

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest

The ideal scrum master¹

Henny Portman

Introduction

When are you the ideal scrum master? If the product owner is a five-legged sheep, what is a good description of the scrum master? In this compact article, you will find a few valuable insights and reading tips for further exploration.

The Scrum Guide

The Scrum Guide², shows that the scrum master is accountable for establishing Scrum as defined in the Scrum Guide. They do this by helping everyone understand Scrum theory and practice, both within the Scrum Team and the organization. The Scrum Master is accountable for the Scrum Team's effectiveness. They do this by enabling the Scrum Team to improve its practices, within the Scrum framework. Scrum Masters are true leaders who serve the Scrum Team and the larger organization.

The Scrum Master serves the Scrum Team in several ways, including:

- Coaching the team members in self-management and cross-functionality
- Helping the Scrum Team focus on creating high-value Increments that meet the Definition of Done
- Causing the removal of impediments to the Scrum Team's progress; and,
- Ensuring that all Scrum events take place and are positive, productive, and kept within the timebox.

The Scrum Master serves the Product Owner in several ways, including:

- Helping find techniques for effective Product Goal definition and Product Backlog management
- Helping the Scrum Team understand the need for clear and concise Product Backlog items
- Helping establish empirical product planning for a complex environment; and,
- Facilitating stakeholder collaboration as requested or needed.

¹ How to cite this article: Portman, H. (2022). The Ideal Scrum Master, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue V, May.

² <https://scrumguides.org/scrum-guide.html>

The Scrum Master serves the organization in several ways, including:

- Leading, training, and coaching the organization in its Scrum adoption
- Planning and advising Scrum implementations within the organization
- Helping employees and stakeholders understand and enact an empirical approach for complex work; and,
- Removing barriers between stakeholders and Scrum Teams.

Scrum Mom' syndrome

In a blog³ by Stefan Wolpers, the 'Scrum Mom' syndrome was described. The 'Scrum Mom' syndrome is an anti-pattern that new or starting scrum masters sometimes fall into. This syndrome is characterized by the following aspects when you:

- do everything yourself instead of coaching the team to do it themselves
- keep negative feedback away from the team
- pamper the team
- are too accommodating and do not set the team enough boundaries
- prevent the team from making mistakes and learning from them
- are too quick to accept how the team functions
- love all team members and have a favorite team member.

A scrum master is not a project manager

A scrum master is sometimes compared with a project manager. Unlike a scrum master, the project manager monitors the planning, budget and scope and reports on progress. The project manager also prioritizes and assigns tasks to teams or team members.

The 8 Stances of a Scrum Master

The whitepaper *The 8 Stances of a Scrum Master*⁴ describes eight roles that the scrum master must be able to deploy situationally.

Role	Description
Servant leader	Servant Leader whose focus is on the needs of the team members and those they serve (the customer), with the goal of achieving results in line with the organization's values, principles, and business objectives.
Coach	Coach coaching the individual with a focus on mindset and behavior, the team in continuous improvement and the organization in truly collaborating with the Scrum Team.

³ <https://age-of-product.com/scrums-mom/>

⁴ <https://www.scrum.org/resources/8-stances-scrum-master>

Facilitator	Facilitator by setting the stage and providing clear boundaries in which the team can collaborate.
Teacher	Teacher to ensure Scrum and other relevant methods are understood and enacted.
Mentor	Mentor that transfers agile knowledge and experience to the team.
Manager	Manager responsible for managing impediments, eliminating waste, managing the process, managing the team’s health, managing the boundaries of self-organization, and managing the culture.
Impediment Remover	Impediment Remover solving blocking issues to the team’s progress, taking into account the self-organizing capabilities of the Development Team.
Change agent	Change agent to enable a culture in which scrum teams can flourish.

Scrum Master competence framework

Agile cockpit⁵ describes a Scrum Master competence framework based on 8 Agilities and 19 competencies.

Competence	Description	Sub-competence
Personal Agility	The ability to be self-aware and have a realistic view of one’s own strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional intelligence • Active listening
People Agility	The ability to understand and relate to other people and collaboratively work with them in dynamic situations to harness and multiply collective performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Servant leadership style • Coaching • Facilitation • Teaching • Communication • Conflict management
Stakeholder Agility	The ability to leverage data to understand and validate stakeholder’s/customer’s assumptions and hypotheses and ensure complete stakeholder/customer satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration
Results Agility	The ability to deliver valuable results in short iterations by inspiring teams and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process improvement • Value maximalization

⁵ <https://www.agilecockpit.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Competencies-of-a-Scrum-Master.pdf>

	enabling the organization to execute long-range strategic plans.	
Mental Agility	The ability to think critically to deal with complex problems and expand possibilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lean thinking • Problem solving
Change Agility	The ability to identify and seize opportunities in a consistently changing environment and enabling teams to contribute to change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading and facilitating change • Adapting to change
Innovation Agility	The ability to focus on untested hypotheses and validate their relevance through continuous experimentation to trigger creative discovery and innovation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity
Systems Agility	The ability to embrace, encourage and follow systems thinking, Agile values, principles and practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and organization skills • Systems thinking • Agile principles and Scrum values

Creative metaphors

The blog⁶ *Puzzled about the Scrum Master Role in Scrum?* gives some twenty creative metaphors for the scrum master that can also get you thinking about the role of the scrum master: a leader but not a manager, a sheepdog, a helicopter parent, a little bit of oil, roundabout master, general family physician, bosun (boatswain), gardener, professional football coach, football referee, firefighter, host leader, nitrous oxide system, race-car mechanic, chief mechanic, team coach, process owner, protector of the team, personal trainer, or orchestra conductor.

Scrum Master anti-patterns

Stefan Wolpers gives over 160 Scrum, including scrum master, anti-patterns in *The Scrum Anti-Patterns Guide— A Hands-on Manual from the Trenches*⁷.

⁶ <https://vitalitychicago.com/blog/puzzled-about-scrum-master-role-scrum-framework/>

⁷ <https://age-of-product.com/scrums-anti-patterns/>

Luis Gonçalves gives in his blog *Scrum Master Anti-Patterns That Every Scrum Master Must Understand*⁸ some common scrum master anti-patterns.

Scrum master Anti-pattern	How to avoid
Scrum master instead of project manager	First, the Scrum Master must be aware of his behavior to be able to correct it.
Role mixed with product owners	Ensure both product owner and scrum master understand their roles and responsibilities.
Lack of understanding of focus	Demonstrate to the Scrum Master and the team how important it is to work on one single topic at a time.
Scrum masters do not coach the organization	A good possibility to solve this problem is to bring external coaches for some months to teach scrum masters to become a great team and organizational coaches.
Scrum master is just a secretary	The scrum master has dozens of different roles and hats, but this is far away from the secretary job that most of the companies associate scrum masters with.
Scrum master does not coach the product owner	Make sure the Scrum Master is not only focusing on “team tasks” but also on the business part.
Scrum master is not recognized by management	Managers need to understand “What is an Agile Manager“, they need to understand that this job is different than in traditional companies. Managers need to understand that scrum masters are their partners of success, and their life is much easier if they support them since the beginning.
Change scrum master role often	Don’t. The big problem with this idea relies on the fact that every time a person within a team changes, the interactions between people change.

Conclusion

As a scrum master, do not be a 'Scrum Mom' but a five- plus three-legged sheep, avoid the scrum master anti-patterns and choose the metaphor or stance that the situation calls for. In that case an important precondition for successful product delivery has been met.

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series

This article is part of a series of articles called *Sensemaking in the Agile Forest*. This series⁹ consists of the following parts:

⁸ <https://adaptmethodology.com/scrummaster-antipatterns/>

⁹ This series is based on a number of short blogs I made for Forsa Advies, a project management training organization in the Netherlands (<https://www.forsa-advies.nl>).

- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Scrum? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article 2, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue II, February](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Is agile always better? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue III, March](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The ideal Product Owner, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue IV, April](#)
- The ideal Scrum Master
- Is an agile team always autonomous?
- What do iterative and incremental mean in Agile?
- The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) unraveled
- Prioritizing in an agile team (MoSCoW, WSJF)
- Multitasking task switching or monotasking
- Being predictable as an agile team (story points, velocity, t-shirt sizing, flying fingers)
- Self-managing or self-organizing agile teams
- Slicing user stories
- Agile management products (burn-down and burn-up charts)
- Agile user testing (cohorts, A/B testing)
- The Kanban board (WIP-limit, cumulative flow diagram)
- Culture makes or breaks your agile transformation
- Getting started as an agile team (a pilot)
- The evolution of agile frameworks
- ?

Please let me know if you would like to add specific agile topics to this series.

About the Author



Henny Portman

The Netherlands



Henny Portman, owner of Portman PM[O] Consultancy and was partner of HWP Consulting, has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, program, and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches, and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional (PM(O)) communities.

Henny Portman is/was accredited in a variety of qualifications, including P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and an SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant (PMO Global Alliance). On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition to this, he is an international speaker, author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field, and an active blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com/).

Henny can be contacted at henny.portman@gmail.com.