Agile Journey discussion series:
("Sharing is Learning"):

Real Agile Coaching?

By Yesper Olsen at March 2021
(Request PDF version at yesper@yescoaching.dk)
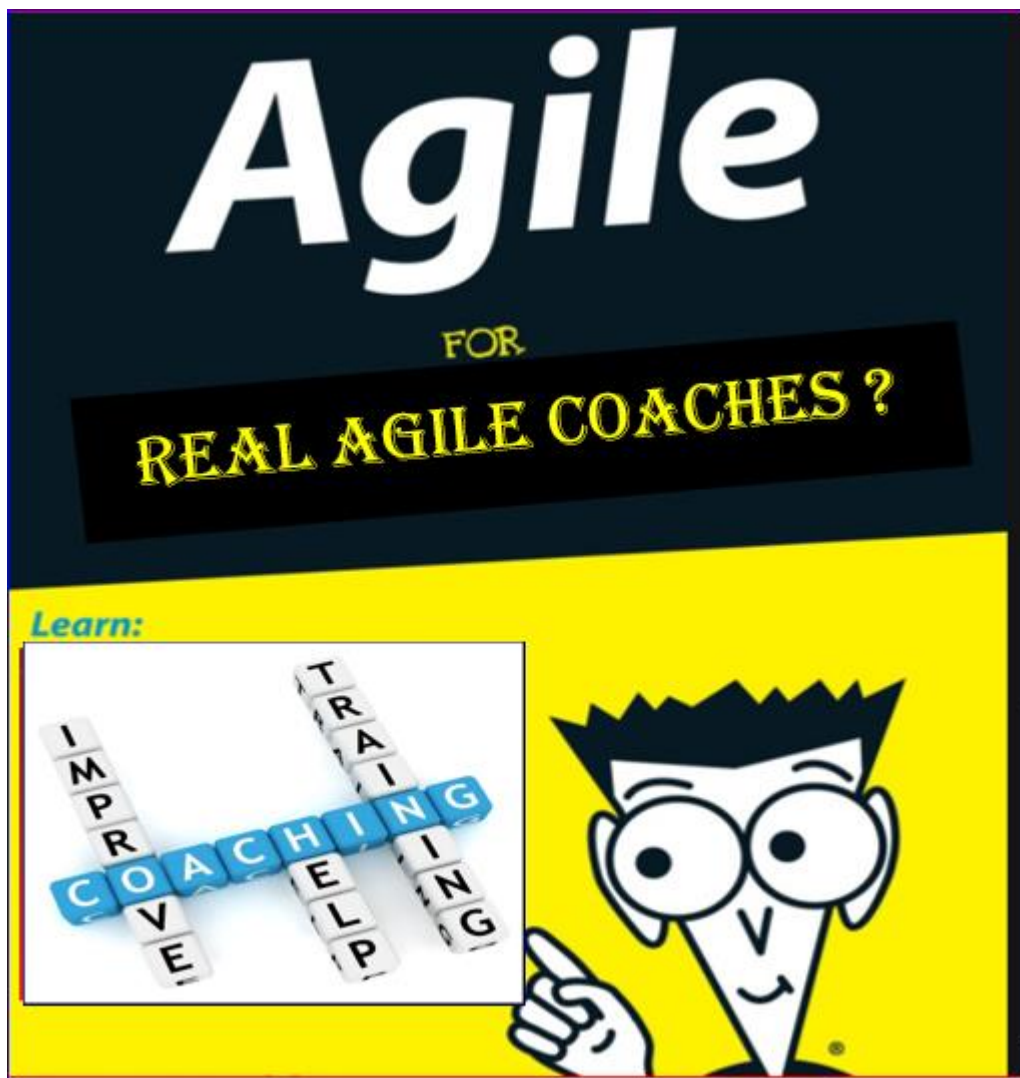
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01 Introduction:

If you sometimes ask yourself this question:

"Am I a real Agile Coach?

Then the answer is probably **yes** if you ask and No if you don't.

Let this be the "cliff-hanger" for continuing reading 😊

Actually both words, "**Agile**" and "**Coach**" are so used and misused that everyone has their own opinion and definition of the term, and you often have to use a lot of energy to convince people of the definition and value.

This article, sorry to say will not give you this answer, but at least will indicate some of the elements that should be in place to call yourself a Real Agile coach.

The primary reason is that this cannot be answer by you and I you luckily only indirectly will answered by others agile results because:

"It Starts with you – but is not about you " (Lyssa Adkins)

So what you get here is my reflection based on experience and input from much cleverer people like Lyssa Adkins (Ref03), Agile42(Ref04) , Agile Book club and other CoP and many more.

I've been in the IT Consulting business for 34 years, in all areas you can think of, including waterfall development, and have spent the last 7-8 years in the agile world(Ref01).

But the most interesting for this article is properly my background as a certificated systemic coach (EMCC Senior level) and my experience by own company (Ref02). So, my mind is actual traditional coaching and combined with IT, Waterfall and Agile my reflections on the question "Real Coaching?" could maybe be get interesting.

To make sure this document is light reading it is created as a 10 Commandments, and a subset of statements for some of the primary roles.

Even if this look like a check list – it's not!!

Use this as starting point for your agile reflections journey and not as the destination.

This simple article is divided into 4 chapters and references/appendix:

- 01 Introduction – This chapter
- 02 Ten Commandments /tips: My reflection on the agile coach role
- 03 Agile Coach Roles – A structured introduction to many roles
- 04 Retrospectively – A retro wrap up of this article

02 Ten Commandments:

Even if this "Narrative" may sound like some religious rules, it could not be further from that.
As you know, Agile is a mindset and has some relatively simple values and principles, and you must know more to go for heaven :-)

So here are my "best" 10 tips of the day and memories from my agile journeys so far.

Overview:

Tips:
1. Listen to be understood
2. Silence is often the best answer
3. Stay at Meta and Process level but remember....
4. Release your control and release potential for everybody
5. Know and BElieve and trust agile
6. Know your preference and know yourself
7. Never stop unlearning and Learning by crying
8. Conflicts are good
9. Be the Change
10. Be the "Missing Agile link"

Prospects (cliff-hangers for asking me questions :-):
11. Never stop unlearning (Project Manager, Control, Prove yourself)
12. Learn to swim up and away from the Waterfall (but remember WF could also be beautiful and a right solution in a lot of situations)
13. Do you own learning sprints, but slow ("Some time the fastest way is to go slow and sometime you have to let go" (Tina Dickhow)
14. A Servant leader should unemploy him/herself and look for next the meaningful task to do.
15. Agile is Lean but Waterfall is also a Flow
16. "If you just play **SAfe**, Go for **LeSS** or just project your own **SPOT**ify - you lose the game and this will just be "Your 5 min of Frame"
17. Begin with the end in mind" Then do "First things first". (Ref: 06)

Tip01: Listen to be understood (Stephen Covey)

As an Agile Coach your only real "tool" is people, and people share by talking and are motivated by sharing. So if you really listen with the mindset of understanding people's standpoint you actual will have better chance to grow people and make them self-understand their potential and opportunities (Ref. 06)

Tip02: Silence is often the best answer (Dalai Lama)

People often do reflections in silence and a mind shift takes time. So even if you as an Agile Coach think you have a solution and would like to help – consider waiting for some extra time since the lasting solution is often the one that the team have come up with themselves/ . So sow a seed and let people themselves decide if this should grow. Also as a Conflict Navigator (see next chapter) it's important that don't take a stand and you let team learn how to navigate and grow.

Tip03: Stay at Meta and Process level but remember...
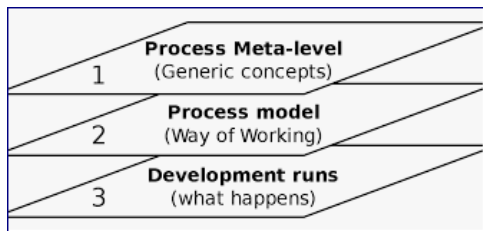
As an Agile Coach your focus should be on the process level and above, so the team could use all their time on the content and actual work. And even when the team is more mature you also could let some of the process focus be in the agile team and "just" focus on meta level including alignment for other processes etc. But a concern could be that this will be too abstract for the team. So remember now and then to join the team at the content level by for example doing Gemba walks or invite for small Shu/Ha/Ri (Ref. 04)

Tip04: Release your control and release potential for everybody

Often the most challenges for humans incl. Agile Coaches 😊 is to really avoid keeping control, especially since we traditionally have a control culture. But by doing this with a real coach and agile mindset – potential will grow and fly. Not just for the agile team, but also for you as a coach, since you simply save energy for other focus areas. But this is not a quick fix since we have been used to being control-junkies for along time and it demands a lot of agile gasoline called "Trust" to let go.

Tip05: Know and BElive and trust agile

To Know or not to Know - The difference between Doing and Being Agile - that's a question of trust. Most agile journeys start with just Doing – but you know you reach the next level of Being agile when you unconsciously just do the right things. So as an Agile Coach, you should be getting a lot practice by aiming for this level and accept that your starting point is often consciously incompetent.

Tip06: Know your preference and know you self

"It starts with you but it's not about you" - So start to know yourself, your preferences and history. This insight gives you outsight to make it easier to see the world as the agile team. In other words, this empowers your coaching skills and turns potential concerns into benefits. So, take your time for this insight with respect for people around you.

Tip07: Never stop unlearning and Learning by crying
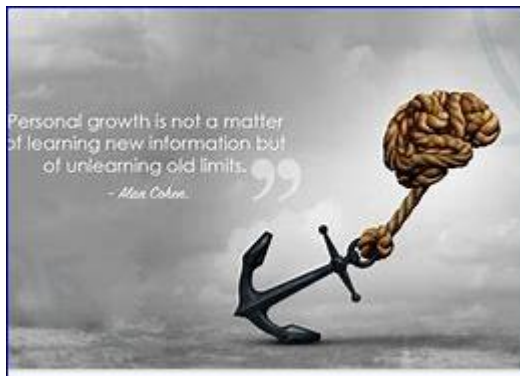
A real agile mindset is many ways a paradigm shift and demands unlearning some well-established habits. Some of them are control, power and influence and could demand a lot of fighting and "crying" to change. This goes for the Agile Coach as well for Agile teams and organizations. So to be aware of this process since this is an important skill of a coach,

Tip08: Conflicts are good

"Enjoy the honeymoon , but grow by conflict": Real team simply have to be in the storming phase to really learn and grow. So as an Agile Coach you shouldn't invent conflicts, but also shouldn't, on the other hand, either hide or ignore them. Actually, you should consider this as an opportunity for the team to go for next level (Ref. 03)

Tip09: Be the Change

Lead by example and be a role model etc. This is often addressed for a Servant leader and Agile Coach –but to really cover this you have to BE the change. Meaning if the transformation has demands eg. new role/tasks or uncertain issues – you should actually, not just do it but BE the change. So, no free ride on the agile journey

Tip10: Be the "Missing Agile link"

Often agile transformations have focus on improving and solving a lot of issues. Even if different layers of the organization (Portfolio, Program, Team) are doing fine, the actual and real outcome often is missing. Since the Agile Coach often sees this from a Process Meta level (see Tip03) some missing links could be visible when seen from this dimension. So, without actual DO'ing the Agile Coach could actual in some cases play the role of BEing this link.

03 Agile Coach roles:

The role of an agile coach is actually just what is needed nothing more and nothing less. By this I mean don't invent a role that is not necessary for the team and remember:
"It Starts with you – but is not about you "(Lyssa Adkins)

On the other hand you should not be afraid to jump into a role that the team needs as long as you don't take the self-organisation and agile mindset from them.

So as an Agile Coach you should act as a real AgileHumanBeing and cover many other roles and in different combinations.

So below (inspired by Lyssa Adkins (Ref. 03)) are some more of my reflections on Agile Coach roles and I repeat you this is not a checklist – just inspiration.
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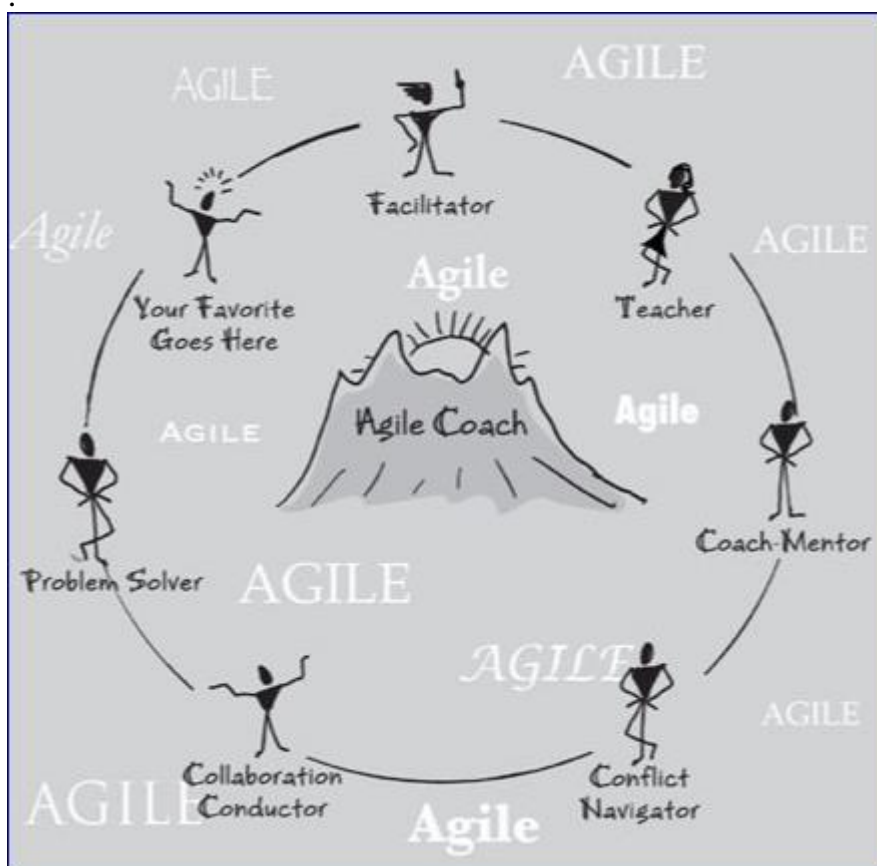
And as you see she added the spot "Your Favorite Goes Here" and use this as reminder that this model has room for improvement by you ("Inspect", "Adjust" and Adapt) and is not a total list of all roles.

Coach/Mentor:

This role simply involves coaching/Mentoring the Agile Team and environment to gain the insight to grow the team in the Agile Context and as individuals.

- Potential awareness (Individual/Team/Org.)
- Guiding and BE Agile
- Situational and servant based "leader"ship
- Motivate potential next steps
- Influence "System" and environment around agile
- Focus on opportunities
- Drive Meta level (process) of coaching
- Be Agile SME of process NOT content
- Coach all Agile WIP for example PO, SM, DevTeam ,Business and "System"

Facilitator:

This role covers the role of driving and doing facilitation of the agile process on behalf and respect of Agile Team and environment.

- SME in agile process and mindset
- Process" Driver" but not carrier of content
- Ask Powerful questions, but keep options open
- Offer Structure of the ceremonies - but don't be religious
- Observe on all levels and channels
- Be agile and transparently use other roles

Teacher:

This role covers the only role where the Agile Coach is considered as a sort of general agile expert and by teaching, invites the team to learn, reflect, inspect, adjust and adapt.

- Be agile and its ok here to be SME and not a coach
- Teach aligned with the team's maturity
- Be transparent that you are in the teaching role
- Make room for reflection, challenging and owning growth.
- Teach from "Copy/Follow" to "Inspect, Adjust and Adapt"
- Teach based on e.g. mindset, values, principles, Vision, Purpose, Norms, Roles and process.

Problem Solver:

This role covers the role of building the team muscles to be able to inspect, adjust and adapt problems and antipatterns.

- Start with observing then facilitate
- "Don't give them fish - Teach them to fish"
- Don't be the problem owner (Then you are the problem)
- Offer problem solving structures, process and tool (BART,5Whys,etc.)
- Let symptoms guide you - but not mislead you.
- Revisit the Agile basics to get help/inspiration (Ref. 05)
- If there are real problems offer to be their agile guide (Retro etc.)
- Help to see problem from "Outside" and other contexts.

Conflict Navigator:
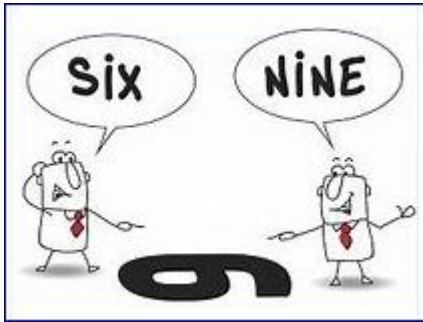
This role covers the role of building the team muscles to be able to See, inspect, adjust and adapt to conflicts and non-necessary inter team challenges.

- Embrace conflict as a potential opportunity
- Grow by "Crying" and be honest
- Self-organisation and maturity includes conflict handling
- Ensure awareness/respect of the 5 conflict levels (Ref. 03)
- Observe and proactively/transparently (Eg. Retro) support to keep conflict level at right level
- Offer to facilitate, give agile inspiration and structure to handle conflict.

Collaboration Conductor:

This role covers the role of building the real team muscles regarding cooperation, and in the long run collaboration and high performing team.

- Focus on moving individuals from group to team
- Start with individuals and cooperation (1+1=2)
- Continue (if relevant) with team and collaboration (1+1>2)
- Use traditional group dynamics and sociology techniques
- Focus on individual competences to build team muscles
- Embrace differences as team power
- Teach the team to identify and remove team obstacles

04 Retrospectively:

Congratulations, you've reached this sweet spot (Cheating is also a journey :-))

Hope you've got some inspiration and would like to join me on other agile journeys (See References)

Maybe you also got some ideas of answers for some questions?

Final quotes:
"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" (Lao Tzu)
"The first giant step is in your mind" (Yesper)
"You do everything twice – first in you mind then in reality (Stephen Covey)
" Change your mind for a change" (Yesper)

So, don't forget all agile journeys starts with an Agile mindset:

Figure 1. Adopting a new mindset requires a belief that new abilities can be developed with effort

Finally I promised to return for the cliff-hanger:

If you now and then ask you self this question:

"Am I a real Agile Coach?

Then the answer is properly yes if you ask and No if you don't.

By reading my reflections you maybe know by now what that meant?
If not, my simple reflection here is actually just like with agile process: Agile coaching is also a journey without a real destination and always with room for improvement.

So, you always have to ask the above question to be a Real Agile Coach !

With this I thank you joining my so far on my journey – to be continued....

05 Source/References:

Ref. 01: Linkedin profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/jesperbergerolsen/
Ref. 02: Own coaching company www.yescoaching.dk
Ref. 03: Inspiration by "Coaching Agile Teams" by Lyssa Adkins
Ref. 04: Inspiration by course "Advanced Agile Team Coaching" and book " The HitchHikers's Guide to Agile Coaching" by Agile42
Ref. 05: Inspiration by "Clean Agile – Back t Basics" by Robert C. Martin
Ref. 06: Book: "Seven habits of highly effective peoples"(Steven R. Covey)
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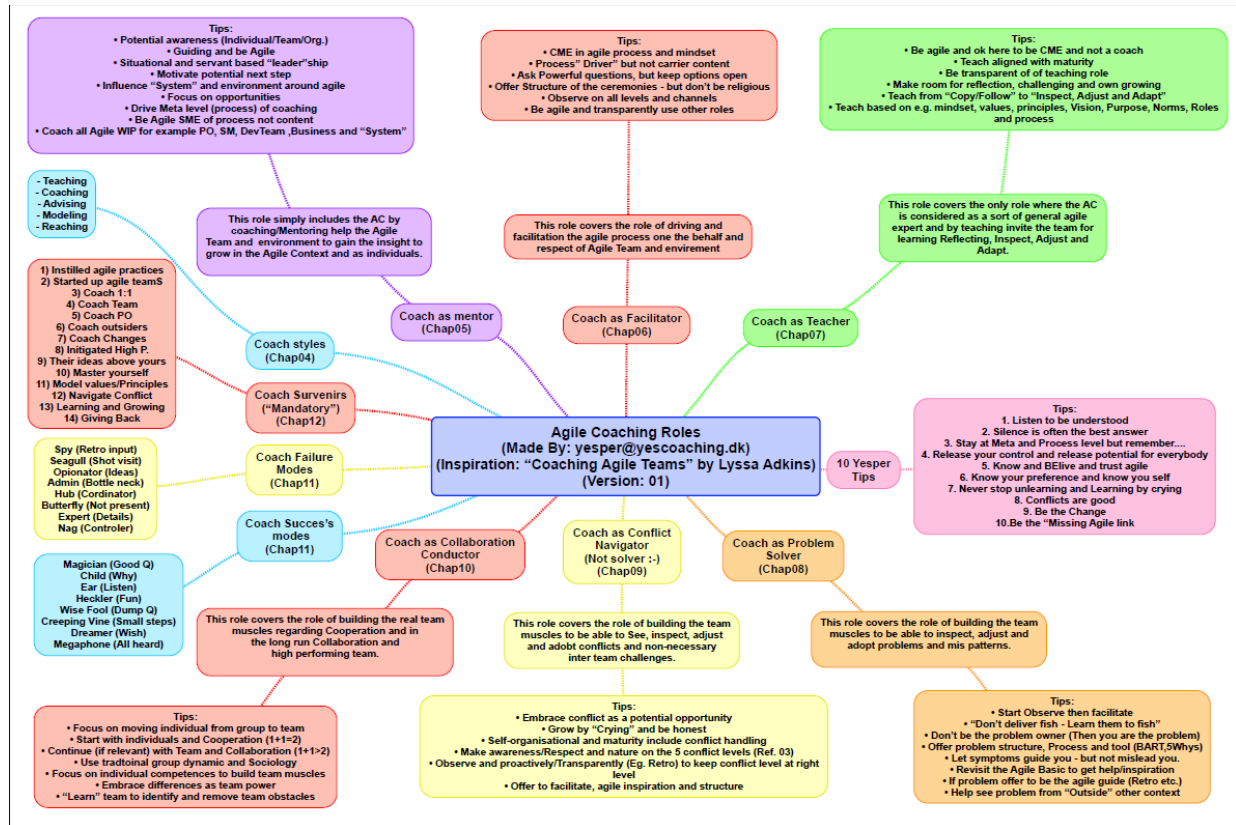Ref. 13: Linkedin Post: "Product Owner – more than just the owner" :
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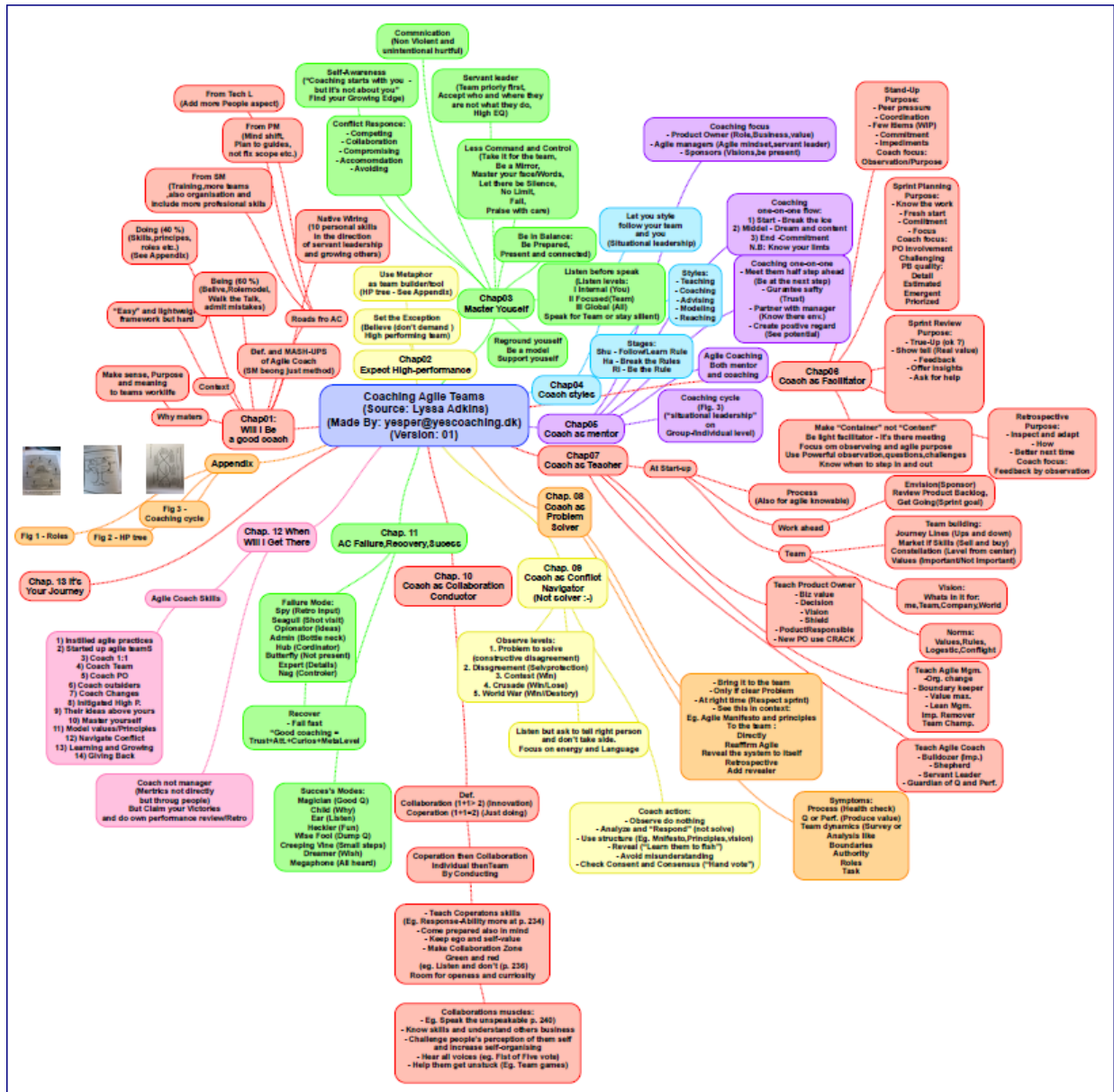
06 Appendix:

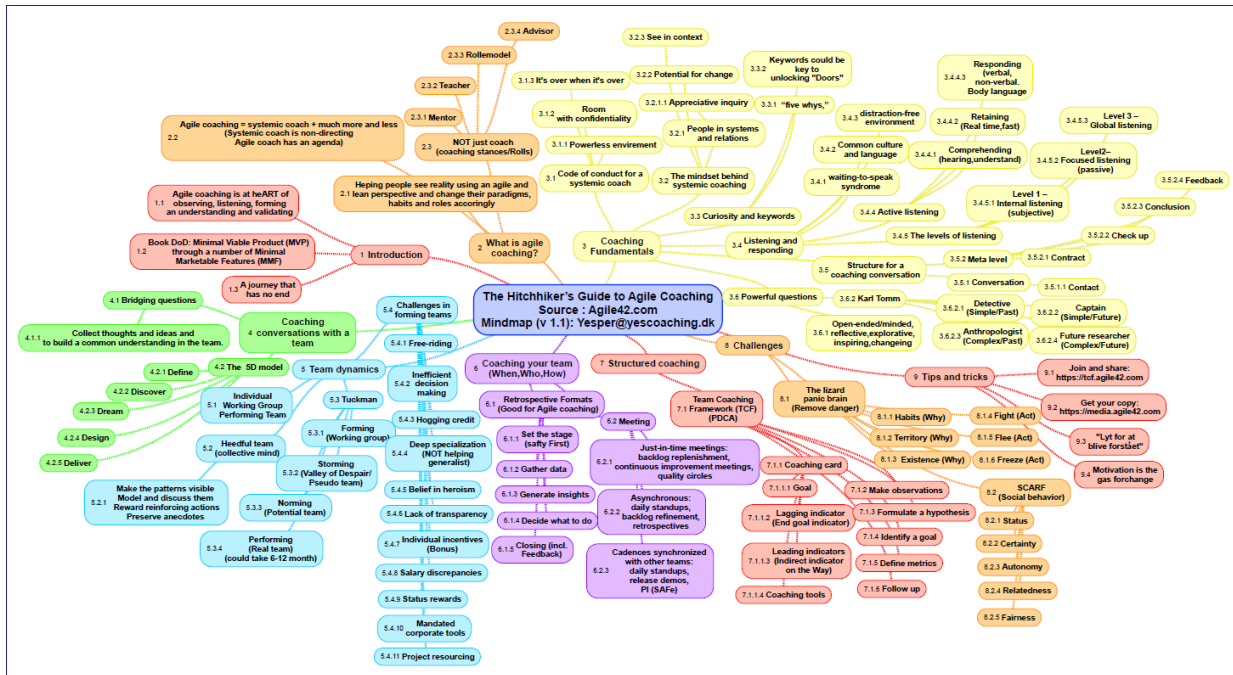(Request pdf versions at yesper@yescoaching.dk)
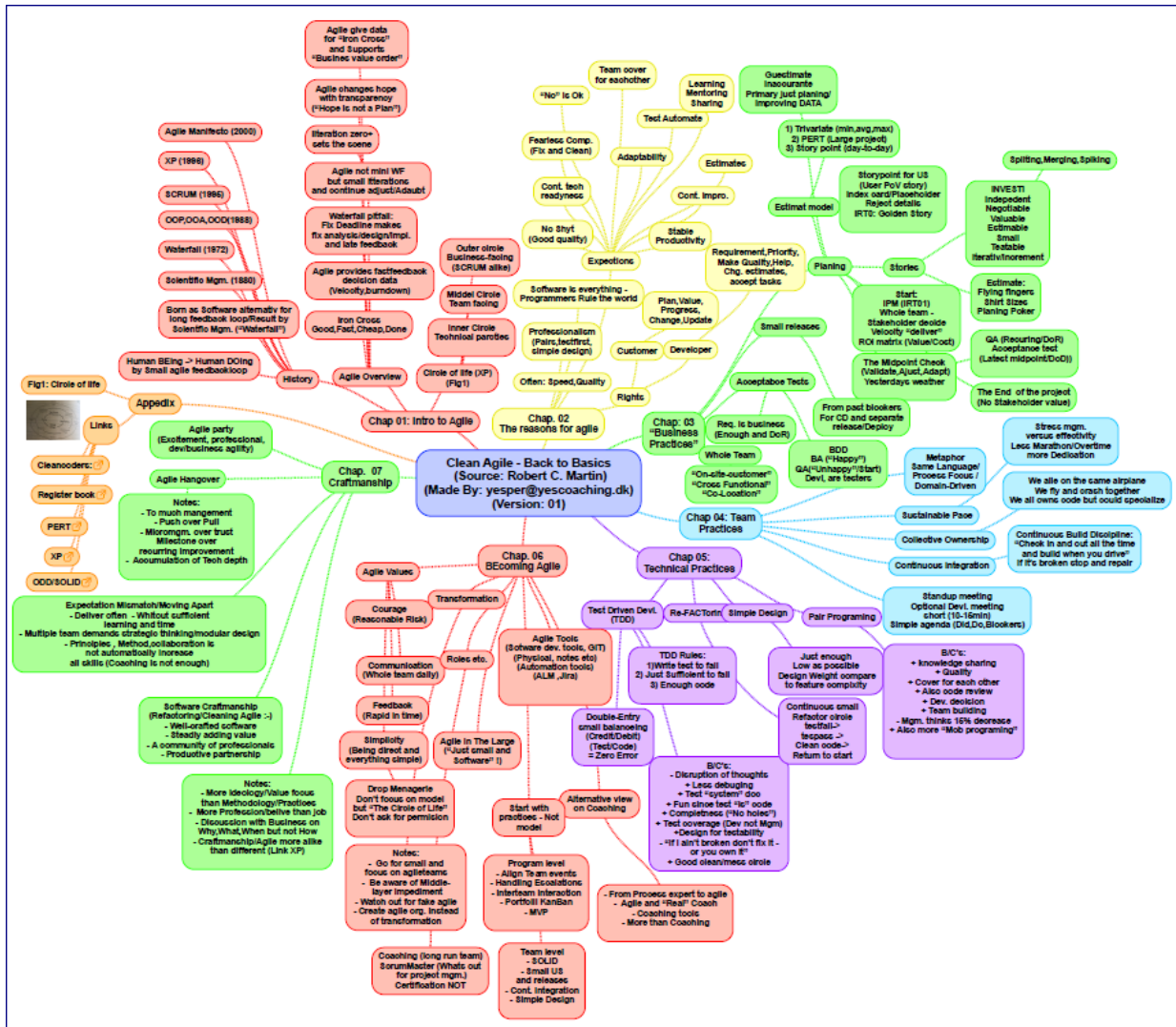
Appendix01: One-page overview of "Agile Roles"

Coach as mentor (Chap05)
Tips:
• Potential awareness (Individual/Team/Org.)
• Guiding and be Agile
• Situational and servant based "leader"ship
• Motivate potential next step
• Influence "System" and environment around agile
• Focus on opportunities
• Drive Meta level (process) of coaching
• Be Agile SME of process not content
• Coach all Agile WIP for example PO, SM, DevTeam ,Business and "System"

This role simply includes the AC by coaching/Mentoring help the Agile Team and environment to gain the insight to grow in the Agile Context and as individuals.

Coach as Facilitator (Chap06)
Tips:
• CME in agile process and mindset
• Process" Driver" but not carrier content
• Ask Powerful questions, but keep options open
• Offer Structure of the ceremonies - but don't be religious
• Observe on all levels and channels
• Be agile and transparently use other roles

This role covers the role of driving and facilitation the agile process one the behalf and respect of Agile Team and envirement

Coach as Teacher (Chap07)
Tips:
• Be agile and ok here to be CME and not a coach
• Teach aligned with maturity
• Be transparent of of teaching role
• Make room for reflection, challenging and own growing
• Teach from "Copy/Follow" to "Inspect, Adjust and Adapt"
• Teach based on e.g. mindset, values, principles, Vision, Purpose, Norms, Roles and process

This role covers the only role where the AC is considered as a sort of general agile expert and by teaching invite the team for learning Reflecting, Inspect, Adjust and Adapt.

- Teaching
- Coaching
- Advising
- Modeling
- Reaching

Coach styles (Chap04)
1) Instilled agile practices
2) Started up agile teamS
3) Coach 1:1
4) Coach Team
5) Coach PO
6) Coach outsiders
7) Coach Changes
8) Initigated High P.
9) Their ideas above yours
10) Master yourself
11) Model values/Principles
12) Navigate Conflict
13) Learning and Growing
14) Giving Back

Coach Survenirs ("Mandatory") (Chap12)
Spy (Retro input)
Seagull (Shot visit)
Opionator (Ideas)
Admin (Bottle neck)
Hub (Cordinator)
Butterfly (Not present)
Expert (Details)
Nag (Controler)

Coach Failure Modes (Chap11)
Magician (Good Q)
Child (Why)
Ear (Listen)
Heckler (Fun)
Wise Fool (Dump Q)
Creeping Vine (Small steps)
Dreamer (Wish)
Megaphone (All heard)

Coach Succes's modes (Chap11)

Agile Coaching Roles
(Made By: yesper@yescoaching.dk)
(Inspiration: "Coaching Agile Teams" by Lyssa Adkins)
(Version: 01)

10 Yesper Tips
Tips:
1. Listen to be understood
2. Silence is often the best answer
3. Stay at Meta and Process level but remember....
4. Release your control and release potential for everybody
5. Know and BElive and trust agile
6. Know your preference and know you self
7. Never stop unlearning and Learning by crying
8. Conflicts are good
9. Be the Change
10.Be the "Missing Agile link

Coach as Collaboration Conductor (Chap10)
This role covers the role of building the real team muscles regarding Cooperation and in the long run Collaboration and high performing team.

Tips:
• Focus on moving individual from group to team
• Start with individuals and Cooperation (1+1=2)
• Continue (if relevant) with Team and Collaboration (1+1>2)
• Use tradtional group dynamic and Sociology
• Focus on individual competences to build team muscles
• Embrace differences as team power
• "Learn" team to identify and remove team obstacles

Coach as Conflict Navigator (Not solver :-) (Chap09)
This role covers the role of building the team muscles to be able to See, inspect, adjust and adobt conflicts and non-necessary inter team challenges.

Tips:
• Embrace conflict as a potential opportunity
• Grow by "Crying" and be honest
• Self-organisational and maturity include conflict handling
• Make awareness/Respect and nature on the 5 conflict levels (Ref. 03)
• Observe and proactively/Transparently (Eg. Retro) to keep conflict level at right level
• Offer to facilitate, agile inspiration and structure

Coach as Problem Solver (Chap08)
This role covers the role of building the team muscles to be able to inspect, adjust and adopt problems and mis patterns.

Tips:
• Start Observe then facilitate
• "Don't deliver fish - Learn them to fish"
• Don't be the problem owner (Then you are the problem)
• Offer problem structure, Process and tool (BART,5Whys)
• Let symptoms guide you - but not mislead you.
• Revisit the Agile Basic to get help/inspiration
• If problem offer to be the agile guide (Retro etc.)
• Help see problem from "Outside" other context

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Appendix02: One-page overview of "Coaching Agile Teams by Lyssa Adkins (Ref 03)

Appendix03: One-page of "The Hitchhikers' Guide to Agile Coaching" by Agile42 (Ref. 04)

Fig. Mind-map of "Clean Agile – Back to Basics" (Source: Robert C. Martin)

Appendix05: One-page of "Systemisk Coaching" by Hanne V. Moltke and more (Ref. 07)