BUSINESS

COACHING

AGILE COACHING
EXCELLENCE

EDITORIAL

Agile is one of the most interesting stories to be told, especially these days. We can apply agile mindset in everything we do, both in business and in personal life.

In this special edition, we want to share the most useful articles that come from Bob Galen, an Agile Methodologist, Practitioner & Coach. Publishing this format, we want to collect and share with you all the articles published by the authors only in the online edition as an added value to your knowledge. The thematic edition of the magazine always focuses on a single topic, and this time it is **Agile Coaching Excellence**.

The special edition is the latest format of the magazine that we've published. This magazine is smaller in format, but we tried to keep it large in content and design.

Enjoy your reading and stay safe!

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ABOUT
AUTHOR

Bob Galen is an Agile Methodologist, Practitioner & Coach based in Cary, NC. In this role, he helps guide companies and teams in their pragmatic adoption and organizational shift towards Scrum and other Agile methods. He is currently a Principal Agile Coach at RGCG. Bob regularly speaks at international conferences and professional groups on a broad range of topics related to agile software development. He is the author of the books: *Agile Reflections, Scrum Product Ownership, and Three Pillars of Agile Quality and Testing*.

I HAVE A DREAM...

I've been practicing "agile stuff" for 25 years. Over that time, I've been actively coaching agile notions at the team, group, organization, and company levels. In 2012, I received my Certified Enterprise Coach (CEC) designation with the Scrum Alliance as an indication of how invested, serious, and (hopefully) skilled I was in the craft and practice of agile coaching. In other words, I'm a relatively long-time agile coach who's seen and experienced quite a bit over that time.

I participated in the Scrum Alliance – Guides Open Space sessions on Friday, October 23rd. I was in one session where we explored the Certified Team Coach (CTC) & CEC coaching tracks. The focus of the session was on formalized mentoring and training, but we didn't explore that. Instead, the discussion ambled around the lack of clarity of what it meant to be an "agile coach".

As I was listening and engaging in the discussion, I was scribbling down notes and ideas around the topic. I created a flow, if you will, of things that I'd develop or require if I were creating my own vision for developing agile coaches. And I worked on it after I left the session and into the evening...

The session was cathartic for me in a way. And I took the perspective of—

If I were the leader of the agile coaching universe and,
I felt we lacked clarity, consistent skills, and competence in the universe, in addition,
I felt that our lack of clarity was causing clients to misunderstand what an agile coach does, while also diluting the quality of coaches and coaching, so...
I want to create guidelines for becoming a great agile coach and establishing what that might look like.

As I scribbled and brainstormed, I came up with the following flow of ideas. You could consider it a somewhat sequential learning and development flow for becoming an excellent agile coach.

The high-level flow in my thinking ran from—

• First focus on Coaching Capabilities, then onto;
• Defining a set of Learning Objectives aligned with the capabilities, onto;
• Establishing a space for Mentoring & Practice, then onto;
• Creating a professional Certification, onto;
• Continuously Sharpening the Saw (improving as a coach).

As critical steps in a coaching journey that would result in someone becoming a great agile coach.

Now I want to expand a bit into each of these areas to give you a more detailed sense of my thoughts.

1. COACHING CAPABILITIES

Establish/select some sort of capabilities model that defines the areas and capabilities required of an agile coach. We'd agree that this model represented all of the capabilities that a solid agile coach should have (some) minimal and demonstrable proficiency in.

• We'd establish the notion of situational coaching where we could nimbly change stances (competencies).
• We'd speak to a metaphor of a coaching arc where the coaching would be comfortable "dancing in the moment" with multiple competencies.
• Part of our coaching would include the notion of a "coaching plan" where we would (1) come to understand the client's goals and (2) plan on leveraging our various capabilities in helping the client achieve those goals.
• At the moment, I'm quite partial to the Coaching Growth Wheel. But not wanting to be too prescriptive, here it minimally serves as an example.

2. TRAINING & LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Related to each area of the model, there ought to be training/learning guidance around what this capability should look like.
• What areas to focus your learning on;
• What classes to take; What books to read;
• Other sources for learning (blogs, podcasts, videos);
• What practices to leverage;
• What coaches to "follow" as remote mentors.

Ultimately, how to develop "full competency" in each of the competency areas and to become well-rounded or balanced.

3. MENTORING & PRACTICE

The focus here should be on developing your craft of agile coaching.

• Learning how to articulate the value proposition of coaching, client negotiation, and establishing coaching plans & goals.
• Getting help in finding a mentor—what to look for, where to find them, what mentoring is and isn't.
• Also serving as a mentor.
• Volunteering to practice your craft in coaching clinics, retreats, circles, and camps.

• Actively engaging in Dojo practice sessions with other coaches and co-coaching.

4. ACQUIRING CERTIFICATION

Only after sufficient practice and verified evidence, could someone receive a "certification". And the practice and evidence would need to cross all of the capabilities, not just one or two.

• Right now, the Scrum Alliance application process is mostly a written form with some demonstrated evidence of Professional Coaching capability. This is far too narrow and doesn't allow for the demonstration of your experience via face-to-face collaboration.
• We need to emphasize signing off and adhering to an Agile Coaching – Code of Ethics.
• Mentoring & pair-coaching with multiple certified coaches would be required. As would their verification and validation of the competency(s) that they helped adequately develop. An emphasis here is on pair-based coaching in simulations, Dojo's, and with real-world clients.
• Focus: breadth over narrow depth AND experience over academics AND demonstration over description.

5. SHARPENING THE SAW

This is the continuous improvement aspect for each coach. It would include—

• Participation in worldwide coaching events (Coach Clinics, Coaching Retreats, Agile Coach Camps).
• Finding a more experienced Mentor (or more) to continue your ongoing learning.
• Mentoring others; pair-coaching whenever possible.
• Evaluating your competencies and either (1) making the strong ones stronger or (2) making the weaker ones stronger.
• Staying curious about the evolution of professional coaching and agile coaching.

Drivers

Someone asked me WHY am I writing this? And why do I seem to be pushing so hard on professionalism in the practice of agile coaching? My current drivers for pushing this forward include:

• The current market where everyone seems to be a coach and that trend is increasing;
• Coaches who only demonstrate one-tool – unbalanced and potentially harmful;
• Coaches who are only academic, with little / no real-world experience in the areas they're coaching;
• Coaches who stay with their clients for far too long and reduce their coaching effectiveness by becoming part of the culture;
• Coaches without ethical standards of practice;
• Clients who don't understand what agile coaching (is) nor what excellence (looks like).

In other words, I think the world of agile coaching is largely a hot mess. It needs leadership, direction, more rigor and standards, and more excellence. And the bar for "becoming" an agile coach needs to be broad, consistent, and practice-based.

Wrapping Up

To the best of my knowledge, none of the current coaching certification firms/approaches

• iCAgile – coaching certification program and delivery variants
• Scrum Alliance – CTC and CEC
• ICF – affiliated professional coaching programs (Co-active, ORSC, ACC/PCC/MCC, etc.)
• DAC – Disciplined Agile Coach

SAFe – because they certify everything 😉 take as comprehensive a view to developing your agile coaching craft as I've outlined above. And in my opinion, they're not even close. Now that's perfectly understandable for ICF which is more generally focused on professional coaching. But it doesn't explain it for the others.

One of the most common gaps is not aligning with an agile coaching competency framework. Another is little/no emphasis on the mentoring and practice-side of the equation. Nor on demonstrability of actually coaching within each stance via co-coaching. And none of them has tried to establish a common understanding of what agile coaching IS (ICF doesn't really have to).

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I have a Dream!

I have a dream that it's time for us to DO BETTER in the field of agile coaching.

• Do better in having an underlying competency model.
• Do better in having clear coaching training goals.
• Do better in practicing and being able to demonstrate our craft.
• Do better in explaining what coaching IS to our clients AND its inherent value proposition
• Do better for our clients.
• Do better for ourselves, our craft, and our profession.

And my DREAM is to inspire a **League of Extraordinary Agile Coaches** where the breadth of craft, professionalism, and clients come first.

AGILE COACHES – WE'RE COACHING THE WRONG PEOPLE!?!?

SCENE 1 – WHERE HAS ALL THE COACHING GONE?

I'm a Certified Scrum Coach and I know quite a few CST's. Many of them offer training and coaching as part of their services. However, the typical client interaction, either with public classes or private training engagements, for many of them is as follows:

• Deliver a 2-day CSM class to a group of mostly client team members
• Rarely deliver a "talk to leadership" as part of the engagement, as theirs is more of a team-centric play...

Then they move off on their merry way. One of the "tag lines" of the Scrum Alliance is "Transforming the world of work"; so many CST's get a sense of accomplishment at this point—feeling that the world of work has been, well...transformed.

This approach is training centric and coaching light to non-existent. It's also focused towards team members rather than management or leadership roles. It's my understanding that one driver for that is training is much more lucrative than coaching. Now I'm not saying that's the only driver, but I'd bet it's one of the primary drivers. It's also easier to "sell" training sessions and the related certifications over coaching.

My main issue with this approach is I'm not sure it sets the clients up for success. For example, I can't tell you how many times I've seen an organization send folks off to a CSM class and then assign them Scrum Master duties upon their return. These newly minted CSM's are ill equipped for the role of Scrum Master in the real world and they almost always fail in some way, which inevitably gets blamed on "agile".

Or another pattern is that team members leave "hyped up" on the agile principles and the promises of self-directed execution, go back home to their organizations, and then encounter the same dysfunctional management patterns without any tools to change how they engage with their leadership teams.

In both cases these CSMs need role models, examples, mentors, and coaching—in the trenches with their teams in order to be successful. It's also surprising how little of this is required to help them get over the hump and become more effective.

The other issue I have is that these folks seem to avoid traditional management in their training. Some even marginalize and/or somewhat demonize traditional management in the very companies they're training. They do this in the classes—painting a some-

what purist view towards agile leadership that inevitably the company leadership falls short on.

But there is often little to no "reaching out" or "partnering" with the leadership folks in these organizations. And if coaching the teams themselves is minimal, then coaching leadership isn't even attempted.

SCENE 2 – WOW, I SPENT MOST OF MY COACHING TIME WITH "MANAGEMENT"

If you've followed my career in my writing, you are aware that I spent three years at iContact as a senior technology leader and the head agile coach and evangelist. During my tenure, I was the primary coach and trainer for our teams in agile methods and approaches. I taught Scrum and Kanban basics, Agile Requirements with User Stories, explored roles and responsibilities, and helped us scale with a modified Scrum of Scrums model, and even focused heavily on Extreme Programming practices.

I also coached our management team (team leads and functional managers) across UX, Quality & Testing, DevOps, Architecture, and Software Development. This went far beyond training and focused on situational leadership in moving their style and tactics from command-and-control to more ser-vant leadership styles.

I joked at the time that I had two distinct jobs. I was the Director of our Technical teams reporting to our CTO. But I was also the organizational Agile Coach with responsibility for our overall transformation. Needless to say, I was fairly busy.

But here's the thing.

If you had asked me when I was working there, what percentage of time I spent coaching the "teams" vs. coaching "management", I would have said 70:30. It just felt like I was doing way more team-based interaction and coaching.

But if you asked me the same question after I left the organization, I now flip the ratios around. I realize now that I spent a relatively small amount of my time at a team level. Instead, I spent the majority of my time at the middle leadership level and a little with senior leadership. Here's the more correct ratio:

• Team – 30%
• Middle Management – 60%
• Senior Leadership – 10%

And the most important point here is that I normalized to these ratios as I was coaching across the entire organization and leading it

into a state of high-performance. So these were based on the real world dynamics in moving the organization forward.

As I reflect on my most successful coaching gigs, these ratios come through—in coaching, conversations, training, and simply influencing change. The middle management tier in organizations, comprised of team leads, managers, and directors, needs the most help in making the transition. And they're in the position to do the most with the coaching, helping to sustain and grow it.

SCENE 3 – I AM AN AGILE COACH. I AM AN ORGANISATIONAL DYSFUNCTION

Chris Matts published this wonderfully introspective blog post in March 2014. I believe he came to the same conclusion that I did in my ratios. That as coaches we should spend the majority of our time coaching the leadership teams within organizations.

Here's an excerpt from his post:

This was the point that I realised that I was an organisational dysfunction.

Some of the more experienced coaches had suggested I should work for the team doing what was right, rather than work for management. It felt right because management did not have a deep understanding of agile but I had a stronger feeling that I should be aligned with management who represented the goals of the organisation. The management skills matrix helped me realise that I should not work with the team at all. Instead I should work coaching the leadership of the organisation so that THE LEADERS COULD COACH THE TEAMS. That way, there would be no misalignment. Management would know why they were doing each agile practice. There would be no disconnect between the teams and management. By training the teams, I am perpetuating a disconnect between the teams and their management... I am perpetuating an organisational dysfunction.

I would encourage you to read the entire post.
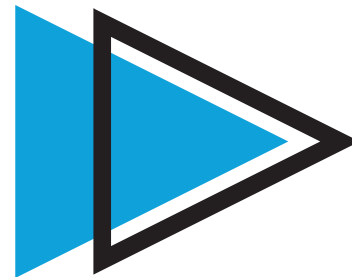
WHAT'S THE POINT BOB?

As the title implies, I think we (agile trainers and coaches) are spending too much time with the wrong people.

Instead of taking the easy road (and money) by mostly training & coaching teams, I'd like us to focus on partnering with and training the management tiers within organizations. In fact, I'm starting to think we've been avoiding these folks.

Why?

• Is it because they are in the ugly business of dealing with demanding stakeholders and customers and, as much as we'd like to pretend we understand that world, we don't?
• Is it that our messages, models, and repetitive and simplistic directions don't work as nicely with them? Or is it that we need to show more flexibility and incremental transformation strategies in our guidance?
• Is it that we're afraid of being pulled into their real world vs. our purist views of agile tactics that apply independent of context?
• Is it because they'll ask tougher questions? And expect us to have relevant, real world experience.
• Is It because it's much tougher to get their time and gain their respect from a change management vs. results perspective?

I'm not sure. But I do know that operating at the team level is "safer" for many of us. It's more secure to "fire up" teams that are sent to us by these very same leaders and managers, and then send them back to their organizations as the primary instigators of agility.

WRAPPING UP

I know this post may make some in the agile training and coaching community uncomfortable. It might even anger a few. But I honestly feel we need a "wakeup call".

I think Agile Trainers and CST's should coach more. Perhaps a minimum of 50% of their revenue being generated by coaching and that's across a solid cross-section of their clients.

I also align quite nicely with what Chris Matts was saying in that we coaches need to engage leadership much more in our coaching. Or as Chris wraps up his post with:
It answers that age old question? Who should go Agile first? The team or the leadership?

GIVEN that management want Agile
WHEN they hire a coach
THEN the coach should start with management. So now I have to change the way I work so that I'm no longer a dysfunction. For those of you who know me, you know how hard that will be. 😉

And that includes not allowing folks to bring us in to too heavily engage teams, while not engaging leadership. We need to have the integrity to say no to the easy road inquiries and yes, to the harder contexts that are more leadership focused.

We'll be much better coaches for it AND I truly believe the quality of our agile transformations will drastically improve.
Which is the point isn't it?

As for me, I want to thank Chris for the wake up call. I will be changing both my training and coaching style and approach within my client engagements. Drastically, probably not. But an immediate and fundamental shift will occur.

Now the question is...what about others?

THE TRAP OF BEING AN EMBEDDED AGILE COACH

I was having dinner the other evening with a few agile coaches after teaching a CAL class all day. I think we all wanted to "trap" each other into either:

• Revealing our coaching secrets
• Checking to see where out passions lie
• Challenging each other on our "agility"
• And simply, learning from one another

It was a small group and we engaged in some serious discussion and debate around our agile experiences and how to help our client engagements.

A NEW TOPIC

Then the conversation changed to one that I've been thinking about ever since.

One of the coaches spoke about the principle of getting "sucked into" the client's culture. That they had:

• Started attending way too many meetings and events that really weren't necessary.
• Found themselves adopting the company's cultural mindset.
• Also found themselves justifying the company status quo.
• And most concerning, that their overall coaching stance was being affected by all of this...

The group sort of laughed it off or said that yes, it was simply part of the job and a side-effect that was inevitable. But I walked away thinking about it more deeply.

THE TRAP!

The more I thought about it, the more I came to realize that long-term coaching in a context is inevitably a trap. That the more we stay within a clients' culture, the more we get assimilated into it.

It's like the Borg...resistance is futile and we become assimilated until we become part of the culture. It's dangerous because we start to:

• Lose our independent perspective, while starting to see things from the perspective of the client.
• Compromise our principles, while finding excuses for why things are the way they are.
• Start defending the status quo and avoid crucial coaching conversations.
• Stop pushing (inspiring, asking, guiding) the client to improve.
• Understand the client's context (business dynamics, organizational structure, etc.) so well that we get "pulled into" the complexity.
• Play it "safe" so that we can continue a

slow-roll agile journey without unsettling anyone important.
• Establish close working relationships to the point where the relationships skew our independence and advice.

And the most insidious part of the trap is this. Often, we don't see it. We lack the self-awareness to take a step back and actually see that we've become assimilated.

HOW DO WE AVOID THE TRAP?

I think that part is easy. We have to limit the time we spend in the culture.

An example of this is provided by Dan Mezick and his concepts of Open Space Agility. Dan cycles through open space periods of 100 days in OSA. During that time, the coach tells the organization that they'll be leaving at the end of that cycle. Perhaps being replaced with another coach. But importantly, setting the stage that they are not a "permanent fixture" for the organization to become dependent on. Or for them to be overly influenced by the organization.
When I first encountered OSA, I don't think I fully appreciated the wisdom Dan had in engaging in this way. But in thinking of the trap we often find ourselves in, I now think every coaching engagement should have an expiration date/period for each coach. And that timeframe should be relatively short.

Is embedded coaching always bad?

For long periods of time, yes.

And this isn't just for external coaches. I think the same danger exists for internal coaches. Perhaps even more so. We need to be very careful about not getting assimilated.

Is there a period of time where it's safe to coach?

I'm not sure.

In OSA, it appears to be 3-months. I might see it extending to 6 months at the most.

And of course, if you're not embedding full-time, but doing more part-time and situational coaching, then I think much of trap is diminished.

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WRAPPING UP

I didn't really focus all that much on it, but a big part of the driver for embedded coaching is that it's easy.

It's easy to budget and easy to quote.

It's easy to come into an organization every week.

It's easy to integrate with the teams.

It's easy to get used to a steady paycheck.

It's just easier!

But if you buy into the true role of a coach being putting themselves out of work, then it's not the right model for the client or the coach.

So, the next time you're asked to coach in a client's context, please consider shortening the timing. You might just avoid a very wicked trap.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS IS MORE PRESCRIPTIVE AGILE COACHES

I was once working with a peer agile coach and we were discussing the role of the coach within agile teams. His view was that it was as a "soft, encouraging, influencing" role. That at its core agility is about the team. And the team in this sense is...self-directed.

He also emphasized that taking a more direct or prescriptive approach in our coaching would be anathema to good agile practices. That it was draconian and dogmatic.

He was actually a leader of this firms coaching team, so he had tremendous influence over a team of ten or so agile coaches. I was one of them and I sometimes struggled with his view and approach.

Now don't get me wrong. I honestly get the importance of self-directed teams within agility. I want teams to sort out things on their own. But I also think that we should occasionally provide some direction as coaches instead of always deferring to "it depends"—especially if we're dealing with brand new teams that don't have a whole lot of experience. This leads into the whole area of situational coaching, which is where I'm going next.

SHU-HA-RI

A fairly common method for expressing team experience in the agile community is the metaphor or model of Shu-Ha-Ri. It comes from Aikido and represents three levels of team experience:

1. SHU – Novice, entry level, newbie
2. HA – Journeyman, mid level, experienced practitioner
3. RI – Master, high level, expert practitioner

The metaphor is useful in expressing the situational coaching involved with agile teams at these various levels. For example, I would expect a coach to be relatively hands-off and simply guiding for a RI-level team.

However, when that same coach encounters a freshly minted, SHU-level team, I would expect them to give the team quite a bit of prescriptive guidance. Also clearly articulating organizational constraints to the team, for example, helping them establish their Definition of Done.

SELF DISCOVERY

Many of the CST's have started to present their CSM classes with minimal to no Powerpoint slides. They're leveraging a style of training entitled Training from the Back of the Room (TFTBOTR), which has been developed by Sharon Bowman. The style is mostly focused on short bursts of discussion followed by hands-on simulation, exercises, or gaming to get the points across.

Of particular interest is the focus by many of our CST's on gaming, where they want team members to learn on their own. Again, while this is useful for some with this learning style, not everyone has this style. And it also assumes everyone being at a certain level of experience.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is that we all have different levels of experience, different learning styles, and different tolerances for this self-discovery approach to learning. At what point does having an expert coach truly directing or prescribing the next 10 steps of your journey help you more than trial and error discovery on your own? And where is the balance?

I'd argue that you need a balance of both,

but there is a tendency in the agile community to lean heavily to the self-discovery and self-direction side of the equation. I want to start challenging that view to a degree.

AND ARE WE BEING "TOO SOFT"?

A famous Project Management consultant and teacher, Neil Whitten, ran a very popular workshop for a number of years. I believe he still runs a variant of it. The title, loosely interpreted was: The Problem with Most Project Managers—Too Soft!

His primary premise in the workshop was that project managers lacked the courage to truly engage their teams for what I would call the "hard bits". Things like personal performance, estimate integrity, commitment, providing early feedback on issues, asking for help when appropriate, telling the truth to leadership, taking personal risks, etc.

He pointed out that it was easy to go through the tactics of project management, but that real leadership and maturity was driven from a different place—a willingness and a skill to attack virtually any topic or issue that was standing between the project

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team and success. That there was a tendency for avoidance of topics that were uncomfortable or difficult to face and discuss.
His main point was that within this space of avoidance lied the success or failure of most projects and that successful project managers had to have the hard discussions and lead from the front.

Now most project managers don't consider themselves too soft. Nor quite frankly, do their teams. But it's where they're being soft that counts. And why am I bringing up this story?

Because I think I want to make the same assessment and then challenge many agile coaches as being "too soft".

WHAT DOES "TOO SOFT" LOOK LIKE?

I can't speak directly for Neil Whitten, so I'll leave project management alone. However, I can speak for agile coaching. I do believe we've generally become too soft as a discipline of agile coaching. There are probably dozens of contributing factors, but I want to share five that come to mind:

1. An unwillingness to "tell" the team what to do—I see this incredibly often with agile coaches. The team directly asks them for help and under all circumstances they decline to directly answer the team. Instead, they fall into a pattern saying: "it depends", asking questions, playing games / simulations, or telling stories as a means of showing the team the way. I often liken this to a "pull request" and frequently I'll directly give an answer to the team. At the very least, I'll give them a few options that I've seen work in similar situations and I'll make a recommendation to them.

2. An unwillingness to step in and say "Stop it"—This is an even harder thing to do at times. For example, estimation is something that many team struggle with. A common pattern is for teams to estimate at too fine a level of granularity. Their hope is that success will surface from the details. But often the reverse is true. That planning at a higher level and sorting through the details as you go is the best strategy. If you encounter a team who is obviously "in the weeds", will you tell them to get out? Even if you've seen this "pattern" a thousand time? I'd say that I would. And I'd like you to consider it as well

when you get into similar situations when you know that a team is going to "crash and burn" by using the wrong tactic or practice.

3. A lack of balance in knowing when to say when—Often coaches stay the course in one direction or the other—either they are consistently too hard or too soft. They lack the balance across both of these dimensions. And the teams they coach suffer as a result. I often think that experience comes into play here. Many agile coaches have little experience in their careers; often less than 5 years of agile and 10 years of overall software experience. Much of my coaching depth comes from my experience, and that's not simply agile experience, but my waterfall history helps immensely as well. Don't be afraid to leverage ALL of your experience and don't be afraid to say "I don't know", and ask another coach for help.

4. A lack of situational awareness vs. prescriptiveness—I brought up Shu-Ha-Ri intentionally to illustrate the incredible importance of "situational awareness" when it comes to your agile coaching. That when you're coaching Shu-level teams, you better be prepared to provide them direct guid-ance and support. I've found that wrapping the ceremony of reflection or retrospective with situational coaching is a wonderful way to help guide your team. As they are exploring an issue or a challenge and looking for way to attack it, you can bring up your own stories and advice and get it into play. I also think you can be quite firm here, and yet still let the next steps emerge from the team.

5. A fear of engaging or getting "in the game"—Many formal schools of coaching encourage the coach to stay at a distance. The coach owns the observations, but the coachee, team, or organization owns the action decisions and performance results. There is a fine line between the two. While I honor that view and maintaining some healthy boundaries, I've found that being in the game with the team helps to connect your coaching to the reality of the situation. And it often emboldens the coach to be more prescriptive. I think what I'm saying is that the coach having a stance "as a team or organizational member" is healthy and will draw out more situational prescriptiveness.

WRAPPING UP

I submitted this topic as a session at the 2014 Agile Conference in Orlando and it was selected. I was very, very excited about that and was looking forward to seeing how others in the community reacted to my ideas here. Unfortunately (or fortunately) I was invited to be a part of the Agile China experience the same week and I declined to present at Agile 2014. I'll be doing more research and thinking on this topic in 2014 and will submit it again in 2015.

I'm also making an odd request that I hope some of you take on. I'd like someone to respond to this article with a view to what "too hard" looks like in agile coaching. I'd love some examples and general guidance and anti-patterns that you've seen in your coaching travels. I guess my point is I'd like to see both sides represented, because I think the truth lies somewhere in between.

AGILE COACHES NEED MORE THAN COACHING SKILLS

I earned my CEC (Certified Enterprise Coach) certification with the Scrum Alliance in 2012. I'd applied in 2011, so it took me about a year to go through the process at the time. If my memory is right, I believe I was about the 43rd CEC at the time.

I did a search of CEC's and CTC's on May 26th and it showed 118 and 156 world-wide respectively. That's ~300 coaches. The growth of CEC's over an ~8-year period was ~10/year.

I had been serving in leadership and agile coaching roles for quite a few years prior to that. I'd also been part of a couple of fairly successful agile transformations at the organizational level. So, while I was confident in my coaching capabilities, I was excited to go through the process as a way of validating my journey, experiences, and skills.

- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Teaching
- Modeling
- Lean Skills
- Leadership Skills
- Consulting
- Partnering
- Facilitating
- Communication
- Business Skills

Back then, the focus was on the breadth of your stances. For example:
Were all areas where you had to have skills, experience, and acumen as a coach. And you needed to demonstrate a nice balance across that spectrum of capabilities. For example, you couldn't simply be a strong teacher or facilitator and weak in your consultative or coaching chops. Instead, you had to be relatively balanced across all of them.

Of course, everyone has strength areas, but balance and breadth were the keys.

You can see an example model for what I'm talking about in this post about The Big Wheel of Agile Coaching. While it has a strong emphasis on coaching skills/capabilities, it's a much more broadly balanced and nuanced view to exactly what agile coaching encompasses.

But the times seem to have changed...

But I've discovered a potentially alarming trend in the Scrum Alliance (CTC, CEC) coaching paths.

There seems to be a strong skew towards the (professional) coaching stance. In fact, I think that skew is a dangerous one. Not because it's not important. It is. But because it's not the only stance. It's only one of many and balance and breadth are still keys from my point of view.

What evidence do I have?

COACHING CANDIDATES

I've been mentoring candidates for the CTC and CEC since I earned my CEC. It's something I've been doing pro bono as a means of "paying forward" everything the Scrum Alliance coaching community has given to me.

What I've discovered recently is that there is a strong emphasis on professional coaching chops. In fact, a recent CEC candidate was told that they lacked PCC equivalent coaching skills and were not a good candidate. Even though they had attended iCAgile coaching classes, had solid coaching skills, and were incredibly balanced across the skill areas I mentioned. It seemed the emphasis was nearly all towards their ability to profes-

sionally coach—balance be damned.

And, as you'll see later, the PCC level is a fairly mature certification within the International Coaching Federation (ICF) certification levels, so not an easy hurdle to clear.

GUIDANCE ON THE SCRUM ALLIANCE WEBSITE

You can also see the skew in emphasis in the documents on the Scrum Alliance website that detail the requirements for the CTC and CEC certifications.

• SA – CEC Readiness Checklist
• SA – CTC Readiness Checklist
• SA – Study Resources for CEC Candidates
• SA – Comparison of CTC and CEC differences

The starkest example for me of the skew is reading the study resources for CEC candidates. If you review it, there are three primary sections focused on coaching.

1. Coaching Tools, Techniques, and Frameworks, with ~15 references

2. Agile Knowledge, with ~10 references
3. Professional and Agile Coaching Competencies, with ~10 references
4. Coaching Mindset, with ~10 references
5. Consulting with 1 reference
6. Mentoring with 2 references

Outside of agile and coaching skills there are literally three recommended references. Imagine that...three!

For example, I think Gerald Weinberg's and Peter Block's seminal works on consulting would be invaluable references for agile coaches adopting a consulting stance.

And my point is not to expand the references now with recommendations. Instead, it's to show that they are imbalanced.

THE PATH TO COACHING

A great group of volunteers on the Scrum Alliance have put together a series of recordings entitled the Path to Coaching. It's a wonderful resource to help develop your coaching stance skills. I haven't watched or engaged with all of the content. But I watched a sampling of them and reviewed the descriptions of the materials.

ICF coaching competencies were mentioned in every lesson I reviewed. And the teaching/focus, again, seems entirely focused on professional coaching.

Beyond what's been recorded, I'd love to see some coverage of:

• Consulting with leaders;
• Coaching UP and not simply from a coaching stance, but from an advisory or mentoring stance;
• Cultural transformation and scaling at an organizational level;
• The coach's role in Product Organizations and in understanding the business;
• Connecting to organizational silos, for example, HR and Accounting;
• Something focused on cultural tools like StrengthsFinders, Leadership Agility, and The Leadership Circle;
• OpenSpace Agility;
• Invitation/self-selection models and how to coach an organization towards those approaches;
• Much more in the way of storytelling; and while I'm there, what about communication techniques and storytelling for coaches?

And those are just a quick list of concepts and skills that are missing and would broaden the impact and value of the resources. But again, The Path to Coaching is a GREAT resource for learning the craft of professional coaching. It's just lacking other dimensions.

PROFESSIONAL COACHING

Now I want to clarify something. When I reference professional coaching, I thought I'd share some information as to what I mean by that. The following are representative of pure coaching:

• International Coaching Federation (ACC, PCC, MCC) credentials
• Co-Active Coaching (individual/personal coaching)
• ORSC Coaching (group/system coaching)
• iCAgile Coaching (well-regarded boot camp for basic coaching skills)

And all are representative of this coaching mindset:

The client is naturally creative and resourceful and whole. Therefore, they have the means to solve their own challenges.

While I understand the power and simplicity of this mindset, when you adopt it too strongly over the other stances, you'll often miss other opportunities to help your clients. Here's the language in the Scrum Alliance Comparison of CTC and CEC differences document:

• A CTC is expected to demonstrate professional coaching skills at the ICF-ACC level. ICF certification is not required
• A CEC is expected to demonstrate professional coaching skills at the ICF-PCC level. ICF certification is not required.

And keep in mind that both the ACC and PCC are fairly mature certifications with robust coaching training and practice requirements. And again, they are purely coaching stance focused.
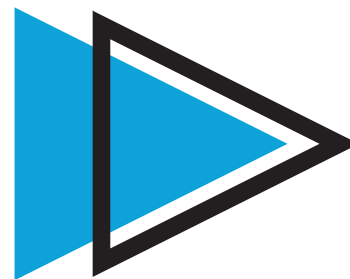
SCRUM ALLIANCE

I did speak to a few folks at the Scrum Alliance about my concerns and I shared a draft of this post with them. Essentially the response (paraphrased) was:

We agree with you that perhaps we've skewed a bit towards professional coaching.

The reasons for that are two-fold. First, there was a trend in the incoming CTC and CEC candidates where they lacked any sort of professional coaching skills. And second, we believe it's an incredibly important stance for all coaches and it's a relatively easy one for us to check on in early phases of the certification path.

They also acknowledged that they're still looking for better balance in the agile coach's skill set even though everything on the website materials seems to skew towards professional coaching.

I do want to emphasize that they graciously took my feedback and promised to consider it in future adjustments in the focus for the certifications.

WRAPPING UP

Independent of my conversation with the Scrum Alliance, I still think there is a problem. And I believe it's skewed beyond the Scrum Alliance certifications to the agile community-at-large.

It's not clear to me that every Agile Coach needs to have a strong coaching stance in order to effectively help their clients (our agile community). I would say there are situations where I would take an agile coach with strong consultative and mentoring skills and very lightweight coaching skills. They could meet a client where they are and help to guide them forward.

And I think there are situations where an agile coach, whose only strength is their coaching stance, might be incredibly unhelpful to a client by subjecting them to death by a thousand powerful questions. In other words, I can see senior leaders and leadership teams (ejecting) agile coaches whose only tool is powerful questions, clean language, NLP, or a variety of questioning frameworks in every situation.

What is that old adage, if the only tool you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail.

That perfectly illustrates my concern. It's not that the coaching stance isn't important for agile coaches. It certainly is. In fact, that's exactly why I've pursued my ORSC training and am currently in an ORSC certification cohort. To sharpen my saw when it comes to my professional coaching capabilities.

But that being said, I feel it's approaching irresponsibility to emphasize ANY stance/tool so strongly over the others.

Successful agile coaches need to be much more nuanced and situational in the breadth, depth, and usage of their skills. And yes, sometimes we need to be skilled consultants and STILL be regarded as "Agile Coaches".

I sincerely hope that the Scrum Alliance reconsiders its balance when it comes to the coaching certifications and immediately begins to swing the pendulum back towards

the middle. Otherwise, we're certifying and releasing a large group of "Agile Coaches" on the business world who potentially have a single (albeit strong) skill in their toolbelt.

Nails beware.
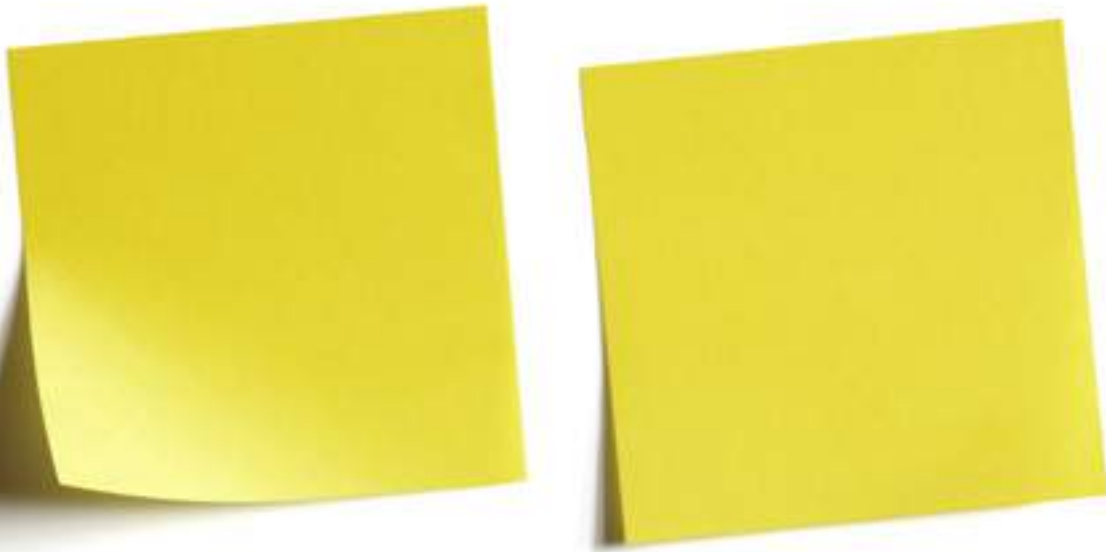
GIMME BACK MY BULLETS

There's a song by Lynyrd Skynyrd entitled Gimme Back my Bullets. It came to mind when I was thinking about this post and I thought I'd share that backstory with you.

This is a follow-up to a blog reaction I had to a post from Dan Mezick.

Bullet Metaphor

I've been using this metaphor for the past 20 years of my agile coaching. It helps me to focus on what engagement opportunities I want to pursue. These would be both as internal and external coaches.

The metaphor has strengthened as I've gotten older. And right now, it very clearly guides every discussion I have around helping others with their agile journeys.

It involves an old west gun holster with bullets around the belt. Many years ago, I started out with a full belt when I began consulting. And over the years, I've used my bullets at a wide variety of organizations. Some of them hit the mark and the organizations had great successes. Not because of me. But because of themselves and their level of com-

mitment to an agile mindset and agile principles.

But many of the bullets missed. Entirely. And it was a waste of a good bullet. The client was unsuccessful and wasted good money chasing a change. And I wasted my time. Time that I've found is increasingly more valuable than anything else.

Nowadays, my holster only has a few bullets left (not trying to sound morbid, but it's true). And I want to make each and every one of them count when I approach a new agile coaching/training gig with a client.

I thought I'd share some of the factors that I currently think about to ensure I'm leveraging my remaining bullets prudently and impactfully with each client—

Engagement Success Factors

1. Alignment on Values – The client doesn't seem to have competing values with my own. For example, their desire for speed vs. my focus on quality. Instead, the client seems to align with my own principles. For example, they have an innate value for and

intent to grow and empower their people.

2. **No Sales Pitch Required** – The client isn't looking for a sales pitch or a competitive bid. And I'm not being treated as a "commodity". Instead, they've done some research and are aware of my expertise and value proposition and are excited for the potential to work together.

3. *Partners Instead of Consultant* – The client isn't engaging me the way they would/do your typical consultants. As in a customer – consultant relations. Instead, we establish an outcome-focused partnership. Where we both are working together. I.e. I don't do work for them, I'll be working with them.

4. **Edict vs. Invitation** – The client is leaning less towards telling their organization to "be Agile" and more towards an inviting everyone to change. They understand how important it is for their teams to "have a say" in the transformation.

5. **Hubris or Humility** – The client isn't full of themselves, overly demanding, overly knowing, and full of hubris. Instead, the cli-

ent is curious, humble, coachable, and able to admit what they don't know. They are someone that I (want) to help.

6. **Measuring Success** – The client is less focused on trailing, leading, or output metrics and more focused on outcomes and impact metrics. They also understand that measuring a few key indicators is more important than looking at hundreds of items.

7. **Leaders Go First** – The client leadership team wants to – go first in the engagement. First in training & coaching, first in understanding, first in making the change themselves.

8. **Excellence trumps Cost** – The client does not view agile firms, consultants, coaches, etc. as a commodity. Instead, they looking for real experience and quality; looking for the best coaches to help them succeed.

9. **Project or Journey** – The client understands that agile is not an initiative or a project to be completed at high speed to arbitrary deadlines. Instead, they realize that it's a journey that is never really done.

BUSINESS COACHING

10. It's Important – Instead of giving me 30 minutes to an hour to fully explain "Agile", they invest plenty of time personally and organizationally. The clients view their time investment to be equivalent to the importance and breadth of this change.

I don't necessarily have to have all of these aligned. BUT, when the overall leanage of our initial discussions are in these areas, then the potential for working together is high. Also, the potential for great and sustained outcomes is also high.

WRAPPING UP

First, please don't react poorly to my gun/bullet metaphor given the current environment around guns. In this case, it's just a metaphor. No political or social implications are implied or intended.

The real message in this post is that I've re-discovered how precious my time is. Every minute of every day. And that I need to be working on things that matter. Investing my time toward positive outcomes & impacts.

No matter what the situations around me... focusing on things that align with my values and principles for each one of my remaining bullets.
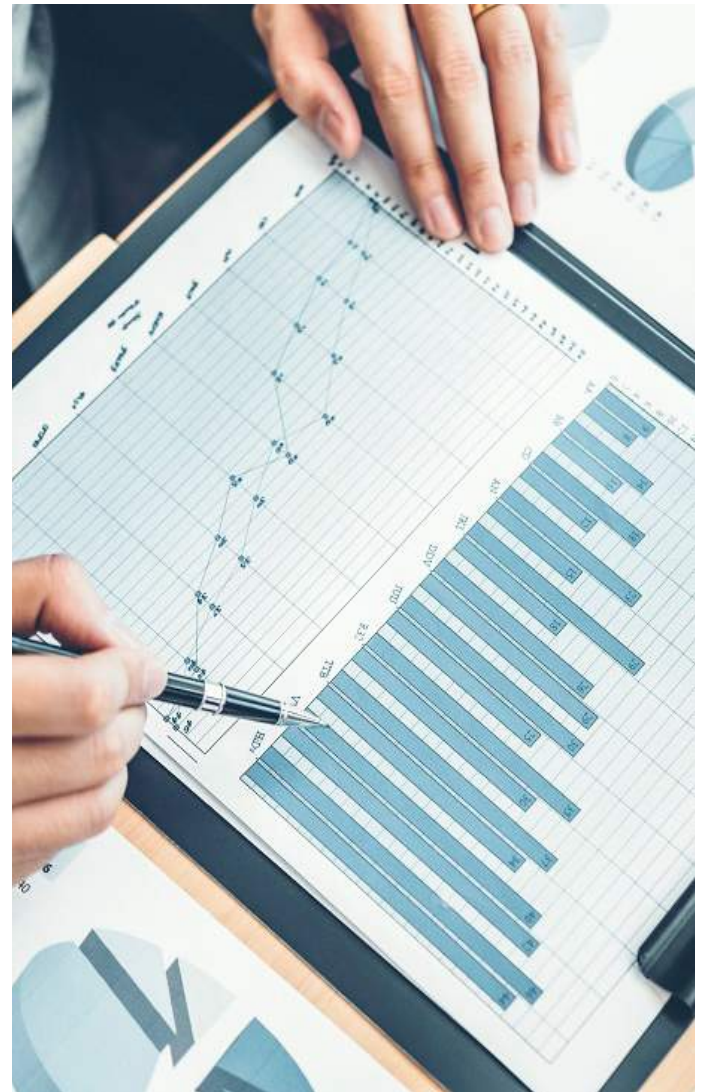
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