Do you have a self-organizing team? If so, half the battle is already won. But if not, beware: Creating a self-organizing team is far more challenging than we had ever imagined. This is especially true in today's dynamic world, where the focus of building a team can get sidelined due to changing business demands.

Defining self-organizing teams

A group of motivated individuals, who work together toward a goal, have the ability and authority to take decisions and readily adapt to changing demands. Let's look at some important ingredients of a self-organizing team:

- They pull work for themselves and don't wait for their leader to assign work. This ensures a greater sense of ownership and commitment.
- They manage their work (allocation, reallocation, estimation, reestimation, delivery, and rework) as a group.
- They still require mentoring and coaching, but they don't require "command and control."
- They communicate more with each other, and their commitments are more often to project teams than to the ScrumMaster.
- They understand requirements and aren't afraid to ask questions to get their doubts clarified.
- They continuously enhance their own skills and recommend innovative ideas and improvements.

Five essentials of self-organizing teams

- **Competency**: Individuals need to be competent for the job at hand. This will result in confidence in their work and will eliminate the need for direction from above.
- **Collaboration**: They should work as a team rather than as a group of individuals. Teamwork is encouraged.
- **Motivation**: Team motivation is the key to success. Team members should be focused and interested in their work.
- **Trust and respect**: Team members trust and respect each other. They believe in collective code ownership and are ready to go the extra mile to help each other resolve issues.
- **Continuity**: The team should be together for a reasonable duration; changing its composition every now and then doesn't help. Continuity is essential for the team.

Creating a self-organizing team

Who takes responsibility for making a self-organizing team? Is it the ScrumMaster, who is also focusing on timeline and delivery; or senior management, who are concerned about financials; or the organization itself, which has bigger challenges to ponder?

In fact, it takes a combined effort from all three entities to help a team emerge as self-organizing. The ScrumMaster should act as a coach and ensure that the team gets job-specific training and coaching. He or she is primarily responsible for ensuring a cohesive and soothing working environment, which is a must for the blossoming of a self-organizing team. Coaching individual team members is important so that they understand the principles of self-organizing teams and trust each other. The ScrumMaster should also look at a variety of ways to improve collaboration within the distributed team (using application lifecycle management tools, video conferencing, and so on).
Senior management should ensure that they don't get in the way of the team's work; they need to act as supports rather than distractions. Team goals should be set and individual heroism should be discouraged — it only acts as a block to self-organizing teams. It's essential to allow team members to fail before they're expected to deliver.

The organization as a whole should ensure that it provides the necessary infrastructure, training, and incentive system to keep employees motivated at work. These are hygiene factors that constitute the first barrier to cross before you can expect your team members to be self-organized.

**A three-step process: Training, coaching, mentoring**

Creating a self-organizing team can be considered a three-step process.

*First step:* We need to groom employees to get the desired skill set. At the end of this phase, you can assume the team has the capabilities to exhibit self-organizing behaviors. Provide any needed classroom and on-the-job training to make each employee competent in a particular domain/technology. Behavioral training is also helpful.

*Second step:* Once the team starts working together, adopt a coaching style to see if the members are facing any difficulties. They may require more support and guidance at the beginning. As noted earlier, some indicators of a self-organizing team are: Scrum ceremonies are productive, the team enjoys the work and members help each other, new ideas are forthcoming, and teams are pulling work for themselves. By the end of this phase, you know the team is self-organizing. However, keep your eyes open to observe the team's behavior and provide need-based coaching. This is the phase that will result in innovative ideas and improved results from the team.

*Third step:* Once the team is in self-organizing mode, the key is to sustain this for the longer run. Assign mentors who can help the team go to the next level. Job rotations can be an important aspect of keeping employees involved and of encouraging continuous learning. As mentioned earlier, a self-organizing team doesn't need "command and control," but it does need coaching and mentoring.

Teams aren't static; they change over time. Building a self-organizing team is an ongoing process, and we're really never done. Whenever a team's composition changes, we need to repeat the whole process.

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