

“ HOW TO ACCELERATE
YOUR COACHING OUTCOMES
WITH MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS ”

RESPONSIVE

AGILE

COACHING

Niall McShane

Foreword by

Arie van Bennekum

(co-)Author of The Agile Manifesto

RESPONSIVE AGILE COACHING

**HOW TO ACCELERATE YOUR
COACHING OUTCOMES WITH
MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS**

Niall McShane

Copyright © 2020 Niall McShane

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

ISBN: 978-19-5-036738-2

Published by



If you are interested in publishing through Lifestyle Entrepreneurs Press, write to:

Publishing@LifestyleEntrepreneursPress.com

Publications or foreign rights acquisition of our catalog books.
Learn More: *www.LifestyleEntrepreneursPress.com*

Printed in the USA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	1
About the Author	3
Acknowledgements	5
How to Read This Book	7
PART I: <u>WHY</u> Responsive Agile Coaching?	9
Introduction	9
Chapter 1: The Agile Industry	11
The Rise of Agile Coaching	11
Outcomes	12
Meaning	13
Chapter 2: The Story Behind This Book	15
The Agile Coaching Expert	15
The Agile Coaching Beginner	18
Expert-Beginner Tension	19
Responsive Coaching	20
Chapter 3: The Agile Coach and Agile Coaching	23
Definitions	23
The “Agile” Part of Agile Coaching	24
The “Coaching” Part of Agile Coaching	27
References and Further Reading	29

PART II: <u>WHAT</u> Is the Responsive Agile Coaching Model? . . .	31
Introduction	31
Chapter 4: Two Stories Explain How the Model Originated.	33
Sunny-Day Story.	34
Sunny-Day Story Debrief	37
Rainy-Day Story	38
Rainy-Day Story Debrief	43
Chapter 5: Two Pathways, Four Moves, One End Point	47
Two Conversation Pathways	47
Overview of the Four Moves	48
Move 1: Sense Then Respond	51
Sense	52
Sensing: Practical Tips and an Experiment.	54
The Responsive Moment	55
Respond.	57
Respond: Practical Tips and an Experiment.	59
Move 2: Tell or Show.	60
Tell	61
Tell: Practical Tips and an Experiment	63
Show.	64
Show: Practical Tips and an Experiment.	66
Move 3: Open and Hold	67
Open.	68
Open: Practical Tips and an Experiment.	70
Hold	71
Hold: Practical Tips and an Experiment	73
Move 4: Await Then Co-Create	74
Await	75
Await: Practical Tips and an Experiment.	77
Co-create.	78

Co-create: Practical Tips and an Experiment	80
The End Point: Embed	81
Embed	81
Embed: Practical Tips and an Experiment	83
References and Further Reading	85
PART III: <u>HOW</u> to Do Responsive Agile Coaching	87
Introduction	87
Chapter 6: How Conversations Work	89
The Four Levels of Depth to Conversations	90
Flowing Through the Four Levels of Conversation	93
Chapter 7: MOVE 1: Sense and Respond	97
Sensing: Scanning the System	98
The Trigger to Start a Coaching Conversation	98
You Are Affected	101
Your First Action: STOP	102
Orient Your Intent to Serve	103
Agile Coaching’s Core Question	105
Permission to Coach	106
Question the Question	107
The Responsive Moment – React or Respond	107
A Sense Then Respond Conversation	109
Chapter 8: MOVE 2: Tell or Show	113
Caution: Downloading Risks Repeating Old Patterns	114
Tell Them; Show Them	114
Chapter 9: MOVE 3: Open and Hold	119
Questions to Enable an OPEN MIND	120
The Neuroscience of Intuition	121
How to HOLD the Space	126
Things NOT to Do as You Hold the Space	129

Questions to Enable an Open HEART	131
Questions to Enable an Open WILL	134
Chapter 10: MOVE 4: Await Then Co-create (and Embed)	139
How to “Await”	139
Co-create Questions	141
Embed Questions	144
Chapter 11: Responsive Agile Coaching – One-on-One	149
Sense and Respond	150
Across Pathway – an Attempt to Tell or Show	150
Down Pathway – Open and Hold	151
Awaiting	152
Co-create	153
Embed	154
Chapter 12: Responsive versus professional coaching	155
Overview of the GROW model	155
Using GROW with Responsive Agile Coaching	156
Goal	158
Reality	158
Options	158
Way Forward	159
Responsive versus Professional Coaching – Key Differences ..	159
Chapter 13: Responsive Agile Coaching with a Team	161
Accelerating Coaching Outcomes	161
Coaching a Team from Forming to Performing	162
Tuckman’s Stages (Modified) for Agile Team Coaching	164
Why “Containers” Are Critical to Coaching Agile Teams	166
An Agile Team Change Management Approach	168
Phase One – Create the Container	170
Phase Two – Resolve Resistance	171
Phase Three - Embed and Re-provoke	172

Chapter 14: Combinations and Experimentation	175
Provocation in Your First Encounter	175
Cycling Between Tell and Open	176
Other Moves and Combinations to Experiment With	177
Practice the Basics, Experiment, Then Master	178
References and Further Reading	180
PART IV: Responsive Agile Coaching Practices	183
Introduction	183
Chapter 15: Key Practice – Listening	185
Level 1 – When You Have the Right Answer	187
Level 2 – When Facts and Opinions Need to Be Heard	187
Level 3 – When Clients Need to Feel Felt	188
Level 4 – When Everyone Needs to Reconnect to Purpose	190
How to Use Listening	191
Chapter 16: Key Practice – Mindfulness	195
Mindfulness: What It Is and Why It’s Important?	195
Mindfulness Helps You to Make Meaning	198
Mindfulness Exercises	200
Creating Your Mindfulness Practice	204
Chapter 17: Key Practice – Habit Management	207
Agile Coaching Habits	207
The Structure of a Habit	208
Cues	209
Routine	210
Craving	210
Your Personality and Social Style	212
The Reward from Agile Coaching	214
Chapter 18: Key Practice – Unlearning	217
Unlearning Opportunity #1 – “I Am the Expert” Reaction	219

Unlearning Opportunity #2 – Problem-Solving Reaction	220
Unlearning Opportunity #3 – Emotion-Avoiding Reaction	221
An Approach to Unlearning	222
Chapter 19: Key Practice – Evoking Presence	227
What Is Presence, and Why Is It Important?	227
Presencing Reflection	229
Working with Presence	230
References and Further Reading	232
PART V: A Responsive Agile Coaching Career	235
Introduction	235
Chapter 20: Responsive Agile Coaching Across a Career	237
What Does It Take to Deliver Responsive Agile Coaching?	238
Agile Coaching Role Types	238
Agile Coaching – the Three Roles in a Career	239
The Start – Working with Yourself	240
Agile Coaching Small	241
Agile Coaching Medium	244
Agile Coaching Large	246
Which Role Is for You?	247
Chapter 21: The Journey to Becoming a Responsive Agile Coach	249
First Day on a New Job	250
So, This Is What “Great” Looks Like	254
Call to Adventure	256
Refusal of the Call	258
Meeting with the Mentor	260
Stepping into the Unknown	262
Approaching the Turning Point	266
Facing Your Fears	267
The Reward	270

The Road Back	272
The Final Test.....	275
Return as the “Expert”	277
Chapter 22: What We Learned from Steve’s Journey.....	279
You Will Step Across Into the Unknown.....	279
You Will Face Multiple Nemeses.....	280
Continuous Learning and Practice.....	281
Working with Others (Including a Mentor).....	282
Soft Skills and Self-management.....	282
References and Further Reading.....	283
PART VI: Responsive Agile Coaching Capability	285
Introduction	285
Chapter 23: Creating a Learning and Unlearning Plan	287
Overview of the Approach	287
Build Your Community.....	289
Organizing Your Learning	291
Organizing Your Unlearning	295
Learning/Unlearning Canvas.....	297
Chapter 24: Responsive Agile Coaching in an Organization.....	301
(Agile) Coaching as a Culture.....	302
Agile Coaching as a Skill.....	303
Coaching Capability for Executives	304
References and Further Reading.....	306
Conclusion – Final Words.....	309

FOREWORD

For more than 25 years, I have been working in this system we call “agile.” In the beginning, I was experimenting because everything was theoretical. Later, I was working on making these approaches solid and reliable and, most of all, delivering value to the client. What has always been a big question mark for me is the fact that although the results of agile implementation were initially successful, clients always had an excuse to step back into their old habits—the old habits that resulted in non-delivery.

Later on, I detected the power of old paradigms deeply embedded in the organizations, in areas such as decision making, documentation standards, career paths, bureaucracy, job descriptions, evaluation and reward, and—last but not least—habits. Habits, once in position, are difficult to change (“it does not work for us”) and also define a person or company’s reflexes under stress. These deeply rooted habits make it difficult to help

people change; it is common for people and organizations to revert back to their old ways. People bump into an issue, and instead of fixing it in an agile way “forward,” they regress “backward” by reimplementing old habits. This problem offered a massive opportunity: the professional domain of the agile coach.

Now there are a lot of people who call themselves agile coaches; however, and I am so sorry to say this, I often meet coaches who don’t know how to coach. Agile knowledge and experience are often issues already, but the lack of coaching skills strikes me over and over again as a major problem within this professional domain.

The question is: what exactly are those coaching skills? I do not claim I have the one and only answer, but for me it is clear that “supporting people in finding their own way” is not the way. For me, an agile coach is like a sports coach. Sometimes you have to be directive and strict on the dos and don’ts, and sometimes you have to let teams struggle a bit and move forward on their own. Collective change (to achieve collective benefits) and tailor-made team improvements are both part of the support needed, and this is what the book is all about.

I recommend you read this book to learn. Read to see how this book can help you in your career. A professional agile coach is always interested in the lessons and improvements that can be learned from another. Enjoy!

Arie van Bennekum

(co-) Author of the Agile Manifesto

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before we go any further, let me answer your obvious question: “Why should I listen to you?”

My day job is hiring, training, and mentoring agile coaches whilst delivering agile coaching to a broad range of clients. I am a Professional Certified Coach accredited with the International Coaching Federation and I have a Masters of Business Administration. Of course, I’ve also gained certifications in scrum, scaling frameworks, human centered design and other industry qualifications as I moved through my career. You can check out my online profiles for more on my background.

But this book is *not* about what I’ve learned from studying agile; instead it mostly draws from my experiences on-the-job. Some of what you’ll read in this book I learned as the head of an agile coach academy at a large (30,000 people) Australian corporate that was undergoing a full transformation in its way of working. Other content comes from my 10+ years of agile

coaching across company-level initiatives as well as work at small companies with only three to four teams.

Prior to agile I was a professional leadership coach, and before that I was a professional sports coach (my first degree was in sports science), working with elite athletes up to the Olympic level. In short, I love coaching and I live agile.

The personal and spiritual life I lead has greatly influenced my work as a coach. I consider myself a practicing Buddhist and an amateur neuroscientist; both of these pursuits have been woven into this book alongside professional coaching and agile content. I'm not claiming to know everything about the topic of agile coaching, but what I can say is I've lived and practiced everything I write about in this book—and it works!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I began to explore writing this book, I conducted a pre-order campaign to “crowdfund” and test the idea with the agile community. This book sold 312 copies before I’d written one word. I’d like to acknowledge these early “backers” of my idea and their contributions to bringing the project into reality. Here are all the wonderful people who signed up as contributors; thank you from the bottom of my heart. I couldn’t have done this without your early support.

Arash Arabi

Beresford D’Silva

Brad Bennet

Chris Riley

Fiona Tibballs

Daniel Prager

Ian Main

John Farrow

Michael Law

Rasoul Baghdad

Ravi Shankar

Ross MacIntyre

Sandip Rananavare

Chelsea Bates (Adaptovate)

Paul McNamara (Adaptovate)

The Responsive Agile Coaching model draws upon elements from the work of Otto Scharmer and the Presencing Institute.¹ My ideas have come from experiencing workshops run out of MIT's u.lab online program that utilizes Theory U. You can go to the website to learn more: www.presencing.org.

I would like to acknowledge the book's cartoonist/illustrator, Simon Kneebone, who worked patiently to capture the style, look, and feel of what the Responsive Agile Coaching model aims to communicate. Thank you for your wonderful work.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The best way to use this book is to consider it a laboratory book for you to use in order to design and conduct behavioral experiments (on yourself) as you practice coaching throughout your day. I suggest you keep an open journal or notebook, and as you read, stop and pause periodically to jot down ideas, insights, actions, opportunities, or experiments that you can execute as relevant coaching scenarios arise.

The practice of reading, understanding, then learning by doing experiments will greatly accelerate your ability to turn the theoretical concepts written here into practical capability uplift in your agile coaching.

Please note, some of the concepts in this book may seem very abstract, but within every chapter I'll provide you with practical experiments and actions you can take to solidify these concepts and build up learned experience, which will help you more deeply appreciate them.

The ideas in the book build on each other, so it is important that you read the chapters sequentially. I introduce language at the start of the book that I then expand on and utilize later, so you may get confused if you skip ahead.

In addition, I've created a community around the ideas in this book, so I recommend you join in and, as you read, participate in conversations with others who are also reading or have read the book. You can find the community at www.responsiveagile.coach

I hope you have as much joy reading this book as I did writing it!

PART I

WHY RESPONSIVE AGILE COACHING?

Introduction

In Part 1, I want to give you a little background on agile and agile coaching as well as point out some of our industry's challenges that this book aims to address. I'll also share some personal stories that led me to write this book as well as start to outline the core elements of the Responsive Agile Coaching model.

CHAPTER 1.

THE AGILE INDUSTRY

The Rise of Agile Coaching

According to a recent article in *Forbes Magazine* by one of the world's leading thinkers in management, Steve Denning, “Agile is eating the world”—a bold statement.² Agile is a way of working, and to adopt this way of working, people are required to change their values, principles, and practices. This is where agile coaching comes in—to support people in changing their ways.

There's been a shift in how industry sees this move to agile; from it being primarily about agile process implementation to towards it being a change in mindset (values, attitudes, beliefs) across the workforce.

In large-scale transformations, agile coaching is now considered part of everyone's role. Like leadership being a distributed responsibility, agile coaching is being built into other positions, such as change managers, leaders, and other “agents of change.” I believe it is time we reconsider agile coaching as a skill; it is

time to encourage more people in a variety of roles to build their capability to deliver agile coaching. So, this book is about agile coaching and NOT just for those with the role of agile coach.

The subtitle of this book points to two key themes or consistent pain points in the agile coaching industry that I am attempting to solve for:

1. To be more effective and achieve coaching outcomes faster.
2. Reconnecting with the meaning of work.

Outcomes

Agile coaches are constantly under pressure to prove their worth and show value. Agile coaching engagements typically need to show observable improvements within 15 to 20 weeks (sometimes shorter); in this span of time, an agile coach is expected to make an impact, establish a system of work, or correct an “off-the-rails” project utilizing their skills. Coaches who do not have the ability to combine their hard (process) agile knowledge together with their softer (coaching) capability will struggle to effect change in these timeframes. This book is my contribution to help deliver coaching outcomes faster through enabling coaches to balance, in the moment, between how often they tell (the client what to do) and how much they ask clients open questions (e.g., “What do you think?”).

If you’re just starting out on your agile coaching career, this book will help guide you towards what you need to know to ensure you can build both your “agile” and “coaching” knowledge together as you progress through your career. If you’re an

experienced agile coach, this book will allow you to experiment with a new model of coaching that leverages the best of what you already know while supporting you to integrate deeper conversations into your practice. Regardless of your circumstance, this book will enable you to accelerate the delivery of coaching outcomes.

Meaning

Coaches are telling me that they want to conduct meaningful and impactful conversations to help their clients change their mindsets, beliefs, and attitudes relating to agile but don't know how. This lack of meaning at work is now seen as a global issue, with a recent survey of 2,285 professionals across 26 industries finding that employees crave more meaning.³ The research findings were clear:

“Employees want more meaning from their work and are even willing to trade money to get it.”

What agile coaches need to know is that (almost) no other role has so much potential to bring meaning to the workplace than ours. As you read, you'll learn a new agile coaching model that enables you to conduct meaningful conversations that support clients to not only change their mindsets but also adopt new agile processes. By using this model, you will literally make meaning for yourself (and your clients) at work; it will feel good AND produce results/outcomes faster—a win-win!

CHAPTER 2.

THE STORY BEHIND THIS BOOK

The Agile Coaching Expert

I was walking out of an interview room when I turned to Sarah, who was helping me recruit agile coaches, and sighed. “That’s another no...”

This was the thirteenth such interview, and an interesting pattern was emerging across all the applicants.

Before I tell you what this pattern was, let me give you a bit of background on the situation and the type of agile coach we were looking to hire. The agile coaches we were seeking required two key competencies. They needed to be able to:

- ♦ Work with, influence, and coach leaders in the adoption of agile.

- ♦ Advise and lead a team of agile coaches to implement changes to the way of working across a business function (large system of work).

Sound simple enough?

Now let's go back to the emerging pattern in the job applicants. What was becoming obvious after over a dozen interviews (screened from dozens of resumes) is that senior agile coaches were entirely ill-equipped to conduct coaching conversations with senior managers/executives.

Of course, we found a few applicants with the right stuff, but they were rare and the exception to the norm; maybe 5 percent. The “deal-breaker” question we would ask ourselves to determine whether the applicant should be given a senior agile coaching role was: “After the first meeting with an executive, would this agile coach be asked back for another conversation?” The answer kept coming back as an emphatic “NO!”

“Why?” I hear you asking. The answer is simple enough; senior agile coaches have traditionally been recognized and rewarded for their agile expertise. The coaching part of their agile coach role has not really been emphasized. Coaching for agile coaches usually means process coaching; providing advice on the best way to do something—tips, tricks, and shortcuts to a more efficient and effective way to work based on agile values, principles, and practices.

The problem I needed solving, though, was different to simply needing a coach to help with agile processes. I required agile coaches who had the capability to deal with resistance to change and situations where telling or even showing people what to do was not enough. I needed agile coaches who could, when

required, hold back giving advice and stop being the agile expert. What I needed was a listener who could ask the right questions in order to help to influence beliefs, values, and attitudes; this “professional” type of coaching was vital, especially with executives. Upon reflection, I realized I wanted to hire coaches who could, in addition to being agile experts, bring a non-expert mind to their agile coaching; a mind that helps the people they’re coaching to understand the emotions and beliefs that are blocking them from “getting on board” with the change to agile.

All the coaches we interviewed were specialists in agile processes; in fact, they were expert-level. But they were awful at putting their advice aside and working with the emotions, attitudes, values, and beliefs of the people they were coaching.

One example was when I asked one of the applicants this question:

*“How would you use emotions
as you work with clients?”*

Upon asking this question, the candidate got visibly annoyed with me and replied, “Well, that just sounds manipulative!” He refused to answer the question and was clearly uncomfortable with discussing emotions at all.

Now you could just dismiss this as us being overly picky or setting the bar too high or having a poorly worded job advert, but the gap was so clear relative to the applicants with the right stuff that the following statement was undeniable: *Most experienced agile coaches don’t have the capability to discuss emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and values with their clients.*

What became obvious to me after conducting all these interviews and seeing this pattern repeatedly was that what was

needed from agile coaches had changed and the coaches had not changed with this need. Agile coaches have to be able to *coach*; they need the ability to be a non-expert, ask questions instead of giving answers, work with emotions, and deal with human stuff—not just process.

When I saw all these expert coaches fail to meet my organization's needs, I empathized with these highly skilled, competent, and confident senior agile coaches. The emerging need for agile coaches to include other elements in addition to process implementation coaching had caught them out.

The Agile Coaching Beginner

At the same time as I was hiring for senior coaching roles, I was establishing a coaching academy with fifty internal trainee agile coaches. These people were invited to participate in a capability uplift initiative based on their mindsets, attitudes, and enthusiasm for learning.

So, on the one hand I could see the gap in the senior coaches being interviewed, while on the other hand I was working with fifty beginners at the start of their career journeys. I noticed a big difference between the expert agile coaches and the beginners.

The beginners were curious, they weren't full of advice, they listened deeply, and they sought to understand the person who was talking to them before offering an opinion. Expert coaches had lost these abilities.

I was training the beginners right at the start of their careers, explaining that they needed to understand the basics of coaching; this required them to (sometimes) hold back their opinions and leave room for those they were coaching to solve

their own problems without being told the answer from an agile expert.

It was then that the idea for this book emerged. What if there was a way for agile coaches to develop into experts while retaining their ability to be open and curious as well as deeply listen to what the client needs? What if there were a model for agile coaching to help you choose how to best respond as either the agile expert or with a more open, non-expert mind?

Expert-Beginner Tension

So, what do the two above stories tell us about what great agile coaching looks like? The reason it has been so difficult to “nail down” what great agile coaching looks like is due to what I call expert-beginner tension. Agile coaching involves two almost opposing behaviors or forces that have confused our industry for years.

The first behavior is to act as a confident agile expert; giving advice on the technical or process aspects of adopting agile as a way to work. Easy, right? Well, it's the second behavior where a lot of the confusion arises; agile coaching also involves coaching people through change. To help people progress from one way of working to another involves softer skills; to execute these soft skills, the agile coach must be open-minded, listen deeply, and put aside their expertness (and act like a beginner). By taking on the mindset of a beginner, the coach is curious, which then makes room for deeper conversations, where the coach displays compassion and empathy for the client's situation. By assuming this beginner's mindset, the coach is better able to work with and support clients through the change. I'll expand on this idea

of an expert and beginner tension in the next chapter, but for now, just realize that this tension is a positive and useful aspect which agile coaches need to work with.

Agile coaches have had no guidance on where and when to use these often-competing behaviors—until now. The Responsive Agile Coaching model will help you answer one of agile coaching’s most perplexing questions: *“Do I tell the client what to do, or ask for their opinion and listen deeply to the answer?”*

The secret to this model is developing your ability to stop reacting and instead respond when called upon to coach. Let’s quickly discuss that before getting into the rest of the book.

Responsive Coaching

I see the next “version” of agile coaching including the ability to choose how to respond when called upon to help. There will be times when clients need you to be the agile expert; this applies when you’re faced with “just tell or show me what to do.” There will also be times when the client needs you to be more like an open, curious beginner. This non-expert type of agile coaching is required when you are faced with “I’m not sure I need to be told what to do” or when you don’t have all the answers. In this second example, agile coaching is about helping co-create the new way of working *with* the client as opposed to telling or showing them the what or how of agile.

Great agile coaches are responsive; they know when and how to shift their approach to serve their clients and get the results the organization is expecting from their work. I would even go further to say the truly masterful coaches can “dance in the moment” between these two extremes—at times, they give

expert agile advice; then, the next moment, they deeply listen with non-judgmental awareness before asking an open question to help provoke thinking and introspection in the client.

I've witnessed these masterful coaches work, and when I first saw them in action, I thought it was magic; so incredible to watch. I could not fathom the skills required to, in one sentence, discuss a highly complex process used to manage a portfolio of work and then, in the very next moment, help a leader deeply consider their impact on workplace culture. This is what responsive agile coaching looks like, and this is what I want you to be able to do through reading and implementing the ideas in this book. You'll get results from your coaching in days, not weeks, because you will have developed your ability to *respond*—not react—when called upon to help your clients. By being able to respond as you deliver coaching, you are more likely to take the right approach (at the right time) and get to the outcome faster. Let me show you how!

CHAPTER 3.

THE AGILE COACH AND AGILE COACHING

It is really important for us to be on the same page about what agile coaching is and what an agile coach does. Even if you've been working this role for many years, it is still helpful to establish concrete definitions and get some of the language straight before we proceed further.

Definitions

By “agile coach” I am referring to anyone who is or aspires to deliver agile coaching, irrespective of their actual job role or title. So, if you're a leader, manager, agile practitioner, or even a professional agile coach, I am using this term generally.

Also, throughout the book I'll refer to “clients.” By client I mean any individual or team you are coaching; so from here onward, you can assume the word refers to either.

Now that we have those two terms out of the way, it is important to get a clear answer for this simple question: “What is agile coaching?”

One of the problems with defining agile coaching right now is that when you ask 10 people this question, you get 15 different answers. So, I’m going to give you my very simple definition to get us going:

*Agile coaching is enabling others to
adopt agile ways of working.*

I like this definition because the outcome is observable; people are either working differently or they aren’t. This definition may seem simple enough, but it is important to clarify what the “coaching” part of agile coaching actually means, as well as what “agile” means in this context. We have sports coaches, life coaches, leadership coaches, and many other types of coaches, which creates confusion in the agile coaching community. So, to clear up any uncertainty, I want to explain agile coaching by considering the two parts “agile” and “coaching” separately.

The “Agile” Part of Agile Coaching



In any workplace, individual people will work with others, follow processes, and utilize various tools to get their work done. Let's call this a “system of work.” The agile coach has the job of helping the people in this system to change the way they get their work done; to adopt better ways of working.

For any workplace adopting agile, there are associated frameworks, values, principles, processes, roles, patterns, tools, practices, ceremonies, naming conventions, methods, models, etc. Agile practitioners and consultants need to not only have knowledge of these as part of their role but are also expected to have experience in actually doing them and implementing them into how people work.

Agile coaching is usually about implementing a practice and its associated processes. Sure, these are underpinned by agile values and principles, but the coach's primary outcome is to enable the adoption of the new ways of working (processes), resulting in observable behavioral change.

Agile coaches need to understand the types of agile frameworks (collections of processes, roles, and associated artifacts) that apply to the size of the system of work they are coaching.

I typically see three main sizes for systems of work that agile coaches operate in: team-level (small; up to 30 people), teams of teams (medium; 31 – 300 people), and large systems (301 – 1300 people). This is discussed in more detail in chapter 20; for now, this is just context regarding the role itself.

Agile coaches should have experience *doing* a specific agile process (run a planning session or facilitate a retrospective) before they consider helping others adopt it. For example, before considering oneself an agile coach, an agile practitioner should have experience in executing (doing) all team-level agile practices using one or multiple frameworks for at least six months. In other words, before you coach an agile practice, you need to have actually done it yourself. This applies to each size system of work; only coach that which you have done. If an agile coach has not personally done the practices they're attempting to coach others to do, they come across as inauthentic and are usually met with skepticism. So, good agile coaches come with lots of experience; they've been there and done it; hence, they can coach it.

To summarize, agile coaches need to know and have practiced the appropriate frameworks for the size of the system of work they are coaching. I recommend a progressive, three-step sequence for agile coaches to follow when they are learning new knowledge/skills relating to agile ways of working: (Make sure you) KNOW IT – (and can) DO IT – (then) TEACH IT.

I will talk a lot more about this later, but I think you get the idea; if you think you are ready to be an agile coach on a topic, then you'd better have the knowledge, have applied it with real teams, and be able to prove you have the right depth of understanding by teaching someone else. Only then are you ready to coach the topic.

Of course, a progressive sequence is not meant to always be linear in how it actually happens; coaches often learn by doing a practice first, then read the theory later, and that's OK. However, coaching capability in a particular area should be built upon knowledge and experience.

The “Coaching” Part of Agile Coaching



The type of coaching I've referred to so far is called “process” coaching. There's another type of coaching that is part of the agile coach's role: “professional” coaching. This type of coaching is required in situations when simply telling or showing people how to do agile won't work. This usually occurs when people are resistant to the proposed changes or the coach needs to co-create the way of working with their clients. The Interna-

tional Coaching Federation describes professional coaching as “*partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.*”⁴

During a professional coaching conversation, the coach co-creates and inspires the client through deep listening and powerful questions. Note: professional coaching is not about giving advice (providing answers) on agile processes. Professional coaching is completely different to process coaching; almost the opposite, in fact. Process coaching gives answers on how to work, whereas professional coaching asks questions to understand why we work.

Although professional coaching has been included in some recent agile coaching competency frameworks, I would argue it does not naturally fit into a day-in-the-life of an agile coach, at least in the way it is taught as part of traditional certified professional coaching courses. A professional coach formalizes the coaching relationship (time, duration, often even the number of sessions) upfront when working with a client and does so in a structured, orderly format.

Rarely do agile coaches sit down deliberately and use a structured format when conducting “coaching” conversations. And rarely would an agile coach conduct a considered and structured deep coaching conversation on the reasons why their clients work the way they do (which is how professional coaching is conducted). Of course, some of this type of coaching does happen, but it is not the norm. Despite professional coaching not fitting neatly into an agile coach’s day, there are certain elements from professional coaching (listening, use of questions, silence) that are vital to becoming a great agile coach.

Agile coaches need professional coaching capabilities but do not use them in the way they are currently taught. I'll expand on this later, showing how and when agile coaches should use professional coaching techniques.

Chapter Summary

- ◆ Agile coaching is not only a role but a capability, defined as a type of coaching that enables others to adopt agile ways of working.
- ◆ Agile coaches need to know and have done agile prior to attempting to coach others.
- ◆ Agile coaching involves two often opposing types of coaching—agile process coaching and professional coaching. The latter is not well understood or commonly practiced by agile coaches.

References and Further Reading

1. This book builds on the work from Otto Scharmer and the Presencing Institute: www.Presencing.org.
2. Stephen Denning, “Why Agile is Eating the World,” *Forbes*, January 2, 2018, www.Forbes.com.
3. Andrew Reece, Gabriella Kellerman, Alexi Robichaux, www.BetterUp.com, “BETTERUP // MEANING AND PURPOSE AT WORK.”
4. <https://coachfederation.org/faqs>.

5. Stephen Denning, *The Age of Agile: How Smart Companies Are Transforming the Way Work Gets Done*, (HarperCollins Focus: 2018).
6. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, (Berrett-Koehler: 2007).
7. If you really want to know my inspiration for this chapter, here's a Buddhist book that started it all for me: Shun-ryu Suzuki, *ZEN Mind Beginner's Mind*, (Shambhala Library: 2006).
8. Go to www.responsiveagile.coach to learn with others who have read or are reading this book; you can also visit www.responsiveagilecoaching.com for up-to-date content, downloads, and templates.



Thanks!...

from Niall Mcshane

We hope you enjoyed the 1st section.
You're welcome to purchase the entire book
online at:

www.responsiveagilecoaching.com/the-book

Feel to browse our website
for our full suite of:

- Agile Community,
- Agile Videos,
- Blogs & Resources,
- Courses and more...

sourceagility.com.au

SOURCE
AGILITY