

Leader of the Band:

Six Attributes of the Good ScrumMaster

by Mike Cohn •

32 Comments •

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In my [last column](#) I asserted that in an ideal world a team would select its own ScrumMaster, but that it isn't always practical. I promised that my next column would discuss what to look for in a potential ScrumMaster, whether the selection is being made by the team itself or by someone outside the team. In this week's column, I present six attributes that your next ScrumMaster should demonstrate.

Responsible

In most organizations, when someone is given responsibility they are concurrently given the authority necessary for success. ScrumMasters are in a different situation. While a ScrumMaster does not assume responsibility for the success of the project—that remains with the team—a ScrumMaster does assume responsibility for the team's adoption of Scrum and practice of it. A ScrumMaster takes on this responsibility without assuming any of the power that might be useful in achieving in it.

A ScrumMaster's role is similar to that of an orchestra conductor. Both must provide real-time guidance and leadership to a talented collection of individuals who come together to create something that no one of them could create alone. Boston Pops conductor Keith Lockhart has said of his role, "People assume that when you become a conductor you're into some sort of a Napoleonic thing—that you want to stand on that big box and wield your power. I'm not a power junkie, I'm a responsibility junkie."¹ In an identical manner, a good ScrumMaster thrives on responsibility—that special type of responsibility that comes without power.

Humble

A good ScrumMaster is not in it for ego. A good ScrumMaster will take pride (often immense pride) in her achievements but the feeling will be "Look what I helped accomplish" rather than

the more self-centered “Look what I accomplished.” A humble ScrumMaster is one who realizes the job does not come with a company car or parking spot near the building entrance. Rather than putting his own needs first, a humble ScrumMaster is willing to do whatever is necessary to help the team achieve its goal. Humble ScrumMasters recognize the value in all team members and by example lead others to the same opinion.

Collaborative

A good ScrumMaster will work to ensure a collaborative culture exists within the team. The ScrumMaster needs to make sure team members feel able to raise issues for open discussion and that they feel supported in doing so. The ScrumMaster should help create a collaborative atmosphere for the team through his words and actions. However, beyond modeling a collaborative attitude, a good ScrumMaster will establish collaboration as the team norm and will call out inappropriate behavior (if not already done by other team members).

Committed

While the ScrumMaster role does not always require a full-time, eight-hour-a-day commitment, it does require someone in the role who is fully committed to it. The ScrumMaster must feel the same high level of commitment to the project and the goals of the current sprint as do team members.

A ScrumMaster should not end very many days with impediments raised by the team that are left unaddressed. A team’s impediment list cannot be swept clean by the end of every day because some impediments take time to remove. For example, convincing a manager to dedicate a full-time resource to the team may take a series of discussions with some time between them.

While the ScrumMaster may not be a full-time job, the ScrumMaster should plan on being the ScrumMaster for the full duration of the project. It is very disruptive for a team to change ScrumMasters in midstream.

Influential

To be successful a ScrumMaster will need to influence others both on the team and outside it. Initially, team members may need to be influenced to give Scrum a fair trial or to behave more

collaboratively; later a ScrumMaster may influence a team to try new technical practices such as test-driven development or pair programming. A ScrumMaster should know how to exert influence without resorting to a command-and-control “because I say so” style.

Most ScrumMasters will also be called upon to influence those outside the team. A traditional team may need to be convinced to provide a partial implementation to the Scrum team, a QA director may need to be influenced to dedicate full-time testers to the project, or a vice president may need to be convinced to try Scrum at all.

While all ScrumMasters should know how to use their personal influence, the ideal ScrumMaster will come with a degree of corporate political skill. Corporate politics is often used pejoratively; however, a ScrumMaster who knows how decisions are made in the organization, who makes them, which coalitions exist, and so on can be an asset to a team

Knowledgeable

The best ScrumMasters have the technical, market, or specific knowledge to help the team in pursuit of its goal. LaFasto and Larson have studied successful teams and their leaders and have concluded that “an intimate and detailed knowledge of how something works increases the chance of the leader helping the team surface the more subtle technical issues that must be addressed.” LaFasto and Larson note that the knowledge may be broad rather than deep but that team leaders (such as ScrumMasters) “need to be conversant around the key technical issues.”²

Whether your team is able to select its own ScrumMaster or you are selecting one for the team, keeping these six key attributes in mind will help point you toward the person who will best fulfill the role of ScrumMaster.

¹“Responsibility Junkie”, Keith Lockhart in *Harvard Business Review*, October 2006, p. 30

²*When Teams Work Best*, Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 133.

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About the Author

As the founder of Mountain Goat Software, Mike Cohn specializes in helping companies adopt and improve their use of agile processes and techniques to build extremely high-performance teams. He is the author of *User Stories Applied for Agile Software Development*, *Agile Estimating and Planning*, and *Succeeding with Agile*. Mike is a founding member of the Agile Alliance and Scrum Alliance. Mike can be reached at hello@mountaingoatsoftware.com. If you want to succeed with agile, you can also [have Mike email you a short tip](#) each week.
