How to actually change team culture

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Engineering

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About me

I joined a core product team as an external hire and spent three years trying to change how it worked

- Engineering TL at Bloomberg
- In leadership roles for nearly seven years
- Started as a graduate software engineer

This talk is a result of retrospection

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Act I: The Questions

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Why is culture so hard to change?

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What makes it difficult

You can’t mandate it.

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What makes it difficult

You can’t mandate it.

You can’t declare it.

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What makes it difficult

You can’t mandate it.

You can’t declare it.

You can’t fix it with a slogan.

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You can have vision.

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What makes it difficult

You can’t mandate it.

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You can have vision.

You can set the values.

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What makes it difficult

You can’t mandate it.

You can’t declare it.

You can’t fix it with a slogan.

You can have vision.

You can set the values.

You can be deliberate.

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But can we at least define what culture is?

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Act II: The Definition

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What team culture is not…

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What team culture is not…

A collection of team processes

Two teams following Scrum won't be the same

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What team culture is not…

A collection of team processes

Two teams following Scrum won't be the same

A collection of individuals

A person joining the team can impact the culture, but not erase it entirely

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Team Culture

A team culture is a **pattern of repeated interactions** that emerges between **team** members.

It's not just people, or just processes – it's a function of both.

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Team

A team is a group of people who work together on a **common problem** following **agreed processes**.

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Team culture is a pattern of repeated interactions that emerges between a group of people who work together on a common problem following agreed processes.

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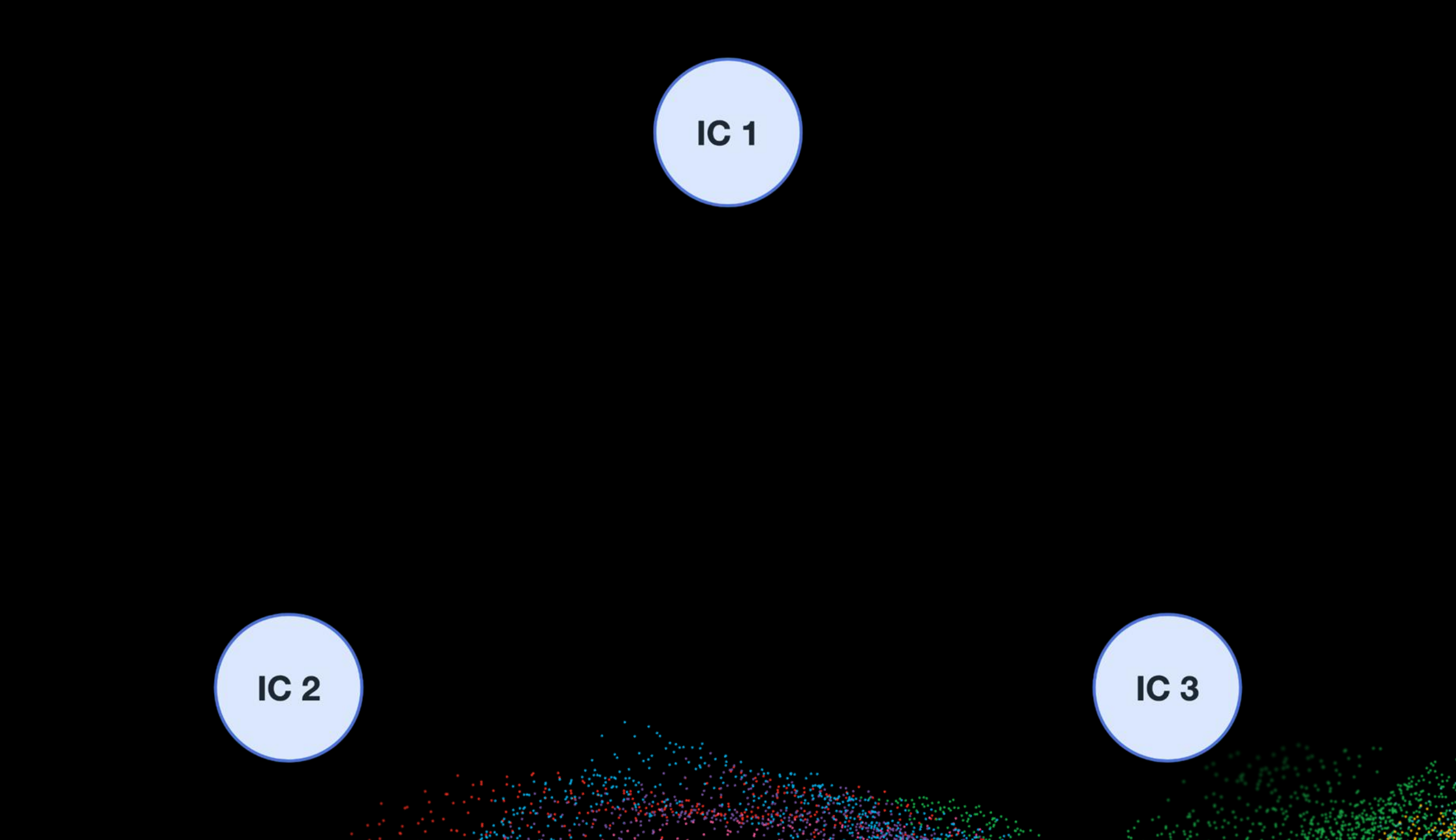
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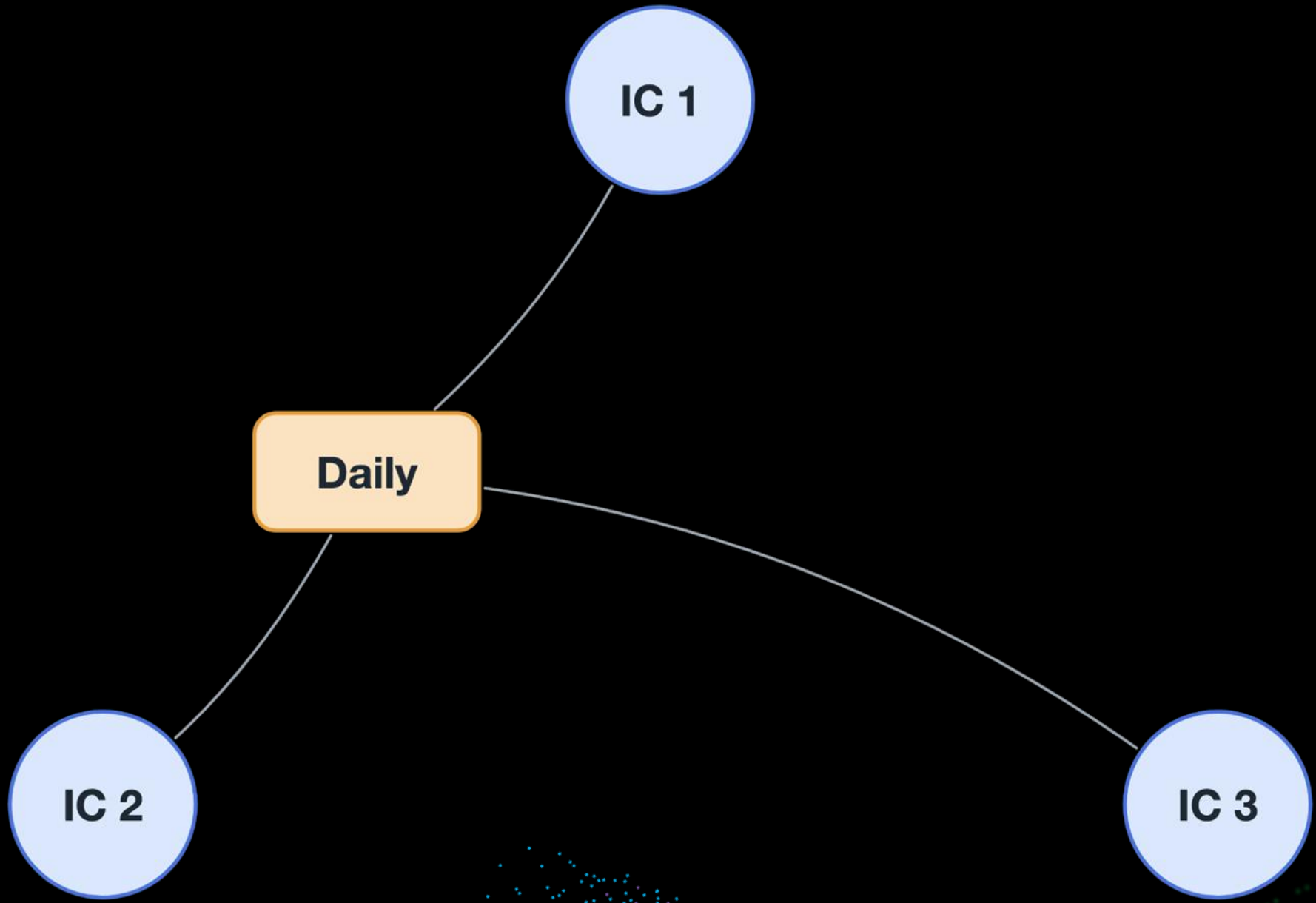
Putting it all together

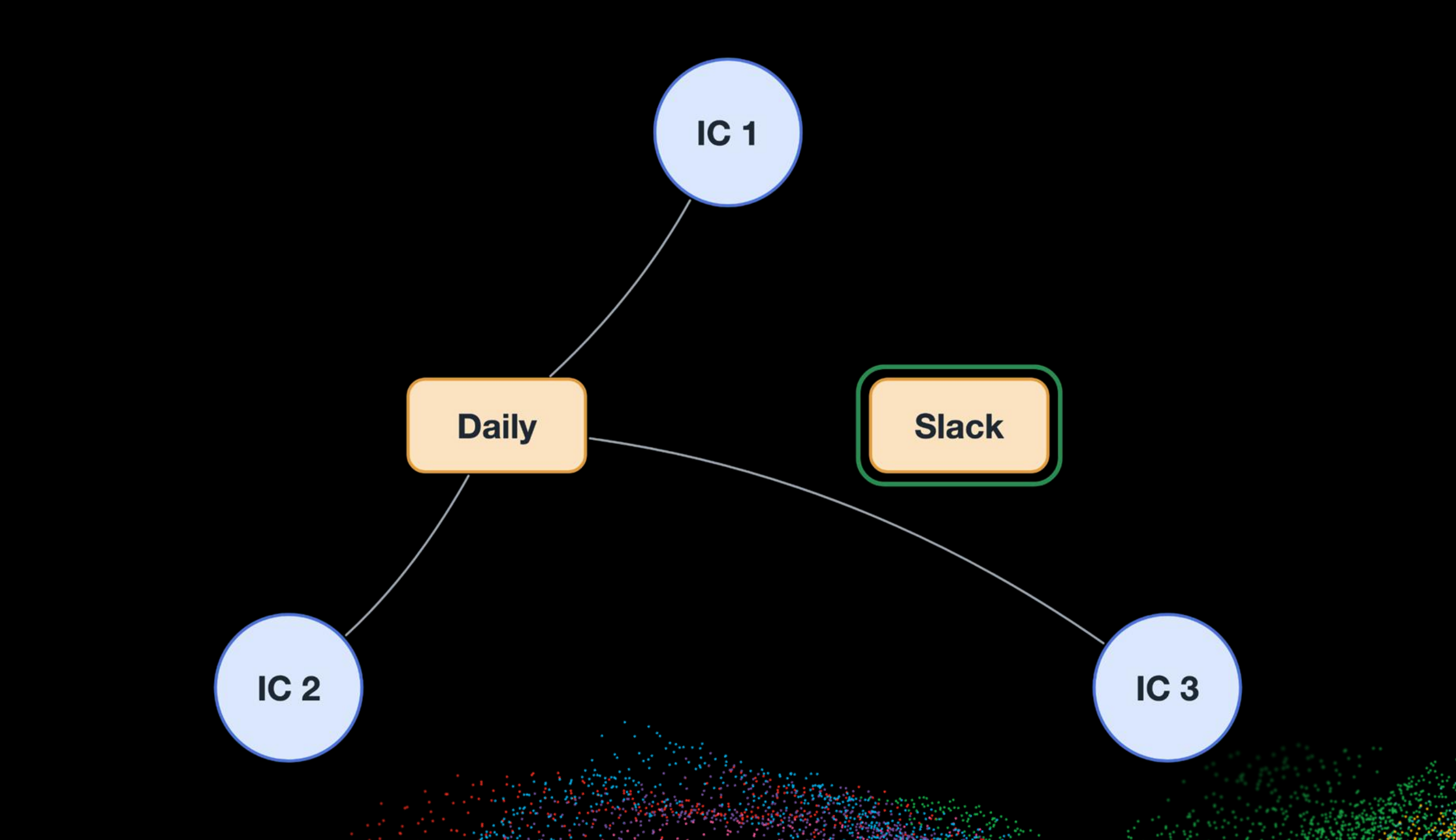
Visualise your team culture as a bipartite graph, where:

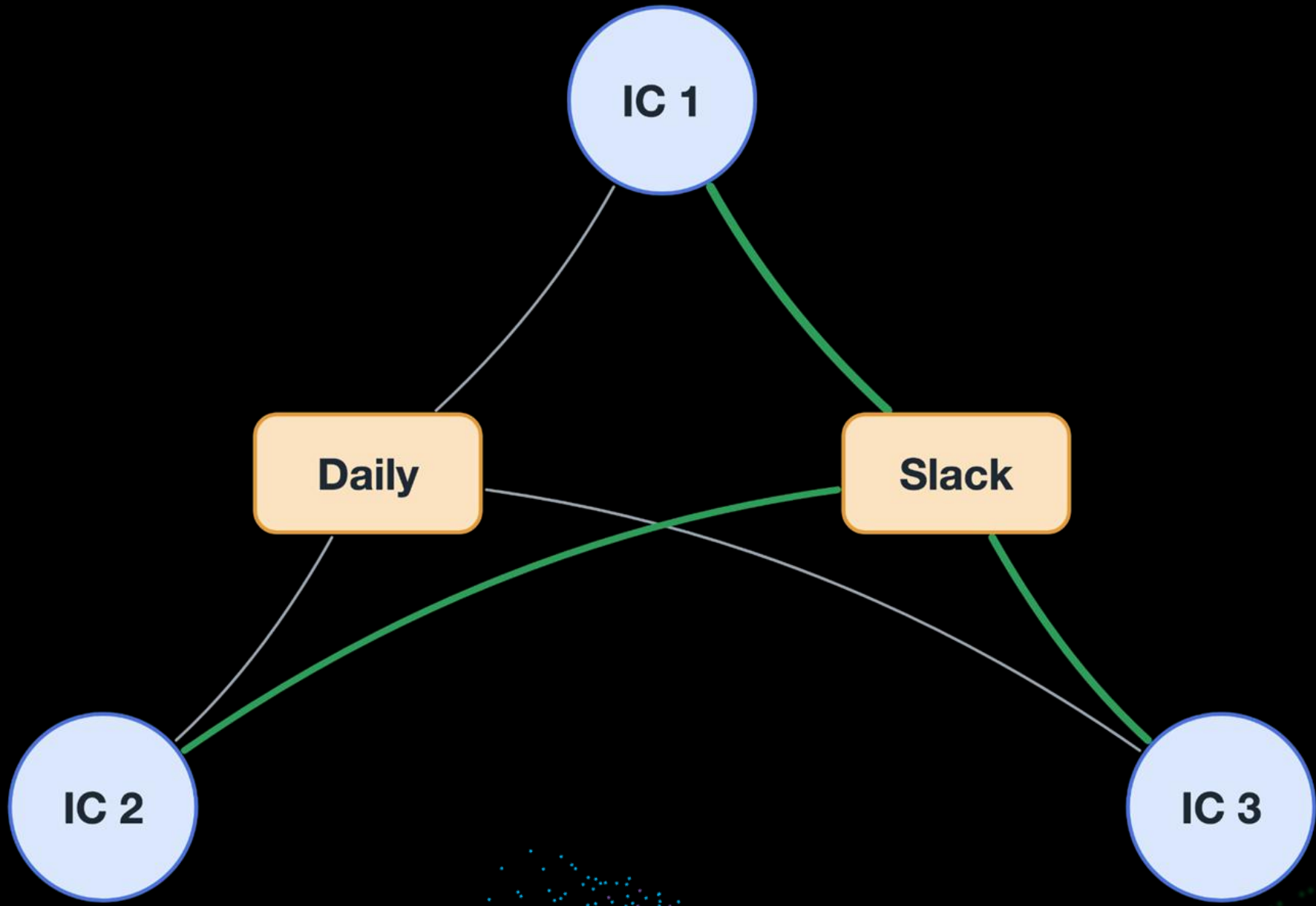
- Nodes are people and processes
- Edges are the repeated interactions
- Weights represent degree of adoption or reliability

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IC 1
IC 2
IC 3


IC 1
Daily
IC 2
IC 3


IC 1
Daily
Slack
IC 2
IC 3


IC 1
Daily
Slack
IC 2
IC 3

Act III: The Story

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My Team: Before

- Uneven collaboration patterns
- Fragmented ownership
- Slowed hiring pipeline

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My Team: Before

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What I changed: People

- Split the team and product
  - Reduced the team size by 50%
  - Single, clearer domain scope
- Deliberate changes to team composition
  - Internal transfers in and out
- First external graduate hire in three years

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What I changed: Processes

- Shift daily Scrum focus
- Switch to Slack
- Use one Zoom link for all team meetings
- Introduce Show & Tell

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My Team: Now

- Higher awareness of contexts
- Collaboration levels higher and continue growing
- Ability to attract talent
- Greater openness to process change
- Ability to take on larger project

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Act IV: The Playbook

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Model: Culture change using graph analogy

- Introduce structural nodes
- Reduce bottlenecks and concentrated influence
- Reinforce the edges

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Model: Culture change using graph analogy

- **Introduce structural nodes**
  - **Increase collaboration** → Inspect your collaboration tools
  - **More accountability** → Introduce visible commitment tracking
  - **Cultural amplifiers** → Find and nurture allies
- Reduce bottlenecks and concentrated influence
- Reinforce the edges

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Model: Culture change using graph analogy

- Introduce structural nodes
- **Reduce bottlenecks and concentrated influence**
  - **Informal leaders** → Do their behaviours reinforce the team's agreed values?
  - **Obstructive processes** → What repeatedly slows or prevents the desired interaction?
- Reinforce the edges

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Model: Culture change using graph analogy

- Introduce structural nodes
- Reduce bottlenecks and concentrated influence
- **Reinforce the edges**
  - Model the behaviour
  - Your choices have impact
    - *Praise*
    - *Tolerate*
    - *Challenge*
    - *Ignore*

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Model: Culture change using graph analogy

Culture is defined by repeated interactions, not declarations.

It's a function of both people and processes – changing either will alter the conditions in which culture emerges.

Design for behaviour, don’t ask for it.

You can’t tell people to collaborate more – but you can create an environment where collaboration is the default path.

Leaders shape culture through everyday decisions.

What you praise, tolerate, challenge, or ignore defines what’s truly expected.

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Values → Conditions → Repeated Interactions → Culture

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