

# More than Booze – Agile Teambuilding

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Teambuilding in Agile is more than taking a group of people out to a pub or restaurant! At its core, Agile is about teaming, solving problems or building solutions together rather than individually. It is, therefore, remarkable that little guidance is given in any Agile framework regarding building and measuring teamwork.

The word “team” in Agile is loosely used and sometimes merely refers to a group of people with a single apparent purpose, often co-located. Yet to be effective, a team is more than this in an Agile context. It is the creation of a unit that readily works together in an environment of collaboration and mutual support. Josephine Klein<sup>i</sup> concluded that team building is relatively trouble-free when the task is simple and group members have equal strength. Yet, many Agile teams’ mission is not simple, and team members frequently have different job grades, skill levels and experience.



A TEAM IS A GROUP IN WHICH  
INDIVIDUALS HAVE A COMMON TASK  
THAT ACHIEVES ITS GOAL IN THE  
MOST EFFICIENT WAY SO THAT IT IS  
READY TO TAKE ON MORE  
CHALLENGING TASKS IF NEEDED

[John Adair Effective Team Building](#)

It is, therefore, alarming and frankly disappointing that the most used Agile frameworks omit all but a cursory mention of building a team floating terms like values and self-managing without grounding the concepts in the how!

One must dig deep to find Agile material beyond Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs or Bruce Tuckman’s form, storm, norm perform stages of group development. Helpful though these models are, they lack the guidance necessary to turn the theory into action. Agile Lineout<sup>ii</sup>, in contrast, presents a model for coaches to develop teamwork or diagnosing challenges measures that can be applied to a team in any activity.

A coach undertakes team building to alter a group’s culture or attitude towards each other. There are two fundamental skills a coach needs in the teambuilding process. The first involves recognising the behaviours that prevent the individuals from working together, and the second has to do with correctly identifying the sequence of tackling these challenges.

The process of team building often starts with establishing team membership. Creating a boundary and ensuring a stable membership is essential for teaming to begin.

When Agile is initially introduced to an organisation and teams are newly formed, then previous roles and responsibilities inevitably alter. Defining who is in or outside of the team may be challenging. The intentional act of teambuilding encourages the definition of team boundaries and establishes a culture of recognition in others *"oh, she's part of the xxx team!"*.

Before the arrival of Agile, managers may have had roles and accountabilities that are now transferred to the team. Yet managers often act in a way to preserve their status. Processes, reviews, and approvals are changed. Therefore, in these circumstances, deciding who is and is not part of the team often becomes a challenge and a source of emotional conflict if not handled appropriately. Establishing team boundaries and creating a team orientation is the beginning of teambuilding.

Team orientation is created by allowing the team to explore their task and examining the skills, knowledge, and experiences each other has. In my experience, this is best achieved by a series of short workshops ninety-mins max. to give the team opportunities to interact firstly about their task but also about their means of delivery and how they plan to organise themselves.

In most situations, team organisation nearly always goes beyond the Developer, Product Owner, and Scrum Master suggested by Scrum. Organising a team often includes responsibilities for activities such as test planning, architecture, stakeholder communications, risk, compliance, finances, and reporting. The desired consequence of focusing on team orientation is creating a sense of belonging and aligning with team goals and priorities.

Traditional people organising approaches rely on rigid structures, placing people into functional silos or project teams. In Agile, team structures are informal and adaptive, positively encouraged to alter as situations are encountered or lessons learned.

A team involves people of different personalities, strengths, and experiences. Therefore, some individuals will eventually become leaders without necessarily having formal authority over others. However, discussing roles and responsibilities, ways of working and documenting the team's initial decisions in a working agreement will formalise the informal.

A working agreement ensures that everyone knows what they can expect of themselves and each other. A working agreement also serves as a record of

decisions if conflict arises and as an initial reference point should new members join the team.

According to a recent paper by McKinsey<sup>iii</sup>. *"The essence of building a team is the creation of open communication between the individuals. When employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions informally, or challenging the status quo without fear of negative social consequences, organisations are more likely to innovate quickly, unlock the benefits of diversity, and adapt well to change."*

At its pith, communication in a team is about exchanging information and transmission of meaning. It is the foundation of collaboration. Open communication allows any team member to learn about any topic, developing trust, building camaraderie, boosting morale, and helping individuals stay engaged.

Contrast the importance of team communications with a statement in the Scrum Guide 2020 *"Events are used in Scrum to create regularity and to minimise the need for meetings not defined in Scrum."* How is a team supposed to be built in Scrum with this guidance? How can relationships develop in a series of time-boxed Scrum meetings predominantly lasting fifteen minutes or less daily?

Team communication has an energising effect. Mutual support and stimulation encourage creativity, enhance engagement, and foster productivity. Tools, techniques, and approaches to improve team communications abound on the internet. It is sufficient to say that a coach should consider using one or more of these techniques if they encounter a team with issues communicating with each other. I particularly like Dojos, using scenarios to create non-threatening team interactions. In role-play, individuals often learn about themselves and others in a way that is readily applicable in real-life team situations.

At its core, Agile teaming is about people working together. Therefore an anti-pattern of Agile teamwork is siloed working. In reality, many individuals in the same team work individually and only communicate in functional discussions. One way to break silos is to encourage pairing. Two people intentionally work on the same task. Despite opposing views, pairing rarely costs more or slows things down. Instead, I have found that pairing enhances creativity, improves productivity, and produces high-quality right-first-time outputs.

Agile team design creates a cross-functional capability pairing that encourages learning and shared expertise. Sometimes it makes sense to create a short-term feature cell of more than two people. The purpose of a feature cell is to explore or even deliver a piece of work with a tightly connected sub-group within the team. Feature cells are particularly useful with non-tech aspects of initiatives, for example, when HR or Marketing activities are needed to support technical activities.

Collaboration is an essential element of Agile team building. Collectively working as members of the team as opposed to performing distinct job functions prevents work from falling in gaps between the individuals and creates a more effective delivery system.

Agile encourages retrospection and feedback, letting the team decide who does what will inevitably lead to conversations about functions performed less well. Teams need the time, environment, and ability to have performance conversations with each other.

Team members should learn and practice the skills of conversations based on observations and the use of questions that inquire or facilitate the candid sharing of ideas and concerns. Dojo's or scenarios are a non-threatening way of learning feedback skills. These skills take hold once teams practice and use them while getting work done. Once learned feedback skills, teams can generate novel solutions to complex problems. An Agile team is encouraged to use structured and informal conversations to assess their effectiveness as they complete work.

As stated earlier, I find it absurd that most Agile frameworks ignore the essential ingredients of building and operating a team. Therefore I have included Team Behaviour as the third line in Agile Lineout. The Team Behaviour line has four strategies, team building, team working, external relationships and team learning. In addition, it has foundational elements in creating psychological safety, clarity over team roles, reducing siloed behaviour and transparency.

I hope this paper has helped Agile Practitioners to think more about team behaviour and provided ideas for building better teams.

For further information regarding Agile Lineout, visit <https://agilelineout.com/> or contact Jon Ward and [Beneficial Consulting](#).



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<sup>i</sup> Josephine Klein, The Study of Groups, Routledge, and Kegan Paul (1956)

<sup>ii</sup> [www.agilelineout.com](http://www.agilelineout.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Psychological safety and the critical role of leadership development, McKinsey and Company February 2021