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Coaching in the third wave of Agile

"We've mastered the Agile way of working. The teams will continue doing their work, whether you coach them or not." I just started a new assignment as an Agile coach and did my new manager just tell me that I wasn't needed?

Derk-Jan de Grood

Agile has been around for many years and some organizations are pretty far in adopting the Agile practices and mindset. Others are just starting and many are struggling to make it work. Analyzing the various organizations I've worked with, I distinguish three separate waves, each with its own challenges and scope. The waves overlap each other and each wave builds on its predecessor.

During the first wave, the main focus is on teaching Agile and training the teams. As progress declines, the second wave arrives, shifting the focus to cross-team alignment. There might be a small downfall in the perceived maturity as teams need to reorganize and adapt their way of working to align with the other teams, but this will enable a next growth spurt. The third wave comes with teams building a technical product and changing their focus to delivering value and boosting business performance. Again, there might be a downfall in maturity as more people in the enterprise get involved, but this will enable a further acceleration in business delivery.

Understanding and recognizing the waves of an Agile journey helps to grasp the different perceptions organizations have and enables us to tailor our coaching approach. The first reviewers of this article started to map their organization on the waves and spontaneously indicated which practices were already in place and what they needed to work on. I, therefore, believe it will enable us to have a better grip on Agile transformations and help us to explain why we focus on certain aspects. It puts our interventions in perspective and

provides a roadmap for the organization. It also offers insight into how the role of an Agile coach is developing.

The first wave: focus on teaching Agile and training the teams

Most organizations starting with Agile adopt Scrum or Kanban. Management plays a crucial role during the transformation. They'll need to explain to their teams why they chose for an Agile way of working and how this has an impact on what's expected from everyone. Agile coaches work with management so they can explain the impact of Agile and support the change. But the teams are the foundation for the Agile development process. If their core activity – realizing IT solutions – is hampered, this will obstruct the later phases as well. The first wave is therefore characterized by a strong focus on teaching Agile and training the teams.

During the introductory phase, the Agile teams get trained and are accompanied by an Agile coach while doing their daily work. The transition to Scrum is a learning process. By doing they will learn what it's like to work together in short iterations, create transparency and continuously improve themselves. In some respects, the Agile way of working differs greatly from traditional development, with different roles and responsibilities. The product owner and scrum master roles will need to be clearly defined so they're understood by everyone.

The teams are the foundation of the first wave of Agile. When they've shown that they can deliver completed backlog items and that they're capable of self-improvement, the first wave naturally evolves into a new phase. This doesn't mean that Agile coaches should ignore the teams, since these will still need attention and guidance. But when the individual teams hit their stride, more impact is achieved by looking at the way they collaborate.

The second wave: cross-team alignment

In the second wave, the adoption of Agile is shifting from a single-team focus to a wider organizational approach. Organizations increasingly start to understand that business agility and responsiveness are key to survive and stay ahead of the competition.

Maturity

Agile maturity models are often used to measure the progress of the transformation. For instance, measuring how well the scrum events are adopted by the teams gives an indication of progress. The adoption of Agile practices can also help teams to self-reflect and self-improve.

In daily practice, we see that these kinds of measurements often lead to teams performing the events without enthusiasm and understanding of their purpose. We encounter teams successfully fulfilling all the requirements for a high maturity level but failing to understand the Agile mindset. "Our teams are repeating the dance steps," a manager sighed, "but they don't dance to the music."

Another effect we encounter is that teams often fall back in maturity. With the exception of one or two champion teams, maturity often gets stuck at an average of 2 or 3 on a scale of 5. This decline can be caused by workload and a lack of understanding of the value of the events. Another factor is changing team compositions. New team members are hired that didn't have the same training and teams get a new product owner or scrum master. Logically, teams are likely to fall back in maturity a bit. Although the focus of the coaching changes in the second wave, attention to what happens in the teams will be necessary.

In order to yield value, the work of single Agile teams should, therefore, be integrated and embedded in larger business processes. During this phase, we pay less attention to the output of single teams, but rather start thinking in releases. We can call these technical products or minimal viable products.

In order to organize the work, all teams engage in portfolio planning. The aim is to align the teams and to start working on a collective goal. The focus on workable releases can be enhanced by having a chief product owner or leader to help the product owners prioritize and see the bigger picture. In organizations employing the Scaled Agile Framework (Safe), this is done in so-called program increment planning sessions, in which all the teams gather to plan their work for the following six sprints. In none-Safe organizations, we often see the product owners of the different teams reconvene at a portfolio marketplace. In both settings, the aim is the same: set a release goal and translate it into more detailed work items, reduce the team interdependencies or at least make them transparent so that the work of the various teams can be combined and integrated into one single solution.

Restructuring the teams will reduce dependencies, enabling a more predictable flow of product releases. A performance dialogue will stimulate teams to help each other and frequently integra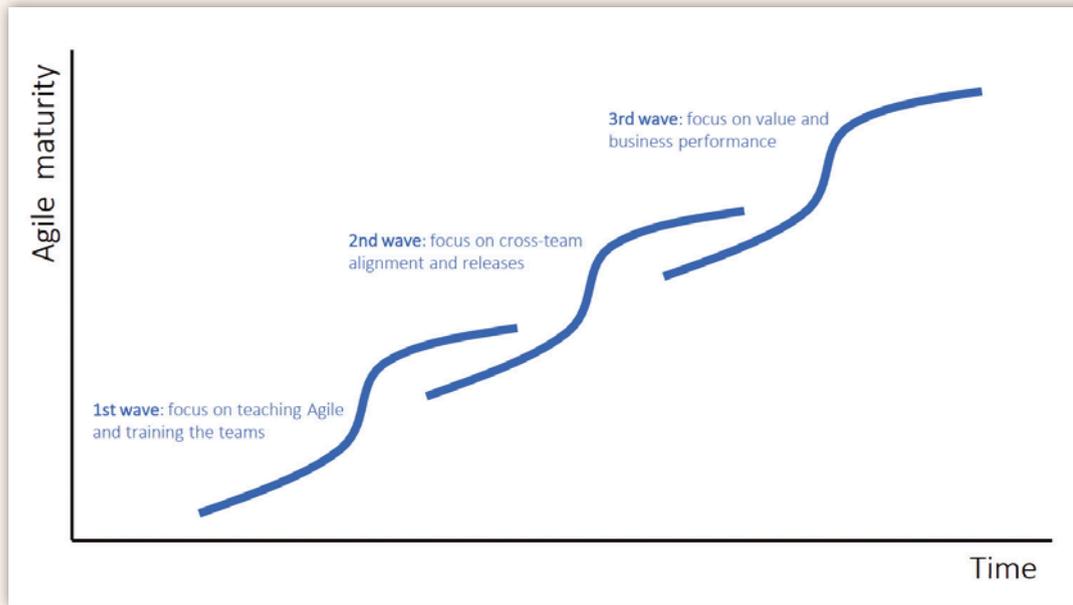te their work. Although this seems obvious, I still encounter many organizations with teams that don't share the same objectives and have their own priorities. Helping another team on its most important item is therefore not always high on their own sprint backlog. A collective program board, review sessions with other teams and the involvement of the business stakeholders can boost the focus on collaboration and collective ownership.

Whereas the Agile transformation during the first wave focused on teaching the teams to adopt Agile practices, managers of organizations in the second wave will experience that their role is changing. They might have been used to project management-like roles and strong involvement in both content and planning. Now, they're expected to facilitate and lead rather than manage the teams. In this phase, discussions will arise about the role of management in relation to that of the product owner and the scrum master – most likely resulting in more autonomy for the teams that embrace the Agile values and mindset.

The second wave is a difficult phase. Individual teams will get less attention as the Agile coach is focusing on cross-team challenges. Still, coaches might spend some time ensuring that the organization can train new people and teams don't fall back in maturity. Coaching in the second wave is aimed at defining clear release goals. On the release level, there's a need for portfolio meetings, stake-

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Typical challenges per wave	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Agile roles	Defining and helping the product owner and scrum master to fill in their role effectively	Discussing the management role in relation to product owner and scrum master role	Empowering leadership with management
Collaboration	Stimulating interdisciplinary collaboration within the team	Stimulating the product owner and team members of different teams to align, help and integrate their work	Stimulating cross-team collaboration with a focus on delivering a business product
Dependencies	Discussing dependencies between user stories and optimizing work during sprints	Making team interdependencies transparent and part of the portfolio planning	Making cross-product dependencies transparent and part of the commercial release planning
Governance	Measuring Agile maturity of the teams based on the execution of events	Measuring Agile maturity based on the adoption of Agile values and team autonomy	Measuring Agile maturity based on quality, predictability and delivered value
Organizational/ team structure	Forming teams based on history or required skills	Reorganizing teams into feature teams	Reorganizing teams around customer journeys
Quality	Ensuring all user stories are tested according to the DoD	Organizing integration and end-to-end testing on the integrated system	Measuring the perceived quality (of the business solution)
Release planning	Planning sprints with the teams to work on the most important items	Engaging overall portfolio planning with the product owners of the teams, thinking in minimal viable products/ releases	Drafting an organizational roadmap and defining minimal viable products with business stakeholders, focusing on business value
Review and demo	Organizing reviews for the teams and involving stakeholders	Organizing collective review sessions with other teams and involving business stakeholders	Reviewing and demoing the completed features and epics with respect to the business goals defined for the minimal viable product
Performance metrics	Completion of sprint goals	Completion of release or quarterly goals	Business KPI based on delivered value, net promoter score, compliancy

3rd wave: focus on value and business performance

2nd wave: focus on cross-team alignment and releases

1st wave: focus on teaching Agile and training the teams

Agile maturity

Time

The three phases of Agile. The challenges and scope change as Agile maturity grows over time.

holder involvement and a test approach. Coaches can moderate role discussions and accompany management in its search for a new leadership role. The second wave is followed by the third once teams have learned to plan and launch collectively built releases and focus shifts from realizing technical products to business delivery.

The third wave: business focus

In the third wave, organizations revisit their business focus. Agile never is a goal in itself, so it's good to challenge the impact of the adoption. Does the way of working yield better quality, a shorter time-to-market and more delivered value? The performance dialogue changes once more and will be business aligned rather than release focused. After all, it's not about the release, it's about business impact.

By now, management will need to show agile leadership. They need to lead the way by explaining the strategic themes, defining the business aim of the next release and helping the product owners to prioritize. In order to do this right, the IT organization needs a clear definition of its commercial products. Some organizations have this in place, but many still have a systems way of thinking. Product and customers aren't well defined. Once the products are defined, their relative customer value can be determined. Release planning should be based on the value and include cross-product dependencies. Dependencies outside the organization may lead to delays or introduce inefficiencies.

Leadership should stimulate raising these impediments and take an active role in eliminating them. Most organizations I work with have too much on their plate. When product owners indicate that their teams are unable to deliver the requested or expected epics, it's up to the leaders to take action. No matter how difficult this may be in the corporate culture, they should address this at their level. This implies that in the third wave, higher management needs to adopt the Agile way of working as well.

In the third wave, the Agile coach is working closely with the leaders. Giving them feedback on their leadership style, addressing concerns and protentional problems. The coach helps setting up the performance dialogue and defines the appropriate metrics for key characteristics such as value and predictability. He or she facilitates design sprints at various levels in the organization to align the product definition and view on customer value. Root cause analysis sessions can be held with the teams to optimize the flow and get bottlenecks on the table. Not seldom

this will yield insights into process flows and team dynamics that can be improved. Once again, the impact will be addressed on a higher corporate level and involve business management as well.

Note that there's still a need for team coaching and teaching the basics. Teams tend to fall back in maturity. On top of that, the demands put on them change and the product owner and scrum master roles evolve as the organization transforms into a more agile enterprise. Even in the third wave, Agile coaches will need to guide the teams to grow their Agile maturity and business impact. However, we also see new roles emerge for them: in the third wave, they'll act like counselors and business consultants with a strong focus on empowering leadership and optimizing business value. Since only a few organizations are already in the third wave, these roles aren't clearly defined yet, but I believe they will shape the Agile coach of tomorrow.

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