**Scrum Master Interview questions**

**Document Purpose:**

This document was created in response to needing an interview process for evaluating scrum master candidates, who may or may not have experience, against scrum master attributes for the purposes of hiring and/or entering them into an apprentice program.

The interview questions in this document are given in two parts:

* Part 1 targets scrum master attributes, traits, and/or soft skills. These attribute questions should be used for both non-experienced and experienced scrum master candidates.
* Part 2 targets understanding scrum master knowledge and levels of experience. The knowledge & experience questions should primarily be targeted for experienced scrum master candidates.

**Part 1 - Scrum Master Attributes:**

| **Attribute** | **Description/ Question** | **Explanation** |
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| **Problem Solver** | Scrum Masters remove impediments; therefore, they need to be creative problem solvers and great collaborators and facilitators in bringing issues to resolution. | |
| Question | Describe a time when you coordinated the solution and resolution of a problem for a group. What approach did you take? What challenges did you overcome? How did you involve and empower the group to help? | For this question we should be more focused on the candidates approach to group problem facilitation than we are focused on the actual problem being described. |
| Question | * Give an example of an effective/innovative solution you created to solve a problem. | Ideally we are looking for the candidate to articulate and describe how they do the following:   * Define the problem * Analyze the problem * Generate possible solutions * Select the best solution(s) and courses of action * Lessons learned |

| **Confidence** | Scrum Masters need confidence coming from within them and based on facts in order to maintain the credibility of agile and agile frameworks. Pay close attention to candidate body language and eye contact while they are answering confidence questions. | |
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| Question | Would your friends describe you as a confident person? | Ideal answer revolves from the fact that confidence comes from within and from facts and not from what others believe. |
| Question | Tell me about a situation that would describe your co-workers confidence in you. | Not only must the Scrum Master display personal confidence the must also create confident trust with their team. |
| **Sense of Humor** | A sense of humor is an important leadership trait. Testing ones sense of humor results in weird questions. See if the candidate can remain calm and relaxed with an off the wall question. | |
| Question | What do you think of garden gnomes? | This question is purposefully designed to be weird and possibly create a humorous witty response. |
| Question | Tell me 5 things you can do with a paper clip other than its intended use? | Not only can this question be responded to with humor but it can show if the candidate has a creative mind. |
| Question | If you were shrunk to the size of a pencil and put in a blender describe how you would get out? | Not only can this question be responded to with humor but it can show if the candidate has a creative mind. |
| **Honest and Ethical** | Ethical standards are critical to the success of any organization. Honesty and courage are especially important for scrum masters who must sometimes challenge the ethics of others. | |
| Question | Would you ever lie for me? | The response you’re looking for with this question is: “I would never lie for you. “ An employee who won’t lie *for* you won’t lie *to* you. |
| Question | I see you’ve worked with people from different cultures. What ethics and values did you find you had in common, and where did you differ? | This question is especially important when the candidate will work in multicultural settings. If the candidate is from outside the US, be aware that in some cultures, “ethics” is translated into a word that’s more about personal values, and you may do better using the word “integrity” when talking about workplace values. |
| Question | Your team has been asked to complete a given set of work by a specific deadline. After a lot of discussion your team determines that the work cannot be completed on time and informs your manager. You are meeting with your manager and his boss to discuss the upcoming work of the team. In the meeting your manager commits to his boss that your team will complete all the work on time. What do you do? | There is no right answer to this question. If the candidate says nothing then he/she will likely lose trust with the team. If the candidate objects then the manager will lose face in front of his boss. The question is designed to observe the candidates thought process in an ethical no-win situation. |
| **Courage** | Courage is one of the Scrum values. Scrum Masters need courage to confront dysfunctional behavior and correct agile anti-patterns. | |
| Question | Tell me about a challenge or problem you confronted head on, and one where you waited to see if the situation would change without intervention. What happened in each case and how had you decided on your approach? | This question not only deals with the courage required for a head on confrontation; but, it also deals with the thought process required to deal with a challenge correctly. |
| Question | Tell me about the last time that you took a stand on an issue that others disagreed with. What were the merits in the other person's viewpoints? | Courage to do the wrong thing is undesirable. This question is designed to determine if the candidate understands the need to think things through before taking a stand. |
| **Communicator** | Scrum Masters need communication skills in spades. They are the communication glue between the Team and PO as well as the face of the work to the business. | |
| Question | Tell me about a situation in which you had to present complex information. How did you ensure that the receivers of the information understood what you were saying? | This question is designed to discover if the candidate understands that communication is a two way street. Is the candidate verifying that everyone is understood? |
| Question | Tell me about a time that you misunderstood directions. What action did you take? | Can the candidate assess and adjust when miss-communication occurs? |
| Question | Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to your co-workers or group? How did you do it? Did they "buy" it? | Does the candidate’s communication carry influence? |
| **Leader** | These questions are designed to determine if candidate understands good leadership approaches versus command and control. | |
| Question | Give me some examples of ideas you've presented that required your team's "buy in". How did you modify your behavior to influence team members' opinions? | The candidate should be able to explain how to motivate others without the use of threat or command and control. |
| Question | When have you inspired someone to work hard to do a better job? How did you do that? | The candidate should be able to explain how to motivate others without the use of threat or command and control. |
| **Articulate** | There is not a question for this attribute. You should be able to observe this attribute based on other questions being asked. | |
| **Observer** | A good Scrum Master is very observant constantly looking for ways to improve the team. | |
| Question | Describe your analysis and decision making process. | Is the process thoughtful and reasonable? |
| Question | Describe a time when you did not act on an issue immediately. Why did you wait? | Did the candidate use observation to strengthen their actions? |
| **Listener** | You should be able to tell if the candidate is a good listener. Are they answering the questions specifically as you asked or are they answering unasked questions? Is the dialog back and forth or one sided? Here are a couple of optional listening questions: | |
| Question | Tell me about a time when you misunderstood directions. What action did you take? | How does candidate correct course when not listening? |
| Question | Give an example of a time when you made a mistake because you did not listen well to what someone had to say. | Is the candidate self-aware of the need to listen? |
| **Accountable** | Scrum Masters are accountable to the team and make sure that the team is accountable to the customer. | |
| Question | Describe a situation where something that you did had a negative outcome.  What did you do to turn the situation around? | Does the candidate take initiative towards accountability? |
| Question | This position may require you to work flexible hours, weekends and holidays. Tell me about a time you were scheduled to work and it interfered with your plans. How did you handle it? | Is the candidate creative about accountability? |
| **Collaborator** | Candidate has skills to work with others whilst participating in a group activity. This may be geared towards a situation which benefits all of the people involved:   * Works with others to share information and achieve goals. * Resolves conflicts, confrontations and disagreements positively and constructively. * Shares information and own expertise with others to enable them to accomplish group goals. * Coordinates efforts with applicable stakeholders to ensure awareness, share information, and provide updates until completion. * Maintains positive and productive relationships. * Fosters an environment that emphasizes knowledge sharing and group participation. * Keeps people informed and up-to-date. * Demonstrates respect for the opinions of others. * Knows when to seek additional outside counsel. * Identifies and pushes for solutions in which all parties can benefit. | |
| Question | Select 1 or more bullet above and form questions. Describe a time when . . . | Interviewer may formulate one or more questions from above bullet points to discover how the candidate collaborates. Try to use at least two approach questions. |
| **Empathetic** | An un-empathetic Scrum Master usually becomes a task master. Empathy and understanding is key to the position. | |
| Question | What problems does empathy address and solve? | Does candidate understand empathy? |
| Question | What is your personal metaphor for empathy? |
| **Stewardship** | Scrum Masters need to lead in the absence of organizational authority. | |
| Question | What does it mean to be a servant leader? How have you demonstrated servant leadership in the past? | Does candidate understand stewardship and what experience do they have with it? |
| Question | You are given accountability for a team’s performance; however, you have no authority over the team members. How will you help the team achieve performance objectives? | Does candidate understand how to lead a team by serving them? |
| **Curious** | Curious people naturally want to learn how to do things better, which improves the team as a whole. | |
| Question | Tell me something you have taught yourself in the last six months. How did you go about teaching yourself this new skill or idea, and what was the result? | Curious people will ask original questions — period. If someone either has no questions or asks canned questions like, “What do you like about your job?” it’s a big red flag. |
| **Foresight** | Good Scrum Masters and Coaches understand that experience gives them foresight into what may happen next. Is the candidate able to demonstrate both foresight and the ability to use it wisely? | |
| **Organized** | To be an effective Scrum Master or Coach, being able to manage time and multitask is essential. Is the candidate able to demonstrate that they are able to use techniques like time boxing to keep sessions within a time constraint? Are they able to demonstrate that they have some basic organizational skills to help them be effective? | |
| **Humble** | Does the candidate exhibit behaviors that would lead you to believe they have humility (as compared to giving you the impression that they are arrogant)? | |
| **Pragmatic** | Being over prescriptive has been the downfall of many Coaches and Scrum Masters. Is the candidate pragmatic enough to let a team self-organize yet prescriptive enough to maintain frameworks and agile adoption patterns | |
| **General Experience** | | |
| **Facilitation** | Does candidate have past facilitation experience? | |
| Question | When you are facilitating a group through a process (decision making, consensus building, etc.), how do you ensure that you remain effective as a facilitator without influencing the decision the group makes? | Can the candidate clearly describe an example in the past where they facilitated a group of people through a process while still maintaining a degree of neutrality over the decisions made? |
| **Education** | How important is it to you to keep your current skills fresh and current? How much investment do you make in yourself each year in terms of professional development? What are the ways in which you best acquire new knowledge? | We’re not looking to evaluate their past formal education, that will come through on their resume, but rather we are trying to ascertain whether they show characteristics of a “lifetime learner”. |
| **Conflict Resolution** | Looking for any past real world experience resolving conflict. | |
| Question | Have you had any formal training in conflict resolution? What were some of the strategies or techniques that were taught in that method/process? | Looking to determine if they have received any formal training on conflict resolution? If they have, they should be able to explain the technique/method. |
| Question | Have you ever facilitated a conflict resolution between 2 or more parties that had a strong disagreement? What process did you use to help facilitate that conflict resolution? | Looking to see if they have had any real world experience doing conflict resolution (either using a framework described in a formal training, or using their own process). |
| **Teaching/Training** | Looking to ascertain if the candidate has any real world teaching or training experience. | |
| Question | Have you ever conducted a training session in a classroom setting? How do you measure the effectiveness of the learning experience? | Looking to determine if they have actually taught a class in formal setting. |
| Question | What types of teaching styles do you like to utilize? | There are different types of pedagogies, and this question is trying to drill down into whether they have any sort of education in how to be an effective trainer/teacher. |
| Question | Have you ever designed your own training curriculum? | This is trying to understand if the candidate can also design a learning experience in addition to being able to deliver one. |
| **Leadership** | Who is a leader that you admire? What were some of the characteristics of that leader that you found admirable? | By asking them to describe some of the characteristics of a leader that they admire, we can get an understanding of leadership attributes that they consider important. |
| **Work Experience (Nice to haves)** | | |
| **SDLC** | Prior to learning about Agile, what if any experience did you have in structured software and/or project methodologies? What were some of the pitfalls about large formal processes and frameworks like SDLC? | This question is really about learning what level of wisdom the candidate has in terms of waterfall or other formal sequential/project management methodologies. |
| **IT background** | Have you ever worked inside an information technology group or department? What were some of the different roles you have played in that organization? | This question is trying to learn whether the candidate has worked within an information technology group because that is sometimes a very different set of backgrounds than working in software engineering. This should help understand if the person has experience with project management, architecture, testing, application development, support, etc. |
| **Software** | Do you have any firsthand experiences writing software? Please describe a software application you worked on that you are the most proud of? | This question is trying to understand how much software development (programming and design) and engineering experience the candidate has. |
| **Agile** | When was your first experience with Agile? What was your first experience with Agile? | For candidates that have had prior Agile experiences, this question is trying to get to an understanding of how long their experience has been and the nature of their Agile experiences. |

**Part 2 - Scrum Master knowledge and levels of experience**

| **Attribute** | **Interview Question** | **Model Answer** |
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| Agile Experience | What is Agile? What would be your 30 second Agile elevator pitch? | Agility allows you to collaborate more, communicate continually, develop quicker with motivated, empowered, and engaged teams, deliver valuable products - earlier and often. Typically, you fail faster too, but then you can also recover faster (with less devastation). |
| Agile Experience | What is the difference between Agile and Scrum? / What are some other Agile methods/frameworks? | Scrum is a framework for managing work. Agile is a collection of values, principles, practices, frameworks, and tools that allow us to maximize value delivery quickly with motivated individuals at a sustainable pace. |
| Scrum Master Experience | What is the biggest mistake you have made as a Scrum Master? If you could do things differently, what would you change? What have you learned? | Demonstrated transparency, humility, life-learning characteristics |
| Scrum Master Experience | How do you continually grow your craft as an individual and employee? | Demonstrated life-learning behaviors. Possible answers include reading, attending training classes, attending industry conferences or workshops, attending or leading meetups, participation in LinkedIn groups, co-training, etc. |
| Scrum Master Experience | Your team is scheduled to do sprint planning on Wednesday, but the stories aren’t ready yet. How would you lead your team to be ready to start developing on Wednesday? | Facilitate a backlog refinement session (a.k.a. Story time, grooming, pre-planning) with the Product Owner and other team members. |
| Scrum Master Experience | Name 3 key characteristics of a good ScrumMaster. | * Guide team to continually improve quality and delivery practices * Possess leadership abilities * Have the respect of the team * Possess deep knowledge of Scrum, Lean principles, and Agile best practices * Continually coach the team in Agile principles * Protect the team from outside distractions * Have adequate bandwidth to be effective in the role * Be a Great Facilitator (not Commander) |
| Scrum Master Experience | Besides looking at a burn-down chart, what are some other ways Scrum Masters can determine if a team is on target for delivering their sprint commitment? | Staying plugged into all team communications, asking for confidence vote, reading people |
| Scrum Master Experience | Are you familiar with the term "powerful question?" Can you describe when it might be appropriate to ask a powerful question? | Possible answers include:   * Anytime! Scrum Masters should always demonstrate intellectual curiosity * When there may be deeper issue or root cause * When there is an elephant in the room |
| Scrum Framework | Using the white board, can you please take me through the scrum framework in about 3 minutes or less? | Can articulate product backlog, sprint planning, daily stand-up, sprint review, and retrospective. May also include backlog refinement. |
| Scrum Framework | Describe an effective daily stand up meeting. | Daily planning meeting that is used to validate progress against the team’s sprint commitment. Time to surface impediments, PO can accept user stories, timeboxed. |
| Scrum Framework | How do you make an ineffective standup more effective? | Demonstrated ability to describe the reasons that stand-ups can be ineffective, and techniques for making them more effective. Examples:   * Stand-up takes too long>>Use Parking Lot * All work in-process not visible>>Go story by story instead of person by person |
| Retrospectives/Continual Improvement | Provide an outline of a retrospective – What does it look like? Take me through the steps. | 5 steps: Set the stage, gather data, generate insights, decide what to do, close. May also review progress against last retrospective item. May assign action owner(s). Bonus: Retro the retro (or ROTI) |
| Retrospectives/Continual Improvement | How would you prioritize a team's improvement activities and make them happen? | Listen for a logical and executable plan for prioritizing based upon impact to team, value to team, or ease of making the improvement. |
| Retrospectives/Continual Improvement | If your team identifies 10 or more improvement ideas during their retrospective, can you suggest a technique that might allow them to select 1 or 2 to focus on for the coming iteration? | Describes “decide what to do” technique. Possible examples include dot voting, impact analysis, spheres of influence. |
| Impediment Management | What are some of the common Agile anti-patterns that Scrum Masters often see? What can be done to address them? | Possible answers include:   * Leaders telling how instead of what * Testing after the sprint * Extending the iteration timebox * Failing to retrospect and improve * Not working on the most important things * Too much WIP * Non-sustainable pace * No working software at iteration end   For each example provided, listen for candidate’s ability to coach toward a better outcome |
| Information Radiators | Describe some diagrams or artifacts that can help make a team’s progress visible | Burndowns, Burnups, Task board, Cumulative Flow, |
| Potentially Shippable Product Increment | What is the goal of an iteration in scrum, and how do you determine if the goal has been met? | Spring commitment met; Working software |
| User Stories | What are some attributes of well-written user stories? | Possible answers include:   * Type of user, user action, and business reason * Who, what, why * INVEST |
| User Stories | What is the difference between Acceptance Criteria and Definition of Done? | Acceptance Criteria are the conditions of satisfaction for a single user story. Often defined by the product owner  Definition of Done is the success criteria for all user stories. Often defined by the scrum team. |
| Estimation; Derive duration | Describe how planning poker works | Team members simultaneously vote using Fibonacci numbers until consensus is reached on story size |
| Estimation; Derive duration | Describe how affinity estimation is done | Size stories from smallest to largest (or least to most valuable). Typically, team members take turns, and can either move the placement of a story, or insert a new story into the sequence. |
| Estimation; Derive duration | Describe how you would plan a scope-driven release for a delivery team that has a stable velocity. | Size the scoped work, and divide the velocity into the total size of the scoped work to derive the number of sprints needed. Add buffer time for increased confidence. |
| Engineering practices | Describe test driven development in less than 15 words. | Write failing test, write minimum code for test to pass, refactor |
| Engineering practices | Outside of Scrum, can you suggest other developmental practices that may help to provide deployment value to a software development team? |  |
| Release Planning | Describe the agenda for a 2-day release-planning event for 10 delivery teams planning a 10-week release. | Possible answers include:   * Product Vision & Roadmap * Release Name and Theme * Review Capacity * Release Schedule * Issues and Concerns * Review Definition of Ready and Definition of Done * Review stories from backlog: * Size the stories * Map stories to iterations in release * Risks/Dependencies * Rework Plan * Measure confidence * Team Commitment * Agree upon Communication and logistics plan * Parking Lot * Action Items/Plan * Retrospect the meeting |
| Scaled team implementation | Describe some of the ways that a team of teams can effectively communicate, and manage dependencies and releases. | Possible answers include:   * Scrum of Scrums * Program Impediment board * Communities of Practice * Release Planning events * Scaling through product ownership (e.g. Chief PO) * Creating constructs like Delivery Groups, RMI Size |
| Workshop/Training | What are some of your favorite exercises that you use during training classes or workshops, and what are the intended learning outcomes? | Demonstrated ability to cite 3 or 4 exercises, and describe the learning outcomes for each. |
| Situational | If you are having a meeting with a key stakeholder and a product owner, and the product owner makes a commitment to deliver functionality to the stakeholder within a timeframe upon which you know the team cannot fulfill, what do you do? | There’s no good answer, but listen for   * Pros and cons between communicating the conflict in real time or offline * Level of trust between key stakeholder and PO * Company’s culture with regard to transparency |