A G I L E *Coaching Model*

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Introduction

As a coach, I strongly believe in self-empowerment of people, so their own ability to pick up their own powers and to use them wisely. Furthermore, I noticed in my working environment – the agile world – many clients of agile coaching complain about the outcomes of the coaching received. Far too often agile coaches act as agile consultant and the provide advice or train people based on their own agile expertise. As soon as they have left, people wonder that they are not able to ride that metaphorical bicycle by themselves.

So starting from a curiosity point of view and finding out what people already know and how to apply those powers is more sustainable. An agile coach however is still a trainer, mentor and agile expert as well, so bringing that in wisely can still help our clients moving forward. The act of providing that kind of knowledge though could better be separated from the coaching, so that is becomes more focused, which is one of the agile scrum framework values.

A G I L E Coaching Model

A G I L E means according to the dictionary [1]

- quick and well-coordinated in movement;
- active; lively;
- marked by an ability to think quickly; mentally acute or aware;
- noting or relating to a philosophy of product development and production intended to create and distribute batches of working products in a short period of time with subsequent batches planned in a cyclical schedule of improvement, production, and distribution;

This model is based on many other models, amongst other the GROW-model [2], though reflects to wording that is typically used within agile contexts. Additionally it indicates a very important prerequisite for applying the coaching within the agile world more effectively. As most models it is not necessarily linear, and at all stages one can jump back in previous stages to find the best possible outcomes.

The acronym **A G I L E** stands for:

- **A**wareness

- **G**oal setting

- **I**nspect

- **L**earn

- **E**xperiment

In an agile environment and specifically within the Scrum framework, Inspect & Adapt are together with Transparency the most valuable pillars of empiricism. Adapting can be broken down into two major consecutive parts: Learn and Experiment. Of course you first need to formulate the outcome of the learning before you can start changing thing. Since that change is not guaranteed to be successful (having a better outcome), it is often referred to as Experiment. Before any learning starts, you need to define which "problem you want to be solved", and how a desired outcome would look like. By setting your goals clearly, it becomes relatively easier to apply Inspect & Adapt, or better Inspect, Learn and Experiment.

In this model there is however a defined prerequisite that is needed to ensure that client potentially enter the coaching space with a growth mindset. In the Competence model [4] four stages of competencies are defined. In the first stage people must become aware that there is a problem or challenge to be addressed and that they are able to work on that by themselves. Actually this is a kind of acknowledgement that you are coachable. The need for this part of the model arises from the fact that too many agile coaches act more like agile consultants or agile trainers, so the real meaning of the word coaching is not strongly anchored within the agile community and needs therefore additional attention.

Each of the model elements is explored in more depth in the following paragraphs.

Awareness

In the agile world, clients often say that they are coachable and still fall back into old habits of deferring a problem or challenge to someone else e.g. by asking advice. In my power tool "Exploration vs Advice" [5] the way of how to address this within a coaching conversation is discussed in more detail. However, it is even more important to discuss the intent and the

outcomes of coaching in detail upfront. Within the agile community that implies that you even have to address where and when to place other "agile coaching" portfolio elements. And even if you do that, your client may cycle back to their old habits like asking for advice. As discussed in the Power Tool, that shall always be addressed immediately to create clarity towards your client. That can happen in any of the **A G I L E** model stages, so cycling back to Awareness is always possible and after cycling back revisiting any in between stages to check out whether anything changed over there is important as well.

Takeaways from this stage are:

- Ensure that the meaning and impact of a coaching approach is clearly discussed upfront
- Keep coaching separated from other coaching portfolio techniques, like teaches, mentoring or consulting.

Goal setting

The word agile suggests a lot of flexibility. On the other hand only flexibility is most times referred to as chaos. Within the Agile Manifesto [6] it is even explicitly stated that we have come to value

Responding to change over Following a plan

and while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

To be able to understand a change, you need some kind of plan to compare it with. Actually this line within the agile manifesto is more like an invitation towards a gaining a growth mindset over a fixed mindset. And this fixed mindset is what happens a lot in the companies where we offer agile coaching. Strict hierarchies and rule sets are in place and there is a lack of inviting people to explore alternative possibilities as well.

Therefore goal setting is important. Just having a vision, a dot on the horizon and asking the questions how to get there is not helping people forward, because it is most times too far away from where we stand now. Most times defining small achievable goals help into achieving a bigger goal as well. In this goal setting context, defining useful coaching agreements within coaching conversations is essential.

Takeaways from this stage are:

- Define small, achievable goals to enhance successful outcomes
- Be mindful about fixed versus growth mindset during coaching

Inspect

Since agile coaching is a blended coaching approach, many (external) agile coaches bring in their expertise from a coaching expert consultant perspective. Within the agile domain there is no such thing as one solution fits all. All depends on the context. It sounds like the easiest way by using techniques, methods and frameworks that you have learned or applied in the past So instead of just bringing in all that agile expertise, it is important to start finding out what is really the issue that needs to be addressed by your client. Since humans are typically more complex than the product we are building and groups of humans add another level of complexity, most times there is no such thing as a straight forward solution. So investing in having deep dives into the underlying believes that may stand in the way as well as finding out which kind of ideas your clients already have, is relevant for moving forward more effectively. That may result into that at a certain moment including the agile expertise you are bringing in as well, though exploring your client's options first is much more powerful.

Takeaways from this stage are:

- The coaching mindset (and presence) is crucial
- Be reluctant with bringing in your own expertise

Learn (as part of Adapt)

As already indicated in the Inspect-step, finding out what your client already knows and how to use their own powers is essential. It happens too often that "learning" is defined as "following the instructions provided by the experts". That is not sustainable, because if someone is not convinced about that solution, the moment you turn your back (or leave the company after a coaching assignment), people will roll back to their previous behavior and as a result the new learning has not happened. Within the agile coaching context it is therefore even more essential to explicitly address the learning experience.

This can be linked to the Cultivating Learning and Growth within the ICF Core Competencies [7], and as such needs to be addressed even before starting coaching conversations, so that your client can gain understanding the need for this.

Takeaways from this stage are:

- Ensure upfront that your clients understand their responsibility in the learning process
- Validate that the learning is happening within your client's space

Experiment (as part of Adapt)

Within the agile context, experimentation is a relevant technique to facilitate empiricism. According to the dictionary the verb experiment means "to try or test, especially in order to discover or prove something" [8]. Where the experiment arises from the learning (see the previous step) the words "try" and "discover" are strongly related to the growth element within the Cultivating Learning and Growth within the ICF Core Competencies [7]. Even an experiment that does not lead to a desired outcome has an element of learning in it, since your client may learn that something does not work at this moment in time within the actual context. Note here that this does not mean it will never work, since the context may change such that it may become successful in the future.

The biggest challenge is however that it requires a safe space, where people are willing to fail and to learn from that. And it is even more important to have a safe space, where people are allowed to fail. Within agile coaching we are working within more complex systems of multiple people working together, so a potential experiment may work on an individual level and fail in a group, or the other way around.

Experimentation allows us to check out whether small changes help us in moving forward, so by again executing the Inspect and Learn steps, we can evaluate its value and contribution in the learning experience.

Takeaways from this stage are:

- Creating a safe space for allowing people to make mistakes, is essential.
- Experiments always have an outcome, which may change in time (since the context changes)

Model stage are cyclic, not linear

It requires Awareness before it becomes valuable to define Goals.

It requires Goal setting before it becomes valuable to start Inspecting.

It requires Inspecting before it becomes valuable to address Learning.

It requires Learning before it becomes valuable to address Experimenting.

So at any stage, you should address a previous stage if the outcomes of a previous stage are not completely or correctly fulfilled. Moving back multiple stages even require to check out whether anything changed in the stage in between. And with that this model has full flexibility in mind, so that the best possible outcomes can arise.

Takeaways from the stage approach within this model are:

- Be aware of the outcomes of previous stages are still valid in the later stages.
- Revisit previous stages (including intermediate stages) where needed.

Some final words

Though this model specifically addresses to the agile context, the model itself could be used as an inspiration to many other blended coaching contexts as well. By connecting agile concepts to the ICF Core Competencies [7], it helps in creating more awareness and understanding in both worlds. Linking concepts may be helpful to many other areas as well.

References

[1] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/agile

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GROW_model

[3] https://scrumguides.org/scrum-guide.html

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence

[5] https://forum.icacoach.com/discussion/149167/power-tool-exploration-vs-advice#latest

[6] https://agilemanifesto.org/

[7] https://coachingfederation.org/app/uploads/2021/02/Updated-ICF-Core-Competencies.pdf

[8] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/experiment