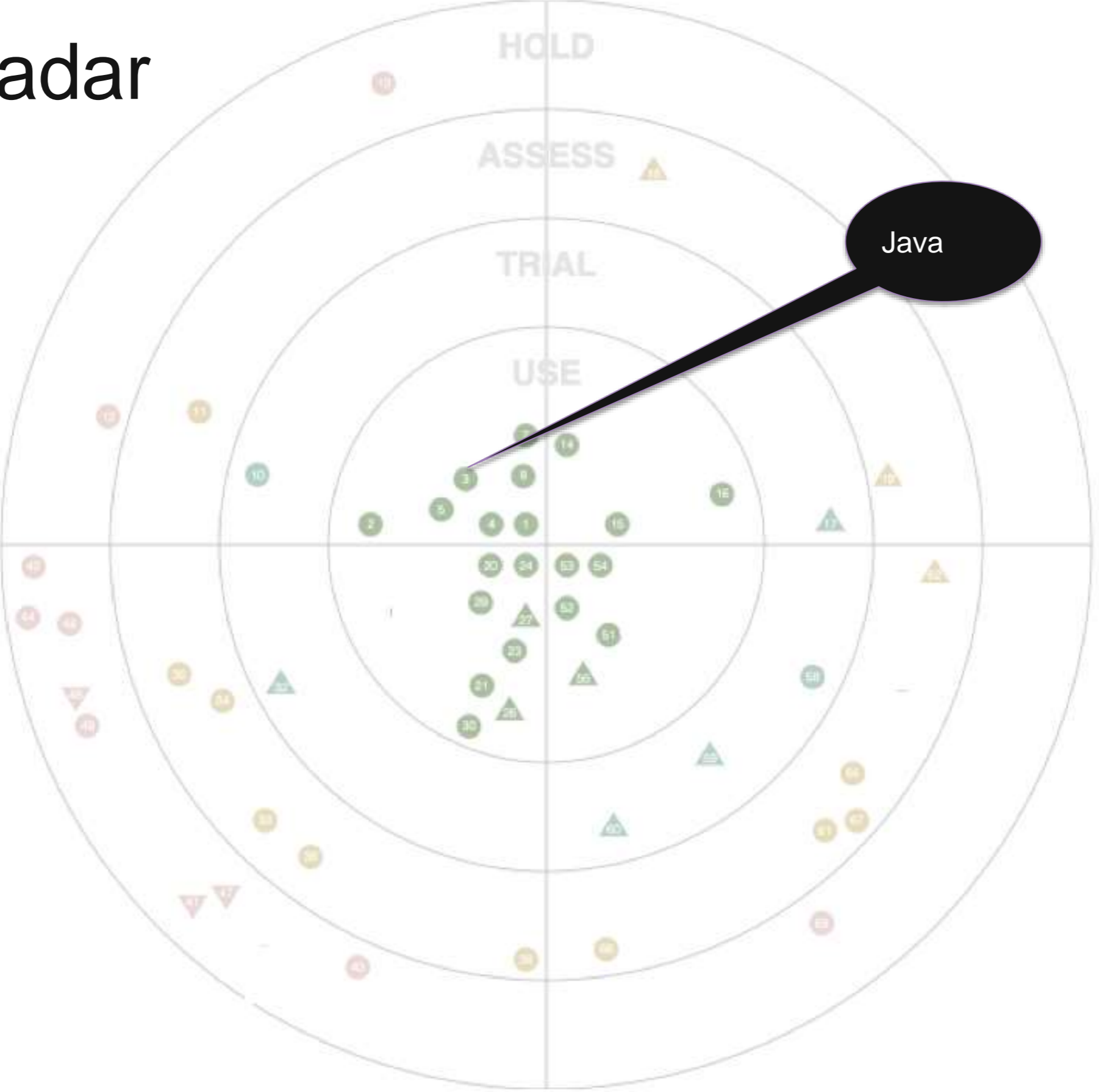


# High consequence decision

## Example 3

What technologies should we use at Spotify?

# Spotify tech radar



## Principle #3

Isolate and move fast on low consequence, distribute high consequence decisions.

# Summary

---



Optimize for autonomy. Enable  
alignment across the  
organisation.

Don't tell people what to do, tell  
them what you need.

Be intentional about how you  
make decisions and invest in the  
ones that matter.

# Thank you!



Kristian Lindwall  
@klindwall