

# Developing Great Agile Coaches

## Towards a Framework of Agile Coaching Competency – Part I



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### Purpose

Getting good results with Agile is relatively easy: form a cross-functional team, prioritize backlog items, create shippable product each iteration. Basically, follow the process and your team is likely to deliver value. No surprise here.

Getting truly great results, especially consistently, is a bit more rare. Great results require a great team. And great teams rarely just happen. A team aspiring towards greatness often needs a coach: trained, experienced, competent in her craft.

Ah, there's the rub! How do we create good (even great) Agile Coaches? We maintain that, as an industry we do not know how.

Beyond basic Agile training, there is no clear path a coach can take towards competence, let alone mastery. For instance, how do Agile coaches know *what* to study, with *whom*, and for *how long*? Just as bad, who (or what) will recognize them when they achieve competence?

Consistently creating competent Agile coaches requires *guidelines* for what coaches do, *criteria* related to what they must know, and one or more *methods or pathways* to help them get there. In former times, the guild structure developed 'craftsmen,' who became skilled practitioners. In the modern world, the concept of a *profession* has replaced the guilds. Agile coaching has neither. It is conducted in an *ad hoc*, even erratic manner. It is not a profession.

We believe, however, that Agile Coaching is an *emerging* profession. And we hope to be agents in—and accelerators of—that evolution.

Our intention is to begin giving form to the discipline of Agile Coaching. In this paper, we focus on the core element needed for Agile Coaching to become a profession: we propose the *beginnings* of a competency model, namely a framework for a competency model. We believe that now is the time for such a framework: to begin using it, to learn from its use, and to evolve the framework through new situations, uses and needs.

We welcome your feedback at [agilecoachinginstitute.com/resources/competency-model/](http://agilecoachinginstitute.com/resources/competency-model/).

### A Competency Framework

A competency model is a key prerequisite for a serious profession. Here we want to distinguish a competency model from the competency *framework* outlined in this paper.

To make clear the contrast, let's look at an example competency *model* from the International Coach Federation (ICF): (<http://www.coachfederation.org/research-education/icf-credentials/core-competencies/>). Here is an excerpt from the ICF competency model revealing its very specific level of detail:

#### C. Communicating Effectively

**6. Powerful Questioning** - Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client

1. Asks questions that reflect active listening and an understanding of the client's perspective,

2. Asks questions that evoke discovery, insight, commitment or action (e.g., those that challenge the client's assumptions),
3. Asks open-ended questions that create greater clarity, possibility or new learning
4. Asks questions that move the client towards what they desire, not questions that ask for the client to justify or look backwards.

This level of behavioral detail supports a fair process (such as certification) that allows experts to judge whether others have met the standards in the model.

For Agile Coaching, this level of detail may well be useful *at some point*, but it is not the first move to make. Instead, we are proposing a *framework* for the competencies an Agile Coach needs, rather than specific behavioral statements that may be required for different applications. We hope to activate the Agile community into reflection, introspection and discussion of this framework, not debate or argument about the details that *could* become necessary at some later point.

Our framework consists of eight primary areas of competence that provide a focus for education and professional development for the aspiring Agile Coach. The competency areas are clear statements of direction, rather than detailed enough to allow practitioners to judge whether they (or others) have acquired the relevant competency.

## An Overview of the Competencies

A brief description of the eight Agile Coaching competencies follows, divided into four clusters, plus a central integrating *stance*.

### **'Process-focused' competencies: Coaching & Facilitating**

Coaching and facilitating are related areas of expertise. In both, the practitioner is responsible for holding the *process* on behalf of the client<sup>1</sup>, rather than acting as an

*expert* in the content. For instance, the Coach holds the 'mirror of accountability' for the individual, team, group or organization they coach. Similarly, the Facilitator conducts the process of the meeting or event without getting involved in the content.

Specifically, acting as a Coach means allowing the client's priorities and values to determine the direction, rather than the coach's expertise or opinion. In the same vein, the ability to act as Facilitator for a team or group process requires hewing to their purpose and definition of success, rather than to one's own.

Of note, both Coaching and Facilitating are professions in their own right, with competency models, professional standards, and ethics.

### **'Content-focused' competencies: Teaching & Mentoring**

In Teaching and Mentoring—in contrast to Coaching and Facilitating—the practitioner specifically relies on her content expertise, seeking to impart some of it to the client.

Teaching is the ability to offer the right knowledge, at the right time, taught in the right way, so that individuals, teams and organizations absorb and use the knowledge for their best benefit. It requires a focus on both *why* and *how* people learn.

In a parallel manner, the ability to Mentor requires enabling others to learn, grow, and become better professionals, thereby advancing their career and their team's results. A good mentor does this in a way that does not merely provide the answers, but builds capability in the mentee.

Teaching is clearly its own profession, though competency models here tend to be more distributed or localized. In contrast, mentoring does not appear to be a profession *per se*, but more a skill set for professionals of any type. Mentors may use the relevant competency model of their profession when working as a mentor.

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<sup>1</sup> Our use of the term *client* is not meant to apply only to external Agile Coaches, but to employee Agile Coaches as well. This is similar to how the

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concept is used by internal Organization Development practitioners, who typically see themselves as a consulting service within their organization.

### ***Agile-Lean Practitioner: Knowledge & Application***

The third cluster is the area most Agile Coach training focuses upon. In fact, it is often the *only* knowledge area and skill set even considered by Agile Coaches. As they begin their career as Agile Coach, this may make sense. As time goes on, however, it becomes limiting, even debilitating.

First, *Agile Knowledge* is the ability to learn and deeply understand Agile and Lean frameworks and principles, not only the practices, but also at the level of the underlying principles and values.

Second, *Agile Application* is the ability to use Agile and Lean practices on real teams, in real organizations, innovating practices in a way consistent with the underlying principles and values, and to apply their use in novel situations appropriately.

### ***Domain Mastery***

Our intent in this area is perhaps the most difficult to understand, and for some it may even be an optional portion of the framework. We divide it into three very different areas: technical, business and transformational. A given Agile Coach will likely become expert in only one. The degree to which competence (or even mastery) is useful in each area will be driven by the organizational and business context, as well as the Agile Coach's personal proclivities. We compare the three Domain Master areas to that of a doctor with his or her specialty (e.g., pediatrics, surgery, etc.).

### ***Technical Mastery***

Technical Mastery is the ability to get your hands dirty architecting, designing, coding, test engineering, or performing some other technical practice, with a focus on promoting technical craftsmanship through example and teaching-by-doing. This Technical Mastery is typically 'delivered' through Mentoring or Teaching.

### ***Business Mastery***

Business Mastery is the ability to apply business strategy and management

frameworks, product innovation techniques, six sigma or other business process management approaches, and other techniques that relate to innovating products, processes or operations in the business domain. Business Mastery is often paired with Teaching, Mentoring or Facilitating.

### ***Transformational Mastery***

Transformational Mastery is the ability to facilitate, catalyze and (as appropriate) lead organizational change and transformation. This area draws on change management, organization culture, organization development, systems thinking, and other behavioral sciences. Transformational Mastery is frequently paired with Coaching and Facilitating, plus Teaching in some instances.

## **The 'Coaching Stance': The Heart of the Competency Framework**

What we call the "coaching stance" is for us the heart of the competency framework because it informs all the other competencies. The *coaching stance* is the place we start from, the place we return, and ideally the place we include when using any of the other competencies.

Without the *coaching stance*, the work of an Agile Coach may become manipulative, ideological, and driven by the coach's own desires—even when those desires are seemingly benign and believed to be in the 'best interest' of the client.

Watch-words of the coaching stance are *maintaining neutrality, serving the client's agenda, reducing client dependence, not colluding, and signature presence*.

**Maintaining neutrality** – By neutrality, we mean the ability to "not vote" on your favorite position, for instance when the team is discussing a problem, or an individual is working something through for themselves, with your help. Neutrality is clear when using the Facilitating or Coaching competencies, but we extend it to Teaching and Mentoring. The neutrality we mean extends even to the point of assisting the client in choosing *not* to use Agile, if that is 'what is trying to happen' in their organization, or is what the client chooses after full exploration of the consequences.

**Serving the client's agenda** – 'Client' in this context could mean an individual, a team, an

organizational department, or the whole organization. Each of these has an agenda. “Serving” could mean holding (balancing, reflecting, supporting) all of these agenda’s at the same time. The underlying belief: *They* are the experts in their own lives and organizations - they are whole and can make their own choices.

**Reducing client dependence** - Everything an Agile Coach does is for the sake of transferring a practice, skill, mindset or value to the client, striving to create a healthy agile ecosystem that is self-monitoring, self-correcting and self-sustaining. For instance, external Agile Coaches should build an organization’s ability to develop and sustain their own Coaches, developing them in the full breadth of the competencies described here. Internal Agile Coaches should build the capabilities of every Agilist and every team, trusting that there will always be more and better challenges to face.

**Not colluding** - The coach does not collude with the client’s desire to accommodate their dysfunctions or limitations. If the client reformulates their chosen Agile method to sidestep problems Agile has exposed, then the coach calls this out, reflecting the current situation, making plain what is actually happening, but without attachment or judgment. The coach does not “go along” with the compromise but, instead, recognizes the current situation for what it is, meets the client where they are, holds out the vision of Agile done well and continues to coach from a place of letting the coaching be loving, compassionate and uncompromising (*Coaching Agile Teams*, p. 81).

While this may seem paradoxical, this approach is not inconsistent with Neutrality. On the one hand, we do not “pretend” with the client that they are really taking an Agile approach even when they are not. On the other hand, we do not resort to shaming or coercing them into doing it “the right way.”

**Signature Presence** – The concept of signature presence is from Mary Beth O’Neill in her book *Executive Coaching*

*with Backbone and Heart*. We use it here to mean the Agile Coach must find their unique voice, their individual way of expressing their coaching, of taking a stand when necessary, and of being authentic while filling their role.

This *coaching stance* is, for us, the default position as an Agile Coach. This stance makes what we do powerful, filled with integrity, and respectful of the client’s right to choose. Ideally applied in all eight competency areas, it is ultimately a distillation of, and largely borrowed from, the Coaching competency area and the world of professional coaching.

## Leadership

If the *coaching stance* is metaphorically like the earth, underlying the framework, then Leadership is like the sky. Above all, the Agile Coach is a leader – a leader who seeks to enroll others in a vision, the “Agile vision;” a leader who leads from a spirit of service to others rather than of “taking charge” or attempting to achieve something in particular.

For an Agile Coach, the concept of “servant as leader” (Robert Greenleaf, *Servant as Leader*) should combine with the notion of a *Catalyst Leader* (from *Leadership Agility*, Bill Joiner & Stephen Josephs). The type of leadership we mean is not soft or weak, despite the reference to servant. The leadership we mean is the ability to build culture, to enroll members in a common vision, to lead by example, to seek to truly understand before attempting to take ‘leaderful’ action, as well as the ability to stand in one’s truth without backing down, yet without harshness or attacking those who disagree. We will have more to say on leadership in subsequent writings.

## Conclusion

In this first part, we have made the case for a competency framework for Agile Coaches based on eight complementary disciplines, linked together by the *coaching stance*. In part two, we will dive into some detail for each of the eight competency areas, then consider how the framework can be used for applications such as self-assessment, creating an Agile Coach development plan, selecting Agile Coaches, and others.