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Agile
Coaching

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Chapter 2

Working with People

To help agile teams improve, you need to work with the individuals in the team. They're the number one experts on how they work and why. Tap into their expertise to reveal what's holding them back. Listen to their concerns and ideas one-on-one to give you insights on how they can improve. Give them feedback to help them see where they can improve.

Agile throws a team into closer collaboration than they may have experienced at work before. As you'd expect, when people work closely together conflicting opinions come to the surface. Coach the team to explore these differences and find solutions that everyone can live with.

This chapter is all about skills that will help you with work with people on the team. We'll start with the art of listening then you'll learn how to give feedback that hits the spot. Next we run through techniques that can help you resolve conflicts and build agreement on the team.

2.1 Listening

A man goes into a doctor's office and says, "Doctor, Doctor, it hurts when I raise my arm over my head." The doctor replies, "Then don't raise your arm over your head!" It's not a great joke but Doctor Doctor jokes have a common theme: the doctor isn't really listening and doesn't help solve the problem. As coaches, we don't want to fall into the same trap.

A coach listens deeply. We listen to the troubles and woes of the team. We also listen for the germ of an idea that needs support to take shape. Respectful listening shows you care about the person who is talking,

Yes, I'm Listening

Listening is an interactive process. If you're wearing a stony-faced expression a speaker can't tell if you're really listening. Give them some signals that you're listening and want to hear more.

Here are some tips that help you put someone at ease so they feel comfortable to open up tell you the whole story:

Create space: Don't chime in and talk about yourself. If there's a pause in the conversation you don't have to fill the void.

Be open: Put on a relaxed and open expression rather than frowning or grinning, which might make them feel you're judging them or not taking them seriously.

Show interest: Use your eyes, look into their face and make eye-contact from time to time (without staring intently) to show you're interested in what they're saying.

Affirm: Nod your head to show you understand. You can also make "mmm" and "ah"sounds to show you heard them.

which in turn has an effect on how much they will listen to you. Prove you really did listen by following up afterwards.

Listening well is a skill that you can learn. Start by giving your full attention to the speaker, stop what you are doing and turn to face them. If they appear hesitant, suggest moving out of the team workspace to find somewhere quiet to sit or go out for a coffee; this can help open up the conversation as they don't need to worry about being overheard and there are fewer distractions.

Give them your full attention and keep it with them rather than glancing at your watch or checking your cell phone. Now show you're listening by following the tips in the sidebar on the current page.

We find the hardest part of listening is resisting the temptation to jump in too early with advice or switch the conversation to a similar story that happened to you. Focus on the person who's talking, try to understand the feelings and needs that underlie their words without judging.

Listen before giving advice

When Chris says "Nicola ignored my design," mentally unpack this as Chris holds the opinion that Nicola ignored his design. You may have a different view of what happened but now is not the time to share it. Take time to listen to Chris's story properly before checking into the facts. As the conversation unwinds, pause to check that you understood what was said by paraphrasing what you heard: "So what I'm hearing from you, is that you provided a design but for some reason Nicola has not implemented it."

Ask clarifying questions

If the pace of the conversation allows, ask clarifying questions to draw the story out without taking sides. Pick your questions carefully so that it's clear you are clarifying rather than challenging or criticizing their actions. You could ask "When did you notice that Nicola had not followed the design?" or "Have you talked to Nicola about this?"

Reading between the Lines

People usually speak much slower than you can think, which is why it is so hard to give your full attention when someone else is talking. Don't spend your time mentally building your response because this can divert you from listening. Use the time to examine the whole situation.

Focus on the person speaking, notice how they express themselves and consider their possible motivation for starting the conversation:

- Are they looking to gain support, provide a favor, repay a favor?

- Are they looking for empathy, advice, more information?

- Are they flagging up a problem because they want you to help them solve it?

Pay attention to any non-verbal cues such as body language and the tone of voice they use:

- Are they upset, angry, excited?

- Do they seem uncomfortable or relaxed about the conversation?

- Are they acting a little different than usual?

Don't assume lack of eye contact is a sign that they are hiding something; people often look away when they are trying to remember something or feeling uncomfortable.

Put yourself in their shoes—imagine how they feel about the situation and empathize by summarizing. You could say "Chris, it sounds like you're feeling frustrated. You worked over the weekend to get that design finished and now your work has not been used." This helps show the person that you are listening and also gives them the opportunity to correct you and continue their story.

Maintaining Trust

In closing a conversation, summarize the key points you heard and check them with the speaker. Do you understand their needs?

The speaker had a reason for wanting to share information with you and they may not do so again if you do not follow up the conversation. If a problem has been disclosed, you'll want to do some further investigation before committing to a course of action so don't feel obliged to make any immediate promises about resolution.

Finally, to maintain trust it's important not to betray confidences. Check whether the person prefers what was discussed to remain private, or if their concerns should be shared with the team and if so, how to approach this.

Background Listening

Besides listening in the context of a one-to-one conversation, you will also be involved in many team conversations. Most of the same rules apply. When facilitating a meeting, pay attention to each speaker and wait until they have finished speaking before asking clarifying questions. It can also help to paraphrase what you heard them say, to check you understood and make it clear for everyone else in the meeting.

When you participate in a team conversation rather than running a meeting, you still need to listen carefully to the words being used and watch the body language of the team. If someone makes a statement that strikes you as indicating that they have misunderstood something, such as "Now that we're agile we don't need to document the release," you have a choice: you could pause the meeting and check group understanding about that point, without singling out the person, or you can address the issue after the meeting. We find it helps to capture a mini-quote—taking note of the exact words used in your notebook—as a reminder to follow up.

Listen to the level of conversation in the team outside meetings too. A healthy team buzzes with sporadic conversation throughout the day

Liz Says...

Don't Abuse the Power of the Pen

If you are writing up notes on the board in a meeting, beware of filtering what you heard. Make sure that you write all the points mentioned rather than only those you agree with. If people don't feel that they've been heard, they are likely to stop contributing to the conversation.

Some filtering of trivial comments is necessary. However take care to use words people said rather than put words in their mouth. Don't be afraid to ask them if you have captured their point accurately.

because team members are truly working together to create software together. Whereas a quiet team may not be working as a team at all.

Listening to the team provides you with a wealth of information about them and the issues they are struggling with. Deep listening also shows that you care about their concerns and are interested in helping them. It puts you in a better position to influence the team by giving them feedback.

2.2 Giving Feedback

When you notice behavior that is not working well for the team or an individual, you naturally want to help them to see what needs to change. You want to share your observations, in the hope that you will influence them to change their behavior, but it can be hard to know the best way to get your message across. For example, if a team member has been acting disrespectfully, how can you bring it to their attention in a way that they will listen to you? Let's take a look at how to give the team feedback.

Your first step in providing feedback is to separate the basic information (what you saw or heard) from your assessment and feelings about the situation. Talk about the data from your perspective and give specific

examples of what you saw and heard rather than your interpretation. If you can give this information sooner rather than later, it will be easier for the person to remember what they did and why. For example, when you say "Nicola, I noticed that you kept having to step out of our meeting yesterday to take calls on your cell phone," it summarizes your observation. Follow this by saying something like "I am concerned that you missed Chris's walkthrough of the design he's been working on," which sums up your feelings and assessment of the situation.

Now it's their turn. Listen to their experience of the events. Maybe there's a good reason for their actions that you don't know about yet. Nicola may be getting calls from day care about her sick child, or she may be getting requests for help from her previous project team. She may be unaware she missed anything important or she may have already taken time to catch up with Chris after the meeting.

If you still think there's room for improvement, make some suggestions of how they might handle similar situations in the future. Ask for their ideas too. Then you can talk through the pros and cons of each option. For instance, if a customer often arrives unprepared for planning meetings, this can waste the team's time. You could suggest that they block out for a time buffer between meetings rather than rushing from one meeting to the next. You could offer to work with them on their preparation next time. Or they could arrange a session with the team lead to prepare for planning.

If you want to give positive feedback, you don't have to phrase it as a judgment and rate their achievement as in "Fantastic job!"—a light touch works better. Let them know you noticed what they did and the positive effects

> Give specific examples of what you saw and heard.

that resulted. For example, "Mike, I noticed that the build is running a lot faster since you reconfigured it. Yesterday, it flagged up a broken test in a couple of minutes so Jules was able to fix the problem before getting started on a new task."

Timely feedback helps nudge the team into improving their process without directing them what to do. As the team works to improve their process, they usually become more reflective on how they are working together, and accept feedback from each other more readily.

Sometimes you will want to give feedback that hasn't been asked for. Take care in doing this, the person you want to offer feedback to may

Rachel Says. . .

Catch Them Doing It Right

Encourage the team they're learning new skills, like *Test-Driven Development*, and aren't sure if they're on the right track. Take time to notice what the people on the team have done well by giving them positive feedback.

Human beings process the world by categorizing. You're probably unaware of it, but we all sort people based on what we see of their actions, which is usually not the whole story. Linda Rising, in her talk "Who Do You Trust?" at the Agile 2008 conference, suggested that catching someone doing it right also has an effect on the person giving the feedback. When you catch someone doing it right, you're categorizing that person as a winner rather than a loser in your own eyes. This helps you to see their other actions in a positive light.

What if they've also not done such a great job on something? Just because you noticed, you don't have to say anything. When I'm tempted to criticize, I try very hard to keep my mouth shut.

feel like you are stepping out of line and criticizing them. If you state feedback too bluntly, you can upset them so much that your message does not sink in or they feel alienated by what you said. Slow down and work through the previous steps.

2.3 Resolving Conflicts

As a coach, you may be drawn into situations where there is a conflict within the team that's holding them back. Sometimes this is an open disagreement, and other times it's a festering situation where there's a disagreement but it's not openly discussed. Spend time listening to the concerns of individuals on the team—it will help you detect a concealed conflict. If the team is still productive and continuing to work despite a conflict, you've got more time to try and resolve it.

Before you dive into the role of peacemaker, consider if the dispute will

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