

# How To Maintain Team Agility in Covid-19 Era

Girish Nandwani  
Scrum Master, Natwest Group, India

**Abstract:** Once a wise man said, “We can’t predict the future. But we can control how we react to the evolving emergency as it unfolds”. Agile approaches always state it would be good if Agile teams are should be co-located in order to get better results while agile pragmatists believe that the best self-organizing, cross-functional teams are the ones who create their own team from a global resource pool, regardless of location. This is no longer the case: Remote Working and Distributed Teams are the New Normal. In this paper, we will be exploring different ways, thoughts and perceptions on how we can maintain Team Agility in Covid-19 Era.

The outputs of this paper are ideas to enable more effective interactions between the individuals in a Scrum team, regardless of their location in the world. We will target to prove that with new ways of working (remote and distributed), the principle of “face-to-face communication” may need reconsideration for the distributed teams that are effectively delivering software. Instead, it may be time to update this principle to “open and authentic communication”. While we have not solved all challenges working in this environment, we continue to inspect and adapt as a truly distributed Agile team.

Agile squads could help a transformation for engaging students to help their peers succeed along with them, thereby enabling their leadership skills, making them co-create and improve the overall results of educational institutions.

The individual teams that make up a company in agile management are known as **squads**. The idea is that each squad has its own defined goal, which they work towards autonomously. Each squad has a 'product owner': they prioritise work to be done.

**Keywords**—Agility, Covid-19, Pandemic, Handling Teams in IT, Empathy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The impact of COVID 19 continues to aggressively disrupt the business-as-usual and has posed indefinite potential business challenges to all sectors and organizations regardless of their size and capacity. Furthermore, the outbreak has reflected the inherent need of an organization to become agile more than ever before. Coping with the challenges to become agile rather quickly, organizations and their immediate partner ecosystems will have to work together strategically and logically to enable remote workforce to deliver operations as well as increase the business’s resilience. Circumstances like these call for identifying viable solutions to minimize disruptions, improve productivity, maintain the business partnerships and broaden the customer base while facilitating innovations and agile development. Charter to achieve these aspirations is simple if we meticulously and cautiously channel the mundane yet crucial resources that hold a digital workplace together.

It goes without saying that we are in unprecedented times; not many organizations would have included a pandemic in their PESTLE analysis when constructing their business plan.

Unfortunately, these are times of uncertainty and anxiety. This can have a huge impact on the Scrum Team. In addition, many will have to work from home with their partner and kids ever-present. You can’t expect people to work as before.

Co-location once a pre-requisite for success with agile approaches is no longer the case.

If you are a Scrum Master in the team, then you may ask yourself if you can be effective in the coming weeks or months. The answer is Yes! You will have your work cut out for you. As we know, a Scrum Master has responsibilities towards the development team, the Product Owner, and the Organisation. As a servant leader, your responsibilities are the same irrespective of your team being remote or co-located.

## II. Working from home

Being an Agile enabler for distributed teams, the following questions will cross your mind:

- A. How do you deal with different time zones?
- B. Isn’t it less efficient than being co-located?
- C. How do you establish coordination within the team?
- D. Are there any tools available that could possibly use that make this easier?
- E. How do you handle with remote meetings?
- F. How do you ensure your remote team members are actually working?

Let us begin the discussion on different ways to overcome challenges, reduce the negative effect & maintain agility of whole Scrum team in this pandemic situation. By applying various suggestions mentioned below, teams can perform their tasks with the same or more zeal despite being in a distributed environment.

A. Creating a healthy and ergonomic work environment with support from the Organizations -: [1]

- a) Use comfortable and ergonomically viable desk for long working posture -: We now know that it is not healthy to sit for long periods of time, many companies are bringing in comfortable desks for their employees. These desks allow you to be able to sit or stand as you please, so you can move around and keep your muscles active throughout the day.
- b) Create a comfortable space for working -: Everyone needs to have their own individual work space, where they can have the tools (Laptop/Desktop, Webcam etc.) that they use within reach.
- c) Recognize & Reward -: One way to keep the momentum up and spirits high is to recognize your team and offer rewards for achieving project milestones.
- d) Keep your team connected -: Start looking at ways that your team can be better connected. If there are remote workers, use video conferencing applications like Zoom that enable everyone to take part in meetings, brainstorming sessions, etc. At each meeting, conference call, etc., you will learn more and more about each other and have a better personal connection that is going to help improve productivity.

B. Arrange remote Team Building activities -: It would be good if the team can set-up different team building activities over web conferencing or other remote channels. The best examples are Lean Coffee Sessions, Online Quizzes / Games (Tambola, Treasure Hunt). Teams can also celebrate Project Milestone success remotely with glass of wine/juice & discuss success stories among all peer members. While joining meetings via video conferencing (if network bandwidth allows), participants may turn the video on so that they can see each other during the team meetings. This can help add a human touch to the conversation, read body language, and keep everyone's attention in check. [2]



Figure 1:- Example of Work from home as per today's scenario

C. **Workload Management** – This is something that we have done successfully at our organization. In every sprint, we consider only 85% of the development team capacity leaving the remaining 15% to deal with any unforeseen circumstances like connectivity issues, family problems, etc. We have also cut down on the number of meetings and their duration by 20%. This has helped the team remain focused during these testing times.

D. **Usage of Online tools for Agile Ceremonies** -: Nowadays, it's not feasible to conduct Sprint Ceremonies with the whole team in a meeting room. Better to choose some good freeware online tools so that it will be interesting for team to participate online. [3]

- a. Sprint Planning & Story Pointing -: Pointing Poker, Google drawings, Trello or JIRA
- b. Retrospective Meeting -: Pointing Poker, Reetro, Miro.
- c. Coffee sessions or some healthy debates -: Miro (Under Miro, have different colour Sticky board).

E. **Kaizen** -: A kaizen loop is an approach where a team experiments with a small change in their way of working (WoW), adopting the change if it works in their given context and abandoning it if it doesn't. The goal of kaizen is often to reduce or better yet eliminate waste or to eliminate unnecessary hard work. This means examining your processes, the tools you use, and even your mind-set and the context in which you work. What are you working on now, and what should be prioritized next? What seems like it might be a blocker to your team's success? What achievements can you celebrate as a team? What's limiting your capacity or hurting your mood? Try small experiments, and always strive to establish and demonstrate progress toward specific goals

### III. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS THAT SHOW WHAT EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES REALLY THINK ABOUT REMOTE WORKING



Figure 2:- Statistical Analysis of Benefit of Remote Working

It's no secret that people value freedom of choice. A whopping **98%** of people would like to have the option to work remotely for the rest of their careers. A flexible schedule, the ability to work from any location, and no more commuting were the top reported benefits. Of course, not everything is positive about working from home. Here are some of the challenges people face as they work remotely.

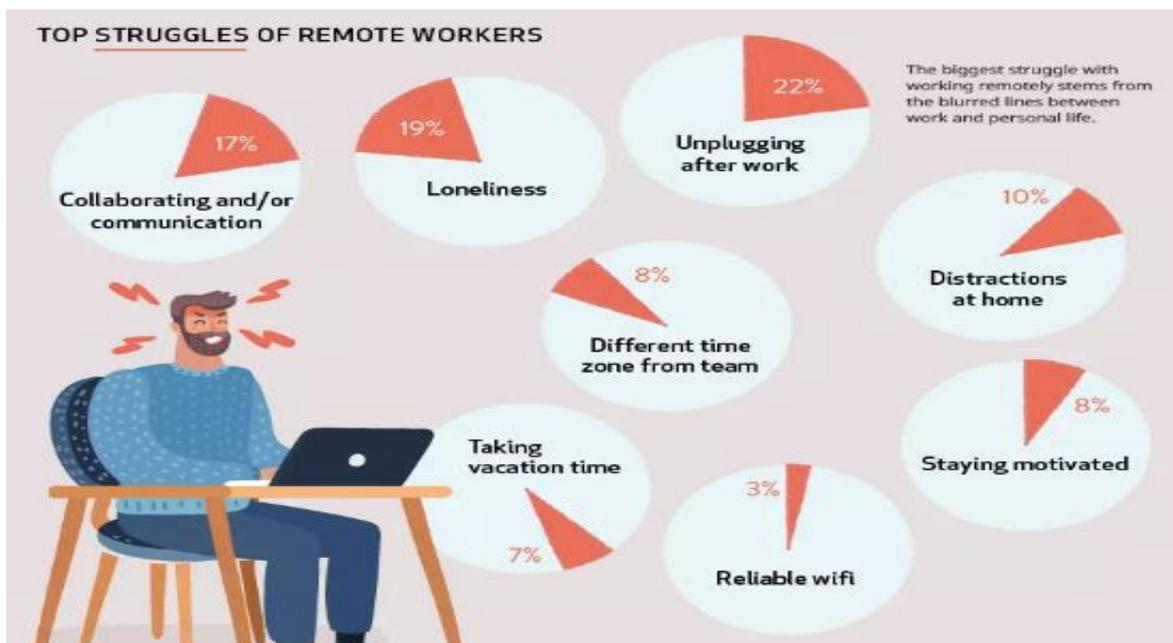


Figure 3:- Statistical Analysis of Top Struggles of Remote Workers

The top issue faced by remote workers was “unplugging” from work. Without the clear-cut change of location and defined office hours, many people had a tougher time clearly dividing their personal and professional time.

And the lack of person-to-person communication can be a challenge for some people. In fact, one-third of people were concerned that the full extent of their professional efforts wouldn't be appreciated because of a lack of in-office contact.

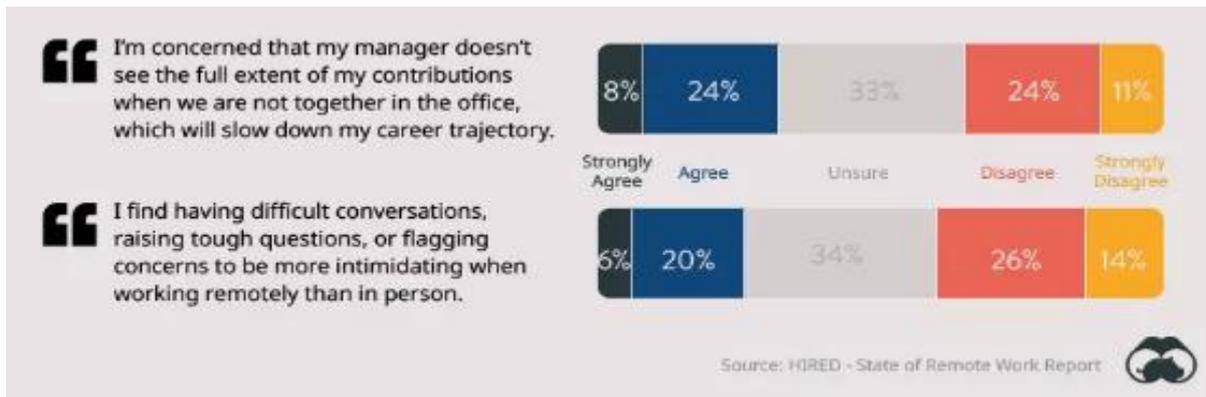


Figure 4-: Statistical Analysis of Survey on Negative side of Work from Home

For most people, having tough conversations via phone or teleconferencing software was actually viewed as a positive development.

Here are the reservations managers have with remote work:

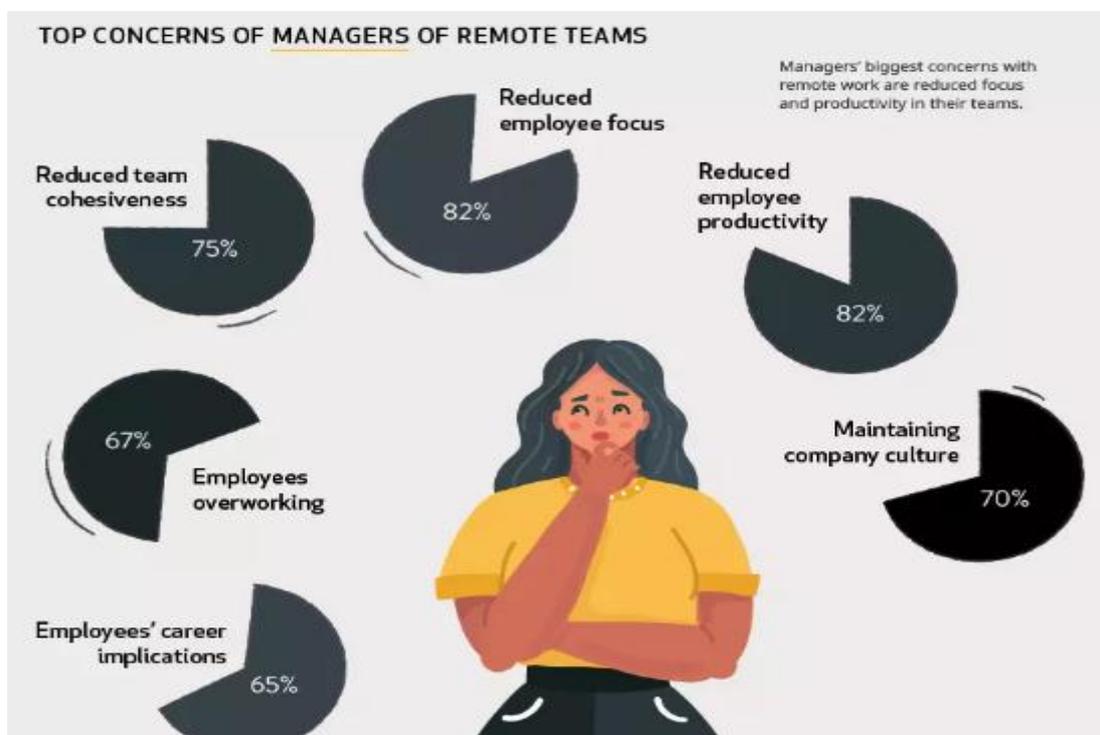


Figure 5-: Statistical Analysis of Concerns of Manager of Remote Work

Managers are worried that productivity and focus will be diminished if people are working in more informal locations, such as home or a cafe. Also, if people aren't working in the same physical location, managers feel that team cohesiveness and company culture could suffer.

On the flip side, the cost savings associated with remote work may win over many companies. Research has found that typical employer can save about \$11,000 per year for every person who works remotely half of the time. As well, switching to virtual meets in some instances can also be a significant cost savings.

#### IV. HOW A SCRUM MASTER CAN HELP THE TEAM, BUILD AN EFFECTIVE ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR DURING COVID-19

Being an effective and successful Scrum Master requires a wide variety of skills, knowledge, and experience. This variety is captured in the stances of a Scrum Master. The Scrum Master is expected to act as a teacher, impediment remover, facilitator, coach, mentor, and change agent. The Scrum Master does so by acting on 3 levels: Scrum Team, building relationships with others, and supporting the entire organization. Everything, with servant-leadership as the foundational mindset and attitude.

Before the Covid-19 times, whenever teams performed Scrum Ceremonies, the mode and tempo were totally different. We knew the agenda and the output came in the form of action items & further discussion points. But during Covid-19 times, as the whole team is working remotely, Scrum Master must check the agility aspect before jumping into the operational discussion. Agility means how people connect with each other or help each other. In other words, the important element is 'Empathy'. Here Empathy means emotional connect with the team. One of the best examples is, during the Scrum call, before jumping into the operations related discussion, better check with the team on their well-being, if everything is well with their family in this pandemic situation & enquire on any kind of help that the

team might require. Also, occasionally, it would be required to arrange for some normal chit-chat sessions like Lean Coffee or others. With the help of these sessions, the team feels more connected with each other.

Living the values of commitment, courage, focus, openness and respect would help increase transparency of the nature of challenges at hand, inspect the situation and people around us and help us act accordingly - for example, who needs help, how do we protect ourselves and others and so on. Let us explore these values in context of COVID-19 crisis in following bullet points. [4]

- A. *We personally commit to do our part* to achieve our common goal of coping with new virus and develop immunity. For example, wash our hands regularly, keep our surrounding clean. The list goes on.
- B. *We use courage to do the right thing* and work through problems. This could include things like letting people know if we feel ill and seek treatment right away. That is what we expect of others too, don't we? Also, when we know someone infected, respect them while talking with them over phone or viewing them virtually.
- C. *We all focus on the work to be done*. In my opinion, it would be a tremendous help to stay focused on "why" are we doing what we're doing to cope. For example, why self-isolation? And then, for office work, let's stay focused on it regardless of working in-person or virtually with colleagues.
- D. *We agree to be open about all the work and challenges*. In addition to discussing matters with colleagues, this could include being open about family and friends and about what's going on in our minds, what's bothering us and how can we help each other.
- E. *We respect each other to be capable and independent people*. Respect privacy. Respect when someone says they'll do something; they will do it. You'd keep your promise, wouldn't you? Remember, we all are personally committed!

## **V. HOW CAN YOU HELP EMPLOYEES THROUGH THIS EMOTIONAL TIME TO KEEP A HEALTHY, POSITIVE, AND PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE?**

### *A. Show them you care*

Employers should not underestimate the importance of empathy in the workplace, and not just for retention's sake. Managers who show compassion to subordinates nearly always improve workers' performance.

### *B. Give them resources*

Employees need resources to help deal with the changes the pandemic has brought about. Each employee may have different needs. A great way to economically provide a host of resources under one umbrella is to offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs offer confidential support like short-term counselling, financial or legal assistance, emotional and mental health resources, and much more.

### *C. Make them feel good about what they're doing to help others*

Consider creating a company-wide initiative to help those in need within the community. You could organize a fundraiser to allow you to purchase N-95 masks, hand sanitizer, sunscreen, or other safety products for local first responders. This type of project will also give you some promotional leverage when you endorse your fundraiser or its results. What a great way to connect your business marketing plan to community involvement and give your employees something they can feel good about all at the same time.

### *D. Keep your finger on the pulse of employee emotions*

Merely asking employees how they (and their families) are doing during this unprecedented time can go a long way in showing you care. Understand how your employees may be struggling and connect with them on a personal level. This helps you discover the types of resources that might serve them best and shows your employees you care about them personally.

## **VI. WHY MIGHT AGILE ORGANIZATIONS BE BETTER EQUIPPED DURING THE CRISIS?**

In times of disruption, agile organizations are nimbler and react quickly to changing market conditions. This is attributed to a shift in values and mindset.

- A. Agile teams demand and thrive on primary means of communication, and typically over communicate. Even during almost 100% remote working, this thirst to talk won't diminish.
- B. Agile organizations self-manage and are not depending on a command and control leadership style to do their jobs.
- C. The teams constantly learn, evolve and adapt to meet the current challenges and environment in which they operate.
- D. Employees are used to pivoting at relatively short notice; a blend of rolling wave planning, PI planning, sprint planning and daily stand-ups means agile teams can quickly change, recalibrate and adapt.
- E. There is a focus on delivery in short cycles, which helps maintain motivation, momentum and velocity.
- F. Agile teams are well versed in removing blockers and impediments to their progress and have a dedicated role in a Scrum Master whose purpose is to clear the runway for the delivery teams to realize constant flow.

## **VII. KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR THE FUTURE [5]**

- A. Look for early release value -: Instead of investing a lot of money upfront in a project or a new initiative, look for early release of value and benefit, and add iterative value thereafter. Not only will this drive results when they are most needed, but it will also allow you to quickly stop any projects with minimal impact to the bottom line – don't fall foul of the sunk cost fallacy

- B. Prioritize activities -: Ensure you are prioritizing your activities to drive out early release of value in preparation for when the pandemic subsides and economic conditions become more challenging. For example, rather than planning a product with 30 features, think about one with two great features that generates early income.
- C. Operate at a fixed capacity of resources -: Cost control is going to be vital in the coming months. Establishing a fixed capacity model will not only force prioritization to deliver things of the greatest value but will also ensure you have full predictability of delivery costs.
- D. Consider Automation -: As we recover from this pandemic, we'll be talking to our clients about a drive towards automation. Right now, you should be identifying all human and manual single points of failure that occurred as a result of COVID-19. If they wouldn't have been impacted as automated tasks, look at ways to optimize them.
- E. Accelerate adoption of Collaboration tools -: Agile organizations will already be adopting solutions like Jira, Pointing Poker, Reetro, Mural, virtual whiteboards and virtual sticky notes to support their agile ceremonies and help people collaborate during remote working. By following their example, your business will find it easier to pivot if a crisis hits again.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, let me conclude by citing a study conducted by Stanford Professor Nicholas Bloom (published in Harvard Business Review) which says that working remotely can lead to a 13.5% performance increase. And, Connect Solutions' annual report suggested that fewer distractions lead to higher productivity, with 77% of remote workers reporting an increase in the overall efficiency.

So takeaway from here is, remote working is an opportunity for companies to change their way of working sustainably and reap the benefits over the medium to long term. Think of less office space, less commuting, fewer business trips, shorter breaks and greater focus for employees. Feedback from the market seems to indicate that remote workers are also less likely to take short absences due to illness. It can also have a positive impact on the remuneration system of companies and provide insights into (HR) opportunities. Remote working on a larger scale also offers companies the flexibility to deal with unexpected events in the future, such as the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, remote working can give a renewed boost to cooperation and cohesion.

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