ScrumMaster. Clarify roles to boost your teams productivity!

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Background

Did you ask yourself – What's going on here? Why don't we come to a decision? Why is this task pending forever? Who are all the attendees in this meeting? …

Unclear roles cause unclear situations and produce a lot of waste!

Reading this post you'll find some answers on situations to watch for role conflicts, possible solutions and consequences if you don't take the responsibility.

Watch your environment

Signs for missing role clarifications

Scan for a lack of decision making. If decisions take long and it's not clear who needs to be involved in coming to conclusions to foster decisions – this can be a clear sign for unclear roles.
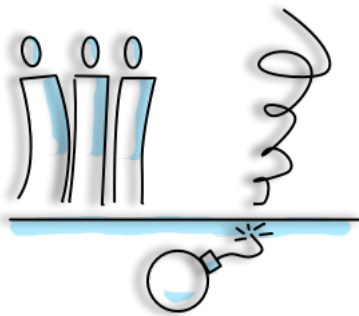
Delayed discussions. Do you face the problem that discussions don't take place immediately when necessary? Are discussions handled indirectly – through other topics, through other team members? Beside the possible absence of trust, it also points in the direction of missing role definitions.

Long E-Mail distribution lists and unclear meeting attendee lists. Do you remember situations sitting in a meeting without a clue of the role of each attendee? In E-Mails – you

ask yourself whom to add to the subscription list and to be sure you add some more and later there are still complaints from missing ones. Again, roles?
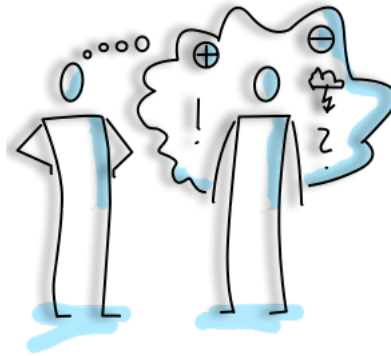
Negative energy and tendency of subgroups bashing another. Unclear roles lead to assumptions about the role and the connected responsibilities. This way it's ensured that assumptions don't match with facts and frustration and disappointments are the results.

Pending tasks and missing responsibility. You have a team (shared) responsibility – sometimes leading to no one taking the responsibility? Getting the roles clear and knowing the routes for tasks is important to avoid waste by delays.

## Possible consequences of unclear roles

Friction and stress. Through assumptions about one's role and often missing communication, team member drift away from each other. Taking tasks on their own, causing irritations by the peer feeling responsible for it. Slowly but surely you feel and later see increasing walls, causing stress and friction in the whole team.

Waste! A lot of not necessary communication to go the save way and missing knowledge, whom to talk to. Delays in decisions. Raising emotions based on disappointments – causing lost focus in projects. Meta discussions, spreading discussions – not solution focussed. Doubled work – because it's not clear how does what and why.

ScrumMaster – do you see your role?

Observe. You can see distractions, disharmony, lack of decision making, pending tasks,… during the daily work with the team. It's inherent in your role and your responsibility.

- Check for pending tasks in the daily Scrum. Ask for clarification who does what – e.g. Who does the review together? Who starts the test? Who implements class XYZ? I recommend a name shortcut on the task card as soon as you start working on the task (not before ;-))
- Check if meetings have a well defined agenda, that the attendee list is sufficient and everyones role in the meeting is clear
- Watch discussion paths. Is the same topic discussed again and again among different peers? Why?
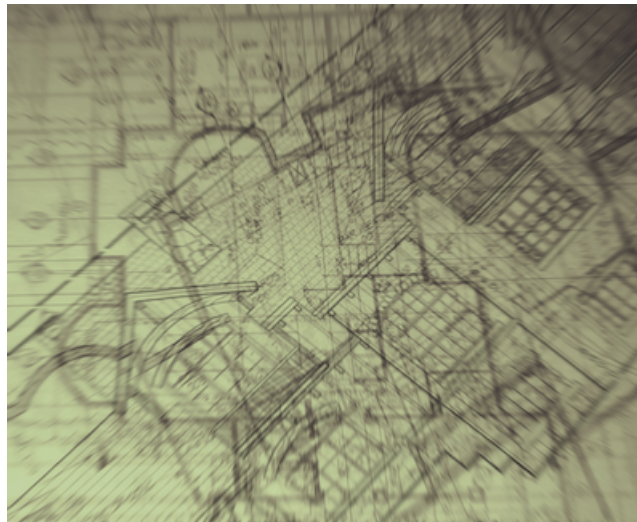
Make it transparent. Discuss your observations in the retrospective (or even immediately). As soon as you feel the routes are not clear in the team, you should act as the mirror to the team!

Ask for suggestions to solve it and depending on your team maturity level – guide or coach the team (respecting the already Scrum inherent role descriptions – ScrumMaster, ProductOwner, Dev Team).

Transparency is an important step.

Visualize the roles. Note the teams conclusions for later recaps with new team members and the team itself (sometimes we forget things ;-).

Foster clarification. What roles does the team need and who fulfills the roles. Who takes the responsibility and makes final decisions?

Respect but also challenge hierarchy. Sometimes you need to escalate topics. It's best to try it first via the hierarchy. But sometimes the hierarchy is weak. It's the ScrumMasters strength to challenge it and go the way necessary!

If it smells, clarify it!

Circles of influence

In the Scrum team (including Product Owner and ScrumMaster). This is the ScrumMasters direct circle of influence. It's your daily task to check for possible role irritations.
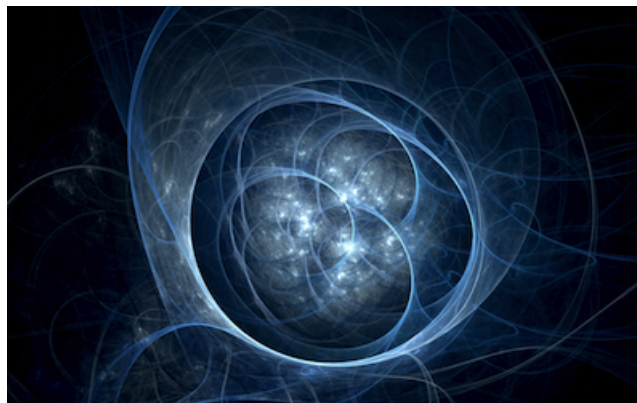
Across teams. Check for missing role clarity for the Scrum of Scrum, Scrum of ScrumMaster, Scrum of Architects, Scrum of Testers,…. Discuss role definitions among the ScrumMasters to enable cross team learning.

With Stakeholders. Check with the product owner if the role and influence of the stakeholders is clear for the team. What is their circle of influence?

With external partners (freelancer, implementation partners). Do they know your teams role distribution. Does the team have the picture what to expect from an external?

With management. Who are the contact points in management for what questions? How does management influence with the project work? To whom to escalate, if necessary.

Potential sources of role clashes

Architecture. Who has the final say? How to consolidate architecture across teams?

Testing. What kind of tests do you need and who defines and implements them? For sure a source of necessary clarification as soon as you start working with an agile tester in your team.

ScrumMaster, ProductOwner, Dev team. Although a lot is written by the agile community about the roles – in reality it is often still a lot of discussion necessary who does what and why.

As this changes with the team's maturity level too – another important area for support by the ScrumMaster.

ScrumMaster and next management level. A clear potential role conflict, if not properly discussed and defined right from the beginning. There are a lot of overlapping parts, especially in newly setup Scrum environments. It is up to you to open the discussion and remove assumption based role finding.

Management and Management. Who decides in what area? What is the circle of influence and how does it affect the team(s)? Implies – whom to contact. A not that easy to walk area … but the most important as decisions often have a high impact on your environment.

Beware agility

Clarifying roles is important to enable a smooth flow.
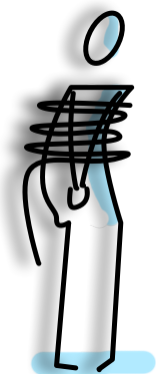
But to narrowed role usage and insisting on roles can hinder agility. Being agile means constant inspection and adaption – roles are included.

If a role does not any longer make sense, change it or remove it (as long as you really checked for consequences and you know what you do. Destroying the memeplex

(Scrum) is easy and not the goal).

What you earn when getting the roles clear

Faster processes. Decisions are done in time with the members involved that are necessary (less peer to peer discussion, clear decision paths).

Focus on things that matter. No waste of energy in meta discussions and role conflicts with all side effects. Team members hold each other accountable, based on facts and lesser assumptions.

More fun and and an environment people like to work in. Unresolved role conflicts (as conflicts in general) eat motivation – in opposition clear roles increase motivation.

What's your experience with roles and potential conflicts? How did you address it in your environment? Something to add from your side! Thanks for commenting on it.

Update 2015-02-07 – Check out the whiteboard animation describing the role of an Agile Coach/ScrumMaster