

*The Addison-Wesley Signature Series*



BOOK 1  
MIKE COHN  
SIGNATURE  
Mike Cohn

# COACHING AGILE TEAMS

A COMPANION FOR SCRUMMASTERS,  
AGILE COACHES, AND PROJECT  
MANAGERS IN TRANSITION

LYSSA ADKINS



*Forewords by Jim Highsmith and Mike Cohn*

## Praise for *Coaching Agile Teams*

“The subtitle of this book says it is for ‘ScrumMasters, Agile Coaches, and Project Managers,’ however, its guidance and advice extend to anyone associated with an agile (Scrum) team. It will also certainly help team members better understand their relationship to the work ScrumMasters, agile coaches, and project managers do for the team. And, beyond this, the book can be valuable to anyone working in a coaching capacity with any group of people, expanding the book’s application beyond agile-based efforts.”

—Scott Duncan, *Agile Coach*

“Lyssa explains brilliantly how skills from professional coaching can be applied to coaching agile software development teams. What I love about this book is how Lyssa brings practical advice to life by relating it to everyday experiences we all recognize. An essential guide for every agile manager’s bookshelf.”

—Rachel Davies, *author of Agile Coaching*

“As I read this book I could actually hear Lyssa’s voice, guiding me and sparking precious ‘a-ha moments.’ This truly is the next best thing to having an experienced and wise coach sitting by your side, helping you be the best coach you can be for your team.”

—Kris Blake, *agile coach*

“Lyssa Adkins presents agile coaching in a gentle style with firm underpinnings. She resolves the paradox of how coaching can help a team to self-organize, and shows how a nurturing environment can push teams to perform better than ever.”

—Bill Wake, *Industrial Logic, Inc.*

“I love Lyssa’s three qualities of an agile coach—loving, compassionate, uncompromising—sweet. Every chapter offers a compelling blend of philosophy and action, framework and freedom, approach and avoidance, as any agile book should. *Coaching Agile Teams* is a good candidate to become dog-eared on my desktop rather than looking good on my bookshelf. The depth and quality of expertise that Lyssa sought, sampled, and sounded out along her own coaching journey have been synthesized in her own voice of experience.”

—Christopher Avery, *Responsibility Process mentor, [www.LeadershipGift.com](http://www.LeadershipGift.com)*

“In my experience with agile projects, the agile coach is one of the most important roles to get right. *Coaching Agile Teams* by Lyssa Adkins gives the details and practical insights for what it takes to be a great agile coach.”

—Dave Hendricksen, *software architect, Thomson-Reuters*

“I remember the first time I met Lyssa at a Scrum gathering in Orlando, and realized very quickly how inspirational she would become in the agile community. This book encapsulates her thoughts and ideas into a fantastic literary work that, I believe, fills a void in our community. We knew the role of a coach was needed, but for a long time we were not sure what that role actually was. We struggled as a community to explain what to do, when to do it, and what to do next. Lyssa not only collates all of the things we as coaches aspire to be, but has provided some great advice with realistic direction on how to be the best coach you can be for your team.”

—*Martin Kearns, CSC + CST, Principal Consultant, Renewtek ply. Ltd.*

# **COACHING AGILE TEAMS**

# The Addison-Wesley Signature Series

Kent Beck, Mike Cohn, and Martin Fowler, Consulting Editors



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# COACHING AGILE TEAMS

**A Companion for ScrumMasters,  
Agile Coaches, and Project Managers  
in Transition**

**LYSSA ADKINS**

◆ Addison-Wesley

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*To emerging and experienced agile coaches alike—may you find  
something here to help you on your way.*



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## Foreword by Mike Cohn

The buzz at the 2008 Scrum Gathering in Chicago was all about a presenter who was new to that conference. On Monday afternoon she presented a session called “The Road from Project Manager to Agile Coach.” By Tuesday everyone was talking about it.

The reason that the presenter of that session—Lyssa Adkins, whose book you hold in your hands right now—created such a stir was the obvious passion, knowledge, and experience she brought to the critical topic of agile coaching. As a classically trained project manager and director of a large corporate project management office before discovering agile, Lyssa is the perfect guide for becoming a skilled agile coach.

Watching a great agile coach is like watching a magician. No matter how closely you watch, you can’t quite figure out how she does it. In this book, magician/agile coach Lyssa Adkins takes us behind the curtain and shows us the tricks of her trade. What’s even more amazing is that there is no sleight of hand or cards up her sleeve. What you’ll find are simply wonderful techniques for guiding teams toward ever greater success.

Lyssa breaks down the magic of coaching into concrete terms. She not only explains the distinction between teaching, coaching, and advising, but she also shows us when and how to move between them. Lyssa provides guidance on how to choose between coaching one individual or the whole team. She also tells us how to identify coaching opportunities—chances to make a powerful impact on the team.

Guiding us past the white rabbits and black hats, Lyssa reveals how to initiate tough conversations using powerful questions designed to get team members talking constructively about a problem. This is one of my favorite parts of the book. Lyssa shares practical advice about collaboration—a rare find, because so many other books on the subject say merely that collaboration is necessary yet offer no advice on how to make it happen. But as important as all the tools she gives us is Lyssa’s reminder that part of the coach’s job is knowing when to sit back, observe, and let the team work things through.

Because we as agile coaches can fail, too, Lyssa presents a wonderful description of eight failure modes we can fall into. Early in my career I would often fall into the Expert and Hub failure modes. I can honestly say those are safely in my

past, but I struggle still with acting in the Opinionator mode. Maybe you are occasionally a Spy, Seagull, or Butterfly, or perhaps you suffer from one of the other failure modes she describes. Fortunately, Lyssa also presents us with eight success modes to model. Read Chapter 11, “Agile Coach Failure, Recovery, and Success Modes,” to see what mode you might be in.

Great agile coaches and ScrumMasters help their teams achieve more than those teams could ever achieve on their own. Becoming a skilled agile coach, like becoming a magician, starts with learning a set of techniques. From there it’s a matter of practice, practice, and more practice. Though the practicing will be up to you, this wonderful book will get you started in the right direction by showing how a master agile coach performs her craft.

—Mike Cohn  
Author of *Succeeding with Agile*  
Boulder, Colorado

## Foreword by Jim Highsmith

**F**irst and foremost, this is a great book! I get a chance to read many agile books, book proposals, and manuscripts, and too many are more of the same—a few good ideas here and there, but no solid contribution to the field. Lyssa Adkins' book is not more of the same.

I look for four things in agile books: Does the book contribute new ideas? Does the book organize existing ideas in new ways? Does the book extend existing ideas? Is the writing good? For example, Kent Beck's groundbreaking *Extreme Programming Explained* combined new ideas and organized existing ideas in new ways. Some people say there is nothing new in agile, but Kent's combination of specific practices and values was new. When I first received Mike Cohn's *Agile Estimating and Planning*, my response was, "How can there be a whole book on this topic? Wasn't it covered adequately in the Beck and Fowler's *Planning Extreme Programming*?" I realized quickly that Mike's book extended existing ideas in exciting new ways, plus added new ones.

*Coaching Agile Teams* builds an effective framework that organizes existing ideas and practices. Further, it extends existing ideas in thought-stimulating ways. Finally, the book is well written and compelling to read, and the ideas are practical and accompanied by experiential examples.

One of Lyssa's ideas that resonates with me is defining coaching by multiple roles: teacher, mentor, problem solver, conflict navigator, performance coach. This differentiation among roles brings depth to a coach's job. For example, mentors teach stuff—agile practices—whereas performance coaches encourage individuals and teams to learn about themselves. Lyssa's experience as a life coach brings this rich dimension to her coaching work and this book. Many agile "coaches" are mentors who teach agile practices. This book can help them become effective performance improvement coaches.

There are three audiences for this book: agile coaches, agile leaders, and individuals.

First, for everyone who considers themselves to be an agile coach, trainer, mentor, or facilitator, this book has a wealth of ideas, practices, and tidbits that can help them improve. For example, here's one thought-provoking quote from Lyssa, "A ScrumMaster who takes teams beyond getting agile practices up and running into their deliberate and joyful pursuit of high performance is an agile



coach.” In Chapter 10, “Coach as Collaboration Conductor,” Lyssa explores cooperation and collaboration, a valuable differentiation for team performance improvement. Each of these ideas adds depth to the role of an agile coach.

The second audience for this book is anyone in a leadership position in an agile organization—manager, product owner, ScrumMaster, coach, project manager, or iteration manager. Although coaching is an agile coach’s full-time job, it is a part-time job for all leaders. There is a lot written about self-organizing teams, but not as much on how to actually become a self-organizing team or how to help such a team emerge. Leaders influence the workplace environment, and Lyssa’s book can help them facilitate the maturing of self-organizing teams, in large part, by being more agile themselves.

Finally, anyone who aspires to be an effective agile team member will benefit from reading this book. I am a fan of Christopher Avery, author of *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill: Getting Your Work Done When Sharing Responsibility*, who writes “To improve teamwork, I need to improve me” and “I am responsible for all the relationships within my project community.” This means that improving team performance is not just the responsibility of the leader or coach but the responsibility of every team member. Lyssa’s book can help individuals become agile self-coaches—improving their teams by improving themselves. Chapter 3, “Master Yourself,” is as valid for individual team members as it is for agile coaches.

As you can see, I am an enthusiastic champion of this book. It goes on the bookshelf as one of my top ten agile books. *Coaching Agile Teams* focuses on what some would call *soft skills*, which we realize are usually harder to learn and apply than the so-called hard skills. For individuals, leaders, and coaches, there is a gold mine of ideas, practices, checklists, and thought gems in this book.

—Jim Highsmith  
Director Agile Practice,  
Cutter Consortium  
Flagstaff, Arizona

# Acknowledgments

Without Mike Cohn this book simply would not be. It took him about eight months to convince me to write it. And now, having written it and believing that it will bring more joy and meaning to people's work lives, I offer to Mike a big ol' bear hug of gratitude, only because I know that would embarrass him the most. My deepest thanks, Mike.

After Mike came Chris Guzikowski, editor at Addison-Wesley, who gave me the chance to write the book once I became convinced I should do so. Thanks, Chris. And then came the support of the talented authors and agile practitioners contributing books to the Mike Cohn Signature Series: Lisa Crispin, Janet Gregory, Clinton Keith, Roman Pichler, Kenny Rubin, and Jurgen Appelo. Knowing that each of you was going through many of the same things I was going through made the trip far less lonely.

Many thanks to my human muses, the women who helped me stay in the flow of ideas and turn a deaf ear to my inner saboteur: Sandra Enoch, my work/life coach; Beverly Johnson, my Phoenix Rising Yoga therapist; Eleanor Rouse, the mastermind of my local Women's Circle; and Kathy Harman, the one who kept encouraging me by finding tidbits in my writing to show me why coaches need this book. From the service of all these women, I draw great strength. Thank you, ladies. You and the music of B-Tribe kept it coming.

Without John Adkins, my husband and editor-in-residence, dear readers, you would simply have less content to read in this book. His willingness to do the heavy lifting in the final iterations of the chapters extended my ability to create new material and give you more. And, as the last round of edits came to a close, we could both see his mark on the book, and the book was made all the better for it. His English teacher mother would have been proud. And John, lover, the ways in which you contributed to this work are countless, every one of them deeply appreciated.

Lee Devin and his beloved wife, the talented director Abigail Adams, opened their theater and their hearts to me to allow me to experience true collaboration through the example of a troupe of actors working together in a start-up ensemble. That experience started the thinking and writing in earnest and "kicked things off" for this book quite nicely. Then, throughout it all, there was Lee—steadfast, insightful, experienced, brooking no excuses, even though

the last word in a good tail kicking would always be “darlin’.” As a first-time author, one could not wish for a better mentor.

Throughout the creation of the book, collaborations with new people and remembered moments with others provided the seeds of the stories that, I believe, make the book come alive. Thank you for those seeds Tobias Mayer, Kristen Blake, Ellen Braun, Aaron Sanders, Rich Sheridan, Michael Spayd, Mike Vizdos, and all of the coach apprentices and other agilists I have been blessed to see blossom.

Once the pieces of the book started to come together, reviewers appeared out of nowhere (OK, out of the Internet) to help make them even better. My sincere thanks to Bachan Anand, Brad Appleton, Suzanne Davenport, Rachel Davies, Scott Duncan, Scott Dunn, April Johnson, Robert Mead, Dan Mezick, Bent Myllerup, Michael Sahota, and Chris Sims.

Once pulled together, a group of experts was asked to review the book. Through their doubts and encouragements alike, the book became better yet again. Thank you, Ken Auer, Dave Hendricksen, Michael Feathers, Jim Highsmith, and Bill Wake.

Thanks to the founding agilists who created a way of working in which people find greater meaning in their work lives while producing amazing results for their companies and—now just emerging—the world. To Jeff Sutherland, Ken Schwaber, Alistair Cockburn, Kent Beck, Jim Highsmith, and many others, some known and others unknown, I offer my gratitude.

My special thanks to Jim Highsmith and Mike Cohn for contributing forewords to the book. When I was thinking about whom to invite to write a foreword for the book, Mike offered this advice, “Choose someone because you’d be thrilled to see their name on the cover of the book.” Thrilled, indeed. Thanks, gentlemen.

Abiding love and thanks to my parents, Jeanette and John Clark, who continue to show me through their own example that hard work never killed anyone. Their hard work and sacrifices made possible this book and a life where I get to choose my work and work at it joyfully.

Last but never least, thanks to my daughter Kailey Adkins, who thought it quite normal that I should write a book. Her unwavering belief that I could do it (and would do it) helped make it so.

# Introduction

These few pages of introduction were probably harder to write than most of the book. Bemoaning this fact to an agile coach colleague of mine, someone who was my coach apprentice a few years ago, I watched a slow smile creep across her face as she looked up at me and fed my words back to me. She said, with simplicity and clarity, “Take it to the team.”

“Take it to the team,” I repeated. How many times had I said that to her during her agile coach apprenticeship? Too many to count, as I helped her recover from command-and-control-ism and move into a world where she would routinely take problems to the team instead of solving them single-handedly.

So, when confronted with the problematic introduction text, “take it to the team” sounded like sage advice. I sent a note to the people who have been with me every step of the way while this book was coming to life and asked them what two things must be conveyed in the introduction. Their responses are interwoven with one another and my own ideas throughout the rest of this introduction.

This small example—this tiny reminder of what it is to be an agile coach—contains in it the purpose of this book. Perhaps you are like me, finding yourself recovering from some past way of working with teams and people that used to be successful but doesn’t seem to work anymore. Or, perhaps you sense something ineffective, or even inhumane, in the way you have been trained to work with others. You want to change as you take up your agile leadership mantle but don’t know where to start.

I’ve been recovering for many years now, yet the behaviors of the past linger. They hang around even though I find myself in a totally new agile landscape, full of freedom, accountability, and possibility. In this example, the need to take on the problem of the introduction single-handedly and solve it so that I can say “I did it all by myself” still clings to me even though it no longer serves me. I know this, yet I forget. And herein lies the practice of agile coaching: to constantly reawaken and refocus, so you can improve the span and impact of your coaching. Why? So that people become great agilists, teams create products that make them proud, and companies and nations reap the benefits of free and accountable teams living in a world of possibility from which both innovation and excellence arise.

The imperative to “constantly improve” means exposing ourselves to one good agile coaching idea after another and incorporating them into our daily responses as coaches to teams and people. This book serves up a wide variety of those good coaching ideas, some provocative and some practical. Some you will chew on for a long time, maybe even struggle with. Others you will adopt as yours right away. Expect both.

## Why Is This Topic Important?

Most teams I see in my teaching and coaching use agile to achieve so-so results, usually in the form of mediocre products created faster. Yes, agile works for this, and perhaps it’s better than what came before, but it’s not the whole game. Look around and see that there is so much more to get! And agile coaches help people get it, but only if they hone their skills and keep improving.

Although I worked with agile teams as their coach, I constantly challenged myself with these questions: What is it, *really*, to be an agile coach? What does that mean for me? What else must I acquire? What must I let go?

This book offers answers to these questions. The answers came from agile frameworks themselves and from the allied disciplines that supplement the agile coach’s toolkit quite naturally, such as facilitation, conflict mediation, collaboration, work/life coaching, and teaching. In this book, each chapter unfolds to bring you mind-sets and tools from these disciplines and others so that you can incorporate them in your coaching. The expected result? Teams that achieve astonishing results.

## Who Is This Book For?

This is not a beginner text on agile frameworks and how to get the basics up and running. Throughout, I assume you know what agile is and how the practices work. If not, consult online references such as [ScrumAlliance.org](http://ScrumAlliance.org) or [mountaingoatsoftware.com](http://mountaingoatsoftware.com).

I realize that my agile may not be your agile, but I’m betting that the core concepts of all agile frameworks shine through in the way I talk about agile in this book. My personal agile background started with Scrum and then, using Scrum as a backbone, mixed in other agile and nonagile tools and techniques. You’ll see this reflected in the text.

You'll find this book to be tailor-made for you if you recognize any of the following:

- You've had a few experiences as a ScrumMaster, Extreme Programming (XP) coach, or other agile team lead, and it just doesn't seem to be working for you; or it's been good, but you sense that there's something *more*.
- Your job has become routine, and you notice the teams you coach seem to be going through the agile motions, too.
- Your teams get the agile practices and are doing well but not getting the fabulous results you were supposed to get.
- You are spread across many agile teams because your managers think agile coaching isn't a full-time job and you're not sure how to prove them wrong.
- You are not convinced that the agile coach role is right for you and want to get a real sense of it before diving in.

## What Can You Achieve with This Book?

Let this book take you on a tour of the inner world of becoming an excellent agile coach. As you read it, notice the mountainous terrain of how an agile coach observes teams and people, frames thoughts about those observations, and processes personal biases and emotions. Pay attention as the book takes you to the wide-open plains of deciding to put observations and reflections into action (or nonaction) in the best service of agile teams in the unending quest to be better than we are today.

This book offers one person's approach, my approach, to building high-performance agile teams. It will not tell you "the way." Rather, through my journey, it will tell you one good way that will help you find your own path as a coach. I have used this pattern and the ideas in this book successfully while coaching many aspiring agile coaches, with the result that each coach found their path and, then, their unique voice.

Perhaps through this book you will see that the role of agile coach, successfully done, is more than getting the basic agile processes and principles instilled in a team. Perhaps this book will help teams know what to expect from a good (or great) agile coach so they can be specific about what they need when they don't get enough. Perhaps through this book middle and upper managers will

see the job of agile coach as a time-consuming, energy-consuming, and valuable contribution so that the trend of having one agile coach split across many teams evaporates. Perhaps this book will set the aspiring agile coach on a personal journey toward enlightenment, where their motivation and intention is for the team rather than for themselves.

I accept all of these as stellar outcomes and the least of which I can imagine happening for you and the people you influence as you read this book and put its ideas into practice.

## How Does This Book Work?

Each chapter of this book stands alone so that you may come to it when its message strikes home most. Perhaps you find yourself in a panic over something happening on a team and, scanning the table of contents, say to yourself, “A-ha! That’s the one I need today.” Or, in a reflective mood, you simply open the book to a random spot and start reading, trusting that the words on the page serve you best now. Feel free to read the book from cover to cover if you like. It will work that way, too. Just know that you don’t have to travel any preset path, conventional or random, to use it well. Use this book as your companion along your journey, there when you need it and waiting patiently for you to come back when you’re flying on your own and don’t need its help in the moment.

The chapters contain “Things to Try” to assist as you move ideas into action, taking very sure steps toward better coaching. Because the chapters stand alone, references to other useful bits of the book appear in the “See Also” text found throughout the book. In addition, strategically placed thought-provoking quotations invite you to ruminate on the nature of remarkable agile coaching.

The book serves up its stories, secrets, and things to try in three sections and thirteen chapters:

### **Part I: It Starts with You**

<i>Chapter 1</i> <i>Will I Be a Good Coach?</i>	Who is this person we call an agile coach, and how do I know whether I am one already? What are the ten aspects of “native wiring” that predict success for an agile coach?
<i>Chapter 2</i> <i>Expect High Performance</i>	The foundations that allow a high performance team to emerge are revealed and put in an agile team context. The secret? Expecting high performance.

*Chapter 3*  
*Master Yourself*

Coaching starts with you, but it is not about you. It is about what you can bring to the team to help them get better. To do this, you must recover from command-and-control-ism and, then, master yourself.

*Chapter 4*  
*Let Your Style*  
*Change*

The leadership style framework in this chapter helps coaches know which style to use as the team they coach evolves (and devolves).

## **Part II: Helping the Team Get More for Themselves**

*Chapter 5*  
*Coach as Coach-*  
*Mentor*

This chapter offers fundamentals of professional coaching in the setting of an agile team, along with the specifics of coaching whole teams as well as team members, product owners, and agile managers.

*Chapter 6*  
*Coach as Facilitator*

Practical tools for facilitating conversations are offered, for standing meetings such as agile planning sessions, as well as for unstructured collaboration conversations.

*Chapter 7*  
*Coach as Teacher*

Channel the best teacher you ever had—the one who was kind and hard, the one who knew you could do better and expected the best from you. Then, use the techniques in this chapter to teach agile, especially the roles in agile. Get ready to take advantage of common teachable moments such as team start-up, standing meetings, and those random perfect moments when agile just “clicks” for someone.

*Chapter 8*  
*Coach as Problem*  
*Solver*

Viewing the team as an ecosystem surfaces the coach’s role as “systems revealer,” which, when done with the foundations of agile in mind, allows the team to move from simple recovery from problems into health and into vibrancy.

*Chapter 9*  
*Coach as Conflict*  
*Navigator*

Conflict, as a useful element of a high-performing agile team, means that the coach helps the team navigate through conflict and into the desired state of constructive disagreement.



*Chapter 10*  
*Coach as Collaboration Conductor*

Building a team’s collaboration muscle is an important aspect of the agile coach role, but only if we want astonishing results.

**Part III: Getting More for Yourself**

*Chapter 11*  
*Agile Coach Failure, Recovery, and Success Modes*

Common failure and success modes in agile coaching are recognized and named in this chapter. Steps for recovering from the grips of failure modes are also offered, as this don’t-take-yourself-too-seriously exploration of failure to success unfolds.

*Chapter 12*  
*When Will I Get There?*

A “road map” of abilities is served up in this chapter. It contains lists of skills, mind-sets, tools, and techniques, all of which can be helpful to indicate when you have successfully reached agile coachdom.

*Chapter 13*  
*It’s Your Journey*

Every coach’s journey is different from the last, and the only Holy Grail to find in agile coaching is your best expression of the role. In this chapter, stories of other people’s journeys inform and inspire you to see your coaching journey anew.

Are you ready to start? Well, what are you waiting for?

# About the Author

**Lyssa Adkins** came to agile as a project leader with more than 15 years of project management success. Even with all that experience, nothing prepared her for the power and simplicity of agile done well.

She has coached many agile teams and been a master coach to many apprentice coaches over the past few years. Coaching coaches one-on-one and in small groups, Lyssa enjoys a front-row seat as remarkable agile coaches emerge and go on to entice the very best from the teams they coach.

Lyssa's agile experience, along with her professional coaching and training abilities, gives her the perspective needed to guide teams and agile leaders to harness agile as the competitive advantage weapon it was meant to be. She knows the transformation path is rocky. As a large-scale program manager and director of Project Management Offices turned agile coach and trainer, she has lived it herself. This makes her uniquely able to help others change their existing world to the agile world.

Lyssa holds triple certifications: Certified Scrum Trainer (CST), Project Management Professional (PMP), and Six Sigma Green Belt (SSGB). She is also a trained coactive coach.

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# Chapter 2

## Expect High Performance

**T**eams often get the basics of agile running within the first few sprints. Agile frameworks, designed to be simple, are just that—simple and easy to get started. And the practices, well-coached, are easy to set in motion, too.

It doesn't take long before the rituals built into agile can leave the team feeling like they are caught in a never-ending hamster wheel—always moving from one ritual to the next and from one sprint to the next and the next and the next. They are making progress on the product they create together but spinning in the hamster wheel nonetheless.

Beyond the company results the team is asked to produce, teams need something else to strive for—something to change the hamster wheel into a journey of their own making. Instead of seeing the same scenery in the hamster wheel again and again, they need to see different signposts and landmarks along the way indicating progress toward something resonant and worthwhile. This “something” is the quest for high performance. It's the daily act of, together, striving to be the best they can be.

We know that motivation in the knowledge age comes when people achieve autonomy, mastery, and a sense of purpose (Pink 2009). Setting high performance as your baseline expectation and giving teams a way to achieve it

**By the time you finish this chapter, you will be able to answer these questions:**

- How can I set my expectation that the team simply will be high-performing?
- What references and images can I use to teach the team a useful definition of high performance?
- How can I help the team create their own path to high performance?

play directly into these powerful motivators. Thus invigorated, everyone wins. The company gets better results. The company gets teams that can do anything. The teams, and the individuals who comprise them, achieve more autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their lives. Everyone tastes the sweet fruits of high performance.

## Set the Expectation

Expecting high performance does not mean that you demand it. Expecting high performance means that you simply know achieving it is more than possible; it is normal. Expecting high performance means that you believe the team can attain it, so you hold them, compassionately and firmly, to that expectation. By believing, you urge them to strive for a vision of what they can become together. They get called forth to be more than they are now.

This propels them forward sprint after sprint and release after release. All along the way, they touch moments of greatness together, fueling their desire to continue the journey. They also experience disillusionment and heartache, causing them to fall back. Through it all, you remain steadfast in your belief in high performance—and in them.

You believe in high performance, but what is it? It's a slippery thing; high-performance models, assessments, and descriptions abound, yet a satisfying all-inclusive dictionary-type definition eludes. You will not find that kind of definition of high performance in this book, either. I seek not to pin it down but to free it by acknowledging that high performance is not as much about achieving a certain state as it is a journey toward something better. Teams that “outperform all reasonable expectations” and “even surprise themselves” may be on such a journey (Katzenbach and Smith 2003). So, too, may teams that get fractionally better all the time.

As their agile coach, help them start their journey toward high performance by simply setting your expectation that they will achieve it. Then, give them the raw materials they will use to create their own resonant definition of high performance—a vision that lets them imagine it and reach for it. Coach them to choose the next step on their path (and the next and the next), all the while staying aimed toward their inspirational vision of high performance.

Create a sense of anticipation, expectancy, and excitement for this journey—first in yourself and then let it flow to them. Lead by believing. After all, if you don't believe they can get to high performance, why should they?

## Introduce a Metaphor for High Performance

Metaphor is a powerful thing. Professional coaches have known this for a long time. In fact, “metaphor” is a core skill taught in professional coaching courses (Whitworth et al. 2007).

“I’m the glue that holds this family together.”

“I’m the pebble in your shoe, reminding you to tread lightly.”

“I am a thousand candles lighting the way.”

“I am a bird soaring above it all.”

“I am a beacon calling you forth.”

Coaches ask questions that help clients create their own metaphor, one that is visceral and resonant. Clients use the metaphor to guide them through the events unfolding in their lives.

If it’s keeping one’s head above water during a time of rapid and unpredictable change, perhaps the metaphor “I am a bird soaring above it all” serves to help the client stay balanced as waves of change crash all around. Perhaps the client has a calling, something important to share with the world. Maybe then the metaphor “I am a thousand candles lighting the way” helps keep the juiciness of the purpose alive and resonant as it fuels their work.

Teams use metaphors the same way. Through your coaching, a team may create their own metaphor to help guide them through turbulent or exciting times. To get them started and to help them create a vision for high performance, offer images that spark metaphor. One such image features a tree: the High Performance Tree.

### The High Performance Tree

The High Performance Tree came into existence when I was coaching several teams that had been together for some time. They were doing fairly well with the basic practices of agile (standard meetings and accomplishing sprint goals), and they were consistently delivering results that mattered, yet their managers knew there was more to get.

As their agile coach, I had no idea how they were going to move toward high performance, and I knew each team would do it their own way no matter what I offered, so creating a highway or even a meandering pathway for them to follow wouldn’t work. I had to come up with something evocative that would kindle their desire to pursue high performance on their own terms,

something each team could use to come up with their own highway or pathway. Fresh from my own learning about the power of metaphor, I created the High Performance Tree (see Figure 2.1).

Introduce the tree to the team any time. Doing so at the beginning, perhaps in the team start-up, sets them up well, but it also works to introduce the tree as a way to look at a problem or deficiency when one crops up. Once introduced, refer to it as situations arise in the team and use it as material for retrospectives.

To introduce the tree to the team, just draw the tree from the roots up as you teach the meaning of the Scrum values and as you list the characteristics of high performance. You can see from the illustration that you need not be a good artist to do this.

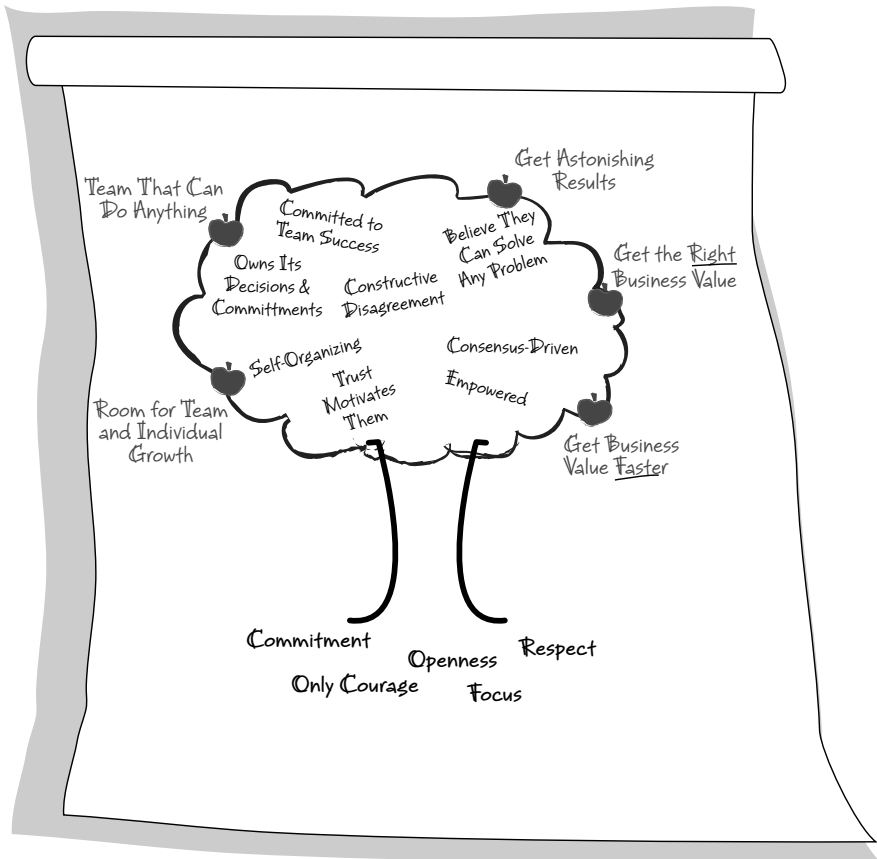


FIGURE 2.1 High Performance Tree

As you write the words for the roots of the tree, teach the Scrum values. Simply stated, they are as follows:

**Commitment:** Be willing to commit to a goal. Scrum provides people all the authority they need to meet their commitments.

**Focus:** Do your job. Focus all your efforts and skills on doing the work that you've committed to doing. Don't worry about anything else.

**Openness:** Scrum keeps everything about a project visible to everyone.

**Respect:** Individuals are shaped by their background and their experiences. It is important to respect the different people who comprise a team.

**Courage:** Have the courage to commit, to act, to be open, and to expect respect (Schwaber and Beedle 2001).

If you don't use Scrum but think these values will serve, remove the references to the word *Scrum*. (You don't even need to mention that they come from Scrum.) You can also use Extreme Programming values in place of, or in addition to, the Scrum values if your team develops software. The definitions of these values assume Extreme Programming practices occupy the center of the team's software development repertoire:

**Communication:** Keep the right communications flowing by employing many practices that can't be done without communicating. Problems with projects can invariably be traced back to somebody not talking to somebody else about something important.

**Simplicity:** What is the simplest thing that could possibly work? Make a bet that it is better to do a simple thing today and pay a little more tomorrow to change it if necessary than to do a more complicated thing today that may never be used anyway.

**Feedback:** Concrete feedback about the current state of the system is absolutely priceless. Optimism is an occupational hazard of programming. Feedback is the treatment.

**Courage:** Have the courage it takes to develop good software, which may mean throwing away code and changing direction, even late in development. What's to say that you won't ever develop yourself into a corner? Courage (Beck and Andres 2004).

If neither of these sets of values fits and your company has established values that will work well, then use those instead. Here's the key: The values you use must be defined so that they are relatable to agile, easily understandable (not full of abstract notions or business jargon), and resonant. Use only those values that



evoke a sense of desire in the team members. You know you have a good set when team members consider the definitions and say, “Yes, I want to be more like that. I want us to be more like that. I want our company to be more like that.”

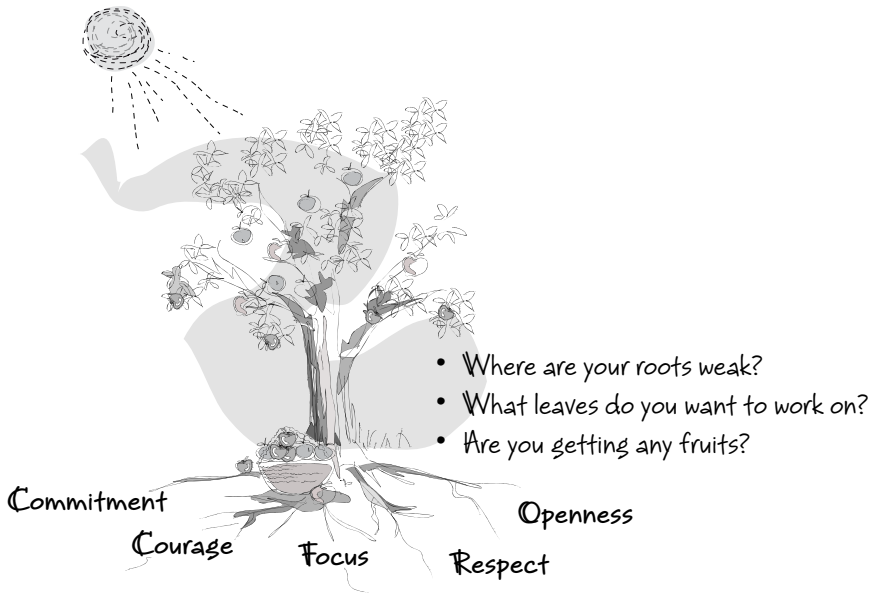
As you continue the drawing, go on spinning a vision for them. If the roots are strong, they nourish the tree, and the tree grows up to the sky—straighter and taller. It sprouts leaves that gather in more and more sunlight. As the leaves gather light, they, in turn, nourish the tree. Everything grows stronger, taller, and greener. The tree has become an inviting place, and the team notices they have sprouted some things themselves—the characteristics of high collaboration and, thus, high performance (adapted from Tabaka 2006):

- They are **self-organizing** rather than role- or title-based.
- They are **empowered** to make decisions.
- They truly believe that **as a team they can solve any problem**.
- They are committed to **team success** vs. success at any cost.
- The team **owns its decisions and commitments**.
- **Trust**, vs. fear or anger, motivates them.
- They are **consensus-driven**, with full divergence and then convergence.
- And they live in a world of constant **constructive disagreement**.

These characteristics shape the leaves of the tree. If the roots are strong and the leaves gather in enough light, the tree will bear fruit. These are the fruits of high performance.

The first fruits you may notice are these: You get business value *faster*, and then you get the *right* business value more often. As the roots (values) and leaves (high performance) continue to grow, the team may even bear the fruit of *astonishing* results—the kind that causes a business to leapfrog its competition and the kind agile was meant to create. Through these, two other fruits appear: a team that can *truly do anything* and a team that offers room for team and individual *growth*. These two fruits are the ones that rejuvenate the whole tree and give back again and again. They fuel sustainable growth.

No matter when you introduce the tree, just having the drawing in the team’s work room will be enough. It hangs there, a quiet reminder that high performance is normal and your ardent expectation. As in Figure 2.2, it hangs there when they get into trouble or get into a rut and you point to it and say, “Where are our roots weak?” It hangs there when they are showing all the signs of a high-performing team yet their products reek of mediocrity. You sense they can do better, so you say to them, “What fruits do you want to get now?”



**FIGURE 2.2** Use the High Performance Tree to spur the team to take their next step toward high performance.

Using the tree this way, your questions become challenges to them, a way to call them forth to a brighter vision of what they can become together. When they take up the challenge, they create the next step in their journey toward high performance. In so doing, they lay down their own path.

For example, perhaps the team feels disappointed in the quality of their work and, through considering the High Performance Tree, concludes that they aren't truly consensus-driven. They recognize that they tend to jump to the first thing possible rather than hearing lots of ideas from all team members. They think that if they entertained a divergence of ideas before converging on the one to use, the quality of their products would increase. So, they might circle "Consensus-Driven" on the High Performance Tree and write themselves a reminder that doing this well means hearing a lot of ideas first. Getting better at being consensus-driven is this team's next step toward high performance.

A second team has been missing their sprint goals lately. Someone notices the word *Commitment* drawn as one of the roots of the High Performance Tree and muses aloud, "I wonder if our problem is that we're not really committed to what we say we are going to do." In the conversation that follows, the team discusses how they have been letting extraneous demands on their time and energy take away from their feeling of commitment. They recognize

that as soon as they let one distraction in, a bunch more seem to follow until they are doing everything but what they said they would do. So, they make a pact: “From now on, we will help one another push away distractions so we can truly commit and deliver what we said we would. We will put aside our discomfort and challenge each other when we notice someone has become distracted. We will call distractions out for what they are—impediments.” They write these words like a banner across the top of their High Performance Tree. Truly committing is this team’s next step toward high performance.

As they address their shortcomings and make plans for getting better, encourage them to make their reflections and choices equal portions of lightness and heaviness. They need not be engaged in self-flagellation to prove to you or anyone else that they are in the act of improving. Hold out to them that the work of becoming high performing can be done with humor, curiosity, and appreciation, too.

*Over-seriousness is a warning sign for mediocrity and bureaucratic thinking. People who are seriously committed to mastery and high performance are secure enough to lighten up.*

—Michael J. Gelb

Approached with amusement or anguish, moving swiftly or sluggishly trundling along, there are no two paths alike, and you cannot even begin to imagine what a team’s path might look like in the end. So, it’s best that you don’t try and,

instead, rely on the team to create the path that feels right for them.

You can tell when the tree has taken hold. It’s when the team talks about the tree as a metaphor for themselves and their chosen pathway to high performance:

“We can grow if we strengthen our roots.”

“We’re a tree; we can bend.”

“The wind may shake us, but it will not break us.”

That’s when the power of metaphor shines through and becomes something useful to them, helping them survive turbulent change or reach for that next big goal.

## **Another Metaphor: Building the Foundation**

If the High Performance Tree doesn’t grab you, try a different image. Make up your own. It need not be fancy or complicated; straightforward works well, too. Scrum trainer and mentor Tobias Mayer uses the imagery of “building a foundation” in his classes. It’s a simple list of five things that make Scrum (and

all agile methods) work. He tells people that if you have these five things, then you have everything you need, and the other details will work themselves out (Mayer 2009):

**Empiricism:** Succeed through a rapid progression of failures. Drive by hindsight, not foresight.

**Self-organization:** The people closest to the problem know best how to solve the problem.

**Collaboration:** Foster a “yes, and” mind-set. Re-conceive ideas; do not compromise (Austin and Devin 2003).

**Prioritization:** Focus! Do the next right thing.

**Rhythm:** Breathe, and the rest will follow.

About using these, Mayer says, “I see these five principles as the foundation of emergence, which (metaphorically) is Scrum in flower, blooming. Everything emerges in Scrum: ideas, teams, process, design, architecture, products....”

Introducing the imagery of “building a foundation” to the team creates a rich field for metaphor to surface and for them to generate a vision of their journey toward greatness together. See? You need not even call it high performance if that closes people down. Journey toward greatness works well, too. Perhaps you will hear team members use the imagery you offered to create momentum-producing metaphors for themselves:

“Where is our foundation weak?”

“Have we crumbled a bit lately?”

“If we were to lay a new cornerstone today, what would we chisel on it?”

## The Destination Never Comes

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.

Almost assuredly, as soon as they start living in high performance, something will happen to set them back. A team member will get promoted and start micromanaging his teammates. The company will reorganize, and a new vice president will assert her will over the team’s direction. Someone on the team will go on maternity leave, someone will get married and move away,

and someone else will simply move on. Every time one of these things happens, team dynamics will change, and the team will take a step back from high performance.

Given this, teach the team to honor their ability to fully and quickly recover from setbacks—even to honor that above the progress they’ve made so far or where they currently “are” on their journey. For sure, setbacks will occur. Your expectation that they will achieve greatness together, a contagion they catch and then expect of themselves, will sustain them even when the way is rough.

## A Refresher

Let’s lock in the ideas from this chapter:

- Make sure the team knows that you expect high performance and long for them to reach for it.
- Ignite their journey with imagery and challenges that allow them to create their own path to high performance.
- Support the next step they have chosen by coaching for their greatness and believing they can attain whatever they put their effort and passion into.

## Additional Resources

Schwaber, K., and M. Beedle. 2001. *Agile Software Development with Scrum*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Tucked away in the last chapter of this book are the Scrum values. Reading the clear and compelling definitions of these values is mandatory for any agile coach. Reading them several times over a period of time, and considering them carefully, is mandatory for any great agile coach.

Pink, D. 2009. The Surprising Science of Motivation. [http://blog.ted.com/2009/08/the\\_surprising.php](http://blog.ted.com/2009/08/the_surprising.php). Want to know what matters to people and what this has to do with why they would reach for high performance? Watch this short talk to find out. If you want more, get his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, which goes deeper.

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