How to Build an Agile Coaching Team That Drives Your Agile Transformation

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Agile transformations are often underestimated in time and effort. Applications and software engineering leaders need to combine the experience of outside agile coaches with the cultural sensitivity and organizational knowledge of internal coaches to ensure agile transformation success.

Overview

Key Findings

- Applications and software engineering leaders incorrectly believe they can drive agile transformation alone, so they undervalue the experience of the agile coach.

- Application and software engineering leaders often rely solely on external agile coaches in limited engagements. This approach fails to take advantage of transitioning long-term employees into coaches, as these employees will be fully aware of the company culture.

- Applications and software engineering leaders have limited knowledge of the agile coach role, so they don't understand how agile coaches can help the organization.

Recommendations

To succeed at agile transformation, application and software engineering leaders should:

- Maximize the benefits of using agile coaches by building an in-house coaching capability.

- Bootstrap their in-house agile coaching by engaging and synergizing with experienced external agile coaches.

- Clarify the agile coach role by working with HR to create clear job descriptions and a career path.
Strategic Planning Assumption

Through 2024, 80% of enterprises combining external and in-house agile coaching will be more successful at agile transformation than their peers.

Introduction

As the pace of digital business change accelerates and more organizations respond quicker by adopting agile approaches, those that don't react will be left behind. Agile transformations are not projects that have a start and end. They require continuous improvement and are challenging to manage successfully.

Applications and software engineering leaders need to build an agile coaching capability to help them in their quest for agile success and business competitiveness. A combination of external transformation experience and internally grown, culturally sensitive talent is the ideal mechanism to supercharge agile transformation.

This research lays out the guidance to bootstrap your "in-house capability" with experienced agile coaches who have driven transformations at other enterprises. They mentor and guide your in-house coaches and help build the agile and DevOps infrastructure upon which the organization evolves over time. This research also provides the definition of the various agile coaching positions.

External coaches also augment the capacity of your coaching team to address the early stages of transformation. See Figure 1 for an example of staffing levels for beginning an agile transformation. You may think from the surface that this may be too high a cost for the organization. But the improvements in productivity and effectiveness will more than justify the high price of good agile coaches.
Maximize the Benefits of Using Agile Coaches by Building an In-House Coaching Capability

It is important that you commit to creating and developing in-house agile coaching capabilities that will stay for the long haul. Experienced external agile coaches can get you started, but many will not stay for long. Either they will finish their transformation service package or the coaching initiative will run out of budget support.

Agile coaching needs to continue long term to keep the vision of agility from regressing. This coaching capability can also be a strong force to continue the transformation and educate new hires. As the Spotify agile coaches Erin McManus and Fiona Siseman presented at AgileAus 2019, “agile coaching doesn't stop once the transformation is done.”

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1. Source: Gartner 757374_C

Analysis
“An agile team’s journey toward high performance is just that — a journey. The team may touch high performance now and then, they may even live in a state of high performance for a while, but they have never ‘arrived’ at high performance where the story ends. No, the story continues.”

— “Coaching Agile Teams,” Lyssa Atkins

Internal coaches are a strong asset to your organization as they are well-versed in the corporate culture and political forces, which allows them to navigate better than external coaches. Internal coaches will have the buy-in and passion to generate value for your customers and benefit from a longer-term perspective.

Bootstrap Your In-House Agile Coaching With Experienced External Coaches

When agile transformations begin, augmenting your internal agile coaches with external agile coaches will ensure resources are sufficient to successfully facilitate the early transformation stages. Over time, your in-house coaches should be able to handle the steady state of continuous improvement, and your staffing needs should reduce as the teams take over more responsibility for their own improvements.

External coaches are instrumental to success due to their experience in transforming and coaching many other companies. This allows you to avoid the impediments that many organizations have encountered in their transformations. At the same time, internal coaches will be well-versed in your company culture and political environment. Application leaders should therefore synergize these two forces to maximize results with a continued emphasis placed on improvement.

External coaches bring with them several benefits:

- They are brought in with backing and funding from leadership, which empowers them to make real change.
- External coaches can force disruptive change because they are less impacted by the fallout and ramifications.
Use a rigorous selection process for finding external coaches. Do not rely solely on your approved vendors, and keep options open to find the best external coaches. Validate the external coaches’ history in coaching transformations and check their references. In addition, each agile coach you bring in from outside will have their own, or their respective corporate, approach to agile and transformation. Determine the approach and see if it aligns with your culture. If the coach is proposing the Spotify model and your organization has a lot of traditional waterfall culture, then it is probably not a good fit. The Spotify model is particularly difficult to get right, as we have found in Gartner research (see Implement the ‘Spotify Model’ as a Full Operating Model and Cultural Transformation — or Risk Career Failure).

Build Your Agile Coaching Capability by Defining the Role

Having a clear definition for your in-house coaching roles is critical to their effectiveness. The clarity of the role encourages employees to commit to the career path. Also, since finding good coaches in the open market is hard, building your own in-house capability will lead to faster results.

In larger organizations, there will be multiple roles focused on different levels of the organization and the transformation:
These levels, as defined by the Agile Coaching Institute, can be represented in a support structure for the organization where each level is responsible for supporting the level above it, as in Figure 2. By inverting the traditional command and control hierarchy, we emphasize the servant leadership aspect.

- **Enterprise agile coach** — This role will be focused on driving the change management of the overall agile transformation roadmap and coaching IT and business leaders to drive the culture change. The enterprise agile coach will be a key underpinning to all coaching activities, setting coaching priorities, mentoring the other coaches and training the organization, including leaders. This coach will be the key coach for the senior and middle managers of the organization who may struggle with the agile transformation. To learn more, refer to *How to Help Middle Management Thrive When Transitioning to Enterprise Agile and Product-Based Organization*. To be truly effective, enterprise agile coaches need to be servant leaders who have coached other agile coaches and have the experience of multiple transformations.

- **Agile coach** — Program-level coaches working on common practices across multiple teams, release coordination and scaled agile dependency work make up the next level. These individuals will coach teams and Scrum Masters in an agile mindset and in software development practices. They need to have several years of experience at agile as well as techniques like extreme programming (XP). They should have the passion and mindset to serve others and have proven success in doing so.

- **Scrum Master** — Sometimes also called the team facilitator, the Scrum Master is the most important level of agile coach, also known as the frontline agile coach. This role is focused on helping the Scrum team to continuously deliver customer value and drive continuous improvement of agile practices every day. Scrum Masters will also push for Extreme Programming (XP) practices like automated testing and continuous integration. They should be servant leaders who empower the team to make decisions, rather than direct and command the team direction on work and product functionality.
Providing clear descriptions of the various agile coaching jobs and aligning them to existing pay scales will encourage employees to commit to such a career and have an opportunity to increase their impact on the organization. Take care in determining the reporting structure for these coaches. Having the coaches report to a person higher up in the organization than their implied job level will help to alleviate any biases related to their positional influence within the company or political allegiances. Having clear support of coaching by a senior leader will also empower the coaches for effectiveness.

Use these guidelines to vet agile coach hiring or transfer candidates:

- Determine the actual level of agile experience among the candidates you are screening for the role. Experience in a Scrum role as well as coaching teams is essential.

- Seek continual learners as can be evidenced by agile certifications, especially those that require rigorous vetting protocols, such as the certified enterprise coach/certified team coach (CEC/CTC) application process of the Scrum Alliance. ³
Ask for examples of serving and empowering the team over command and control techniques.

Ensure candidates have an agile mindset as described in the Agile Manifesto.

Look for a proven track record of cultural sensitivity and empathy in agile transformations.

Ask for examples of good listening and a coaching mindset.

Evidence
1. The Evolution of the Agile Coach, InfoQ.


3. Scrum Alliance Certified Team Coach (CTC) — Application Instructions, Scrum Alliance.

Document Revision History
Avoid Agile Transformation Failure by Using Agile Coaches - 20 February 2020

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