



Coaching Agile Teams in a Remote Setting

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic organizations have been working remotely for the past months. Video conferencing tools have become a daily necessity for many people. But this has not stopped Agile Coaches from guiding and supporting teams during their journey to work more Agile. I have noticed that in a remote setting, people tend to be less inclined to share their dissatisfaction with work practices, colleagues, and the work itself. The informal exchange between colleagues gets lost in the digital meetings and therefore little feedback and opinions are available. Additionally, it is not possible to read somebody's body language to gain insights into their attitudes and feelings at a given time.

I will share my personal experience over the past months and how I have managed the challenges of coaching Agile teams in a remote setting during their agile transformation. And will provide you with a set of practices that I found useful to build a remote coaching environment.

Building rapport

To build a sustainable and productive relationship with an agile team, it is important to build rapport. Building rapport means that the coach “syncs up” with the team by gaining an understanding who the team is, what their role within the organization (and transformation) is and how they function. In a face-to-face setting, rapport is more easily and often naturally built by attending team meetings, observing the team- and organisational culture, “reading the room” and having informal chats by the coffee machine. Unfortunately, most of these factors are taken away when working in a remote setting. Online sessions are dominated by time limits, strict agenda points and often content driven discussions. This makes it difficult as a coach to really understand the team and to get an insight into their working processes and function. To overcome these restraints, I have followed three steps to build rapport with the team.

1. Prior to attending the team meetings, I arranged individual meetings with each teams’ Scrum Master. I asked them some general questions about the team’s role in the organisation, their set-up, working processes, experiences with agility, and impediments he/she sees. These discussions gave me some background information on the teams and allowed me to set a scope and focus for the coaching sessions.
2. With this background information in mind, I attended the first team meeting. I introduced myself to the team and over the next 20 minutes performed a short expectation management session. I described to the team what my role as their Agile Coach will be over the upcoming months, but I also asked them what they expect from me. This established trust and confidence in the team that I was there to help them improve and accommodate them in the best way possible to achieve a high agile maturity.
3. Once expectations were set, I sat back, observed and listened to understand where they currently stand and what approach I needed to take to best support them. Asking questions for my own clarification, allowed the team to explain to me what their purpose is, their work, and where potential issues lie.

Assessing Agile maturity

In the remote setting that we work in now, I have found it difficult to get an impression of how mature a team is in working Agile. This is the case especially for teams who do not make use of the rituals and events that are commonly performed by Agile teams (for example daily stand-ups, retrospectives, team boards). To overcome this challenge, I started using an 'Agile maturity checklist' developed by one of our consultants at BlinkLane Consulting. Having a set of questions ready, to the teams about their Agile maturity has helped me immensely to bring attention to this and to keep track of their weekly improvements, challenges and progress. (See Appendix for Agile maturity checklist). Understanding where a team's struggle to work Agile is coming from helps me set a scope. It could occur that their Agile maturity is generally low due to a lack of experience, in which case it would be of advantage to take the role of the teacher, or facilitator, to help them familiarize themselves with Agile working tools and processes. It could also be the case that the Agile maturity of a team is high, but they fail to work Agile due to internal team challenges or other issues, in which case it would be more valuable to take on a 'problem-solver' role. Gaining an accurate insight into the Agile maturity of a team, allowed me to better understand where their strengths and weaknesses lie and focus on their needs to become a thriving Agile team.

Tooling

Under "normal" circumstances, Agile Coaches are mostly on site with the Agile teams. This allows teams to readily and easily see their coach when questions or issues arise. Also, within the team, issues can quickly be resolved because teams work together in close proximity (are co-located). They have an overview of what everybody is working on and the progress they are making. Working remotely, I encouraged teams to virtualize their Scrum- or Kanban board and to continue managing it from remote. Additionally, I have found it helpful for teams to introduce and manage a (virtual) team space where they can quickly communicate with each other, ask questions and share any documents.

Make 'coaching' an agenda point

As the teams I worked with over the past months work with strict agendas for each meeting, I find it useful to take some minutes of every meeting to dedicate to discussing working processes, their functionality and any impediments they may be facing. Adding these topics to the agenda creates urgency and opens discussions that help the team improve their working processes. While I initiate thought-provoking questions, I give the autonomy to the team to find points of improvement themselves, to become a self-managing and independent. I also find it useful to ask them the team to occasionally reflect on their functionality ("How do you think it is going for you as a team") and processes ("How are you experiencing your current way-of-working (WoW)?" and compare it to prior to their Agile transformation. The purpose of this is to awaken awareness within the teams of their own development. If teams themselves do not see the advantages and payoffs from working Agile, they will also not feel any urgency to continue making an effort towards continuous improvement.

Also, help your team find some structure in their way of working and set up rituals, whether these are Scrum rituals or just regular meetings dedicated to the exchange of information and progress. Having rituals and meetings with a clear purpose and agenda will allow all points to be covered and no information and work getting lost.

Help your team find what works for them (be adventurous and try things)

Working in a remote setting, retrospectives have become a necessity to stimulate teams to continuously improve. With the lack of informal contact between colleagues, it is difficult to determine when somebody might be dissatisfied with something. Regular team-internal retrospectives give the team space to analyse their working processes and to adapt when things are not going well. Rather than following instructions set forth by their management or their Agile Coach, they need to determine themselves what works for them and what does not. As an Agile Coach, I can help them by asking the right questions, guiding them into the right (Agile) direction and support them in the implementation of improvements (boards, rituals, and events) that help the team become a successful Agile team. Part of working Agile means that teams are able to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. This

should apply to their work itself but also be emphasized for the working processes to enhance the team's functionality and flow.

In these unusual times, it is important to be creative and find a "new normal." These small adaptations to coaching have helped me to deliver the highest possible value to stimulate teams to thrive in their agile development. Perhaps they will also serve as an inspiration for other coaches who find themselves being challenged by the remote work setting.

Appendix

Agile-maturity checklist

1. What do you expect from me as a coach?
2. What is your expectation of your team members?
3. How do you feel it is going for you as a team?
4. What are your goals for this increment? (PI Objectives)
5. Do you feel these goals are achievable?
6. Does everyone know what they are supposed to do in the team?
7. Do you feel you have a good communication structure as a team?
8. How do you see your role as PO? Are you happy with this role? Would you want to change anything about it?
9. Who drives the operations in your team? (Scrum Master)
10. Does your team meet?
11. How often do you meet?
12. What do you do when you meet?
13. How do you record your work? (Boards)
14. How do you divide your work?
15. How do you manage capacity?