

GAME-CHANGING SCRUM MASTERS

IT'S TIME FOR SCRUM MASTERS TO DO MORE.

»» HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Role confusion hurts everyone
- ▶ Scrum masters are transformational leaders
- ▶ Vertical development is the missing link

“ WE CANCELED OUR DAILY STAND-UP BECAUSE (SCRUM MASTER) WAS ON A BREAK. ”

“ ALL (SCRUM MASTER) DOES IS SCHEDULE MEETINGS AND UPDATE JIRA TICKETS FOR THE TEAM. ”

“ (SCRUM MASTER), WE NEED YOU TO CREATE A CR WHEN YOU GET BACK TOMORROW. ”

The role of the Scrum Master was once heralded as a pivotal role on the Scrum team. Today – in large part due to the growing trend to move away from traditional "Scrum-by-the-book" – the Scrum Master role is poised for a significant evolution or, in some cases, a potential phase-out.

This white paper delves into the complexities and challenges that have led to this transformative period as well as how a modification in the way you define the role and develop your people may be the missing link to realizing the value that this role was intended to deliver.

Let's take a closer

➔ **USE THIS GUIDE TO MAKE A MEANINGFUL IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE
AND PROCESSES IN YOUR ORGANIZATION**

As defined by the [Scrum Guide](#), the Scrum Master role has a range of accountabilities which, include:

- Establishing Scrum within their organization
- Ensuring the Scrum team’s effectiveness
- Providing servant leadership to the Scrum Team and the larger organization.

Even if your organization is framework agnostic, to get the most impact from those who fill this role, it’s important to interpret the Scrum Master role with these accountabilities in mind and to understand that **there’s a whole lot more to these accountabilities than what meets the eye**. In other words, Scrum Masters can and should be doing more than facilitating Scrum ceremonies, updating Jira tickets, and creating change requests (CRs).

When we reflect deeply on these accountabilities, it’s not unreasonable to expect Scrum Masters to have mastery of Scrum. Yet many playing the role have never read the Scrum Guide, let alone mastered it! Think about that for a moment. How can a Scrum Master truly understand the Scrum framework if they’ve never read the rules or intention of Scrum before? It may be time well spent to ask your Scrum Masters if they’ve ever read the Scrum Guide. At the very least, you might want to inquire about the most recent changes to the Scrum Guide (made back in 2019) and the intended outcomes of these modifications. Just be sure to ask them in a way that ensures their anonymity – in case psychological safety is low.

Furthermore, throughout the years, numerous companies have transitioned to “agile ways of working” and in doing so, they reassign people from other roles believing they are well-suited for the Scrum Master role. Unfortunately, the humans who find themselves in this role for the first time are often regarded as merely administrative aids for the team, dubbed the “master of ceremonies,” or relegated to updating Jira tickets on behalf of team members preoccupied with tasks deemed more significant. And as a detriment to all involved, their onboarding is severely lacking the proper investment needed to develop and grow the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities.

When we add on the accountability of servant leadership, which tasks the Scrum Master to serve the Scrum Team, the Product Owner, and the organization, we see a juxtaposition of leader and helper. This duality often leads to confusion or disagreements among team members. When the roles of leader and helper overlap, it makes it unclear who is responsible for what, and who has the final say.

All of this culminates in a grossly misunderstood, undervalued, and under-utilized role. It’s no surprise we’re beginning to see many organizations let go of hundreds – if not thousands – of Scrum Masters as a cost reduction strategy.

ROLE CLARIFICATION

THE SCRUM MASTER ROLE IS A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLE

When clarifying roles and responsibilities, it’s not uncommon for organizations to define a role based on expected activities rather than comprehending its intent and purpose. This approach to offering role clarity is problematic because it can lead to dogmatic interpretations of the role's structure or to the Scrum framework. Quoting the Scrum framework as “the reason why” limits everyone’s ability to make sense of complexity.

When fully understood and developed, the Scrum Master will profoundly influence individuals and teams, fostering an environment of growth, innovation, and transformative change.

The intent and accountabilities of the Scrum Master role go far beyond Scrum mastery and servant leadership.

At a minimum, Scrum Masters need the following competencies:

- Influencing and motivating with no authority.
- Balancing individual needs with the value of teamwork.
- Understanding and leveraging psychological dynamics.
- Leveraging advanced adult learning theories.
- Creating and holding space for others to be productive in thought and effort.
- Facilitating healthy conflict.
- Having conviction and courage to stand up to inflexible and challenging organizational hierarchies.
- Practicing and teaching introspective and reflective learning.
- Having strong emotional agility, resilience, and self-awareness.
- Modeling humility, presence, and authenticity.
- Demonstrating a growth mindset.

Additionally, the job calls for real passion – an inner drive capable of leading others through their personal and professional development journeys.

VERTICAL FACILITATION IS THE MISSING LINK

VERTICAL FACILITATION WILL CHANGE YOUR SCRUM MASTERS' GAME

“OUR RETROS USED TO FEEL LIKE A CHECK-THE-BOX ACTIVITY, BUT NOW WE EXPLORE ISSUES MORE DEEPLY AND THE TEAM LOOKS FORWARD TO THEM TO SEE WHAT WE’LL UNCOVER NEXT.”

“EVERYONE SEEMS MORE ENGAGED. EVEN THE QUIETER FOLKS ARE SPEAKING UP MORE. (SCRUM MASTER) REALLY KNOWS HOW TO CULTIVATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR US TO OPENLY DISCUSS WHAT’S GOING ON.”

“(SCRUM MASTER) GUIDED US THROUGH A REFLECTIVE PROCESS THAT LED TO A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT HAPPENED. SHE HELPED US SEE HOW WE CAN DRIVE THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE.”

What do we mean by “vertical facilitation?”

“Inner agility” is essentially what we are referring to when we say things like “agile mindset” or “being agile”.

- Michael Hamman

To explain, let’s turn to the writings of Michael Hamman, a subject-matter expert, author, and thought-leader in the space of adult learning and developmental psychology. In his white paper, [“An Introduction to the Art and Practice of Vertical Facilitation,”](#) Michael illuminates how “the biggest challenges with agility revolve not so much around its outer aspects – its processes, practices, deliverables, and business outcomes – but around the sensemaking, communication, and relationship intelligence of an organization’s people: **its inner agility.**”

Vertical facilitation focuses on enhancing the depth of how individuals think, feel, and make sense of complexity – it is the missing ingredient in many of today’s Scrum Masters. Developing the art and practice of vertical facilitation in your Scrum Masters will be the transformative change your teams and organization needs.

Vertical facilitation is an advanced adult learning theory and has many “moves” in its tool bag. One key foundational capability is the ability to intentionally design a quality of space that they hold for themselves, their teams, and their stakeholders when helping them learn and embrace outer and inner agility.

To clarify what we mean by “quality of space,” let’s consider some examples. Better yet, let’s use some dichotomies to quickly interpret how the quality of space (or environment) can shape a team’s way of being.

- Functional vs. dysfunctional
- Safe vs. unsafe
- (Mentally or emotionally) spacious vs. crowded
- Trusting vs. questioning
- Inviting vs. unapproachable
- Inclusive vs. exclusive
- Authentic vs. disingenuous
- Open vs. biased
- Sustainable vs. rushed
- Curious vs. doubtful
- Collaborative vs. cooperative

While the language of “growth” and “development” is widespread, the actual practices we see tend to be grounded in a transmission model rather than a transformational model of learning.

- Kegan and Lahey, Immunity to Change

- Supportive vs. difficult
- Challenging vs. Impossible
- ...

Of all the possible qualities a space can take on, there’s one that vertical facilitators intend to achieve each time: transformative vs. transactional.

A space or environment (a word choice preference) can have any number of these qualities at play at any given time, in part because each member of the space brings their own story into the fold, confounding the complexity of the system relationships and team dynamic. Vertical facilitators notice, understand, and shape the quality as needed for the team’s shared goals.

This capability is anchored in mindfulness, self- and collective awareness, and presence. How the facilitator shapes the environment is dependent on their vertical facilitation skills, tools, and craftsmanship. Vertical facilitators are continuously aware, present, and in movement with the complexity that's always at play. Vertical facilitation is an artful dance that requires knowledge, skills, abilities, practice, and passion.

ADVICE

DEVELOP YOUR SCRUM MASTERS' VERTICAL FACILITATION SKILLS

In today's complex, uncertain world, Scrum Masters who intentionally design learning environments for those they serve – and who actively promote open communication, ensure diverse perspectives are considered, and cultivate a culture where questioning and innovation are valued – will be game changers for organizations.

This type of leadership might involve fostering a team atmosphere where every member feels empowered to report issues immediately and contribute ideas for solutions, thus enhancing the collective troubleshooting process. Similarly, it may be encouraging teams to engage deeply with data and customer feedback, fostering a culture of curiosity and continuous learning that drives the development of successful products.

Whatever specific scenario arises for your organization, investing in developing your Scrum Masters will significantly enhance their ability for effective sensemaking, leading to more resilient and adaptable teams and operations.

It's time Scrum Masters did more, but they need our help. Vertical facilitation is the missing link that empowers Scrum Masters to transcend outer agility techniques, enabling them to lead with more insight, flexibility, and effectiveness.

There is increasing research showing the benefits of using vertical learning methods in training leaders – and remember Scrum Masters are transformational leaders! You can learn more about this from the Center for Creative Leadership at ccl.org. Many articles in business leadership magazines also discuss these ideas, showing that they are gaining popularity. For more in-depth information, we recommend turning to the works of experts like Robert Kegan, Lisa Lahey, William Torbert, Bill Joiner, and David Rooke.

CONCLUSION

Fully understanding and developing the role of the Scrum Master can profoundly affect both individuals and teams, fostering an environment that encourages growth, innovation, and transformative change.

Organizations not currently using Scrum Masters to this fullest extent are urged to rethink how the role is defined, understood, executed, and how the organization develops the knowledge, skills, and abilities of those filling the role.

Investing in your Scrum Masters' vertical facilitation skills will be a game changer for them and your organization. And we're here to help guide your Scrum Masters on their journey!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Ti Mougne is a passionate stand for growing ourselves, individually and collectively. Her coaching style is anchored in adult learning theory, developmental coaching, and relationship systems intelligence. Product discovery and agility are her current areas of focus, but her professional goal is more broadly to help people and organizations navigate the complexities of change and reach their full potential.



Lindsay Bennett brings over two decades of experience in technology, specializing in agile methodologies, product development, and human-centered design. With a strong background in managing and developing teams, she leverages her expertise to facilitate workshops and drive transformative change. Lindsay is dedicated to guiding individuals and organizations towards their full potential in an ever-evolving landscape.

Special thanks to our peer reviewers:

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Useful links:

[Evolvagility – Vertical Facilitation for growing group and team capabilities](#)