

Coaching Structure

1. Introduction

A *Coaching Structure* is a framework to support a structured approach to coaching. It defines a way to prepare and execute coaching activities by starting from Observations and moving on by identifying what behavioral Goals, as coaches, we would like the coachee(s) to achieve. The fundamental believing behind it, is that the only way to improve a situation through coaching is by helping improving the behavior of the people involved, only that will allow to establish a sustainable and long lasting change.

The *Coaching Structure* is also implicitly a way to coordinate coaching efforts between different coaches (and possibly involving also the ScrumMaster of the team at a later stage). The need of a coaching structure stems from the need of having a more holistic approach to coaching which goes beyond natural evolution assistance, but really tries to challenge the assumptions and constraints in which the coachee(s) is at a certain stage, and by guiding him in a direction which, as coaches, we deem more appropriate for improvements. Sometimes it is about exposing issues, visualizing them, questioning a solution or a direction and stimulating the identification of alternatives options.

Contrary to systemic coaching, agile coaching does have an Agenda, and everything needs to fit into the frame of values and principles which are highlighted in the Agile Manifesto and in other literature.

So in a nutshell Agile coaching is about:

1. *Identify* through *observation* behaviours which are not supportive of an agile mindset
2. *Formulate hypothesis* about the reasons why these behaviours are manifesting themselves in a determined context
3. *Define a Goal*, as a behavioural improvement that we want the coachee(s) to achieve (as we as coaches believe they will be better off)
4. *Define metrics* that will allow to measure the effects of the coaching
5. *Identify which coaching tools* to use, in order to help the coachee(s) realise the dysfunction as well as tools to help them finding an improvement

The balance between how much should a coach tell/teach, and how much should instead allow the coachee(s) to self-discover/learn is left to the judgement of the coach¹.

2. Elements of a Coaching Structure

An agile42 Coaching Structure is composed of Coaching Cards each of which entails the following elements:

1. A short description of a Situation that has been observed, and which represent an opportunity for improvement
2. A list of Hypothesis highlighting possible reasons why the Situation is presenting itself
3. One clearly stated behavioural Goals that we want the coachee(s) to achieve in order to improve the Situation
4. A list of Metrics in the form of Leading Indicators and Lagging Indicators that can be used to monitor the changes and measure the effectiveness of the coaching
5. A list of Coaching Tools that can possibly help facilitating the Behavioural Change

2.1. Describing a Situation

In order to be able to describe a Situation in an objective and analytical way we need to focus on the fact and avoid being judgmental. It is very common to describe a Situation and immediately express our judgement and opinions about it, avoiding to capture all aspects of it. To help understanding what to do, and provide adequate support to write Hypothesis it is important to provide a couple of paragraph stating who is involved, how is the environment looking like, what are the highlight of the situation observed, without adding any opinion nor reasoning. It is also very helpful to state explicitly all the assumptions which are being made, as well as the unknown (this helps reflecting deeper later on, and find out what Hypothesis could be pursued and which ones instead is better to leave behind). The best

¹ For more guidance on this have a look at the agile42 Coaching Approach.

moment to collect observation is directly when the actions happens, in the form of jolted notes first, that can be structure and condensed later on, outside of the action, when you can concentrate and connect the dots.

2.2. Formulating Hypothesis

Once the observations have been structured into a couple of statements describing the current Situation, it is time to start formulating Hypothesis. It is better to perform this task with a fresh mind, and not within the environment in which the situation is presenting itself, unless further observation are necessary to validate the first impressions. This will help structuring the approach to coaching and separating the moment in which we need to collect everything which happens in the environment, trying to judge as few as possible, from the moment in which we need to reflect and make sense of what happened.

It is important to formulate Hypothesis based on the observations and the description of the situation, rather than using the tacit knowledge that we have about it, and that we didn't explicitly capture. This is going to be extremely helpful when asking for peer review or even when co-coaching. Another important advise is never be to eager to discard Hypothesis without having validated them. We often tend to discard the most obvious Hypothesis and searching for more complicated reasons, based on assumptions rather than validation. To validate Hypothesis it is sometimes necessary to use Coaching Tools (see below).

2.3. Defining a Behavioural Goal

The observations about different behaviours need to be made in relation with the Agile Principles and Values framework that we are trying to support through the transformation of people mindset toward a more "agile" one.

1. We define **Positive behaviours**, those which are supportive of that Agile mindset and are positively pushing the coachee(s) (e.g.: a team) to focus on continuous improvement through the delivery of tangible value
2. We define **Negative behaviours**, those which are deterring, or distracting or in any form diminishing the effectiveness or efficiency of the coachee(s) in achieving continuous improvement and continuous value delivery

Sometimes teams are manifesting a Positive behaviour without realizing it, but just because it feels the natural way of doing things in a specific context. If that is the case, as coaches, we do not want to miss the opportunity of *validating this behaviour with the team* and allowing them to realize its positive impact on their work, thus *finding a way to persist it in their way of working* (this is normally captured in a Working Agreement). The Goal we would define in this case would focus on emphasising the Positive behaviour and focusing the Team attention on it, accelerating the understanding about its importance, which would probably lead to a change in the team's Working Agreements.

Related to Negative behaviours, we need to formulate hypothesis on why that behaviour is manifesting itself in the Team (sharing observation with other coaches is extremely helpful in getting insights) and consequently model a Goal which would entail a Positive connotation, and would highlight a possibly balancing behaviour deflating the Negative one we observed.

2.4. Identify the right Metrics

Metrics are not Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), they are simply a way to be able to measure the effectiveness of coaching. We do not need fixed numbers to measure that, but it is important before starting doing something, to have in mind what problem are we trying to solve - by doing whatever we decided to do - as well as how are we going to know that what we are doing is working - meaning we need to have some indicators.

To make metrics more Agile we normally define two categories of Indicators:

1. **Leading Indicators:** as observable properties that would indicate that we are getting closer to the defined Goal. Leading indicators are probabilistic and may give false results, and we therefore need a set of several leading indicators that together give us a usable level of certainty.

2. **Lagging Indicators:** as observable properties that would indicate that we are not getting away from and achieved Goal. Lagging indicators are directly observable, but can only be measured after the event.

Note that the lagging indicators can only be defined after we are aware about being closer to where we want to be, meaning that some Leading Indicators already have been positively observed. Leading and lagging indicators can be replaced when they are no longer useful.

2.5. Choosing the Coaching Tools

Coaching tools are tools which are encouraging if not forcing certain type of mechanical change in the way of working. Through the changes in the mechanics, or the constraints, we can predict the changes in behaviour.

We need to create a mapping between the tools (which need to be documented briefly) and their usage, to facilitate the choice. At the same time, based on experimentation we might identify better mappings, and refine them over time. Coaching tools can be used in different ways, to achieve different goals, but it is important to provide information about how to use a tool, and what could be the expected outcomes, based on real experience and situations.

2.6. Coaching Structure as Coaching Cards dependencies

Finally a Coaching Structure it is nothing more than a set of Coaching Cards *with explicit dependencies and organization*. The aim of the coaching structure is to avoid to start from the wrong place, and also to avoid trying to achieve too many goals in parallel, putting the team under potentially concurring goals, and thus delaying the understanding and the improvements. It can be represented as a simple backlog, but normally it is more of a graph or map, as dependencies tend not to be linear, and Coaching Card are often building on each other in more directions.

Remember that a *Coaching Structure* as well as individual *Coaching Cards* are never right or wrong, as they are meant to provide guidance to our thinking and coaching approach. This means that it is perfectly normal to update them frequently - especially at the beginning - when we are still trying to understand a situation and formulating hypothesis. The first set of Coaching Tools we define, *might be aiming at validating the Hypothesis themselves*, rather than changing the behavior. Once we have validated the Hypothesis though, the Coaching Card should evolve towards the behavioral change, and so should the metrics: **Leading** and **Lagging Indicators**, and the **Coaching Tools**.

Exercises

To incrementally learn how to create a *Coaching Structure* we will proceed in steps, following the structure of the document, so the first part would be to define a behavioural goal, and then think about how to measure its achievement, and finally choose the right coaching tools. As for unexperienced coaches could be hard to conceptualise coaching tools, we will provide some “Case Studies” and also some already prepared coaching tools to use (something like a self-correcting worksheet).

Look at the Case Studies sheets in the same folder where you found this document.