



# SUSTAINABLE AGILITY:

How businesses thrive in an  
era of change and disruption



SustainableAgility.org

POWERED BY

ScrumAlliance®



SustainableAgility.org

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Foreword	What is sustainable agility?	Components of sustainable agility
<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Why a learning culture is essential for organizational agility	What if your hiring process was your greatest recruiting tool?	Recruiting and hiring agile talent
<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>

# FOREWORD

Melissa Boggs

We are all at a crossroads.

As Chief ScrumMaster for Scrum Alliance and a Certified Agile Coach, I've had the privilege of working with dozens of organizations across many industries, and they all have one thing in common: change. It's almost cliché at this point to say that the world is changing, and fast. We've all heard that the pace of change in our technology-fueled workforce has infinitely accelerated, creating new challenges and opportunities for organizations. Simultaneously, the workforce is expanding to encompass multiple generations, each with different needs.

Businesses often fail to realize how drastically their mindset needs to shift in order to not only survive - but also thrive - through this level of change. Gone are the days of assembly lines and treating humans like cogs in a wheel. We have quickly moved through several industrial revolutions, finding ourselves now in the fourth. Today's world requires a substantial investment into knowledge work, and necessitates a deep, genuine look at how and from where we lead organizations. To quote Marshall Goldsmith, "What got you here won't get you there," in the largest sense.

At Scrum Alliance, we found ourselves at our own crossroads. When I stepped into my role in January 2019, we were not built in such a way that we could listen closely or move quickly. Ideas were often lost in a maze of hierarchy and approval processes. Some of our team members felt stifled and unable to creatively problem solve. We had a choice. We could continue going down the same road and get the same results, or we could re-think our way of working.

In recent months, we have rebuilt our organization into cross-functional and community-centric teams empowered to deliver. We have flattened hierarchy to eliminate red tape and place decision making with those closest to our community. As an organization, we have embraced agile values and principles wholly and deeply. It has been hard work for the entire team, but it's worth it. Slowly, we are starting to see the fruits of our labor, evidenced by candid conversations with each other and with our customers. We've increased our ability to change course based on those conversations. We are buoyed by the laughter and energy in the office as teams brainstorm new ideas and collaborate on delivery.

Now, I'm not implying that all of these changes are the right ones for your organization. Every organization has its own sets of needs and opportunities. I share our story to encourage you to reflect on your own organizational values and principles and recognize the crossroads at which you stand. You can continue going down the same road, achieving the same results" or you could take a risk that yields great rewards - and bet on customers and employees.

**Does your current organizational structure support your business goals?**

**Are you built to listen closely and move quickly?**

**Do your reward structures acknowledge risk-taking and innovation, or do they honor the status quo?**

**Are you building feedback loops for both products and people?**

**What are you doing just because it's what you've always done?**

We are proud of our commitment to learning what it takes to live out our organizational values every day and in doing so, we are joining others leading the agile movement. We understand from experience that it feels risky. We've been doing things we have never tried before and letting go of control in places we've tightly held. The good news is - we're also opening doors we never knew existed and are thrilled to be sharing what we've learned with you. The pages of this publication offer ideas and insight, and we stand ready to aid you on your journey.

We are all at a crossroads. Which path will you choose?

## » ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Melissa Boggs is the Chief ScrumMaster for Scrum Alliance®. In addition to her experience and education, Melissa possesses a deep understanding of agile values and principles, organizational change, and leadership agility, as well as proven expertise in enabling organizations to reach their full potential.



## WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE AGILITY?

Agility is on the rise. Businesses are searching for ways to reach the cutting edge of innovation, to increase speed-to-market and adaptability, and to create products and services that delight customers. Employees, meanwhile, are seeking purposeful and rewarding work, excellent teammates, and a good work-life balance. To fulfill these goals, organizations need to become more agile—and to sustain that agility over time and throughout the business.

So...what does being agile mean? What is “agility” in this context? We define the terms as such:

**Agility:** The ability of an organization to sense and respond to market changes and continuously deliver value to customers. Agility is sustainable when it is supported at every level of the organization.

**Agile:** An organizational approach and mindset defined by the values and principles of the Agile Manifesto, often practiced through frameworks like Scrum, Kanban, or Lean.

Developed for software teams and departments, the Agile Manifesto is applicable to all organizations and for every kind of team, from HR to finance, to the C-suite. The Agile Manifesto values Individuals and interactions over processes and tools.

- » Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- » Working product over comprehensive documentation
- » Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- » Responding to change over following a plan

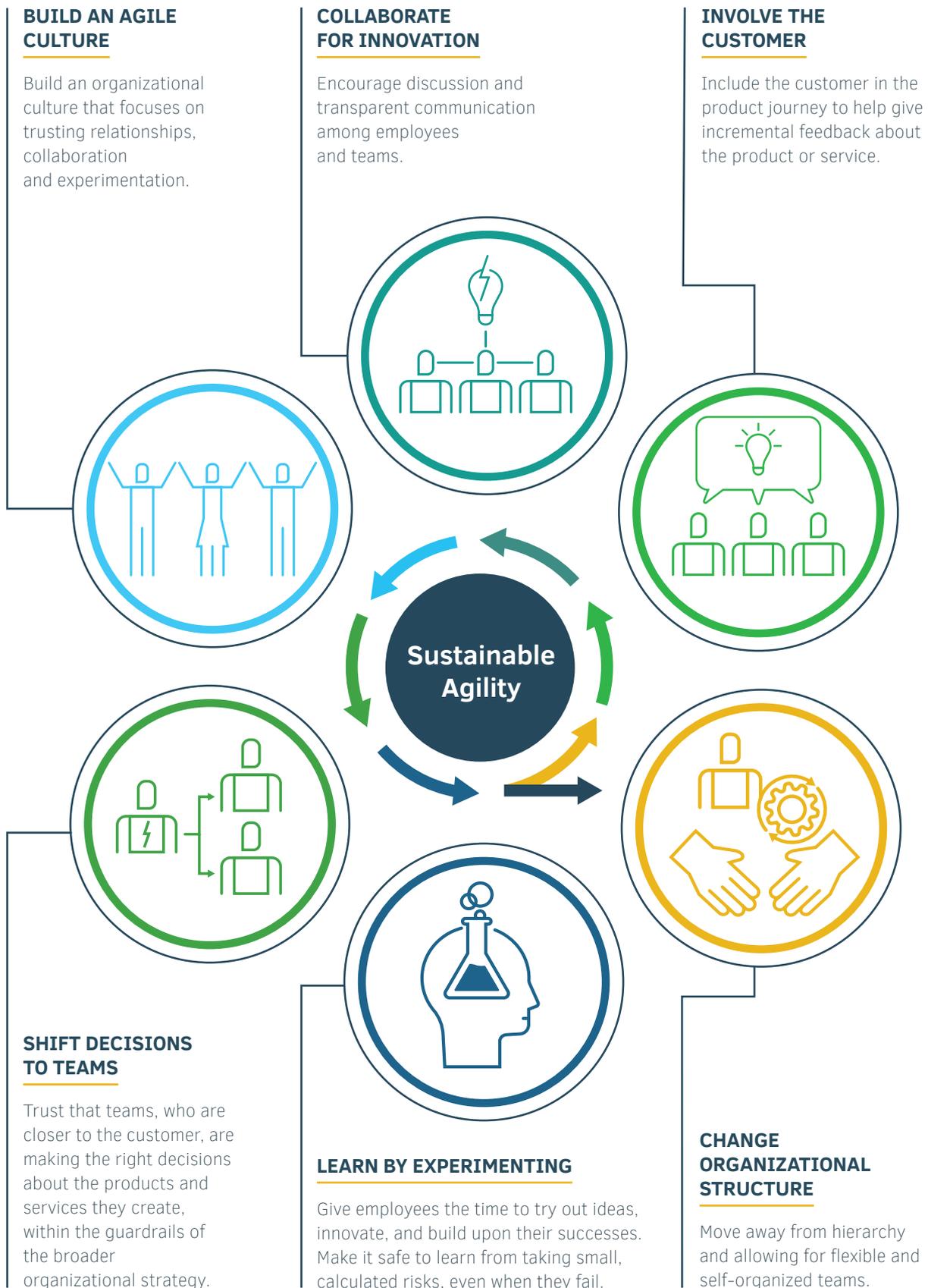
The writers of the Manifesto are quick to say that although agile organizations place more value on the items to the left of the word “over”, there is still value in the items on the right.

The Manifesto goes on to define 12 principles of agility, paraphrased here:

- 1 Satisfy customers through early and continuous value delivery.
- 2 Harness change for competitive advantage.
- 3 Deliver products and services to your customers as frequently as possible.
- 4 Connect business with delivery teams throughout the project.
- 5 Give motivated individuals the support and environment they need to thrive. Then, trust them to get the job done.
- 6 Remember that the best way to convey information is face-to-face.
- 7 Measure progress by what you actually deliver to your customer.
- 8 Maintain a constant but sustainable pace.
- 9 Pay attention to excellence and quality.
- 10 Value simplicity. Maximize the amount of work not done.
- 11 Know that the best work emerges from self-organizing teams.
- 12 Give teams regular time to reflect, inspect, and adapt their behavior.

While businesses can expect to tweak certain agile frameworks and tools to uniquely fit their situations, these principles are unchanging. They are at the heart of what it means to be agile, and form the core of how organizations continuously evolve toward sustainable agility.

# COMPONENTS OF SUSTAINABLE AGILITY





## WHY A LEARNING CULTURE IS ESSENTIAL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY

Growing a business that is able to rapidly respond to change and disruption cannot be achieved overnight – it is only possible when leaders work long-term to establish a culture of continuous learning.

Creating the right culture is a critical part of any transformation, but is particularly important for those seeking greater organizational agility. To thrive in today's fast-paced world, teams and organizations need to build a learning culture, where people feel rewarded for seeking continuous improvement and can do so in a safe and fearless environment.

This article examines why a learning culture is crucial, how fear stops or slows teams from creating change, and how HR directors can lead the charge in developing a culture of learning and agility.

### THE CASE FOR A LEARNING CULTURE

There might have been a time when companies could spend years in research and development, release a product that only sort of met customer needs, went way over budget, and still succeed; but if there ever was, that time has passed. Today, with industry disrupters such as Spotify, Uber, and Amazon more the norm than the exception, companies must be able to react and respond quickly and effectively. They must learn what customers need, what works and what does not, rapidly, and then be able to pivot to a new idea or a better strategy based on what they discover.

The software industry saw this coming years ago. The agile movement began as an antidote to bug-prone, years-long product deliveries that didn't satisfy customers, let alone the teams working to create them. In 2001, a group of innovators met to write what they termed the Agile Manifesto, a set of 12 principles and 4 values where individuals and interactions trump

process, collaboration and a working product are more important than contracts or documentation, and where responding to change takes precedence over following a plan.

Teams that use an agile framework or methodology work in short timeblocks to deliver small but functional increments of a product or service to their customers, then use that feedback to inform what they deliver next. Because agile teams deliver so often, they naturally shift their focus to radical customer satisfaction, and are able to quickly move and adapt to meet customer's needs.

In today's business environment, every company needs this kind of agility, whether they officially label it as agile or not.

*For organizational agility to be possible—and sustainable—companies need a different mindset and culture.*

They need a culture where teams are comfortable receiving and giving feedback, and where people test out new ideas and accept that many of those experiments will fail. They need employees that understand the value in launching something that

might not be perfect but will enable new understanding. They need a culture where people feel rewarded for constantly seeking better ways of doing things and feel safe enough to take small, calculated risks.

In short, they need to build a learning culture.

### **FEAR BLOCKS CULTURAL CHANGE**

The problem is, change is hard. It is deeply rooted in human DNA to fear the unknown. In early stages of human development, fear was a necessary survival instinct, ensuring caution against dangers in the wilderness. Now, that same fear is carrying over into our business decisions.

The truth is, it's incredibly difficult to shift traditions, habits, and behaviors that are deeply ingrained. Leaders who succeed recognize that teams learn and innovate when they test crazy, new ideas – but they cannot do this without support from senior executives, HR directors and the organization as a whole.

Even if leaders outwardly support a learning culture, existing formal and informal policies may stall the initiative. For example, when business leaders set prescriptive goals with no room for experimentation, all the team's time is spent trying to reach targets and objectives, leaving little time to fail or to experiment.

***Business and HR leaders alike need to evaluate whether their words, actions, and policies are aligned to creating the culture they desire.***

Fear of the unknown isn't the only blocker to change. There is also a fear of losing control, particularly for HR professionals and C-suite executives who experience constant pressure to meet the high expectations set by the board or shareholders. These leaders' own fear of failure and fear of disappointing others makes it hard for them trust teams to deliver without strict direction and constant supervision.

This is a difficult fear to manage, given the constraints that are placed by hard-to-reach third parties. Leaders who succeed, do so by setting realistic and inspiring organizational goals while allowing teams to set their own team-level goals and objectives.

By giving that freedom to the teams, leaders create a sense of empowerment and autonomy so that teams can meet expectations but also make time to innovate and learn. With the guardrails of organizational goals in place, leaders can breathe easier knowing that the expectations are clear.

Senior management can also be resistant to the implementation of a learning culture if they fear that pushing decision making down the ranks makes them less valuable. Leaders who succeed understand that enabling those closest to the work to make the daily decisions allows leaders to focus their energy and effort on strategic thinking that will sustain the business for years to come.

Leaders who build learning cultures have the chance to dream and envision a bright future, making them even more valuable than before.

### **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING AN AGILE LEARNING CULTURE?**

The leadership team is responsible for creating a learning culture. The best place to begin is by clearly and passionately painting the future vision for the organization.

***Developing agility in a team is wasted without a wider vision for what the organization wants to accomplish.***

Successful leaders clearly state what the ultimate, collective purpose for the business is, as that provides motivation and acts as the foundation for the culture.

Successful leaders also model the values and principles they want others to adopt. No one can just speak a culture into existence – leaders set the example for what a learning culture looks like, while also helping people in the organization see why it's beneficial to them.

Many who undertake a cultural shift like this find they cannot do it alone. Successful leaders are not afraid to seek help. Many choose to bring in an expert, perhaps a Certified Agile Coach, who has the experience and objectivity to know where to begin making changes and how to best communicate the new vision to ensure everyone feels included and engaged in the journey.

What is important to remember with any change is that it's not a race to the finish line - the aim is to create a culture that is open to continuous learning, with a view toward being able to respond quickly to customer needs and market disruptions.

By embracing agility and empowering a learning culture, businesses can drive towards their broader, overarching purpose – and sustain it.



## WHAT IF YOUR HIRING PROCESS WAS YOUR GREATEST RECRUITING TOOL?

Interview with Melissa Boggs

Earlier this year, Scrum Alliance uprooted their organization and began along a journey towards agility. They flattened their structure, gave complete autonomy to their employees, and began to embrace a learning culture. Even the company's hiring process has changed the rules of the game. Sitting down with Scrum Alliance Chief ScrumMaster Melissa Boggs gave us firsthand insight on how different and exciting their hiring process is.

### WHAT SETS THE SCRUM ALLIANCE HIRING PROCESS APART FROM OTHERS?

Instead of calling it an interview, we call it an event. These hiring events are us being us. We expect team members to take responsibility and have courage to face challenges with excitement. And that is exactly what we're asking of guests (we refer to them as "guests" rather than "candidates") when they come to a hiring event like this. All guests are invited on the same day. We let them know upfront that they will be participating alongside other guests. This may seem very daunting, but as they get to know each other throughout the event, their fears begin to subside, and the process becomes less scary than expected.

### HOW DO YOU THINK A GROUP INTERVIEW HELPS APPLICANTS TO GET OVER THEIR FEAR?

Our brains are wired to fear the unknown. Bonding with the other guests removes one unknown from the hiring process, vis à vis, who the other people are who're interviewing.

One candidate caught up with me after one of our hiring events and said, "You know, I have spent an entire day with other people in consideration for this job. If you hired one of them, I wouldn't even be mad. I have been able to see that these other people are great too."

### » THE ULTIMATE GOALS GOING INTO THE AGILE RECRUITMENT SESSION:

- 1 Learn more – both, them learning more about us, and us learning about them
- 2 Build relationships and community – a chance to meet and connect with others who are passionate about the same things you are
- 3 Have great conversations – best way to get to know each other!
- 4 Have fun – get stuck, in with the games and exercises
- 5 Finding a good match – as a business, discovering that person who meets your needs, as well as you meeting theirs

### HOW DO YOU MAKE THE EXPERIENCE VALUABLE FOR EVERYONE?

Everyone who comes into an interview is also interviewing a company to see if it's a place they may want to work. But in reality, the hiring company holds all the power. We have decided to change that and balance the power between both sides.

Balancing the power is not only good for the person interviewing; it helps organizations too because the guests can be their true authentic selves. We invite our guests to show us their whole person, not just their skills. At the same time, we offer ourselves for the guests to get to know who we are as individuals and as a company. This is a large part of the hiring event. There is never a point in the entire day when we are only interviewing them. All of the activities are a two-way

conversation. What we really want to know is how we have conversations and learn from one another.

### **WHAT CAN GUESTS EXPECT TO EXPERIENCE AT THIS HIRING EVENT?**

We are drawing people who are attracted by the way we hire. It is important for our guests to know that, by coming to this event, they are a part of our community. Even if a particular opening isn't a match, we let our guests know that we may call them back for future openings. Twice I have heard of people who attended our hiring events – and these are people that didn't get the job – talking during networking Meetups and other events about how great the interview process was at Scrum Alliance.

One thing that makes our interview process stand out is that we include many opportunities for our guests to interact with each other and staff. Speed chatting is one activity where guests and members of the cross-functional team have short, two-way conversations. Lean Coffee allows for guests to interact with people in our organization of the same skillset. This isn't a bunch of interview questions; rather, 6-8 people sitting around the table having a conversation about their craft.

### **WHAT IS LEAN COFFEE?**

Lean Coffee starts with the participants (usually 6-8 people) writing discussion topics on Post-it® Notes. The group then votes to decide priority. A time limit is set, and discussion starts.

### **WHAT TIPS CAN YOU GIVE TO ORGANIZATIONS WANTING TO CHANGE UP THEIR HIRING PROCESS?**

I don't think there is anything specific that would make this way of hiring difficult to adopt. The most important thing is for people to have the opportunity to get to know the people with whom they might be interacting and leave with a positive experience and new connections.

*At our last hiring event, we introduced play through The Empathy Toy. It is simply a game with blocks that offers more into understanding how guests communicate and collaborate.*



# RECRUITING AND HIRING AGILE TALENT



## WHAT APPLICANTS WANT:



## AGILE HIRING TIPS:



### VARIETY

Applicants want variety in their work. They want the opportunity to demonstrate their diverse skill set and to learn and grow into others.



During your hiring event, offer a variety of skill-based tasks for applicants to engage in. This will help identify competencies that relate to the position, and those that may be beneficial to the values of the organization.



### AUTONOMY

Agile talent wants independence and flexibility in their work.



During your hiring event, look for applicants that are comfortable working independently and are willing to adapt and respond quickly to feedback.



### BALANCE

Agile workers desire a good work-life balance with opportunities for achievement.



In a one-on-one session, ask the applicants what conditions would allow them to do their best work. Your observations here will give you valuable insights on what motivates them to do work.



### COMMUNITY

Agile applicants want to feel a sense of belonging to an organization and the opportunity to contribute to organizational goals.



Offer interactive games or task-based activities to see how the applicant would respond in different situations. Encourage storytelling, look for collaboration, resilience, and struggles with prioritization.

## HOW SCRUM ALLIANCE CAN HELP YOU

Scrum Alliance serves the largest community of agile practitioners and offers connection with some of the most innovative and experienced agile experts in the world. Our progressive certification model demonstrates the vetted quality and the different levels of experience of agile professionals.

- » Starting as a CSM® (Certified ScrumMaster) or a CSPO® (Certified Scrum Product Owner), achieved through an entry-level, 2-day, in-person course
- » Continuing through CSP® (Certified Scrum Professional), which is a middle-advanced level in the agile journey that incorporates continuing education and experience
- » Culminating in the highest level of certification: CST® (Certified Scrum Trainer) and Certified Agile Coach<sup>SM</sup> certifications, the CEC (Certified Enterprise Coach) and CTC (Certified Team Coach)

## ABOUT SCRUM ALLIANCE

Scrum Alliance® is a nonprofit trade organization that serves over one million members worldwide. Our vision is to “Transform the World of Work” with a mission to guide and inspire individuals, leaders, and organizations with practices, principles, and values to create workplaces that are joyful, prosperous, and sustainable.

**Inspire:** We inspire individuals, leaders, and organizations to adopt agile mindsets. We support their transformations with training and shared stories of change and innovation in companies around the world.

**Enable:** We enable the work of our certificants and community through a global network of agile peers, trainers, and coaches. We develop content and learning opportunities, including webinars, global and regional events, local user groups, and more.

**Guide:** We guide the application of agile practices, principles, and values through our career-long certification path. Our community of coaches and trainers is focused on providing knowledge, skills, and experience that support agile transformations for both individuals and organizations.

## EDITORIAL

Melissa Boggs Chief ScrumMaster

Rebecca Traeger Editor

Carol Miller Editor

## LEADER TEAM

Veronica Ohl Product Owner

Cody Wanberg ScrumMaster

Eric Filonowich Senior Software Developer

Shannon Larsen Senior Educational Writer

Pablo Lozano Designer

Maria Scheifler Global Marketing and Communications

Victoria Whitley Customer Engagement Specialist

<https://sustainableagility.org>

TeamLeader@scrumalliance.org

