The

Agile
Community

How to **grow**, **learn**, **share** and become a
global agile community leader

Alex Sloley

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About the Author

Alex Sloley is an agile evangelist. On top of his busy career working for companies around the world, he is an avid member of the agile community. He speaks regularly on the global stage and is an organizer of conference organizers. He specializes in agile training, coaching, and transformations. For those in the know, Alex is a member of the Scrum Alliance Coaching Advisory Team, and co-chair of the Agile Alliance Agile Coaching Ethics Initiative Team. For the rest of us, that means Alex helps a lot of people and is a mover and shaker.

On the tech side, Alex is a 15-year veteran of Microsoft, where he was a Scrum Master, Scrum of Scrums Master, and Product Owner. During his tenure at Microsoft, he shipped in over ten Microsoft products, worked with Microsoft Research on high-profile projects, and led his organization into an enterprise-level implementation of Scrum. Alex's blue-chip client list includes Cisco, Deloitte, Intel, Macquarie, Nordeus, Nordstrom, Qantas, Satori, Shell, Starbucks, WatchGuard, and Westpac. Alex is a Scrum Alliance Certified Enterprise Coach and an ICAgile Authorized Instructor. And a bit of an overachiever. He likes beer.

Acknowledgements

Dedication

Dedicated to the Sloley family Scrum Masters.
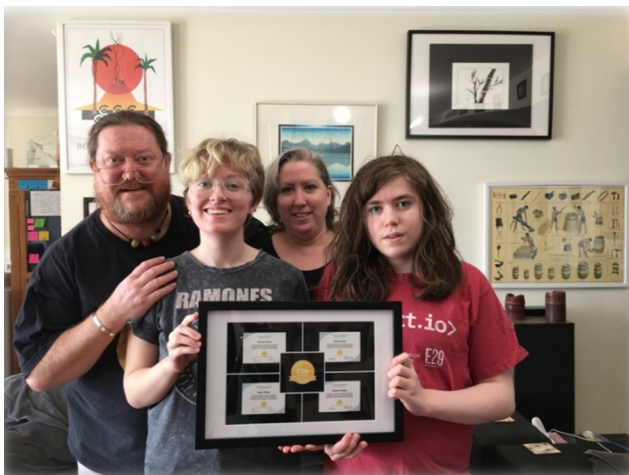
Contents

Introduction

Why should you read this book?

Around the world there is a global network of agile people, the "agilists", who are the building blocks of the "agile community". Simply by picking up this book, you've shown you're interested in becoming more deeply engaged in this community, which makes you my ideal reader. You have an agilist mindset because you love to learn and to create connections with other people like you and you know those people will help you on your journey to becoming an agile master. You have aspirations for your clients, too: you want to help them introduce creative, imaginative, innovative, self-directed learning opportunities in their company. You may also have aspirations for your own personal brand and for realizing new business through networking and speaking at events.

As an agilist, you are passionate about connecting with others because you understand that greater connection makes the world a better place. You're an agilist because you love to help people, and often they seek to help you in return. That's the way the agile world works.

My primary aim in writing this book is to help you negotiate the business challenges you face, because if I help you and you help others, and those others help others, a virtuous cycle is created in which we all help each other. So allow me to welcome you on your journey to becoming part of the worldwide agile community.

Why this book and why now?

This book offers concrete, practical, methodical advice on how to become more engaged, advice that will help you scale this engagement, step by step. Let's start with the easy things. For example, I'll step you through the detail of how to craft a conference submission. Later I'll show you the path you need to take to become a thought leader in the agile community.

Becoming a thought leader requires long-term effort but there's never been a better time to start the journey than right now. The longer you delay, the greater the cost of that delay. Engage now to begin to accrue value and start to build on it. It's like a long-term financial investment. Young people are encouraged to start investing in their retirement as soon as they join the workforce, so by the time they reach retirement age their savings have accumulated enough interest to fund a comfortable retirement. In the same way, if you start investing in your engagement with the agile community now, you'll find the interest will grow amazingly. So don't delay.

The community *wants* you to be engaged. From the love and energy you sow, you'll reap tenfold. If you're willing to put your trust, work, love, blood, sweat and tears into it, you will realize benefits that far outstrip your investment. Great things will happen that you never anticipated. And, as an

agilist, you understand that some of these will only reveal themselves over time.

Why me?

Like many of you, I started off on a software development team, writing code and delivering products. Like many Scrum Masters, I discovered that I love this new way of working because it puts people first. I've found it fulfilling, and I'm certain it helps people live better lives. Since discovering this wonderful community I've established deep, meaningful relationships with other agilists all over the world.

Why am I someone you should listen to? Perhaps partly because I care enough to write a book about it. I see giving back to the community through this book as an extension of the connecting and sharing I already do. Everything in this book is based on my own journey. It seems logical to record and share my experience so you can benefit.

What are my formal qualifications? I have many. You might say I collect qualifications, not just to further my corporate or business goals, but because they represent my dedication to continued learning. I am a Scrum Alliance Certified Enterprise Coach. I'm an ICAgile Authorized Instructor. I'm a Kanban University Kanban Coaching Professional. I have a variety of other certifications across a broad range of areas and interests, from improv and stand-up comedy to Integral Facilitation and Liberating Structures — all the wacky and wild agile things you may be familiar with. I love doing this stuff and learned a lot of it at agile community events before going on to formal training.

My very first qualification was Scrum Master certification with Rod Claar, a well-known Scrum trainer. My partner got her Scrum Master certificate with Simon Bennett in 2011, just after I gained mine. By the time we moved to Australia in 2015, Simon Bennett was living here and we reconnected. That's how the worldwide community works.

In this book we're going to cover the three areas you need to think about as you engage with the agile community. In Part I we'll talk about how you can engage by becoming a speaker and organizer, and how this will help you develop your global brand.

In Part II we'll focus on how you can take these learnings from your personal engagement and apply them in a corporate setting. We'll cover how to create communities of practice in a corporate organization, how to create self-directed and self-learning teams, and where internal agile communities of practice that reflect public ones exist "in the wild".

Finally, in Part III, we'll look at how you can engage at scale with the global agile community, building up connections as you become an internationally recognized thought leader based on your engagement with real communities.

Part I: You

1.
Why Engage with the
Agile Community?

What is the point of being engaged in the agile community? Why would you want to be involved?

The agile community is a global group of people who self-identify as agilists. Its members know, love and practice agile as we know it today. They might be Scrum Masters or Product Owners, or perhaps they're agilists who many years ago used extreme programming (Beck, 1999). They might even be what, in today's terms, are known as agile coaches. They get together, they share, they build connections. They learn with each other and they create shared projects. They work together in companies and organizations. They are a community.

I invite you to ask yourself, "How can I become involved with people who, like me, are agilists?" And, "What is my *reason* for engaging with the agile community?" It's more than just hanging out with like-minded people over a beer.

Our time is always limited. An agilist understands the need to prioritize work that really matters because there's always more work in this world than you will ever have time to do.

If you're going to engage with the agile community, you'll need to understand why this is worth prioritizing.

Let me focus in a little more on what I'm talking about. When I speak of agilists, I'm referring to the worldwide community of agilists. An agilist is someone who identifies with the concepts, values, principles, and philosophies of agile. *Agile* has its roots in the "lean" model associated with Japanese manufacturing. But it has expanded into software development and into corporate life in general. Using these modern ways of working, agilists empower people to make decisions and to work together in productive and high-performance ways.

When you're part of the agile community, you're enabled by a worldwide community whose support might, for example, help you find a new job or consulting work. For instance, I got a job with a client in Sydney, Australia, because of someone I knew from the agile community in Philadelphia. They knew the position was available and referred me. If my contact in Philadelphia hadn't known me from the agile community, she wouldn't have been in a position to provide the glowing reference she did.

In this chapter we'll uncover the career benefits of engaging with the agile community. I'll talk about your branding as an agilist. I'll also discuss recognition, appreciation, and why learning matters for you and others. And we won't forget fun and self-fulfillment.

Define and develop your brand

Some people call this your brand. If you're an agile coach, you might call this your coaching archetype. There's a distinctive difference, however, between the two. The

coaching archetype is the kind of coach you present yourself as — which may change, depending on the context. You'll adjust it as needed. But a brand is the overall impression that you give to everyone out there who hears or knows about you, including the agile community and the corporate world, as well as your clients. The brand is how others see you, and it's also how you want them to see you. The two should align.

The brand you present — and I hope you're presenting your brand with purpose — is the means by which people will identify you. They'll want to engage with you both commercially and personally based on your brand. Your reputation is based on your brand. It's not just how good you are at something. It's who you are.

The brand I try to convey is that of the kind, wise, patient coach. People looking for that kind of person to help them to navigate work challenges come to me because I have broadcast, publicized, and evangelized that brand. It's my brand. I try to be consistent and I make it public. Even though you're good at some things, if your brand isn't consistent, people will never give you work. They won't seek you out. Your brand encompasses the selling points that make people want to engage with you.

In 2013, I was chatting with Steve McConnell at Construx. Steve is a famous software developer and author of *Rapid Development: Taming Wild Software Schedules* (1996) and *Code Complete: A Practical Handbook of Software Construction* (2004). We discussed what makes an agile consultant, and consultants in general, succeed in the corporate world. Steve commented that "a successful consultant is not a jerk". It's worked for Steve. Because I trust his advice I used it to help me build my brand as an agile coach and agile consultant. I chose the kind, wise, patient

brand because I didn't want to be a jerk. I wanted to be a successful agile consultant. I wanted to be good at it. The kind, wise, patient thing has worked for me.

In *Forever Employable: How to Stop Looking for Work and Let Your Next Job Find You*, coach and consultant Jeff Gothelf explains:

> To become forever employable, you've got to first decide what your flag is going to be and then plant it. There needs to be a level of consistency in your messaging so that people know who to turn to when they need to know about product management, baking a cake, investing in cryptocurrency, climbing Mount Everest, leading a team, or whatever the topic might be. When you plant your flag, you have the opportunity to be the person who owns that space. People will seek you out because they know they can get real value from the content you create and distribute to the world. And because you are basing your insight on your experience, your story. No one else in the world has that. (Gothelf, 2021, pp. 32-33)

You might ask, "Why can't I just be myself? What about authenticity? Does having a brand mean you're not true to yourself?" Your brand is authentic because it reflects and reinforces the best version of you.

Whatever you do, don't try to copy someone else. People want to know what make you unique, so make your brand uniquely about you.

Here's a great activity to try. It only takes about five minutes and you can do it at any time during the day — before you get ready for work, for example, or at lunchtime. Think about a person you really admire. It could be a fictional or a

real person, someone historical or someone alive today. Write their name on a sticky note. (Agilists all know and love sticky notes.) Next write one to three things you admire about that person. Reflect on your brand for a moment. How can you take those values and not just project them but exemplify them in your own actions in the agile community?

For example, when I present myself at conferences or engage in the agile community, I adopt the wise persona I've talked about. The first part of understanding how to work with your brand is self-awareness. You need to be aware of how you're acting and what you're presenting at all times to ensure your brand is consistent.

It can be hard to take time out to pause and reflect. Perhaps you're thinking deeply about complex things you've never really thought about before. Reflection is the starting point for identifying your brand. Continue to use that reflection and self-awareness as you begin to personalize your brand.

Be recognized and appreciated

Everyone likes to be appreciated. It's a natural human desire. When you engage in the agile community, you have the opportunity at once to be appreciated and to appreciate others. This is a two-way exchange that will further enhance your agile coaching brand. People in the agile community will want to work with you and will recognize your brand for what it is when you're authentically mutually respectful.

Recognition sustains you as a leader, and as an agile leader. It gives you confidence and makes you a better person. If you aren't appreciated, life can be pretty bleak. Appreciation gives meaning to our lives and a sense of personal fulfillment.

In an interview with Larry King, Martin Seligman, pioneer of positive psychology, argued "grateful people are happier" (King, 2018, June 15).

Hollow appreciation is meaningless. You might ask yourself, "Can I just thank other people?" To really work, appreciation needs to be part of a virtuous cycle. You appreciate others and are appreciated in turn. When you're engaging with the agile community, make sure it cuts both ways.

Start by experimenting with building a culture of appreciation in your workplace. Identify people you want to appreciate, and do so regularly. Start with once a day, in an email, a public chat, or a meeting. Maintain this over a few weeks and see what happens. Observe any changes in the culture of your organization.

Don't confuse appreciation with, for example, monetary rewards. Keep your appreciation brief, frequent, public, and non-monetary. People will enjoy those just as much, or more, than monetary reward.

Invest in lifelong learning

Learning is a central tenet of agile. If you stop learning, you stop adapting. The agile community is a great way to learn from people who, like you, think about learning as reciprocal. You can learn from other agilists and you can give learnings too. Be both a student and a teacher.

Great agile leaders have a growth mindset. They're always learning. If you stop learning, you inhibit your personal growth. In the worst case, you may become arrogant, believing you know everything and have nothing else to learn. People will respond by distancing themselves.

In an article in *The Harvard Business Review*, Arie de Geus, a leading figure in business theory, argues "The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage" (de Geus, 1988, p. 71).

You may say constant learning takes time you don't have but think about it as an investment. If you don't invest, you'll stagnate.

When considering where you should invest in learning or teaching, think about amplifying your strengths. Rather than focusing on your weaknesses, take the things you already do well and develop more depth and more breadth in those areas.

Here's another useful activity. Write on sticky notes three topics in which you're an expert, and reflect on them. Then, on a separate sticky note, write down three topics you would like to learn more about. Pick one topic from each sticky note.

From this, create a blog post, a YouTube video, or a post on LinkedIn and share your expert's wisdom with the world. Give the community the benefit of your experience.

For the learning topic, dedicate some time to researching it. You might spend a few hours, a couple of days, or a week — pick something that can be researched in a short time frame. Take your learnings and do the same thing you did with your expert topic — publish your content as a video, a LinkedIn post or a Twitter post. Share the benefit of what you've learned with the world.

Because finding time for learning will always be difficult, I block it out in my calendar so it's accounted for in my capacity.

Have fun with friends in the agile community

Being engaged in the agile community is more than just a business transaction. It can be the foundation of deep and meaningful friendships. When you need support, even within your professional life, your agile community friends will be there to help you.

Social activity and having fun are built-in human behaviors. If you don't engage socially with your agile people you risk becoming isolated and forgotten.

Some people say, "I don't like to mix my professional and my personal life. I want to keep them separate." But your professional life accounts for about one-third of your day. It's important to satisfy the human need to socialize, whether on a personal or professional level.

Professional partnerships may evolve from the friendships you've nurtured in the agile community. Since money can become an issue that ruins relationships, mitigate the risk by setting monetary expectations clearly at the outset.

Try a small experiment to see how fun can affect you and how you work. Start maintaining a to-do list using sticky notes at your desk or on the wall. Agilists are used to doing this. Every time you write down a task you enjoy, draw a smiley face beside it. Every time you write down a task you don't enjoy, assign it a frowny face. Every piece of work in what we'll call your backlog should now be labeled with a frowny or smiley face.

As you complete these tasks over time, reflect on your initial reasons for assigning frowns and smiles. Did you complete more work that was fun or more that was not fun? What were

the costs and benefits of completing each kind of task? Why do you think that was?

You might think that if work is fun, it can't be serious, especially in traditional corporate environments. At your next work meeting, try beginning with a small fun activity. How did it affect the mood for the rest of the meeting?

Find fulfillment through helping others

A life of purpose and fulfillment helps you achieve greatness. Greatness is not achieved by helping only yourself. You're an agilist because you gravitate to the craft, the philosophy, the set of values that helps other people succeed. People become great teachers, politicians and doctors because they want to help others. Helping others is fulfilling.

Before becoming an agile coach, I had a period of decline in my professional life. I was no longer learning. I wasn't teaching. I didn't feel fulfilled. When I discovered agile, I rediscovered learning — and learning how to teach what I'd learned. Personal learning and teaching continue to sustain me decades later, and I'm a better and happier person than I was.

You might ask yourself, "What happens if I engage with the agile community and still don't feel fulfilled? What if I don't get it?" Working with and creating relationships in the agile community will create friendships that will support you on your journey to realize what will fulfill you. Of course, the support will be mutual. It's a two-way street. A life with purpose and fulfillment helps you achieve greatness. Greatness is not achieved by helping only yourself.

However, engaging in the agile community won't satisfy or fulfill all your wishes and wants. It is just one important part of your life.

Think about analyzing what motivates you. Once you've prioritized the motivators you value, think about how engaging in the agile community might help satisfy them.

Try playing the Moving Motivators game, which can be found in the online resource *Management 3.0* (Management 3.0, n.d.). Follow the instructions and order the motivators that apply to you. The 10 motivators you can sort are: freedom, acceptance, curiosity, status, goal, honor, mastery, order, power, and relatedness. Simply by sorting these core motivations in the order you find relevant to you, you can discover what intrinsically motivates you. It's a great team activity, and there are online versions — see, for example, this version created by Elabor8 *Moving Motivators Online* (Elabor8, n.d.).

You may have difficulty figuring out how you're going to engage the agile community with all the 10 motivators you've discovered. Consider prioritizing the top three and focus on how you might use those.

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As we're beginning to see, engaging in the agile community helps you because it helps you to help others who will help you in return. The business benefits include a marketable brand, being recognized, and spreading your wisdom by teaching. But you'll also gain personal benefits that include learning mastery, having fun, and being fulfilled.

Because many of us now work from home, it's not just about work–life balance any more. It's more about work–life

integration, and engaging with the agile community can help you with this.

The biggest challenge you'll face will be making time to engage with the agile community. Unfortunately, time can't be created, but like any other activity — exercising, for example — once you make it a priority, you'll find it fits into the time available.

Remember that when you help others, you create a virtuous cycle in which they will help you. Trust and rely on your agile expertise to engage with the agile community. You have experience with small self-organizing teams that you have nurtured, supported, and helped learn through inspection and adaption. As an agilist, you embrace the philosophy of servant leadership, where you put the success of others first. All the great high-performing team and servant leadership skills you are developing can be applied to yourself, and that includes being engaged in the agile community.

In chapter 2 we'll continue to explore how you can benefit from engaging with the agile community. A great way to start, and to reap immediate benefits, is to begin speaking at agile conferences.