

The Addison-Wesley Signature Series



BOOK 4
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COACHING AGILE TEAMS

A COMPANION FOR SCRUMMASTERS,
AGILE COACHES, AND PROJECT
MANAGERS IN TRANSITION

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Forewords by Jim Highsmith and Mike Cohn

Praise for *Coaching Agile Teams*

“The subtitle of this book says it is for ‘ScrumMasters, Agile Coaches, and Project Managers,’ however, its guidance and advice extend to anyone associated with an agile (Scrum) team. It will also certainly help team members better understand their relationship to the work ScrumMasters, agile coaches, and project managers do for the team. And, beyond this, the book can be valuable to anyone working in a coaching capacity with any group of people, expanding the book’s application beyond agile-based efforts.”

—Scott Duncan, *Agile Coach*

“Lyssa explains brilliantly how skills from professional coaching can be applied to coaching agile software development teams. What I love about this book is how Lyssa brings practical advice to life by relating it to everyday experiences we all recognize. An essential guide for every agile manager’s bookshelf.”

—Rachel Davies, *author of Agile Coaching*

“As I read this book I could actually hear Lyssa’s voice, guiding me and sparking precious ‘a-ha moments.’ This truly is the next best thing to having an experienced and wise coach sitting by your side, helping you be the best coach you can be for your team.”

—Kris Blake, *agile coach*

“Lyssa Adkins presents agile coaching in a gentle style with firm underpinnings. She resolves the paradox of how coaching can help a team to self-organize, and shows how a nurturing environment can push teams to perform better than ever.”

—Bill Wake, *Industrial Logic, Inc.*

“I love Lyssa’s three qualities of an agile coach—loving, compassionate, uncompromising—sweet. Every chapter offers a compelling blend of philosophy and action, framework and freedom, approach and avoidance, as any agile book should. *Coaching Agile Teams* is a good candidate to become dog-eared on my desktop rather than looking good on my bookshelf. The depth and quality of expertise that Lyssa sought, sampled, and sounded out along her own coaching journey have been synthesized in her own voice of experience.”

—Christopher Avery, *Responsibility Process mentor, www.LeadershipGift.com*

“In my experience with agile projects, the agile coach is one of the most important roles to get right. *Coaching Agile Teams* by Lyssa Adkins gives the details and practical insights for what it takes to be a great agile coach.”

—Dave Hendricksen, *software architect, Thomson-Reuters*

on team performance makes you a coach. Both parts of the equation come together to make agile come alive and bring it within their grasp.

In the agile world, coaching and mentoring have been wrapped up in the cumulative term *coaching*. It's no big deal; just know that the phrase *agile coach* involves both coaching and mentoring. Also, know that we are using skills from the world of professional coaching, but we are not truly professional coaches. A serious point of ethics for professional coaches holds that the coachee's agenda must be the single guiding light of the coaching relationship. The coach exists solely for the coachee, not so for us. We can't let the coachee's agenda rule completely because we must also mix in our agenda: to influence the coachee to use agile well.

Again, it's no big deal; just know that we are coach-like, using tools from professional coaching, and we are mentors with an expertise in agile. We educate from this expertise and use coaching skills to help each person make the transition to using agile well. I have this dynamic duo in mind when I proudly say, "I am an agile coach."

What Are We Coaching For?

Agile coaches champion the brilliant use of agile so that businesses achieve their goals faster and better. If we want to stretch to the full capacity of agile, we'll amend that statement to be faster and better with innovations marvelous and yet undreamed. That's what agile was built to do.

To these ends, you coach to

- Help the organization achieve astonishing results, the kind that will matter to the business and the team members in a fundamental way
- Help the team develop and get healthier together (or recover more completely when not healthy)
- Help each person take the next step on their agile journey so they can be more successful agilists and contribute in a way that feeds team improvement and their own growth

Increasing the joy and accomplishment people feel in their work may be a separate, perhaps side, goal for you. It is for me, because I hold strong the belief that people should be fulfilled in their work, where they spend most of their waking hours. And, I notice that teams that pay attention to creating joy and

feeling accomplished have many accomplishments to feel joyful about. This virtuous circle feeds itself.

Coaching at Two Levels

When you coach an agile team, you simultaneously coach them at two levels: the individual level and the whole-team level. There is a time for each. Also, coaching happens as a layer on top of your agile framework of choice rather than as a replacement for any of it. First and foremost, we uphold agile. Second, we coach.

Coaching interventions have their strongest effect at the beginning and end of a project (Hackman 2002). Project boundaries become blurred with agile because we value creating products that meet the business needs rather than finishing projects on a predetermined end date. Since agile harnesses change for good, the beginning and end of the whole project becomes less useful to us as a way to mark time than the built-in boundaries of sprint and release. The advice about coaching interventions still applies, though. For agile teams, it means that coaching at the beginning and end of a sprint or a release has the most impact.

Even though you channel your coaching intentions at the beginning and end, coaching doesn't go on vacation in the middle of a sprint. You still help the team remove impediments, fulfill their roles fully, and, in general, keep moving. When in midsprint, though, you pause and think hard before bringing a major observation or improvement opportunity to the whole team. Instead, you let them work, and you make plans to bring it up at the end, when whole-team coaching comes to the fore again.

As Figure 5.1 shows, your coaching switches from team to individual and back to team again over the life of the sprint. An ill-timed coaching intervention can do more harm than good (Hackman 2002), especially in an agile framework where we give teams the necessary gift of focus during a sprint. Switching your coaching intentions from team to individual and back again prevents the harm and increases the good.

The whole time, be their ground crew. Help them when they get stuck, remind them of the goals they set out to achieve when they have delved so far into the details that they can no longer recall the purpose, advocate for them to uphold the way they said they wanted to treat one another as they work together, and encourage them constantly.

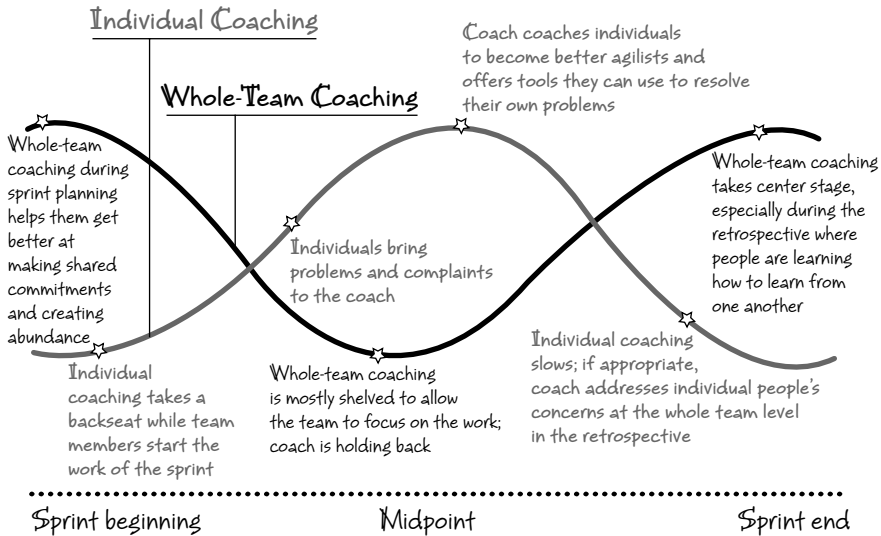


FIGURE 5.1 Whole-team and individual coaching interventions during the sprint

Coaching at the Beginning

As one sprint ends and another begins, the time for coaching the whole team is ripe. Educational coaching takes center stage, such as helping the team get agile practices working well or teaching them to really embody their agile role. Through this kind of coaching, keep your eye on the goal: to help the whole team see how agile works beautifully when simply done. Conduct this coaching “out loud” in the team room as the perfect moment to teach a particular concept just happens to arise. Or, plan a teaching intervention to introduce or reinforce something about agile that the team needs now. If they need to learn how to use their velocity information better to plan sprints while maintaining focus and creating abundance, for example, then prepare to teach them about this when they are in the middle of sprint planning. Educational coaching interventions have their greatest impact when they are delivered in the midst of the activity they are meant to improve.

SEE ALSO

Helping the team maintain focus and create a sense of abundance so that they commit to just the right amount of work is discussed in Chapter 6, “Coach as Facilitator.”

Coaching at the Very Beginning

The coaching intervention at the beginning of the team's first sprint together sets the tone for much of what follows. The coach aims to “breathe life into the team's structural shell [in our case, agile] and thereby help the team start functioning on its own” (Hackman 2002). To breathe life into the team, plan an educational coaching intervention as the team start-up, teaching the team about the agile framework to be used, teaching them about each other and themselves together as a team, and teaching them about the vision of the project and the work ahead.

SEE ALSO

What and how to teach during the team start-up is the subject of Chapter 7, “Coach as Teacher.”

Coaching in the Middle

In the middle of a sprint, coaching at the whole-team level quiets down. The coach becomes physically quieter, too, as the team works. If any whole-team coaching happens, it will be only for the biggest-impact insights that the coach consciously decides to insert.

Since performance strategy conversations are appropriate for midpoint coaching interventions (Hackman 2002), you may ask the team whether a mid-sprint check would prove useful (especially if the burndown chart looks like a ski jump). As a simple, lightweight conversation between the team members, a midsprint check yields renewed ideas and plans about how they are going to get the rest of the work done. It stops short of stirring up a midsprint retrospective, and the coach guards against this.

Since agile coaches protect the team's ability to focus by leaving them alone to work, midsprint is the perfect time for individual coaching. Coincidentally, this happens to be the time that team members often bring problems to the coach.

With individual coaching, agile coaches address a person's issues while keeping in mind the natural rhythms of agile so as not to disturb the team at work. If the problem is between two team members, encourage the problem-presenting person to resolve it one-on-one with the other person. If the problem is not earth-shattering, suggest the retrospective be geared to bring it forth. You can suggest the retrospective option any time, but especially as you near the end of the sprint.

Midsprint is also a great time to recognize and reinforce competent team behaviors that spontaneously occur (Hackman 2002) by coaching “out loud” in the team room. When someone does something particularly helpful or powerful, talk to them about it in front of the rest of the team. You need not make a big scene. A regular, respectful conversation the rest of the team will overhear works well. This means you must be present and observant to “catch” someone doing well.

Coaching at the End

At the end of a sprint comes the final coaching intervention. The end signals a natural time for the team to look back at how they worked together and decide what they will do to make the next sprint even better. Agile frameworks support this intervention through the formal pause at the end of each sprint—the retrospective. During this intervention, facilitate the team’s conversation so that they come up with a few things they agree to change in the next sprint. Over time, ensure that your coaching during the retrospective helps them do more than generate a to-do list of improvements. Coach the team to develop “to the point that members learn *how* best to learn from one another” (Hackman 2002).

The end of one sprint and the beginning of another happen in such rapid succession that the beginning and ending coaching interventions can be pushed together as one event with two pieces: looking back and educating for the future.

Coaching at the Release Level

The coaching interventions cycle is repeated at the release level. The most useful interventions are the same here—education at the beginning of a release cycle and learning through looking back at the end of a release cycle, with a whole-team check during the middle of a release cycle along with individual coaching.

Pay attention to where the team is in the sprint or release cycle to make whole-team and individual coaching useful and powerful. Strike this balance: Coach individuals and teams at the same time, and choose the type of coaching that will be the most impactful and least disruptive.

Coaching Tone

No matter whether you are coaching at the whole-team or individual level, set your coaching tone to these frequencies: loving, compassionate, and

uncompromising. At first glance, those three words don't seem to go together. Am I really saying that you should let your coaching be loving and compassionate *and* uncompromising? Oh, yeah.

Love each person just because they are human, like you, and give them the gift of acceptance so that they know they are supported as they strive to become a better team member (and person). Have compassion for each person's journey so they know you honor where they *are* as you help them become what they *want to be*. When they know—and feel—that you are loving and compassionate toward them, they can shed the all-too-common posturing and preening and get real with you. With these shed, the coaching can begin.

To bring love and compassion to your coaching, you don't have to get all lovey-dovey in the workplace. Hugs and exclaiming “I just love this guy!” are insincere substitutes for the deep expression required of you. Embody the type of love and compassion that rings so true that they can see it in your eyes, in the way you really listen to them, and in the way you honor them as the experts on their own lives.

You don't ever need to say the words *love* or *compassion* for them to know they are supported and valued. In fact, it's better if you don't. Instead, you just *are* loving and compassionate. And here's where the power lies: Being loving and compassionate allows you to be uncompromising.

Gift them with your willingness to be uncompromising, because having seen their great self, you expect the best from them and simply believe that they will become the person they wish to become and achieve the things they wish to achieve. Coaching has nothing to do with stroking their vanity and making them feel good about themselves. Instead, the coach takes the strong stand needed to get to the next level of agility possible for each person and, in so doing, raises the level of agility all around. Coaching helps each person get to that next level of professional growth that makes their work relevant to their whole life. Through effective coaching, individuals emerge who can contribute fully to agile teams so that we reap astonishing results, not just mediocre results delivered a little faster.

There's a trite, but true, saying in coaching: A friend loves you just the way you are. A coach loves you too much to let you stay that way.

Love them too much to let them stay as they are, and let this be the seed of your uncompromising stance. Loving, yes. Compassionate, yes. And 100% uncompromising.

If team members want to “tailor agile” so that they don't have to address dysfunctions in their company, that's their choice, and you can't make them choose differently. But don't buy into it, either. Remember the mentor side