

## Being an Agile Leader over Fulfilling a Scrum Role

“Become a Scrum Master!” they said. “It will be fun!” They said. No I don’t know who “they” is - no one ever does. I know they said it though. I went on this agile adventure first as a Scrum Master and it didn’t take me long to realize that I had to be more. Honestly like Harvey Dent in the Batman movie I find myself hearing “You can die to scrum master or scrum long enough to become the impediment.” I went into the role of Scrum Master knowing one thing for sure - if I was there to remove impediments, I must guard from becoming one myself.

So I would enter teams and not be the master of anything. I just observed, got to know people and listened. This even meant at times that I would NOT coach on Scrum. The very thing my role is created to do. I feel you judging me. It’s ok. I judge you too. I remember a colleague of mine once asked if I had any plans for my first team in a company. I plainly told him “No. Just to join the team and observe.” The reality is where I may have tried the tree back too far in your eyes, I have also seen the adverse - a Scrum Master who comes in guns blazing ready to coach on *Every. Little. Thing*. Good luck with the team trusting you. Until you show you are not perfect and care for them - which could look like a complete meltdown/breaking point for you - you will perpetuate a narrative of you vs them in the team and keep them from being able to trust you.

I honestly wish sometimes we could change the role to “agile advisor” for two reasons:

1. Agile is so much more than Scrum.
2. Advisor is more trusted than the high horse riding “master”.

But I digress.

The Roles in Scrum are good, but they must be seen for what they are at heart - agile leadership. The Product owner helps to drive design thinking, customer collaboration and planning/prioritization to increase agility. He has leadership in doing so. The Scrum Master exists to help people communicate better, remove any obstacles in the way and make sure the team trusts and works well together, that’s how they lead. The Developer leads in how something is to be built, not just in architecture but in minute focus - with “utmost quality”. The reason why decentralized Decision making must exist in an agile team is because the agile team is a team of leaders. This is also why Trust must be prevalent in the foundation of the team. You may have heard of “forming, storming, norming, performing” before when it comes to the stages of a team. This is a progress of trust and cohabitation of leaders.

What I came to realize is that my role - and really any role, is to help teams increase agility. As a Scrum Master that meant removing obstacles in the way. In one particular case it meant sacrificing that role for another. We had a Product Owner who was having a difficult time figuring out where to start on a project that had been tossed through several teams and had lots of stale requirements and little prioritization. As you can imagine the Product Owner left the company after only 6 months. He couldn’t find stable ground to lead his role on.

Sol was faced with a decision - as an agile leader, and at the time a Scrum Master, how do I remove the biggest obstacle for the team I was on - the void of a product owner? The need for a strong Product Owner was seen in every metric, every sprint, every story. Agility was not going to be truly realized if this role did not get filled. The Dev team were rockstars by the way - this was not the first time they lacked a Strong PO and they did their best to keep things moving forward, figuring out architecture and leading their roles in the chaos of it all. My role however was not able to be truly realized outside of the daily slack/email check-up on how the Product Owner search was going. Obviously I locked arms with the Engineering owner and Principal engineer to help fill the void of the PO, but what else could I do to help the team realize true agility and get to where we all knew we could go as a team?

In all of this I have always known that I would try PO as a role one day. I had that side of me. In my background were two very dominant forces. The Pastor, and the Entrepreneur. The Pastor was the Scrum Master in me and the Entrepreneur was the Product Owner. I decided it was time to take a CSPO course to see what I could learn from the product perspective about Scrum that could help me serve the eventual new Product Owner better when they came (and the other product owners I was serving on other teams). I had a suspecting feeling that this move to take training could result in a move closer to the Product side - but I didn't realize how quick.

Monday and Tuesday I got to sit in a course with none other than Dr. Scrumbob himself. Bob Schatz, Dmgt. It was in this course everything I had been feeling around the agile transformation of my company - and even more specifically the issues I was having trouble fixing in my team lacking a PO was confirmed. It was Thursday I sat in a meeting where I fully realized I could fulfill my Scrum Master duty if I laid that role on the altar. The conversation about the Product Owner role came up. I informed I was helping the best I could in the interim. I was then asked a very blunt question - are you interested in filling the role?

To say I wasn't conflicted about this question would be lying. Did I like being my team's Scrum Master? Yes. That goes for all my teams. Did I love being on the scrum master team? Of course. Could I be a true agile leader if I relinquish my Scrum Master title/role? Yes to that as well. The more I thought about it, it only made more sense. Our team was highly volatile in it's change the last few months. New PO, loose PO. New team Member, Loose Team Member. Loose Scrum Master, New Scrum Master. I had just been with the them for two and a half months and they were tired of the revolving door.

And yes "they should get comfortable being uncomfortable" and welcome change. But Change for change sake sucks (More on that later). We were just getting stability and I could help lead it further. By making the move to PO I would ultimately fulfill my role as Scrum Master, unblocking the greatest impediment the team had since I joined and then helping to onboard a new Scrum Master in my stead. It would also give the new PO (who would be me) a higher advantage as I already had built trust with the team to lead in that way, as well as to help them find a Scrum Master who could replace me. It just made sense.

Individuals and Interactions over processes and tools (and roles). I did it. I said yes, and I only want this team as my team. Come Hell or high water, I want to build something great for the customer and see this team win. Responding to change over following a plan. Working Product Prioritization over Lifeless Demos. Being an Agile Leader over fulfilling a Scrum role. We must be ready at all times to be the agile leader we are, not just the role we play. As Dr. Bob said in that fateful class - "We are here to build *agility*, not something called Agile."

The heart of agility, especially in an enterprise, is the ability to move quickly - like a start-up. In Start-ups people wear multiple hats and roles for the sake of their own agility and winning with their customer. When we choose to lead as an agile leader seeking agility, we will ultimately fulfill our role- be it in scrum or another framework, and better realize what it looks like to be an agile team or organization.