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What is the Role of the Scrum Master? - SSA

The Scrum Master (SM) is a member of the Agile Team. The Scrum Master is the coach and facilitator of the team. He / she works to improves the productivity of the Team. He / she always has a training plan for the Team. The Scrum Master controls the continuous improvement cycles of Lean-Agile. The Scrum Master protects the Team and works with the Product Owner to maximize the return on investment. He / she ensures that the Lean-Agile ideals are understood and respected by all stakeholders.

Why Do We Have the Scrum Master Role?

The Scrum Master role was created to address challenges that Agile Teams had when working in Products and Projects where the urgent always overcame the important. Traditionally Teams are on a relentless drive to deliver the next Feature resulting in an inability to improve the way they work. Further Teams often have to respond to the current crisis-de-jour resulting in an inability to meet planned commitments. The Scrum Master role is thus:

- Sheep dog: Protecting the Team from outside interference,
- Coach: Coaching the Team to improve, and
- Facilitator: To assist the Team in making decisions, etc.

Without a Scrum Master organizations often have a number of problems:

- Teams do not become effective at working together
- Teams do not take the time to improve their work practice
- Teams do not understand what kinds of opportunities are “out there” to improve
- Interruptions to the work happens as stakeholders (managers, support, etc.) go directly to Team members to get their issue addressed
- Teams do not appear to meet commitments they have made, as the interruptions and lack of priority result in churn

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What Are the Responsibilities of a Scrum Master?

The main responsibilities of a Scrum Master are:

- Process improvements

    - Ensures that the Team is fully functional and productive
    - Improve the lives of the Team by facilitating creativity and empowerment
    - Improve the productivity of the Team in any way possible
    - Improve the engineering practices and tools so that each increment of functionality is potentially shippable
- Diplomacy
    - Enables close cooperation across all roles and functions and removes barriers
    - Remove the barriers between the Team and the Product Owner, so the Product Owner directly drives value production.
- Coaching
    - Comprehensively understands the broader Lean-Agile frameworks
    - Continuously learning new tools and techniques aimed at helping the Team excel
- Managing change
    - Control changes as they come in and guide various parties in working the change through the system to best effect
    - Shields the team from external interferences
- Manages impediments and obstacles
- Maintains working agreements such as
    - Definition of Done
    - Definition of Ready
    - Team Working Agreements
- Encourage effective communication
    - Conflict facilitation
    - Teaching others to be more effective at communication
    - Ensures that part-time team members are kept informed
    - Facilitating Iteration activities
- Ensures that the process is followed
    - Logistics and facilitation associated with Daily Stand-up, Iteration Review, Iteration Planning, Backlog Refinement, and Iteration Retrospective as well as other meetings and events
- Updating artifacts
    - Ensures information about the Team’s progress up-to-date and visible to all parties
- Change agent for the organization
    - Helps the organization move to the new way of thinking and operating

While all the above provides details on the role of the Scrum Master, perhaps the best way to think about the role is in terms of the business problem the role is expected to address - focus on improving how we get value delivered better, faster and cheaper. The key change that the Scrum Masters needs to embrace in their new role is to step back from the individuals and the steps required to deliver value, and understand the systematic perspective of how value is delivered through the people, through the steps, and work to improve that system.

What Are The Characteristics of a Great Scrum Master?

> “Ah well! I am their leader, I really ought to follow them!” - Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin

The basic answer is that the person is a person who likes working with people and that can provide leadership for the team(s). Characteristics include:

- Intimately familiar with Agile. If you are implementing Scrum, this means you are intimately familiar with Scrum. Kanban, Kanban. And so on. Since the Scrum Master owns the process, they must be intimately familiar with how Scrum works and be able to guide a team to find solutions to help them succeed. This takes experience. Most Scrum Masters come fresh out of Certified Scrum Masters training and jump into the role. The challenge here is that they often do not have an experienced Scrum Master available to mentor and coach them. This means a Scrum Master must be intensely curious.
- Intensely curious: Most Scrum Masters do not start out being a great Scrum Master. In order to provide value to the Team (beyond just administrative) great Scrum Master are always learning about Agile, leadership, people, organizational dynamics, facilitation techniques and so on. The learning is not something you go on a course for 3 years to get. Most of the time Scrum Masters notice an issue, then go out and see what others have learned in a similar situation, so that when it comes up in a team discussion, the learning can be presented as “one possible approach”. This requires awareness of what is going on, but also the drive to learn more.
- Responsible. In most organizations, when someone is given responsibility they are concurrently given the authority necessary for success. Scrum Masters are in a different situation. While a Scrum Master does not assume responsibility for the success of the project—that remains with the team —a Scrum Master does assume responsibility for the team’s adoption of Scrum and practice of it. A Scrum Master takes on this responsibility without assuming any of the power that might be useful in achieving in it.
- Excellent facilitator. Scrum Masters organize and facilitate several of the Scrum meetings. This requires organizational and excellent facilitation skills. Again, these skills will sometimes take awhile to learn.
- Collaborative. A good Scrum Master will work to ensure a collaborative culture exists within the team. The Scrum Master needs to make sure team members feel able to raise issues for open discussion and that they feel supported in doing so. The Scrum Master should help create a collaborative atmosphere for the team through his / her words and actions. However, beyond modeling a collaborative attitude, a good Scrum Master will establish collaboration as the team norm and will call out inappropriate behavior (if not already done by other team members).
- Influential. To be successful a Scrum Master will need to influence others both on the team and outside it. Initially, team members may need to be influenced to give Scrum a fair trial or to behave more collaboratively; later a Scrum Master may influence a team to try new technical practices such as Test-Driven Development or pair programming. A Scrum Master should know how to exert influence without resorting to a command-and-control “because I say so” style. Most Scrum Masters will also be called upon to influence those outside the team. A traditional team may need to be convinced to provide a partial implementation to the Scrum team, a QA director may need to be influenced to dedicate full-time testers to the project, or a vice president may need to be

convinced to try Scrum at all. While all Scrum Masters should know how to use their personal influence, the ideal Scrum Master will come with a degree of corporate political skill. Corporate politics is often used pejoratively; however, a Scrum Master who knows how decisions are made in the organization, who makes them, which coalitions exist, and so on can be an asset to a team.
- Highly available to the team. If the Scrum Master has a full time role elsewhere in the company and just runs in for the daily scrum meeting, they are not going to be very helpful to the team. They need to manage impediments and be available as needed to the team to work through any roadblocks. The Scrum Master should always know the status of the team and how things are going.
- Know when to stop talking. This is a tough one. Often times, skills that make a person a good Scrum Master are the same skills that make it hard for them to keep their mouth shut. Scrum Masters need to avoid telling team members what tasks to do in the daily scrum or start questioning the team's estimates during estimation sessions, for example. As a Scrum Master, you need to know when to keep your mouth shut and when to step in. You are not a traditional project manager and you should not operate in a command and control style. You are a "servant leader."
- All about the Team. As a Scrum Master, you are always focused on the team, not on yourself. A Scrum Master is humble. You need to thrive in watching the team succeed and do whatever it takes to help them do so. If you need a lot of personal recognition and praise, then a Scrum Master may not be the best job for you. One way to think about this is to look at the way sports coaching works: if the Team wins, it's because of the Team, if it loses it is because of the coach. A great Scrum Master, like all coaches understand that it is all about success of the Team. This leads to two other characteristics:
- Empathetic. Feels with the team and is sensitive to the team's changing moods.
- Resilient. As there will be setbacks and Scrum Masters need to lead through the setback.
- Sensitive "BS" detector. A Scrum Master does not have to be expert in the areas the team is working on but should know enough to understand when someone is not being 100% honest. A lot of the time the Scrum Master does this by asking questions ("Could you explain that a little more?" or "Could you draw a picture of this to help me understand the issue?")
- Wants, and understands, the role: Many organizations assign the role of Scrum Master. Many Scrum Masters become the role without really understanding the role. The reality is that to be a change agent in the organization, to work the difficult inter-personal issues is difficult. And if you are being "forced" to do the role, you will not be difficult. So the Scrum Master should understand the role and more importantly wants the role.
- A "growth mindset": As opposed to a "fixed mindset". A growth mindset believes that capabilities can be developed, the love challenges, and that treat failures as learning opportunities and can apply this viewpoint to both themselves and their teams.
- Challenges the Team: As a result of the growth mindset, the Scrum Master creates an environment where Teams are challenged to solve problems that they may not have thought they could do previously.

Notes:

- A lot of this text was developed by reading other web sites but it was done a long time ago and so I have lost the references. If you can provide information on sources I would be happy to attribute.
- Scrum Master is obviously a role in Scrum. Increasingly I have found that the role of coach, mentor, teacher, etc is something that other practices can benefit from as well, depending on context. This write-up reflects this more general understanding.

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What Team Events Is A Scrum Master Typically Involved In?

The Scrum Master is involved in the following events:

- Leads:
  - Stand-Ups
  - Iteration Retrospective
- Facilitates:
  - Iteration Planning
  - Backlog Refining
  - Iteration Review
- Participates In:
  - All Team events

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Where Do We Find Scrum Masters?

The Scrum Master is typically sourced from a leadership positions in the organization they are working in. This doesn't have to be a management position, and in fact that is often a detriment since people sourced this way will often user their command and control power instead of influencing the Team.

Potential sources include:

- Technical lead on the Team
- Senior Team person
- People manager
- Project manager

A word of warning. Being a Scrum Master means that you also need to step away from being whatever it was you were before your were a Scrum Master. This is often hard to do. For example, if you used to be a Technical Lead on a Team, and now are a Scrum Master, then it will often seem like the easy thing to do is to save this technical issue, just like you used to do as a Technical Lead. This is a trap. Scrum Masters need to look at the whole Team as a system, not just the bits they already know well. While it might seem like the right thing to do, what it really means is that (in this case)

- The Team is not learning how to solve these technical problems themselves.

- Perhaps worse, we are ignoring other aspects of the Team where there are in fact issues to address.

What Tips Do You Have for a Scrum Master?

Here are some tips and tricks to help you become a successful Scrum Master:

- Really understand the the values and principles behind Lean and Agile. Leverage this understanding to help the Team address the issues they are facing. Lead by example by using the values and principles in both your own work ("personal agility") and when helping the work of others.
- Making and meeting commitments: One basic of a Lean-Agile implementation is to ensure that the Team is making and meeting their commitments. This is how the Team develops trust with the business. When you have trust discussions about what is possible for the Team to do, trade-offs, etc. all become possible.
- Establish the good use of metrics: The good use of metrics is the use of metrics by the Team to improve (as opposed to the bad use of metrics which is about trying to figure out who to blame when there is a problem). Lean-Agile approaches are, above all, empirical approaches. Use information such a burn-down charts, velocity and throughput history, cumulative flow diagrams, lead and cycle time, defect counts, Team satisfaction, customer delight, etc. to really establish what is happening and whether the Team is improving.
- Establish transparency: Work to help the Team be transparent about their work and issues they are having. Use big visible information radiators to help tell a story for the business. Ensure information about what the Team is doing is available to all. Again this helps establish that the Team is able to be trusted and also reduces interruptions on the Team.
- Develop and leverage feedback loops: Metrics are one form of feedback but there are other (e.g. demonstrations, telemetry in delivered applications, etc.). Scrum Masters should help the Team to establish rapid feedback loops, and then act on what these feedback loops are telling you, even if that means a drastic change in plan.
- Always be learning: Not only is this needed in general, but in the case of the Scrum Master it is particularly important. As you observe problems that are happening with your Teams you will need to go out and research ideas on how these issues might be addressed and then work with the Team to see what experiments you might want to try. A Scrum Master always has a pocketful of ideas that can be applied in various situations.
- Facilitation: Learn excellent facilitation skills. Prepare for sessions that you facilitate. Work hard to understand the tools available to help groups of people be creative while converging on a result (e.g. see Liberating Structures). Establish approaches to work conflicts and disagreements (e.g. see How to Work Personality Issues Without Sounding Like a Marriage Guidance Counsellor?. Leverage time-boxes to ensure discussions continue to be productive. And so on.
- Understand the way value is delivered by your Team. Leverage Value Stream Mapping to help the Team focus on how they take an idea and turn that into a release to the customer.
- Help the Team focus on their quality practice. Make sure your Team has an overarching approach to testing based on Agile approaches, leveraging TDD, BDD, session based testing, etc.
- Leverage Team assessments (such as Spotify Health Check or SAFe's Team Assessment) to help

you understand the state of your Team. Don't underestimate the power of assessing Team happiness: a happy Team is an engaged Team.
- Understand the skill make up of your Team: Establish a learning plan for the Team based on the understanding of both current and future needs. Facilitation techniques such as Skills Bingo will help.
- Systems Thinking. Develop your ability to see the whole system of delivery. This typically means shifting your understanding from the "nodes" (so people, steps in the process) to the "relationships" between nodes (the edges, such as how X works with Y). While focusing on one person or one step may result in Team improvement, true orders of magnitude level of improvement comes from the Team as a system.

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How Do We Know a Scrum Master is Being Successful?

The primary measure that a Scrum Master is being successful is

- The Team is continuously improving their performance

Thats it: it's all about the Team.

What We Don't Want to See in a Scrum Master?

A Scrum Master is not operating successfully when they:

- Operate as the manager of the Team: The Scrum Master is a coach, facilitator and protector. About the only power the Scrum Master has is to enforce the process - expect Daily Scrum meetings, Iteration Reviews, etc. are going to be held and the standard to which they operate.
- Are not engaged: The most under-rated aspect of the Scrum Master's role is the idea that someone can help people get better as a team. Properly done, a Scrum Master can help a Team become much more than the sum of its parts and the additional productivity is typically much more than the person had contributed as another team member. For example, it is not unheard of for a Scrum Team to increase their productivity by more than 2X and 3X … I've seen 9X. See How Do Small Changes Lead to Big Improvements? for more of this thinking.
    - Note: Many people, without a complete understanding of the role, think that the Scrum Master is not a full time role. The problem is that a lot of what a Scrum Master does is hidden. But think about it: if your favorite sports Team needs to a coach to become more effective,

why would this not be true for a Team doing (usually) more complex knowledge work.

- Operate as the Lean-Agile “Police”: Above all the Scrum Master is guided by the values and principles of Lean-Agile. They are pragmatic based on what the data is telling them. In particular if there is a specific practice that is not working, the role is not to insist on the practice, but rather work to determine to approach to take based on these values and principles to achieve the goal.
- Operate as the “Scrum Mom” or “Scrum Dad” role. Scrum Masters are not about doing all the work that the Team does not want to do (e.g. keeping the work management tool up to date, working all impediments, etc.). The Scrum Master doesn’t act as an arbiter when Team members point out the failures of other Team members, but rather works to have Team members deal with each other directly. The Scrum Master doesn’t work to stop Teams from trying risky things, things that might fail, but rather works with the Team to ensure that experiments are relatively safe-to-fail. A Scrum Master doesn’t just worry about keeping everyone happy, but rather challenges the Team to improve.

Want to Know More?

- How Do Small Changes Lead to Big Improvements?
- What Does a Scrum Master Do All Day?
- What Do We Do If We Don’t Have Budget for Product Owners and Scrum Masters? - SSA

Consultant, Tools, Team, Role, ScrumMaster, SubjectSpecificArticle, FAQ, OnePager

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