

Agile and Systemic Coaching

By Siegfried Kaltenecker and Bent Myllerup. Published on ScrumAlliance.org May 1. 2011

Over the last few years coaching has become a prominent issue in the agile world. There is a growing number of agile practitioners who call themselves agile coaches - and the Scrum Alliance even has a certification program for Scrum coaches. But are they really practicing coaching as it is defined by diverse professional coaching organizations? Or does their practice tend towards advising and mentoring? In this article, we discuss the commonalities and differences between agile coaching (as it is commonly performed) and professional coaching; and we advocate why agile coaches can benefit from being trained as professional coaches. Since we are both practicing based on the systemic theory, we will use systemic coaching as an example for the professional world of coaches.

When it comes to agile coaching in practice, we see at least three different levels:

1. the coaching of teams or individual team members by a ScrumMaster or agile coach trying to transform groups of individuals into cohesive teams, where the members support each other and make use of each other's strengths¹;
2. the coaching of managers or other stakeholders, also potentially carried out by ScrumMasters, agile coaches or Product Owners to foster organizational change;
3. peer coaching where members of one or several teams, a group of ScrumMasters or Product Owners try to learn from each other's experience.

As intensively discussed by Rachel Davies and Liz Sedley² or Lyssa Adkins³, these kinds of coaching are focused on helping individuals and teams in their specific transformation efforts. As chameleon-like phenomenon, helping can take many different forms such as assisting, advising, counseling, enabling, facilitating, guiding, mentoring, recommending, steering or teaching (to name only a few).

Being really helpful, nevertheless, is not a given. As we know from our agile and management coaching experience, occasionally even the best-intended support is not helpful at all. In his book title, "Please, do not help. It's already hard enough", Jurgen Hargens points out what many of us might think when confronted with the best of intentions [1]. Sometimes people feel even embarrassed by the way we try to help them; sometimes our help is rhetorically welcomed but practically ignored; and sometimes we are frustrated by the sheer fact that what we regard as our most brilliant feedback is hardly noticed, while some of our most routine questions turn out to be the crucial interventions for the coachee. All of this underlines the fact that helping is a complex phenomenon; it is always, as consulting guru Ed Schein explains [2], a multi-layered social process, grounded in trustful relationships.

Although the concepts underpinning agile coaching refer a lot to the broader context of professional help, neither this context nor its relationship to agile are entirely clear. What is, for

¹ See article: Coaching Scrum Teams, <https://www.scrumalliance.org/community/articles/2008/june/coaching-scrum-teams>

² See book review: Coaching Agile Teams, <http://p-a-m.org/2010/11/book-review-coaching-agile-teams/>

³ See book review: Agile Coaching, <http://p-a-m.org/2010/11/book-review-coaching-agile-teams-2/>

instance, systemic coaching as executed in a dynamic business environment? What are the commonalities and differences between the agile and the systemic approach to coaching? Last but not least, how can agile practitioners benefit from a systemic point of view?

1. What is systemic coaching?

From our point of view as systemic aficionados, coaching is a method of helping a person or a team to achieve specific goals in their professional lives. Systemic coaches try to help with identifying goals, generating different points of view and developing concrete action plans with respect to, as Figure 1 shows, the coachee's individual behavior, current work situation and organizational context. The overall mindset is to acknowledge that the person or team in question already has the potential abilities required for reaching the given goals; and the assignment for the coach is to help unlock this hidden potential.



Figure 1

Moreover, both one-on-one and team coaching provide a place for consistently monitoring the progress towards implementing action plans and an opportunity to inspect and adapt current strategies in a specific organizational context.

As with agile software development, there is a kind of systemic manifesto too. It is a collection of core values and principles guiding the systemic approach [3]. According to this manifesto, systemic coaching is:

- target and solution-oriented, based on an explicit agreement of what the coach and client expect of each other and how they are going to work together;
- result-driven by co-creating a variety of solution opportunities, selecting concrete action points and jointly monitoring their implementation;
- contextual in terms of mindfully recognizing the current environment, the big picture of the coachee's behavior, work situation and organizational set-up (see Figure 1);
- resourceful, i.e. building on the strengths, competencies and experience of the client;
- eye-to-eye, i.e. a meeting of two or more experts: the coach is an expert in providing a solution-oriented approach to problems; the client is an expert in her or his own specific organizational context and work situation, where new solutions can be applied;

- respectful by openly accepting the client's particular expertise and personality as foundation for building a trustful relationship, based on trust in the power of self-help and a belief in the ability of people and organizations to develop;
- challenging individual behavior as the basis for the development of alternative schemes of action: concrete change is driven by new ways of observing, explaining and evaluating situations, focusing on small steps which have the potential to make a difference in the client's work situation⁴.
- Using the systemic loop as basic model for all coaching activities: as Figure 2 shows [4], one starts by gathering information ("What is going on?"), proceeds by building hypotheses ("How do we explain the situation? What do we see as essential elements, causes and effects of what is going on?") planning interventions ("What could help to make a difference?"), intervening ("We try to make a difference") and completing the loop by gathering new information ("What kind of difference did the intervention finally make for the client?"), immediately starting a new loop by building new hypotheses ("Why did it work or not work?") and so on and so forth.

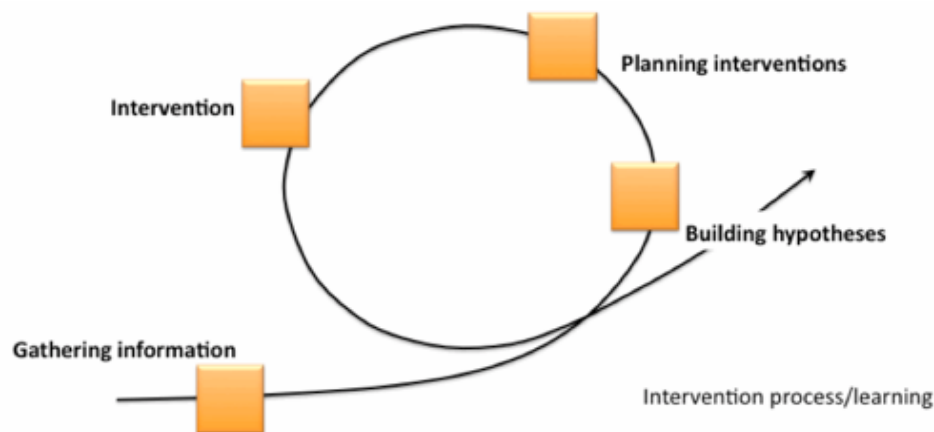


Figure 2

For us these principles provide excellent guidelines for coaching agile practitioners, line managers or project teams. Yet, as our experience of failure shows, there is no guarantee that we are always helpful for our clients. One could even assert that the great enemy of being helpful is the illusion of it [5]. As with communication in general, there is no consulting recipe that fits to all situations.

It's a systemic truism that human beings are not trivial machines, but living systems, constructing their own realities in a self-referential manner, following rules which are black-boxed both for the individual itself and for any external observer. As Königswieser and Hillebrand put it: "Since we are aware of the limitations of our intervention possibilities and take autopoiesis seriously, modesty is as much a part of our attitude as self-confidence is [6]."

Since no one is able to look inside a human being to discover its hidden script of behavior, systemic coaching pays particular attention to mindfully inquiring the social context of the coachee's goals: What exactly do you want to achieve? Why is this important to you? Why is it important to others, to your team, to the whole company? Who are the concrete stakeholders

⁴ See article: Why am I a coach?, <https://www.scrumalliance.org/community/articles/2010/december/why-am-i-a-coach>

of your goals? What are their expectations, last but not least in comparison with your own wishes and interests? How will you measure if your goal is successfully completed?

2. What are the most important commonalities and differences between agile and systemic coaching?

At the risk of neglecting the systemic principle that effective help always depends on the specific circumstances, we would like to summarize some general observations on agile and systemic coaching. Comparing the two approaches, they seem to have a lot in common. Both are:

- focusing on being helpful in a goal-and-result-oriented manner;
- intending to develop and implement new solutions;
- understanding a clear set of tasks such as facilitating, teaching, mentoring or managing conflicts;
- needing a variety of skills, technical as well as methodological or communicative ones;
- easy to get going, yet hard to do well.

On the other hand, there are some important differences to explore. Perhaps the most evident difference between agile and systemic coaching is the standard contract. While agile coaching is mostly based on a long-term assignment for ongoing on-site support, systemic coaching usually works with a rather short-term series of time-boxed off-site sessions, each 2 to 4 hours long, every 2 to 4 weeks.

Although these different contracts certainly make a social difference (defining, for instance, if you are rather an insider or an outsider to the team or company) as well as an economic difference (e.g. on daily or hourly rates, duration of engagement, number of parallel contracts or total income), the contract does not define how the coaching is carried out. Figure 3 shows three more differences between agile and systemic approaches that we see as being of critical relevance for the way you coach: 2.1.) focus on content vs. focus on relationship; 2.2.) use of expertise vs. use of ignorance; and 2.3.) team as context vs. organization as context.

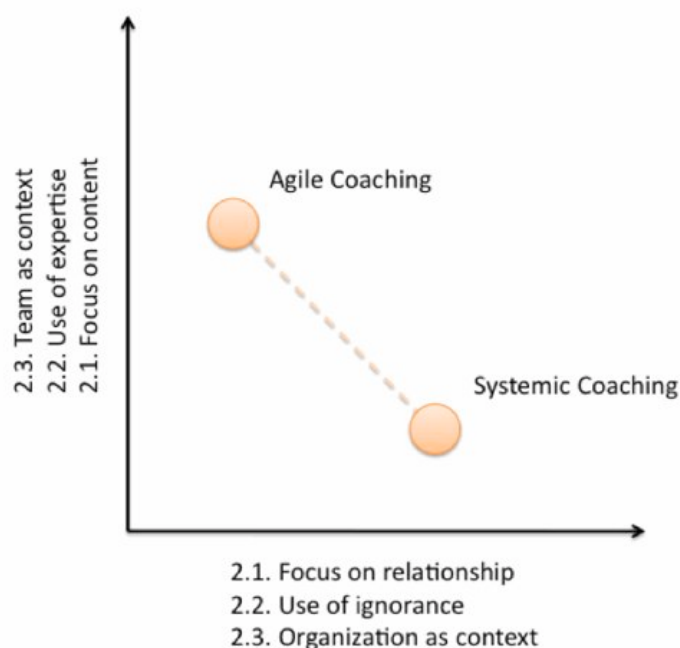


Figure 3

2.1. Content/Relationship

The first pair distinguishes the different focuses of coaching. From our point of view, agile coaching is essentially driven by content. In other words: it is based on the expert consulting paradigm, professionally diagnosing the observed problems and offering answers in terms of best solution practices [7]. A rule of thumb tells us, that the quality of this approach, i.e. the chances of whether it's helpful or not, depend on the complexity of the problem and the socio-political field in which it occurs. The simpler the problem and/or the more trustful the helping relationship, the better the "best practice" expert consulting works.

Another way to describe the difference between agile and systemic coaching in the content/relationship context is: as an agile coach you have a reference in the framework you are using (e.g. Scrum) from which you are helping the coachee towards better performance in the agile practices. Because the framework has a set of principles in which you are experienced, your help will include your opinion as a subject matter expert as an addendum to your coaching. One can say that the conversation will more likely be a mixture of mentoring and coaching. In your effort for helping, you might challenge the coachee to take paths that s/he would not have taken if you have not insisted. As a systemic coach, you must liberate yourself from being a subject matter expert. You help the coachee to choose the most helpful path, but you never lead them in a direction they do not want to go by themselves.

Systemic coaching is generally more oriented on relationship, both in terms of interpersonal communication ("Who is actually talking, listening or paying attention to whom?") and in terms of structural connections ("Who is linked to whom and has the power to make a difference for others?"). As Ed Schein explains: "At the beginning of any helping relationship, and throughout its life, what is crucial is not the content of the client's problem or the helper's expertise, but the communication process that will enable both to figure out what is actually needed [8]."

Instead of taking a problem and its context for granted, just because it has a familiar name ("weak performance", "lack of transparency", "conflicting interests", "organizational impediment", etc.), systemic coaching always starts with a phase of mindful clarification. What is the organizational context of a problem and what is the kind of solution the coachee is looking for? What are key factors of success in the given organizational context? What can we build on when it comes to implement the solution the coachee is looking for? What are positive resources that could help to achieve her/his goals and what might be a relevant obstacle for doing so? What "resistance" in terms of concerns, skepticism, fears should s/he expect? Who in the organization is likely to win or lose something due to the successful achievement of the coachee's goals?

2.3. Expertise/Ignorance

These questions already lead to the second difference we see between agile and systemic coaching practices: expertise/ignorance. Closely related to the first difference, the second one depicts different sources of helping. Perhaps we are looking at the wrong things, but we have the impression that many agile coaches still tend to use their technical or methodological expertise (aka "how to use a hammer right") as primary source for establishing helping relationships. As mentioned, this may turn out to be helpful if the level of complexity on the content as well as on the social level is rather low, i.e. the problem is standardized and/or coach and coachees are bound by trust. Certainly, one can only guess how often this is the case at the very beginning of a coaching engagement....

Systemic coaches use a different approach. As the world is not a bunch of nails, professional coaches need more than the metaphorical hammer to be helpful. The clarification of the roles of coach and coachee helps to identify your possible starting points when you get in touch with each other. Figure 4 shows that there are definitely more relevant players defining a helping relationship than just a client who has a problem and an expert who knows how to solve it.

Roles of coach	Roles in coachee's organization
Expert - gives concrete advice	Contact client - calls the coach & clarifies the contract (at least formally)
Doctor – conducts in-depth diagnosis	Ultimate client - the people you work with as a coach
Process consultant – clarifies with the client what exactly is needed, when it is needed and how to best work it out	Stakeholders – everybody who has a stake in the process and/or the outcome of the coaching

Figure 4

Although not complementary, the three roles on the side of the coach and on the side of the coachee (or better: of the coachee's organization) are multiply interwoven and closely linked to each other. In short: these roles create the complex network a helping relationship takes place in. Unfortunately for all of us who love to keep it simple, the complexity of this network is increased by the personalities, behavioral patterns and power games of distinct role players.

Speaking of power games, we see a special challenge in successfully dealing with contact clients who are often hierarchically superior to the ultimate clients. The contact clients are themselves very important stakeholders of your coachees and have at the same time far more stakeholders than the ones you are dealing with. This inevitably raises questions such as: How willing is the contact client, if s/he is not also the ultimate client, to contribute to the expected learning and development process? Is s/he willing to see herself as learner too? Or is it just about the others to learn (perhaps with the hidden agenda of "fixing them")?

Again, these questions underline that the systemic coach does not start by diagnosing (doctor's role) or by delivering know-how (expert's role) but by finding out what exactly is needed by whom and how you are expected to be helpful (consultant's role). This approach follows the basic assumption that it is the coachee who owns the problem – and the solution (9). Systemic coaches do not see the delivery of solutions as their primary task. Rather, as helping is first and foremost a social phenomenon, the primary task is establishing a trustful relationship by professionally applying ignorance.

Since any coaching, as we have already seen, actually starts with a lot of things the coach and the coachees do not know, you have to start with the process consultant role, clarifying the situation by asking for further information and concrete examples. What are the specific circumstances of both the problematic situation and its possible solution? How does a problem occur? What are typical symptoms? What exactly is to be changed? Who has to contribute to this envisioned change? Who is motivated to do so? What skills and knowledge are needed to successfully achieve the goal?

"Humble inquiry", is what Ed Schein calls this kind of interaction that is certainly combined with active listening as well as observing non-verbal communication (10). Closely connected to humble inquiry is another important ability of the systemic coach: constantly being curious

about the obvious things. When in a conversation with another human being, you most likely interpret the words spoken out from your own background and understanding of the context. This can lead to misunderstandings that prevent you from being helpful for the coachee. By being curious, your approach of asking clarifying questions will help you to better understanding of the challenge as well as fostering a beneficial room for reflection for the coachee.

Professional curiosity and humbly inquiry not only clarify the building blocks of coaching. Moreover, they establish a first draft of a helping relationship that re-balances the unequal status of feeling one up and one down, typically experienced at the beginning of a consulting process. "It is the client who is initially one down and therefore vulnerable of being confirmed as indeed being of less value for having a problem [11]."

Why this ambivalence towards being helped? Is it not a deliberate decision to call in a professional coach? Intellectually, recognizing that you have reached the limits of your knowledge might be a sign of strength (12). At the same time you can hardly be feeling confidence on an emotional level when you enlist outside help. On the contrary, as with any change that is about to happen, even the strongest motivation to consistently alter a problematic situation with the help of a professional coach is inevitably combined with a certain amount of uncertainty, nurtured by uncomfortable questions such as: Will the coaching really be helpful? How much do I have to expose? Will I get blamed for the problems I am dealing with? And will it really offer effective solutions for my most urgent problems?

2.3. Team/Organization

These precarious questions are closely linked to the third essential difference we see between agile and systemic coaching: the relevant context of coaching. Whether a new solution is able to make a positive difference to the coachees' daily business, depends essentially on an appropriate perception of this business. Simply speaking: It depends on the ability to address the right things. In this regard, it is our experience that agilists stick far more to individuals and teams than systemics. While the former often turn out to be perfect team players, the latter try to build their help on a broader understanding of the organizational context. This exceeds the various forms of contracting you have to deal with when entering into a complex organizational set-up. Furthermore, it provokes more "big picture" questions such as: What is the corporate culture like? How does the envisioned change fit to the organizational mission or vision? What values fuel the enterprise? What are the important do's and don'ts of managing problems? How are the values reflected by the organizational structure and/or strategy? How will this structure and/or strategy be different as a result of the coachee's change [13]?

For sure, we do not mean that agile coaches neglect all these questions and do not care about management or organizational issues. But on the one hand we often encounter a strange kind of tunnel vision when it comes to face the complex environment of a team that is to be coached; and on the other hand, there seem to be some negative feelings towards the organization and especially its management. As evidence we can take either the practical polemic of agile coaches against line managers or theoretical approaches such as the whitepaper by Maura van der Linden which features a lot of "bad guy" connotations of organizations.

3. How can agile practitioners benefit from a systemic approach?

Following the differences we've outlined in Figure 3, we see at least three good reasons for agile practitioners to engage in systemic coaching:

- 3.1. to work on concrete guidelines for effective helping;
- 3.2. to enhance your toolbox;
- 3.3. to continuously improve by reflecting on your daily business.

3.1. Concrete guidelines

First of all, there is the obvious benefit of practical guidelines for professional helping. Imagine you are the coach of a newly appointed ScrumMaster of a cross-functional team, based on three different locations in Germany, Poland and Slovakia, who asks for help in dealing with a difficult situation. Whereas the expert in you might start to deliver solutions after having heard about some typical symptoms of the team problem (e.g. "weak performance", "lack of delivery", "irregular stand-ups", "missing retrospectives"), the process consultant in you is tempted to paying more attention to the broader context: Who is a member of the team? Who is playing which role? What is important to the team members, what are their cultural values and rules? How do these values and rules fit into the larger picture of the organization? And what histories can this team tell you about itself and the organization? The answers to these questions add not only more details to the initial short story, but reveal different challenges as well:

- actually, it's not one team but there are three different groups, which are hardly aligned on the functional as well as on the cultural level;
- this lack of alignment apparently goes back to the former team lead who started "Agile" but never refrained from micro-managing;
- the most important cultural rule of the German team members was "having fun", preferring informal meetings and an open-minded "spirit of innovation" that often conflicted with concrete delivery commitments.

To cut a long story short, here are some of the main action points the ScrumMaster defined within the first three coaching sessions:

- clearly, since there is an urgent need to reestablish agile values and principles, the ScrumMaster insists on regular meetings, professional planning, individual commitment and a new spirit of inspection and adaption (instead of "pure" innovation);
- in order to get started as energetically as possible, the ScrumMaster decided to devote much of his time to one-on-ones with all team members in all three countries. These one-on-ones enabled him to get to know each team member better, to learn about the different cultural background and to clarify that a radical transformation is needed;
- the ScrumMaster facilitated two workshop with the section heads of IT and business as well as with the Product Owner, the team lead, the test lead and the tech lead in order to clarify mutual expectations and to reach an explicit agreement on how to successfully manage the transformation process;
- finally, the ScrumMaster convinced the new team lead and the section head to sponsor a 2-day teambuilding workshop with all team members to initiate a "fresh start".

3.2. Toolbox

As this case study emphasizes, the systemically inspired coach is first and foremost a very good communicator with a broad variety of tools and techniques. Enhancing your toolbox, therefore, seems to be another good reason for agile practitioners to engage in systemic coaching.

What can you find in a systemic toolbox? First of all, no big surprise, the systemic toolbox is full of various questions. On the one hand, you find “classical” open questions such as:

- What have you done so far to solve the problem yourself?
- How do you explain the problem? Where, do you think, it stems from?
- When were there moments when the problem was less intense? What was different then?
- Who could best support you in solving the problem within your organizational set-up?
- What would be the best thing I could do for you?

On the other hand, you also find so-called circular, triadic or hypothetical questions such as:

- What do you think your colleagues think about the current situation?
- What do you think our internal customers would say about this?
- What if your Product Owner was to give you one piece of good advice, what would that probably be?
- Imagine our coaching is successful and your problem is solved, how will you realize that?
- Imagine our coaching is successful and your problem is solved, how will you realize that?

Two more examples for systemic questions might appear rather weird: paradoxical questions such as “What needs to happen to make the problem worse?” or “What would you/the team/the management have to do to keep the problem intact?”; and the famous miracle questions such as “Imagine a miracle happens overnight and your problem is gone when you wake up. What would be different for you then? What would be different for your team, management, customer?” or “Imagine a fairy comes to you and she grants you three wishes in order to create a perfect working situation, what exactly would you wish for?”

By asking miracle questions or other questions that refer to an ideal future situation, you are helping the coachee to decouple him or herself from the current deadlock and instead focus on the solution and realize which parts of the miracle or the ideal future situation are already present in the current situation. Those parts can be used as stepping stones towards the desired situation.

Whether you use open or circular, triadic or miracle questions, the aim is always the same: to help your coachee(s) mediate on possible resolutions of the problem situation and define concrete characteristics which point at an improvement of the current situation [14].

Furthermore, we often build on various kinds of percentage ratings, ranking or scaling questions. Percentage ratings invite coachees to assess assumptions or statements by asking them to rate their responses on a percentage scale: “How strongly would you rate the team’s communication quality on a scale of 0% to 100%?” or “The management says, this year’s goals are challenging, but realistic. How strongly do you agree with this statement on a scale of 0% to 100%” are two examples for using concrete numbers to clarify opinions and moods. In a similar way, ranking questions help to reveal differences, e.g. by asking: “Who do you value most/least as a stakeholder?”, “Which part of the company has the greatest power?” or “Which team delivers the most value?”

Scaling questions, finally, are helpful when it comes to SMARTly defining goals. Focusing on the most important goal of your coachee, you invite her to picture a continuum between 1 and 10, 1 standing for the worst fulfillment and 10 for the best fulfillment of the envisioned goal. Then you ask: “Where do think you are right now?” Whatever number your coachee defines, e.g. “2”, “3½” or “5”, let her explain why she thinks she’s on “2”, “3½” or “5”. List all the resources she already builds on, no matter how small they might appear, listen actively and provoke more answers by asking “Where were you 1 month ago/6 months ago/1 year ago”? or “What have you already done to proceed successfully from 1½ to 3?” This should help you to better understand what works under what circumstances. For sure, the main purpose of scaling questions is to get a more realistic picture of progress and success. In order to do so, we use future-oriented questions such as “What could be one concrete step towards 10?”, “What do you think you have to do to proceed from 3 to 4?”, “What exactly are the next small next steps that are likely to bring you from 5 to 6?”



Figure 5

Besides questions, feedback techniques are also a very important part of the systemic toolbox. These techniques build on concrete observations, both externally (“What exactly is happening around me?”) and internally (“How do I resonate with the outside dynamics?”). Although systemic coaches pay attention to a lot of things, they are neither passive inquiry machines nor listening and observing robots. On the contrary, while listening and observing, the coach may have strong feelings and ideas that are potentially relevant to helping the coachee better understand her situation. When the timing feels right, the coach can take some risks and provide a new perspective, an alternative idea or a fresh way of looking at things.

Imagine you are an agile coach, working with the IT department of a well-established Insurance company, who wants to improve his coaching strategy. Busy coping with multiple stakeholder perspectives, you want to improve your strategy with the help of a systemic coach you already know from a leadership course. While your coach uses humble inquiry to clarify the specific situation in a systemic manner, the outcome of this dialogue does not just inspire new questions.

While the coachee presents more and more stories about difficult interactions with individual team members, the team, the Product Owner, two IT line managers and the product manager on the business line, the coach feels that it is the right time to reveal her own confusion. She does so by expressing her awkward feelings of getting lost among all these stories and by raising doubt if all of your interactions are really supposed to be coaching. The confrontational feedback ignites a clarifying dialogue on the role of the agile coach within the given organizational set-up: What are the expectations of your contact client? Who is supposed to be a coachee? And who is a stakeholder with whom you have to communicate regularly but don't have a formal helping relationship? These questions help to clarify why there is a strong tendency of doing too much and the risk of blurring the boundaries between personal, team and management coaching.

During the following three sessions within the next two months, you explore why multiple coaching assignments might cause a lot of conflicts around sensitive areas such as:

- trust - "Can you really be equally trustworthy for all team members, Product Owner and line manager at the same time?";
- connectivity - "What about your credibility as someone who has to protect the team against the line managers and simultaneously coach these line managers?; or
- loyalty - "What about your impartiality in times of conflict, what about unconscious siding?

All of this, as you summarize during the coaching session, seems to be of particular relevance in an organizational environment that is defined by conservative values, a lot of micro-political interests and a high level of mistrust.

A variation of feedback is fostered by the technique of reframing. Simply speaking, reframing is a positive reinterpretation of contexts and events that are considered as problematic. Whereas individuals or teams often focus on the downside of a given situation, the reframing feedback tries to stress the positive aspects of this situation. Picture an agile team that is constantly talking of organizational impediments and complaints about ineffective management. Using reframing, the coach can interrupt the complaining cycle, e.g. by commenting: "This team seems to set very high standards for itself. That's why your focus is primarily on impediments, on things others have not achieved yet. At the risk of ending up like Don Quixote, you never let yourself relax."

Often, as experienced in this real-life example, reframing of a problem situation results in an "aha-experience". Coachees are surprised, sometimes they simply laugh and by doing so transform their emotional set-up. Miraculously relaxed, they can create new ways of approaching the "problem" and start to discovering new viewpoints: "How can we contribute to a solution? What is in our hands to do? How can we make a difference?" are fresh guidelines to look for positive functions, meanings and resources.

Another part of your toolbox is designated to various techniques of visualization. The systemic coach uses verbal metaphors to both reducing the complexity of problematic situations and externalizing it ("How would you describe your individual roles, comparing your working environment with a zoo?", "Picture your organization as a movie and tell us about the genre, characters and storyline you can imagine" or "When you say you take on the role of an entertainer in your team, as what kind of entertainer would you describe yourself?").

More than that, the systemic coach intervenes with concrete objects as well. "Please bring an object that symbolizes a good solution/your current work situation/a positive future of your



Figure 6

teamwork” is, for instance, something we often ask our clients to prepare personal or team coaching sessions (see Figure 6). Working with symbols generates energy, helps to externalize problems and fosters a light-touch approach to challenging situations.

The so-called stakeholder map is another technique of visualization that has proven to be helpful in various situations. This kind of map tries to visualize the power dynamics and involvement of various stakeholders. Imagine you are a team lead who is asked by his section head to send seven of his developers to two agile teams. It is likely that some questions pop up in your head such as: What does this mean for your future role as a team lead? Will you still be held responsible for the performance of your team members? If yes, how do you keep control of your projects? And what does this mean for the collaboration with your peers and other stakeholders? Although you feel an ad-hoc impulse to tackle the first challenge, you manage to hold yourself back for a moment and review the situation: What exactly do I have to clarify with whom? What points of view should I consider? What steps are to be taken? What should be my priority? In short: how am I supposed to contribute to the transformation process of becoming agile? Driven by diverse questions marks, you engage with a systemic coach to clarify your strategy. After having inquired about the cornerstones of your situation, the coach recommends creating a special map that helps to identify areas of conflicts, but also opportunities for cooperation that could be translated into concrete action plans. Here is how this map is to be created:

- you define your goal (e.g. successfully leading in an agile environment) and put it in the centre of your map (e.g. a flip chart, a pin board, two large sheets of paper on the floor);
- you make a list of functions/positions that influence the successful achievement of your goal;
- according to the strength of their influence, you put the individual functions/positions on index cards of different size (the stronger the influence, the bigger the index card)
- now you create the map by linking the elements, finding the right distance to the centre and to each other;
- as shown by Figure 7 and Figure 8, you can use additional symbols or different colours to link the stakeholders or you can add “typical quotes” of each stakeholder;
- you generate insights by discussing the map with your coach and develop a specific strategy for each relevant stakeholder group that, in turn, leads to a concrete action plan (Who? What? When?).

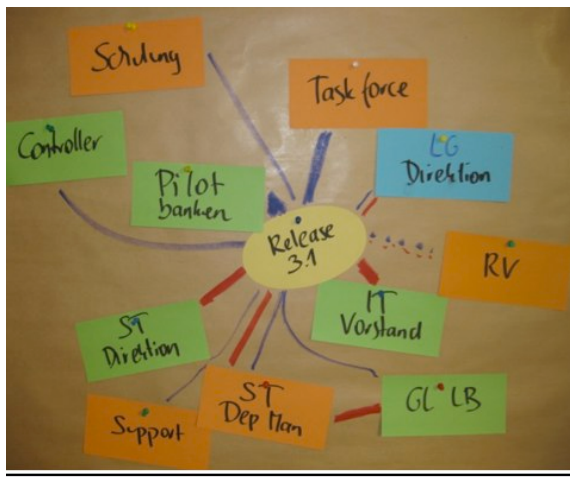


Figure 7



Figure 8

As with the team lead in the above case who distilled from this a lot of hints on how to proceed, the stakeholder map is particularly useful for managing transformation efforts. Based on the team lead's feedback the map creates awareness of the level of influence exerted by the relevant stakeholders. This often reveals surprising perspectives, which help to clarify your strategy and can lead to new ideas for successful change.

3.3. Continuous improvement

As we both know from intense experience of failure, a fool with a tool is still a fool – you need to develop the right attitude to make real sense of all these techniques. We also know from experience that being a coachee on a regular basis is an effective means for this kind of development – and the third good reason we see for following the systemic approach.

In coaching, personal attitude matters a lot. One excellent starting point of attitude might be that the systemic coach understands and truly believes that it is the coachee who owns the problem – and the solution. Hence, we have to resist the temptation to become “solution heroes” on behalf of our coachees (regardless if you address them primarily as individuals, a team or an organization). A well-known pitfall of professional help is simply doing too much. Systemic coaches try to do rather less than more – or better, they try to act less in order to pay attention more. “Take it to the problem owner” is the credo of knowing when to sit back, observe, listen and let the team or your individual coachee work things through. For sure, we know that it takes some strength to do so: at the least it takes patience, the willingness to work with people the way they are, not as you wish them to be and persistence in working on yourself.

In line with Lyssa Adkins, we cannot but insist that it is you who is the basic tool or source when it comes to being helpful. Paradoxically, coaching always starts with you, yet it is not about you as a coach (15). It's about mastering yourself in order to act as a role model, displaying the agile behaviors you want to see in place, e.g. good listening skills, openness for other ideas or constructive opportunism in terms of critical feedback. “Agile coaching is 40% doing and 60% being” as Lyssa Adkins and Michael Spayd describes it in their Coaching Agile Teams classes.

Acting as a role model, nevertheless, is not a narcissistic show. It is inspired by honest self-inquiry and self-reflection. Self-inquiry means applying your question techniques to yourself as

well and becoming an excellent self-observer. What do you notice? What emotional reactions do you recognize? When do you feel a temptation to intervene? And what happens with you when you manage to hold yourself back? Self-awareness is very much about knowing yourself, especially what pushes your buttons, the things that drive you bananas. What happens to you if people need longer to accomplish the given tasks than expected? If they take minutes to figure out answers to questions you find pretty simple? If they say they have no clue? Or if they do not react at all?

According to our experience and the experience of many peer coaches, dealing with unexpected silence is one of the biggest challenges. “Just stand there” is a powerful metaphor for helping yourself in such critical moments. Created by Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord, just standing (or sitting) there practically means pausing and noticing the moment you feel you must speak, whenever an individual or a team falls silent. It is likely that you have to contain confusing feelings in these moments: What did I do wrong? What do I have to do next? Will it be the right thing then? Are things getting out of hand?

Janoff and Weisbord recommend to containing these feelings instead of acting them out, transferring it into pointless expertise or superfluous questions. Their recipe: be aware of your agitation, your fear that things are getting out of hand, your impulse to fix it fast; wait; look around; breathe; make eye contact; repeat as needed, until your coachee or one of your coachees says what needs saying. In Janoff/Weisbord’s words: “Keep the door open by listening without acting. We are mindful that each time we break the silence, we deprive someone of a chance to make a valuable observation. If we treat silence as a problem to be solved, we deprive others of a chance to take care of themselves. Just waiting often is all a group (or an individual) needs to shift toward active dialogue, reality checking and creative collaboration [16].

Beyond better dealing with such critical moments, more and more agile practitioners use systemic coaching to regularly monitor their daily business: agile coaches work on selected case studies, a group of ScrumMasters engage in peer coaching, line managers clarify their role in an agile environment. Yet, having benefited tremendously in our personal as well as professional development by being trainees and coachees for more than 20 years altogether, we are puzzled by the fact that it being a coachee on a regular basis not a given for agile coaches. Is there no need for inspection and adaption for the helper her/himself? No need both for recognizing your individual strengths and illuminating your blind spots? No need for further exploration of the traps you might fall into?

Hopefully, our article makes it crystal clear that the two of us see an urgent need for continuous learning as a professional coach. This could mean devoting some time to a tailored learning plan for yourself, engaging in peer coaching or turning the tables and finding yourself a professional coach. As we tried to demonstrate both on a theoretical and on a practical level with some real-life examples, systemic coaching provides an excellent opportunity for jointly reflecting on current practices and the dynamics of your daily business. It provides a context to step back and out, supports regular retrospectives and helps to digest various coaching experiences to turn them into lessons learned. You learn to better understand underlying patterns, are confronted with a fresh perspective and get concrete advice in terms of new tools and alternative techniques that might be valuable in various situations. That is at least the best way we can think of to get more out of yourself and be able to facilitate better helping.

References

- [1] Jurgen Hargens, *Bitte nicht helfen. Es ist auch so schon schwer genug. (K)ein Selbsthilfebuch*. Heidelberg 2000. Unfortunately, there is no English translation available.
- [2] Edgar H. Schein: *Helping. How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help. Understanding Effective Dynamics in One-to-One, Group, and Organizational Relationships*. San Francisco 2009
- [3] This “manifesto” is explained concisely in Roswita Königswieser & Martin Hillebrand, *Systemic Consultancy in Organisations. Concepts – Tools – Innovations*. Heidelberg 2005. For the application of systems thinking to management practice see Annabel Beerel, *Leadership and Change Management*, London 2009.
- [4] See Roswita Königswieser & Martin Hillebrand, *Systemic Consultancy in Organisations*, p. 45.
- [5] 10 Pierre Martineau: “The great enemy of communication is the illusion of it” as cited in Lee Thayer, *On Communication*. New Jersey 1987, p. 5.
- [6] See Roswita Königswieser & Martin Hillebrand, *Systemic Consultancy in Organisations*, p. 41.
- [7] See Edgar H. Schein, *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*. San Francisco 1999.
- [8] Edgar H. Schein: *Helping*, p. 66.
- [9] And is therefore one of the ten principles of process consultation as outlined by Edgar H. Schein in “Process Consultation Revisited”. See http://www.loop-beratung.at/fileadmin/images/Guidelines_Process_Consultation.pdf
- [10] Edgar H. Schein: *Helping*, p. 49
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Kathleen Sutcliffe, Karl Weick, *Managing the Unexpected*. 2001, p 173.
- [13] For a much appreciated map of these organizational elements see http://www.loop-beratung.at/fileadmin/pdf/Map_Corporate_Culture.pdf.
- [14] For a broader collection of potentially helpful and sometimes also entertaining questions see Tapani Ahola, Ben Furman: *Pickpockets On a Nudist Camp*, Helsinki 2000 and Nino Tomaschek, *Systemic Coaching. A Target-Oriented Approach to Consulting*. Heidelberg 2006.
- [15] Lyssa Adkins, *Coaching Agile Teams*, p 31.
- [16] Sandra Janoff, Marvin Weisbord, *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter*, San Francisco 2007, p. 128.