

The Role of Leaders on a Self-Organizing Team

by Mike Cohn •

43 Comments

Self-organization is a fundamental concept in agile project management. The Agile Manifesto includes the principle, “The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.” Yet a common misconception about [agile project management](#) approaches is that because of this reliance on self-organizing teams, there is little or no role for leaders of agile teams. Nothing could be further from the truth. In *The Biology of Business*, Philip Anderson refutes this mistaken assumption:

Self-organization does not mean that workers instead of managers engineer an organization design. It does not mean letting people do whatever they want to do. It means that management commits to guiding the evolution of behaviors that emerge from the interaction of independent agents instead of specifying in advance what effective behavior is.

Self-organizing teams are not free from management control. Management chooses for them what product to build or often chooses who will work on their project, but they are nonetheless self-organizing. Neither are they free from influence. Early references to Scrum were clear about this. In “*The New New Product Development Game*” from 1986, Takeuchi and Nonaka write that “subtle control is also consistent with the self-organizing character of project teams.”

An agile or Scrum team’s job is to self-organize around the challenges, and within the boundaries and constraints, put in place by management. Management’s job is to come up with appropriate challenges and remove impediments to self-organization. That being said, the fewer constraints or controls put on a team, the better. If leaders overly constrain how an agile team solves the challenge given to it, self-organization will not occur. The team will shut down; because it has already been told so much about the challenge and how to solve it, it will wait to hear the rest.

So how does an agile leader achieve the subtle balance between command and influence? Suppose you are a ScrumMaster for a team. You’ve noticed that one team member, Jeff, is

domineering and no one is willing to stand up to him. This team has self-organized—it has chosen to let Jeff make all key decisions. As the ScrumMaster for this team, though, you recognize that if Jeff continues to make all the decisions on his own it will impede the team's efforts to improve. You consider having a private conversation with Jeff, but that is unlikely to change much. You contemplate stepping in and overruling some decisions he makes, but if you do it once the team will expect you to continue to do so, which won't be good. Then you begin thinking about the agile principles of subtle control and influence. Perhaps you decide to change the team's dynamics by asking management to add someone new to the agile team, someone who is likely to stand up to Jeff. Or maybe you suggest to the enterprise architecture team that someone from its group attend key meetings—someone with the experience and background to challenge Jeff.

No matter the specific problem, if you see that the team has self-organized in a way that impedes it, it is your responsibility to find a way to agitate, stir up, or otherwise disturb the status quo, so that the team adjusts, hopefully reorganizing in a more productive way.

There is more to leading a self-organizing team than buying pizza and getting out of the way. Leaders influence teams in subtle and indirect ways. It is impossible for a leader to accurately predict how a team will respond to a change, whether that change is a different team composition, new standards of performance, a vicarious selection system, or so on. Leaders do not have all the answers. What they do have is the ability to agitate teams (and the organization itself) toward becoming more agile. For more details on how leaders can help teams and their organizations grow more agile, see Chapter 12 of [Succeeding with Agile](#).

**Anderson, Philip. 1999. *Seven levers for guiding the evolving enterprise*.

***The Biology of Business: Decoding the natural laws of enterprise*, ed. John Henry Clippinger III, page 120.

Posted: January 7, 2010

Tagged: scrummaster, teamwork, agile project management, teams, agile manifesto, self organizing teams

About the Author

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 as well as the [Better User Stories](#) video course. Mike is a founding member of the Agile Alliance and Scrum Alliance and 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.
