

Coaching Agile Teams

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Expect High Performance

Chapter 2

Expect High Performance

Beyond the company results the team is asked to produce, teams need something else to strive for—something to change the hamster wheel into a journey of their own making.

Instead of seeing the same scenery in the hamster wheel again and again, they need to see different signposts and landmarks along the way indicating progress toward something resonant and worthwhile. This “something” is the quest for high performance. It’s the daily act of, together, striving to be the best they can be.

- We know that motivation in the knowledge age comes when people achieve autonomy, mastery, and a sense of purpose (Pink 2009).

Set the expectation

Expecting high performance means that you simply know achieving it is more than possible; it is normal

- Expecting high performance means that you believe the team can attain it, so you hold them, compassionately and firmly, to that expectation. By believing, you urge them to strive for a vision of what they can become together. They get called forth to be more than they are now

high performance is not as much about achieving a certain state as it is a journey toward something better. Teams that “outperform all reasonable expectations” and “even surprise themselves” may be on such a journey

So, too, may teams that get fractionally better all the time.

As their agile coach, help them start their journey toward high performance by simply setting your expectation that they will achieve it.

Always Coach them to choose the next step on their path (and the next and the next), all the while staying aimed toward their inspirational vision of high performance.

Create a sense of **anticipation**, **expectancy**, and **excitement** for this journey—first in yourself and then let it flow to them. **Lead by believing.**

Introduce a metaphor for high Performance

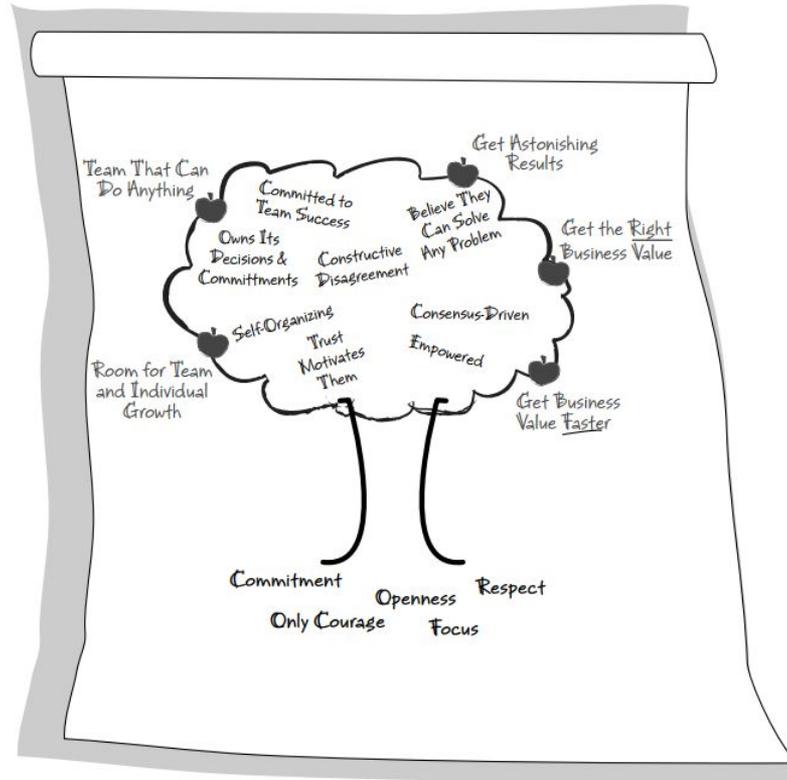
Metaphor is a powerful thing. Professional coaches have known this for a long time. In fact, “metaphor” is a core skill taught in professional coaching courses

(Whitworth et al. 2007).

- “I’m the glue that holds this family together.”
- “I’m the pebble in your shoe, reminding you to tread lightly.”
- “I am a thousand candles lighting the way.”
- “I am a bird soaring above it all.”
- “I am a beacon calling you forth.”

Coaches ask questions that help clients create their own metaphor, one that is visceral and resonant. Clients use the metaphor to guide them through the events unfolding in their lives.

High Performance Tree



High Performance Tree

They were doing fairly well with the basic practices of agile (standard meetings and accomplishing sprint goals), and they were consistently delivering results that mattered, yet their managers knew there was more to get.

As their agile coach, I had no idea how they were going to move toward high performance, and I knew each team would do it their own way no matter what I offered, so creating a highway or even a meandering pathway for them to follow wouldn't work.

To introduce the tree to the team, just draw the tree from the roots up as you teach the meaning of the Scrum values and as you list the characteristics of high performance: Commitment, Courage, Openness, Focus, Respect

High Performance Tree

- **Commitment:** Be willing to commit to a goal. Scrum provides people all the authority they need to meet their commitments.
- **Focus:** Do your job. Focus all your efforts and skills on doing the work that you've committed to doing. Don't worry about anything else.
- **Openness:** Scrum keeps everything about a project visible to everyone.
- **Respect:** Individuals are shaped by their background and their experiences. It is important to respect the different people who comprise a team.
- **Courage:** Have the courage to commit, to act, to be open, and to expect respect (Schwaber and Beedle 2001)

High Performance Tree

Extreme Programming practices

- **Communication:** Keep the right communications flowing by employing many practices that can't be done without communicating. Problems with projects can invariably **be traced back to somebody not talking to somebody else** about something important.
- **Simplicity:** What is the simplest thing that could possibly work? Make a bet that it is better to do a simple thing today and pay a little more tomorrow to change it if necessary than to do a more complicated thing today that may never be used anyway.
- **Feedback:** Concrete feedback about the current state of the system is **absolutely priceless**. **Optimism** is an occupational hazard of programming. Feedback is the treatment.
- **Courage:** Have the courage it takes to develop good software, which may mean throwing away code and changing direction, even late in development. What's to say that you won't ever develop yourself into a corner? Courage (Beck and Andres 2004).

High Performance Tree

If neither of these sets of values fits and your company has established values that will work well, then use those instead.

Here's the key:

- **The values you use must be defined so that they are relatable to agile, easily understandable (not full of abstract notions or business jargon), and resonant**
- **Use only those values that evoke a sense of desire in the team members.**
- **You know you have a good set when team members consider the definitions and say, “Yes, I want to be more like that. I want us to be more like that. I want our company to be more like that.”**

High Performance Tree

The tree has become an inviting place, and the team notices they have sprouted some things themselves—the characteristics of high collaboration and, thus, high performance (adapted from Tabaka 2006):

- They are **self-organizing** rather than role- or title-based
- They are **empowered** to make decisions.
- They truly believe that **as a team they can solve any problem.**
- They are committed to **team success** vs. success at any cost.
- The team **owns its decisions and commitments.**
- **Trust**, vs. fear or anger, motivates them.
- They are **consensus-driven**, with full divergence and then convergence.
- And they live in a world of constant **constructive disagreement**

High Performance Tree

These are the fruits of high performance

- The first fruits you may notice are these: You get business value faster, and then you get the right business value more often. Through these, two other fruits appear:
 - **a team that can truly do anything**
 - **a team that offers room for team and individual growth.**

These two fruits are the ones that rejuvenate the whole tree and give back again and again. They fuel sustainable growth.

High Performance Tree

It hangs there, a quiet reminder that high performance is normal and your ardent expectation

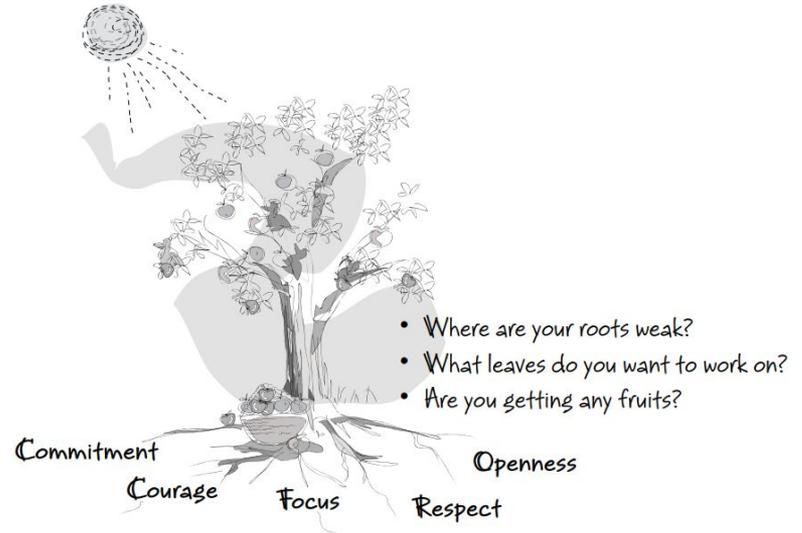
Where are our roots weak?

What fruits do you want to get now?

Where are your roots weak?

What leaves do you want to work on?

Are you getting any fruits?



High Performance Tree

They need not be engaged in self-flagellation to prove to you or anyone else that they are in the act of improving. Hold out to them that the work of becoming high performing can be done with humor, curiosity, and appreciation, too

Over-seriousness is a warning sign for mediocrity and bureaucratic thinking.

People who are seriously committed to mastery and high performance are secure enough to lighten up.

—Michael J. Gelb

High Performance Tree

You can tell when the tree has taken hold. It's when the team talks about the tree as a metaphor for themselves and their chosen pathway to high performance:

“We can grow if we strengthen our roots.”

“We're a tree; we can bend.”

“The wind may shake us, but it will not break us.”

Building the Foundation

He tells people that if you have these five things, then you have everything you need, and the other details will work themselves out (Mayer 2009):

Empiricism: Succeed through a rapid progression of failures. Drive by hindsight, not foresight.

Self-organization: The people closest to the problem know best how to solve the problem.

Collaboration: Foster a “yes, and” mind-set. Re-conceive ideas; do not compromise (Austin and Devin 2003).

Prioritization: Focus! Do the next right thing.

Rhythm: Breathe, and the rest will follow.

Building the Foundation

You need not even call it high performance if that closes people down. Journey toward greatness works well, too.

Perhaps you will hear team members use the imagery you offered to create momentum-producing metaphors for themselves:

“Where is our foundation weak?”

“Have we crumbled a bit lately?”

“If we were to lay a new cornerstone today, what would we chisel on it?”