SAFe vs Traditional Project Management

A guide for project managers transitioning from traditional methodologies to the Scaled Agile Framework.

kW **by Kimberly Wiethoff**

Agenda

Mindset Shift

From command-and-control to servant leadership

Planning Cadence

Waterfall milestones vs Agile PI Planning

Team Structure

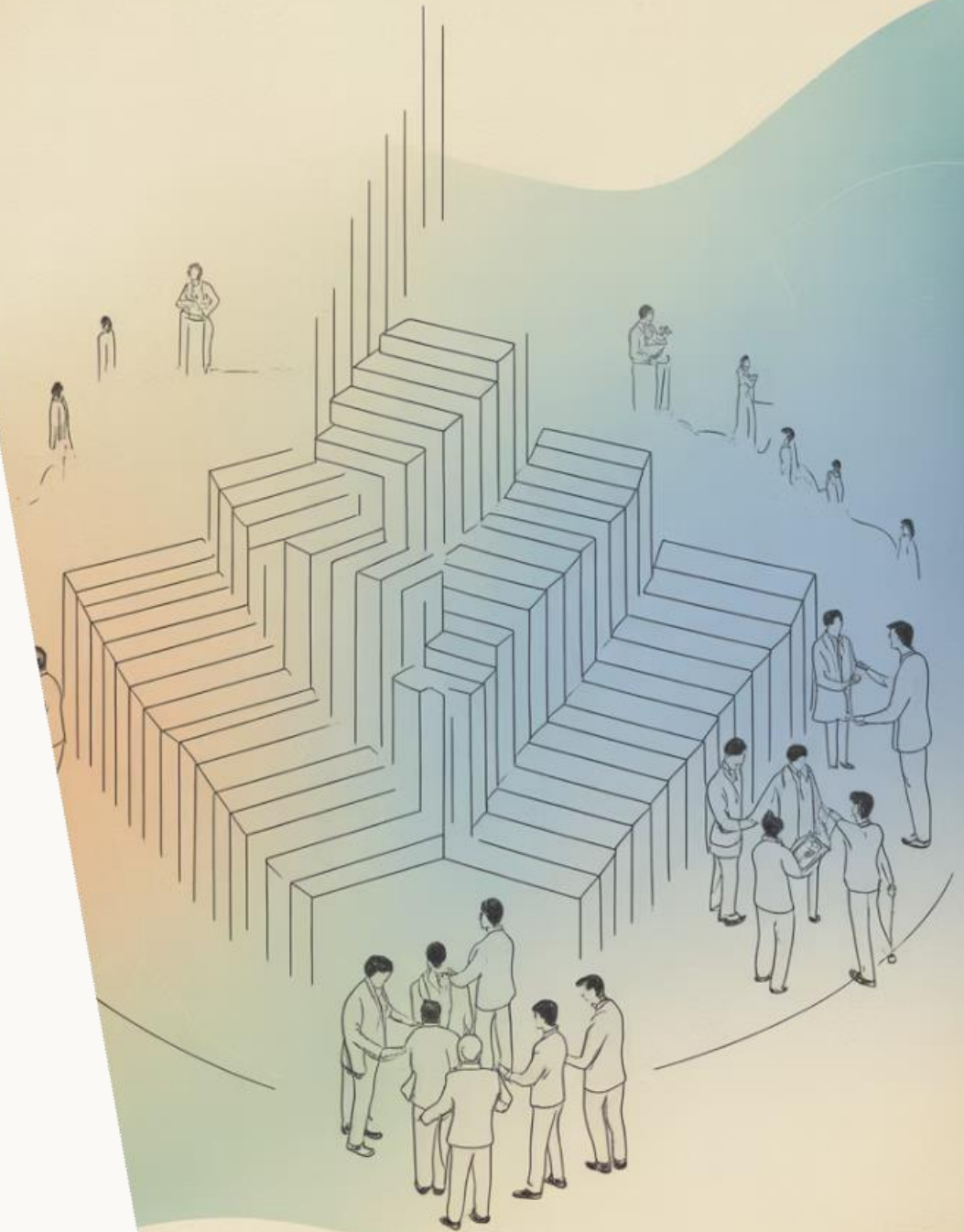Centralized vs decentralized decision-making

Role Redefinition

Finding your place in the SAFe framework

Success Measures

Deliverables vs business value

The Mindset Shift

Traditional Approach

Project manager owns the plan and timeline.

Tasks are assigned to team members.

PM drives progress toward deadlines.

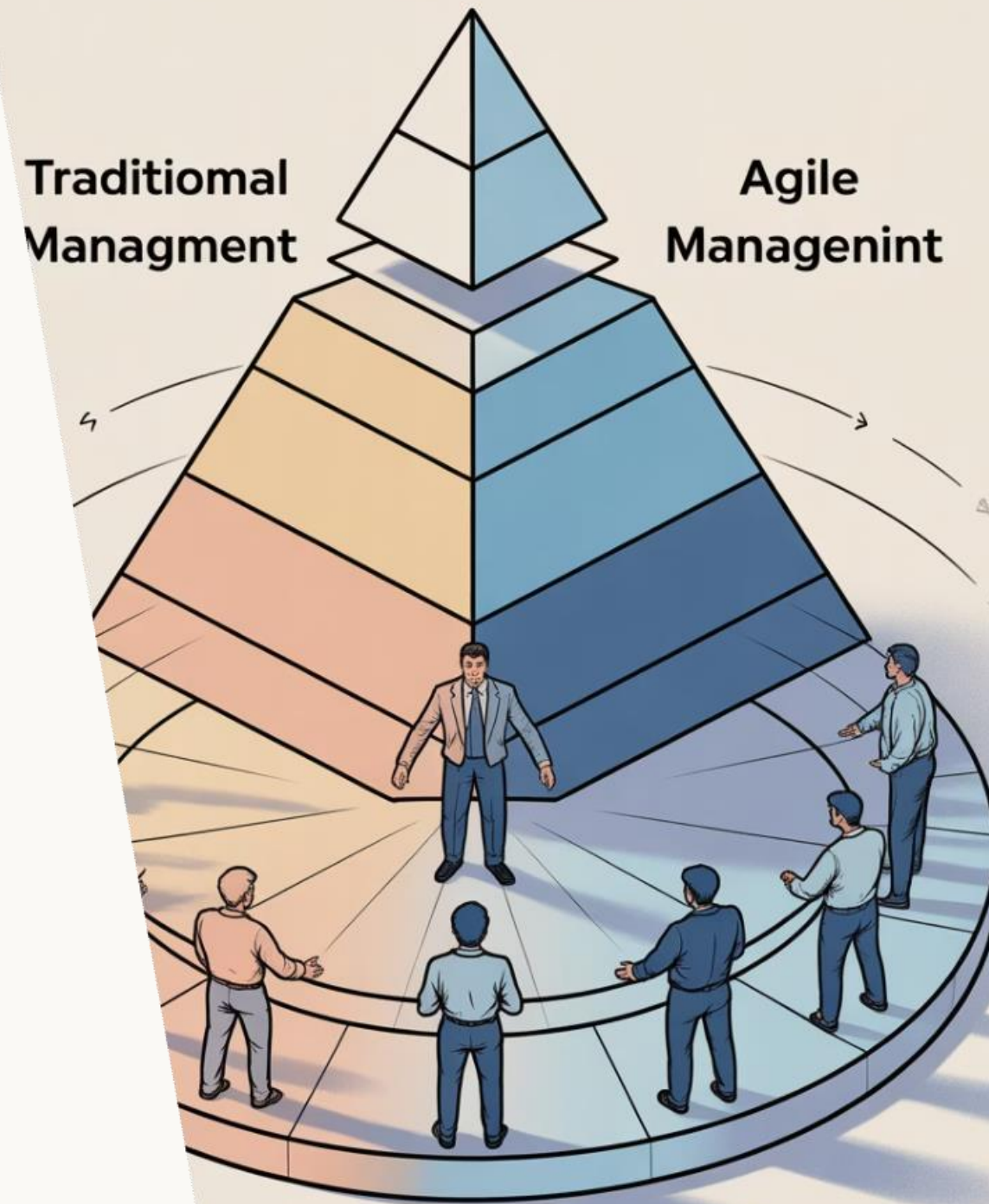Detailed task management is expected.

SAFe Approach

Teams self-organize and collaborate.

Servant leadership empowers the team.

RTEs and Scrum Masters facilitate.

Focus is on removing obstacles.

Traditonal AnD project Management Styles

Traditiomal Managment

Agile Managenint

From Manager to Facilitator

Support Teams

Help teams become self-sufficient rather than directing their work.

Coach Lean Thinking

Guide others in applying lean principles to their work.

Remove Obstacles

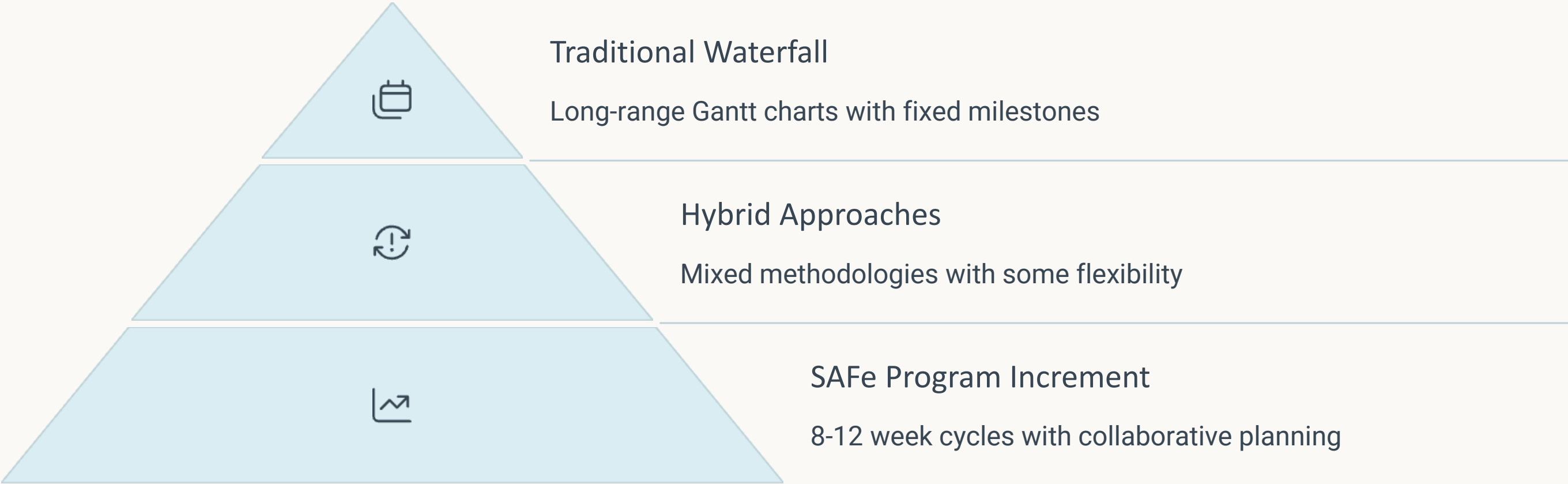Focus on eliminating blockers that prevent team progress.

Build Connections

Create relationships across the organization to solve problems.

Planning Cadence

Traditional Waterfall

Long-range Gantt charts with fixed milestones

Hybrid Approaches

Mixed methodologies with some flexibility

SAFe Program Increment

8-12 week cycles with collaborative planning

The shift from detailed task planning to objective-based increments requires embracing shorter planning horizons and more collaborative approaches.

PI Planning in Action

Business Context

Leadership shares vision and business priorities for the upcoming PI.

Team Planning

Agile teams break down features into stories and estimate capacity.

Inter-team Alignment

Teams identify dependencies and resolve conflicts.

Commitment

Teams present objectives they commit to deliver in the PI.

Team Structure Evolution
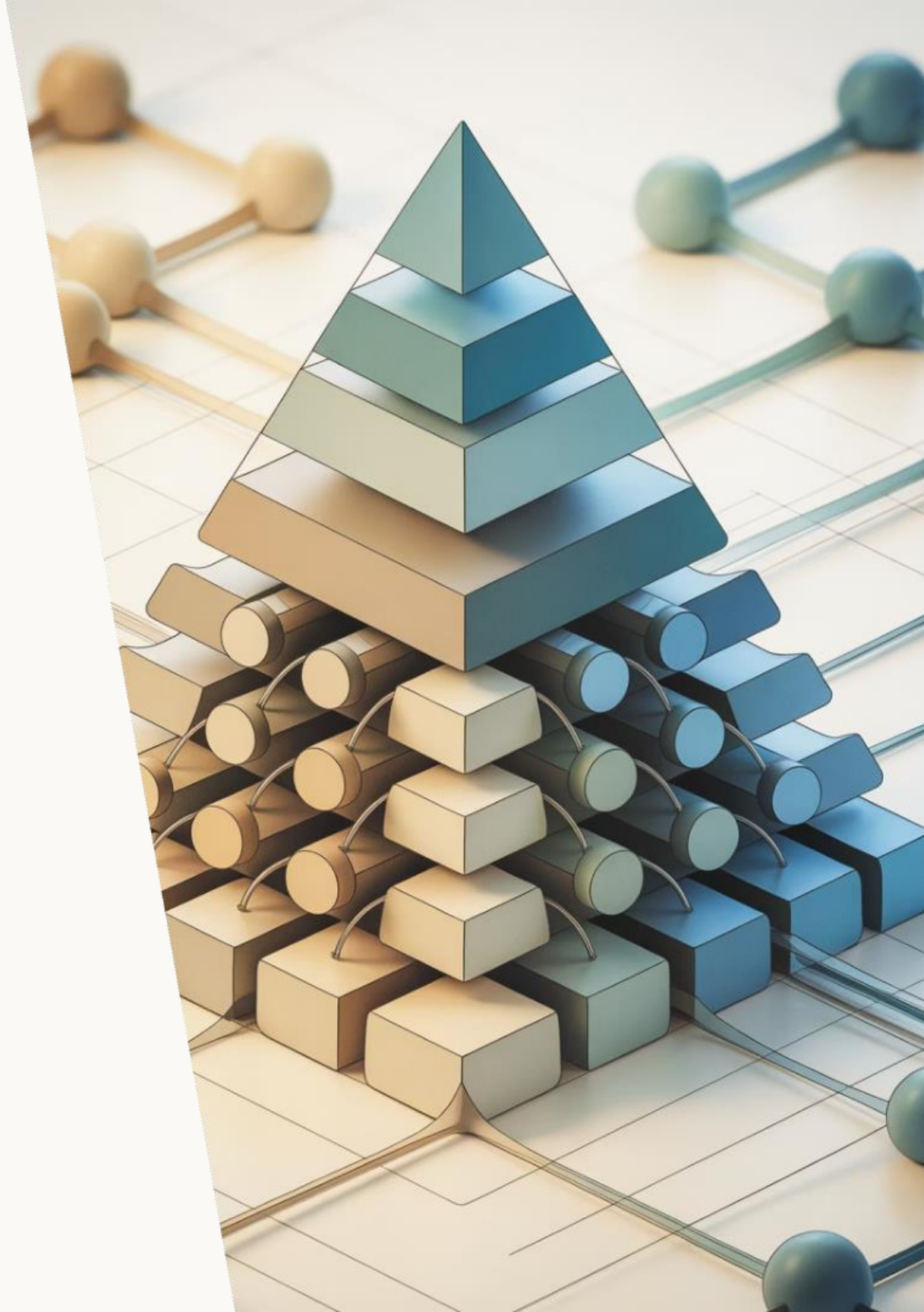
Traditional Structure

- Hierarchical reporting

- Centralized decision-making

- Functional silos

- PM as central coordinator

SAFe Structure

- Agile Release Trains

- Decentralized decisions

- Cross-functional teams

- Shared responsibility

PM's New Focus

- Enabling alignment

- Supporting decisions

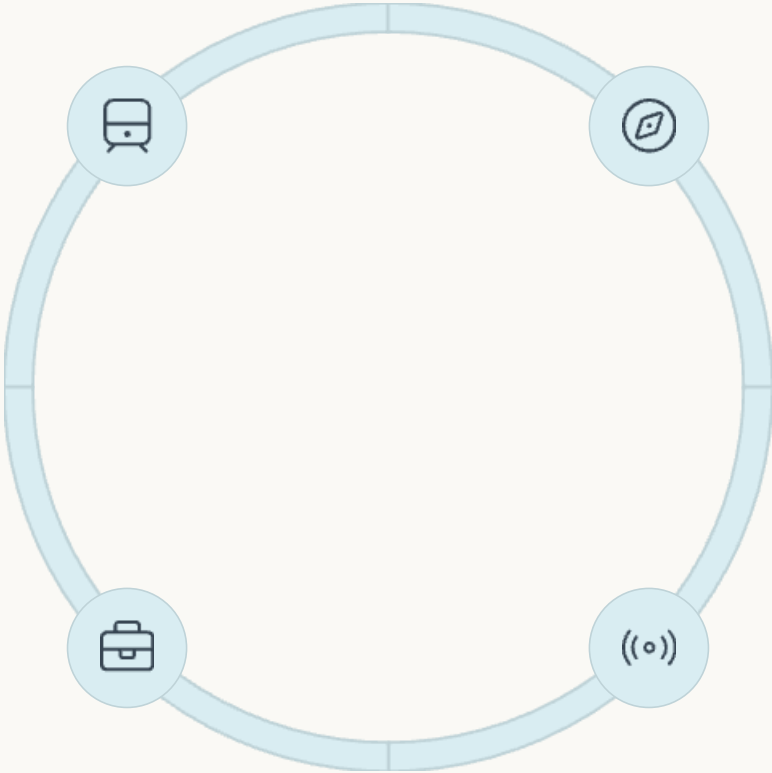- Removing impediments

- Managing dependencies

Role Redefinition

Release Train Engineer

Facilitates the ART and removes impediments. Similar to a "super Scrum Master."

Lean Portfolio Management

Aligns strategy with execution and manages the flow of initiatives.

Scrum Master

Coaches teams on Agile practices and helps maintain process.

Value Stream Engineer

Coordinates multiple ARTs and optimizes value delivery across the stream.

Transferable Skills

Risk Management Management

Identifying, mitigating, and tracking risks remains crucial in SAFe environments.

Stakeholder Communication

Engaging with leaders and stakeholders effectively translates directly to SAFe.

Dependency Coordination

Managing cross-team dependencies becomes even more important in SAFe.

Progress Tracking Tracking

Monitoring and reporting on delivery status remains essential.

Success Measures Transformation

1 **Traditional Metrics**

Focus on delivering on time, on budget, and according to scope.

2 **Transitional Metrics**

Blend of delivery metrics with early value measurements.

3 **SAFe Metrics**

Emphasis on business outcomes, customer value, and flow metrics.

Value-Based Success Metrics

85%

Feature Usage

Track actual customer adoption of delivered features.

3.5d

Cycle Time

Measure days from start to completion of work items.

92%

Reliability

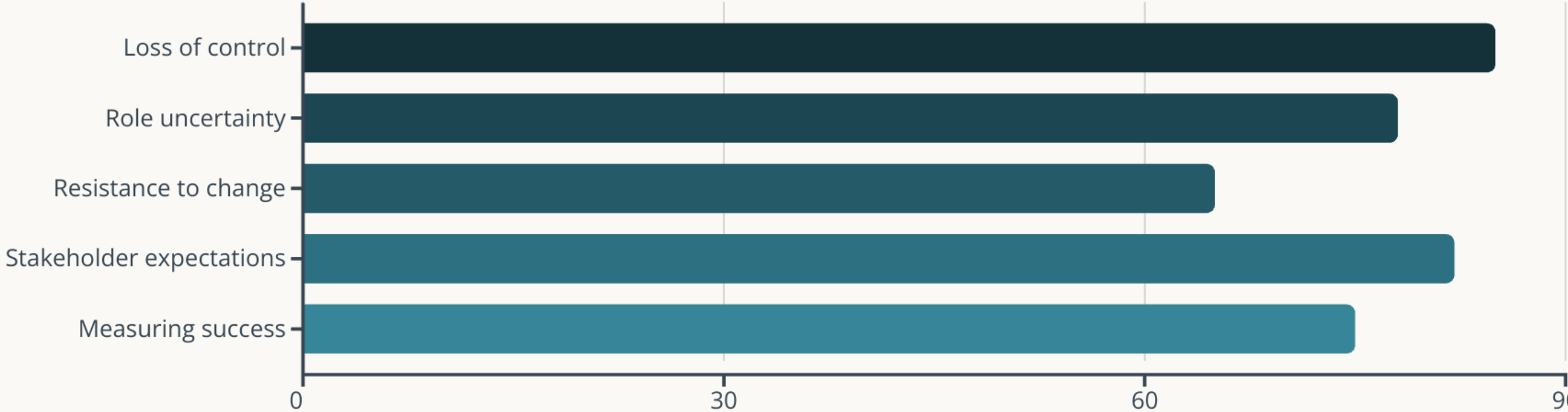Monitor system stability and performance.

46%

Revenue Growth

Connect features to business impact.
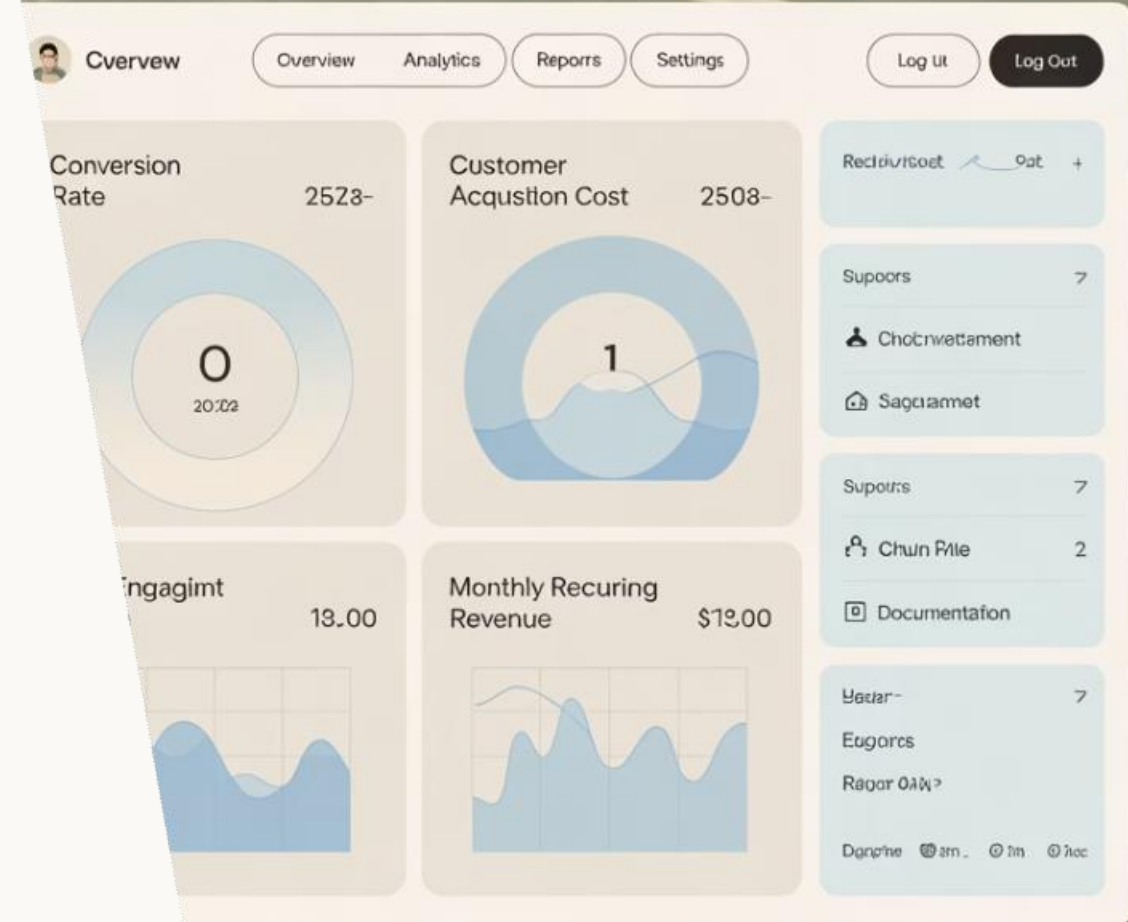
Common Challenges

Project managers often struggle most with the perceived loss of control and uncertainty about their new role in the SAFe environment.

Your Path Forward

Learn SAFe Principles

Study the framework and earn certification

Participate in PI Planning

Experience the event firsthand

Adopt Servant Leadership

Shift your management style

Embrace New Metrics

Focus on value and outcomes

Your project management skills remain valuable. The framework may change, but your ability to deliver value, manage complexity, and drive results is more important than ever.

Final Thoughts

The move from traditional project management to SAFe isn't just about changing tools or terminology—it's about embracing a new way of thinking. While the role of the project manager may shift in a SAFe environment, your ability to coordinate, communicate, and lead cross-functional efforts remains essential.

If you're a project manager looking to stay relevant in an Agile world, learning SAFe principles, participating in PI Planning, and adapting to a servant leadership style are great first steps. The framework may be different, but your ability to **deliver value, manage complexity, and drive results** is more important than ever.