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TEAM CONTRACTING

**ENHANCE TEAM SELF-  
AWARENESS, OWNERSHIP AND  
YOUR IMPACT AS A SCRUM MASTER**

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# Introduction

Being a Scrum Master often means stepping into a world of ambiguity. You're tasked with improving team effectiveness, but without clear agreements or specific goals, this mission can quickly become clouded. Opportunities for enhancement and areas of dysfunction are observable, yet the absence of a clear and agreed strategy leaves you hovering at the periphery, unsure of how to intervene without undermining the team's self-management.

This scenario is not uncommon and it casts a shadow of uncertainty not only over Scrum Masters but also over the teams they support. When the roles and expectations of Scrum Masters aren't clear, uncertainty takes hold, leading to hesitancy and stilted progress.

But there is a solution: Team Contracting. With explicit agreements in place, not only does the fog of ambiguity lift, but Scrum Masters are also

endowed with a mandate to intervene. These agreements become the compass guiding interventions, ensuring they are both welcomed and effective, striking the delicate balance between offering essential support and respecting the team's autonomy.

In this whitepaper, we will explore how we apply Team Contracting at Coolblue and its pivotal role in establishing clear agreements between Scrum Masters and their teams, ensuring that both parties are aligned on the path to achieving sustainable shared goals. We will share the objectives of Team Contracting and the 5 steps for an effective Team Contracting process. We'll also explain how Team Contracting transforms the role of the Scrum Master into that of an Agile Team Coach, and what we see as the next steps for both Team Contracting and Agile Team Coaching.



*We use the term Scrum Master to cover both Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches.*

# The objectives of Team Contracting

The goal we set out for ourselves when bringing Team Contracting to our development teams was to enhance team self-awareness and ownership and to increase our impact as Scrum Masters.



*Team Contracting enhances team self-awareness, ownership and increases the impact of Scrum Masters.*

**To achieve that goal, we defined some key objectives**

Achieving “skin in the game”

Having clear expectations up-front

Defining clear outcomes

Starting the coaching directly from the intakes

Boosting culture by deliberate practice

## Let's take a look at each of these individually

### *Achieving skin in the game*

With this objective we're referring to moving away from a position of trying to manage and persuade the team into trying out changes. Instead, we want to take on a more vested interest and become involved because the team wants us to be there and is committing time and effort into it.

*Skin in the game is having a personal investment in an organization or undertaking, and therefore a vested interest in its success.*

### *Having clear expectations up-front*

Next up is to achieve transparency on exactly what it is that we expect from one another. Most of you reading this can probably recall an instance where it was unclear what the Scrum Master was doing or even trying to achieve. That is why it's critical to lay out what is expected from the Scrum Master and what the Scrum Master expects of the team - right off the bat. The combination of clear expectations up-front and the clear outcomes we're looking to achieve give the Scrum Master the mandate to do team interventions that support those goals.

*Nonviolent Communication is a 4-step method created by Marshall B. Rosenberg, to express clearly what you need, without blame. It helps people navigate difficult conversations at work and at home.*

### *Defining clear outcomes*

Thirdly, we want to create clear outcomes or learning goals. In other words, we want to have a clear understanding among everyone on what it looks like when we've achieved what we set out to do together. For example, what do team members want to have learned? What problem have we solved together?

### *Start coaching directly from the intakes*

We also wanted to avoid a situation in which we have a really long ramp-up time to be effective. We want to bring change from the start, while still building a strong connection with the team and its members. [Nonviolent Communication](#) and coaching skills are critical in this stage.

### *Boosting culture through deliberate practice*

Lastly, and importantly, before Team Contracting we were already working on a culture of continuous feedback and Nonviolent Communication, as well as giving tools to look at team dynamics and team development. But we also really wanted to bring that culture into deliberate day-to-day practice, because that's when the team starts applying what they've learned in the classroom to day-to-day life. It's where habits are either disrupted or formed.

# 5 Steps for an effective Team Contracting process

So what does the Team Contracting process look like? Let's break it down into five steps.



## Assignment conversation

The Team Contracting process begins with an assignment conversation with one or two representatives of a team. The assignment conversation is held when a team asks for a Scrum Master. Its purpose is to get a high-level overview of the challenges of the team. This input is then used to determine the priority and urgency of the different teams who ask for help. Therefore, this is a necessary step prior to honing in on specific team needs.

During this conversation you will assess how things are going and what needs to be done on a more general level. The outcome of which is a one-page assignment description, summarizing the context and learning goals of the team. At Coolblue, we use these one-pagers to prioritize the different support requests from different teams.

### Questions you might ask in this stage include:

- What's going well in the domain?
- What's NOT going well and what would you like to change?

- How would this situation look when the desired change has taken place?
- What are you doing, or what have you done to improve the situation?
- Is the team committed to the fact that the team needs to do things to change & are they willing to spend time to make this change?

It can be useful to keep in mind different team maturities during this assignment conversation. You also ask some additional questions to understand the context or history of the team. For example, how long has the team been together? How much experience does the product owner have? What kind of seniority levels are there in the team?

Additionally, you're trying to determine whether the team is committed to actively working on the challenges and if it's worth everyone's time and effort to move to the second phase of this process.



## Intake with the team

When it's been agreed upon that a team will receive the requested Scrum Master, the next step is to conduct team intakes. This can either be done by doing an intake session with the entire team at once, or more commonly, to conduct individual intakes with each of the team members.

### Some topics to discuss:

- What are the strengths of the team?
- What are the weaknesses/ challenges of the team?
- Which qualities do you bring to the team?
- What role do you play in tackling the challenges within the team?

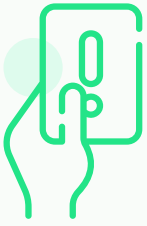
Let's look at an example from Freija's own experience. During the individual intake conversations, just about every team member shared that the decision making process was too slow and meetings took much longer than needed. While they were aware of this pattern and told her about it during the intake, they were unable to address and resolve the issue without the help of a Scrum Master.

In addition to these questions, it may also be helpful to observe at least one Sprint to collect your own data on the team's performance. Some things (among others) that you should look out for during your observations:

- Team maturity and quality of interactions (e.g. communication)
- Collaboration (e.g. process, feedback, stakeholders)
- The use of Scrum or practices related to Scrum, such as user story slicing
- Flow metrics (such as cycle time or lead time)
- State of the product
- Value delivery

Following the intake, in a workshop with the team, you share the patterns you have attained from the intakes paired with your own observations. The goal of this workshop is to create a plan together with the team on how to deal with the behavioral patterns that hamper them. This plan focuses on learning goals: what does the team have to learn in order to overcome these patterns effectively? To do this, we build on the concept of an 'Agile Backlog' shared with us by Fleur van Unen (a Scrum Master who worked with us at Coolblue in 2021).

This workshop is also the moment where you clarify expectations between the team and the Scrum Master.



## Interventions

In this stage you work closely together with the team on the topics defined in the intakes. Simply put, it's the step where you act on the plan that you created during step 2. Note, however, that 'acting on the plan' doesn't mean that other things that pop-up are ignored. Just as in coaching and Agile, the approach welcomes change. When something new appears, or if you find out that what you thought was the problem initially turns out to be different, you discuss this with the team and might

reprioritize (i.e. recontracting).

For example, you might have discussed with the team that they need help with their refinements because their stories are taking way too long to refine. As you start working with the team, you realize that the challenge is actually communication. Team members don't build on what others are saying, speak in abstract terms and go in circles. From here you might prioritize following a training on effective communication.

We've broken down interventions into four main pillars:



By investing heavily into these elements and capabilities, we're able to talk about even the most difficult topics at a much earlier stage than we could before.



## 1:1 Coaching

Within the intervention stage, we do a lot of 1:1 coaching. For example, when somebody complains about a team member with the Scrum Master. We coach that person to investigate why that is the case and help the person to give that feedback directly.



## Team Coaching

We also invest in the quality of our here-and-now interventions whereby we immediately address something that seems to be a pattern in the team or has been identified as a problem. Here, we check in with the team and identify which behavior they are showing in a situation and what its impact is on their collaboration. For example, when the team talks in circles or when certain people are always at the forefront while others are in the background.



## Training

Our portfolio of trainings includes both open trainings (that anyone can sign up for) as well as more tailored team trainings (that cater to an entire team). The advantage of the latter is that you immediately create a shared context and everyone within your team can hold the rest of the team accountable for the agreements made and tailor these to their situation.

Over the last couple of months we have expanded on team trainings to create Team Journeys. Here we guide teams through a curriculum relating to certain competencies, which combines individual coaching, team coaching and training. An example of this is the Feedback Journey. Here, over the course of a quarter, a team receives multiple days of training on feedback, while also receiving individual- and team coaching in the day-to-day.

Helping the teams discover how they can succeed with Agile would also be part of the pillars of Team Coaching and Training. Our interventions and trainings cover topics such as Scrum and Lean Start-up, and also Nonviolent Communication, Feedback and Team Dynamics.



## Workshops

Lastly, we make use of lots of workshops that we have collected, created and refined over the years. Examples range from Consent Decision-Making and Creating a Business Model Canvas to Epic Sizing and Story Slicing.



## Review

You regularly review the progress with the team. During the review, you revisit the Agile backlog with the team. You reflect on the progress with the team, by discussing the following questions:

- Where are we now based on the learning goals we have set out originally?
- And what have we achieved?

**It is also used to actively manage expectations:**

- Are you still joining certain events to coach the team on the job in those sessions?
- Is your involvement changing in any way?

For example, let's say the team has shared that they have difficulty with slicing. You have done a slicing workshop and attended a number of refinement sessions. The review process here would include inspecting the outcome of those efforts: has the team's ability to slice improved? If so, a review might include celebrating the progress within the team. If not, the review shows that there's still a way to go.



## Recontracting

The final step in the Team Contracting process is recontracting. This step is - again - a moment of reflection with the team on the progress, similar to the review. What differentiates this step from the review is the fact that within Coolblue we do recontracting on a quarterly basis with every team we support. This has two benefits. Firstly, by doing these recontracting conversations for all the teams around the same time, it helps us prioritize and move to the teams that need support the most. Secondly, this quarterly rhythm serves as a timeboxed period after which we inspect and adapt. It results in an updated one-pager that is verified by the team.

Let's say the team really takes ownership of their learning goals (e.g. improving the structure of refinements) and are progressing fast. You review their progress and notice they won't require your help anymore for this topic. However, during the discussions, the team signals that they are having difficulty giving and structuring feedback (a new learning goal). So you recontract with them focused on a new topic: Feedback.

If no support is needed anymore, there's no need to create a one pager. Then we leave the team to continue their journey on their own.

# The Scrum Master profile at Coolblue: Agile Team Coach

We have a very clearly articulated vision on the role of Scrum Master and its focus. Essentially, Team Contracting transforms the traditional role of Scrum Master into that of an Agile Team Coach. An Agile Team Coach at Coolblue combines the role of Scrum Master, Team- and Individual Coach and trainer. So having that said, what does the job profile of an Agile Team Coach at Coolblue look like?

Fundamentally, we do not see our Agile Team Coaches as part of the team that they support, but rather part of a team of other Agile Team Coaches. Additionally, we ask a lot of our Agile Team Coaches in terms of vulnerability and leadership. For example, to be able to build a connection with the team, you as an Agile Team Coach must show some vulnerability as well.

Then there is the team coach aspect of the role. We believe that in order to be an effective Agile Team Coach, you should have team coaching skills and, more importantly, know your own behavioral patterns and be able to deal with them in the service of the team. For example, if your pattern is that you always take responsibility for the outcomes of a team (something we both fall victim to occasionally) and you aren't self-aware and able to correct yourself, it's going to be a difficult process trying to coach a team on self-organization, despite putting forth all of your best effort.



## Support system for Agile Team Coaches

As the role of Agile Team Coach is a tough one, we have also put a support system in place with our team of Agile Team Coaches at Coolblue.

This support system is essentially a way of learning from each other's expertise, supporting one another and investigating our own behavioral patterns. It's also where our own deliberate practice comes into play. This support system is broken down into three areas:



Intervision through role-play



Coaching and mentoring



Maintaining a training portfolio together



### Intervision through role-play

We organize intervisions where we practice through role-play. This is basically an opportunity to role-play difficult team interventions or feedback moments and experiment with some variations to see what you could have done differently and discover what kinds of effects those changes have on the response. But next to learning techniques, the practice in a safe environment helps us to stay calm during stressful team situations and tough conversations, and to choose the right intervention during those times.



### Coaching and mentoring

As mentioned in the previous section, it's important to have a clear understanding of your patterns as an Agile Team Coach. Therefore, if you run into a pattern of your own or you notice that you're stuck on something with either the team or an individual within the team, you can always ask for coaching from various other Scrum Masters. They will then help you investigate the pattern and look for effective behavior moving forward.

For our more junior-level Scrum Masters, we offer mentoring to help out with things like Scrum events and scaling.



### Maintaining a training portfolio together

Lastly, we have this flow in our training portfolio where we rotate the role of trainer between the Agile Team Coaches in our team. While pairing as trainers, more experienced members of our team can help other Agile Team Coaches build their skills.

# Where is Team Contracting headed?

Now that we've explained the objectives of Team Contracting and the steps to an effective Team Contracting process, let's take a look at where Team Contracting is headed for us. There are a few ways in which we aim to contribute to Team Contracting including Intervision Days, self assessment tooling and our Agile Storefront.

## Enhancing coaching skills with intervision days

As Scrum Masters, we need to continuously enhance our coaching skills. Our ability to be present and address what's happening without judgment or trying to take over is the number one tool in our toolkit for strengthening the self-awareness and ownership of teams. One way to do so is through regular intervision days with the Scrum Master team, dedicating a whole day every quarter to practicing our team coaching skills together via role-play.

## Improve self assessment tooling

Additionally, we want to improve our self-assessment tooling for teams. An example of this is our Team Talks, inspired by the Spotify health scan. Every six months, teams use them to assess how they are doing and - like the intervision days - to exercise their self-reflection muscles.

We also have an Agile Survey which was created by our colleague Andrés de la Cruz Lobaton based on scientific literature.

The purpose of this survey is to understand how a team, its structure and its environment are impacting its performance. By understanding this, we can help the team inspect and adapt better, while also helping the company to do the same. Note: the purpose of this survey is not to use it as a way to evaluate teams or individuals, but only to understand them to help them improve.

## The Agile Storefront

Lastly, we have created an Agile Storefront for teams, where they can find what they need to help themselves. The Storefront includes formats, tools, questionnaires and guides. This is useful in particular for teams who have already worked with Agile Team Coaches, and want to continue their learning journey on their own.

## Some final words

In this whitepaper we have explained how Team Contracting has addressed and improved a number of challenges in our effectiveness as Agile Team Coaches.

We are not just improving the performance of the team, we are teaching teams how they can use self-awareness to improve their own effectiveness. This enables them to take ownership of their performance on a whole new level. Even after we leave, teams continue to learn and grow their competencies when it comes to agility and teamwork. This means that our temporary efforts lead to lasting results.

Secondly, by being explicit and intentional about the purpose of the Agile Team Coach, we find ourselves addressing the heart of the matter with teams much quicker and we need to spend less time with a team to achieve results. At Coolblue we have decided that we use the extra time to scale our efforts in the organization. We have expanded the amount of training we give, and we consult leadership on - for example - hiring, and we facilitate intervision for leaders.

We have come to be very enthusiastic about this approach and want to encourage other Scrum Masters outside of Coolblue to experiment with Team Contracting to see what it can mean for your pleasure in working with teams as well as your effectiveness. We'd love to hear from your experiences!

## About the authors



### *James De Mulder*

James De Mulder is an Agile Team Coach, professional coach and trainer. Additionally, James is the owner of **Nieuwe Bladzijde**, a company specialized in (Team) Coaching and training. Over the past years he has worked on a consultancy basis for numerous companies such as the NS, VodafoneZiggo and Alliander. Currently he works as an Agile Team Coach at Coolblue and De Postcode Loterij (a.i.) where he coaches teams and leadership on the Agile mindset, Scrum practices, (Nonviolent) Communication and team dynamics.



### *Freija Brouwer*

Freija Brouwer is an Agile Team Coach, professional team coach and team trainer. Currently Freija works as a Senior Agile Specialist at Coolblue, helping both teams and management on Scrum practices, team development and putting the Agile mindset into practice.

Freija also provides training in Nonviolent Communication, team development and DISC, both within Coolblue and also for other organizations.

# Acknowledgements

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