PART II – *WHAT* Is the Responsive Agile Coaching Model?

Introduction

In Part II, I'm going to slowly build up the elements of the Responsive Agile Coaching model for you, piece by piece. Once you thoroughly understand the model, I will then go through and show you exactly how to use it. What's really exciting about the Responsive Agile Coaching model is for the first time it unpacks and provides specific, detailed guidelines on how to actually conduct an agile coaching conversation with a client. The model is going to introduce some new language to describe how agile coaching works, which may seem strange or a little unusual, but it is necessary because we need to reframe what agile coaching is and how it's delivered.

Chapter 4. Two Stories Explain How the Model Originated

I want to take you through the two scenarios I see over and over as I mentor agile coaches through their careers. In one scenario, the coach has the answer and provides a solution, and the experience feels gratifying. In the second scenario, the coach's solution is NOT the answer; this is where a lot of coaches struggle, give up, or go and coach somewhere else. The model I've developed provides for a response in both scenarios and gives coaches a means to deal with both situations.

Below I'll tell two stories based on both scenarios, then I'll introduce the Responsive Agile Coaching model and explain it in detail.

The first story is what I call a "sunny-day scenario," meaning everything goes according to the script; the coach plays the expert and the client plays the student who accepts the wisdom provided by the coach. Everyone in this scenario walks away with what they came for.

Sunny-Day Story

Let me tell you a story that's happening now, as I write this book. It is about a coaching engagement I have just commenced over the last two weeks. It is a great example of when an agile coach gets a "clean run" to deliver their services into an organization, meeting little resistance to change. A nice "sunny-day" scenario.

The client has a problem project. It has been running for a year, is behind schedule, and the team has a lot of internal conflict. Management feels the project is not well governed and is concerned about the risk of further delays. I'm hired as the agile coach to stabilize the project, organize the way of working, and improve the team culture. Here's a quote from my first meeting with the product owner (Fred).

"I think we need to reduce the number of agile ceremonies; they're a waste of my time," Fred says. He stops talking and sits back in his chair with a posture that says, "I've had enough".

I think to myself, *Wow, this guy really is frustrated; he seems to really care but is fed up with the team.*

This is normal team-level agile coaching—nothing special going on here—but you may be thinking, *Is this a sunny-day scenario?* The answer is yes, and you'll see why as our story continues.

In this first meeting, I made sure the complaining product owner felt heard. I didn't argue or interrogate his claims and mostly listened and empathized. Over the next week, I met with the team and project manager and learned the following:

- The product owner has everyone fearful of speaking up.
- The project has a no-governance approach.

- Basics of team-level agile practices are not in place.
- The team does not have a social contract.
- Retrospectives are superficial and not getting to the root cause.

I meet with my sponsor, Mark, to discuss my plan of action.

"OK, Niall, what is the plan here?" Mark enquires.

"We need to bring order to the team's way of working; it is chaos at the moment. The easiest way to do this is just to go back to the basics of the scrum framework. Then once these are in place, I'll work with the individual people on their attitudes, values, behaviors," I reply.

"OK, what changes are you going to implement first?" Mark asks. "I really need this project to have better governance; the board needs to know when it will be delivered. Whatever you want to do, I am fully behind you to implement your recommendations."

After this meeting, I began telling and showing the team how to set up a more formalized scrum implementation. The team recognized me as an expert-level coach, I did not meet any resistance to my suggestions (even the PO did as I asked), and my sponsor ensured I could just get on with implementing change.

Over the following two weeks, I then started on the "softer" aspects of coaching: a social contract creation workshop and a deep retro to air all grievances. I worked one-on-one with the PO, and the team started to learn how to have open and honest conversations about their behavior.

All of my recommendations were accepted and implemented, and within two sprints, the team's ceremonies were completely in line with what would be considered a standard implementation of scrum. I did this by stepping in and facilitating all ceremonies and helping reconfigure the team's tooling setup. I either did it myself or told others to do it for me. There was little discussion or negotiation on what I was suggesting. The sponsor was happy, the team was comfortable with me telling them what to do, and the results came quickly.

See Figure 3 below for a visual representation of this coaching process; a clear, straight pathway to executing my role as an agile coach.

Sunny-Day Story Debrief

So, what happened in this scenario? Let's debrief.

Nothing out of the ordinary here; this is traditional agile coaching. I was able to do my job because a few prerequisites were in place that allowed for a sunny-day coaching scenario:

- Sponsorship and permission to coach.
- A clear reason for me to be there; a well-defined urgent problem that required attention.
- I had the right skills and experience to undertake the job I was being asked to do.

This coaching engagement went "to plan" because all these pre-requisites were in place. Let's look at each one.

Firstly, I could go in to work with the team, knowing I had sponsorship to challenge the current way of working. You could call this power, support, or a mandate, but it all means the same thing: you can assertively implement suggestions by telling or showing people what to do. I didn't need to obtain permission per se because it is explicit that I'm here to change things. The team knows I'm sponsored, they know the organization is expecting change, and they know they need to at least give me an opportunity and listen.

Secondly, there were obvious issues/problems that required resolution. An experienced coach will see these immediately and quickly formulate ideas on how they should be solved.

Lastly, the coach has been in this situation before and has the learned experience of what to do and the advice the team needs to hear. Very quickly they can give answers and provide hands-on help and solutions.

Sunny-day coaching is the predominant approach agile coaches take and is what agile coaches are most known for. The client learns a new skill by the coach telling and then showing them the what and how of agile before embedding the new way of working and letting the client do it themselves. Writing a book about the above scenario, while useful, does not provide the agile coach with the complete picture. What happens when the coach meets resistance, either open or passive, to what they are proposing? The fifty beginner agile coaches I recently trained were not prepared for situations that didn't follow the approach outlined in the sunny-day scenario. That's when I started to see the need to provide coaches with guidance on what to do on "rainy days"; when they are not being listened to, are not well-sponsored, or don't have all the answers to the problems they're trying to solve.

Rainy-day coaching is quite different from sunny-day coaching, and it is not something well catered for within existing education or accreditation training programs for agile coaches. In rainy-day situations, simply telling or showing the client won't work; the answer is not obvious, and a different approach is required. Here's a real (and typical) rainy-day situation I experienced.

Rainy-Day Story

Jen was frustrated. She'd heard about how agile coaching of technology teams was "different" to coaching business teams, but the resistance to change she was experiencing was much higher than she expected. Jen's background as a change management specialist had brought her to agile coaching. She had learned the processes and practices of agile and was quite proficient as a facilitator, but coming into the technology department as an agile coach for the first time meant she was never going to be as knowledgeable about IT as the people she was coaching—no matter how much she read up.

Over her morning cup of coffee, Jen considered her day ahead; she was reflecting on a conversation she had the day prior with John, one of the technology team product owners.

"Hi, John. My name is Jen. I've been assigned to support you as your agile coach. How's it going?"

"Hey, Jen. What's up? Great to have another pair of hands to help get stuff done. What's your background?" John asked.

"I've just finished working on a project in our human resource department where I was helping implement agile across a few teams; my background is in leadership and culture."

Jen noticed that John's posture and mood changed quite rapidly; he didn't look as happy as he did five seconds before. "No offense, Jen, but you've got to be kidding me! Why would I be assigned a business coach to help me with my IT delivery team; this is ridiculous."

With that John walked off, leaving Jen stunned and confused.

Jen was now frustrated; her agile coaching career had been mostly smooth sailing to date, with only a few bumps of resistance along the way. She considered her next steps, jotting down options for a possible way forward on her notepad:

1. Find a way to "restart" the conversation.
2. Have a deeper conversation with John about his reaction; see what's under that.
3. Position my coach role as an enabler to solve his problems.
4. Find out what his problems are.

Jen headed into work with a mini plan. She met John at the elevator.

"Hi, John, I—"

John cut her off. "Sorry to interrupt you, Jen. I just wanted to apologize for yesterday. I'm not sure you're going to be a fit for what we need here. We've got so much backlogged work and not a lot of time. I just don't want to waste your time and mine when you aren't a technology expert."

Jen took a deep breath and relaxed her posture. In that moment, she made a purposeful attempt to empathize with John's situation before responding. "I get it, John. I really do. I'm not an IT specialist and I won't stand here and pretend that I am. What if I just observed for a few days? I'll stay out your way and won't take any of your time. After that we can talk, and if we then both agree there's no value in me being around, then I'll talk to my manager. Would that be OK?"

"Yeah, I suppose, but please don't interfere with the team's work," John said.

"Sure, it's a deal; I'll put some time in your diary for Wednesday for us to debrief in three days; in the meantime, I'll observe."

Three days later, Jen and John were sitting in a meeting room for the debrief.

Jen opened the meeting. "Hi, John. I'd like to use this time to discuss your team's way of working but more specifically to check in with you and see how you're doing."

"Well, we're doing OK; the team had a great sprint, and we delivered on our goal—"

Jen politely interjected. "Sorry, John, to interrupt, but I just want to point out that you're talking about 'we,' your team. I asked how '*you*' are doing."

"Oh, well, yes. Umm…" John paused; there was silence.

Jen waited, listened, and watched intently. She put down her pen, straightened in her chair, leaned in slightly, and put both hands on the table and relaxed, signaling "I'm open to whatever you say next, without judgement."

John laughed nervously. "It's just funny—no one has ever really asks me how I'm doing, at least not the way you did. Everyone around here is so busy that checking in with how people are *really* doing just doesn't happen."

Jen didn't respond. She just kept listening, waiting for John, who looked like he had more to say.

"So, what did you observe over the last two days, Jen?"

"I observed busyness, pressure to deliver. I witnessed you running around, attempting to meet everybody else's expectations and keep the team productive as well as protected. I saw you, a product owner, who cares about his team but also cares about quality," Jen responded.

John laughed, less nervously this time. "Yep, that about sums it up. I guess you now see why I reacted when you came to me but were not going to help as a technical expert."

"John, agile coaches can do many things to help product owners; sure, there are the agile expert and technical expert parts of the role, but there's also the coach part, and that is where I think I can be of most use to you and your team. There are things I can implement to help with the busyness and

pressure you're experiencing. As your coach, we can partner to protect your team while getting things done. I can put things in place with you and your scrum master to take the pressure off you," Jen said, then she was quiet.

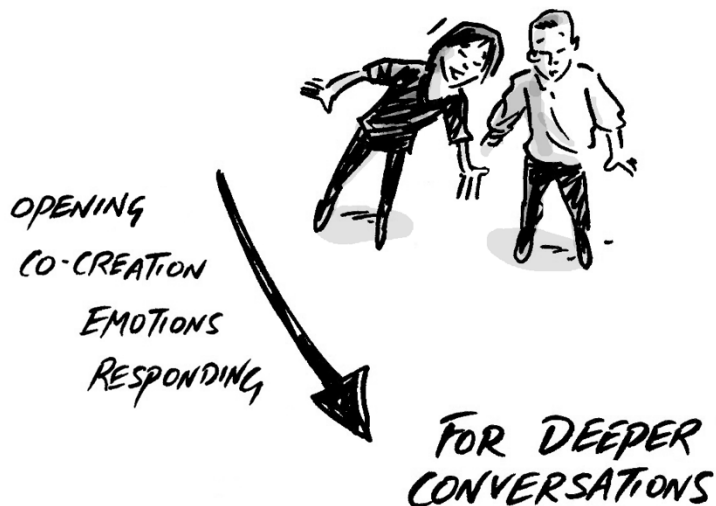John considered what Jen had said. "So you'd work *with* me?"

"Yes, I call it co-creating *your* way of working. That's how I roll, John; I do my job *with* others not *to* them; that way you own the way of working because you helped create it," Jen responded.

"OK, let's see how this goes. We can assess how we go every retro with the team," John agreed.

"Great, John, and thanks for hearing me out. So just to confirm and check: We're going to work together to implement changes and improve the team's way of working. We're a team on this, yes?"

"Yes, Jen. All good. I might even pick your brain on how I can manage my time a bit better."
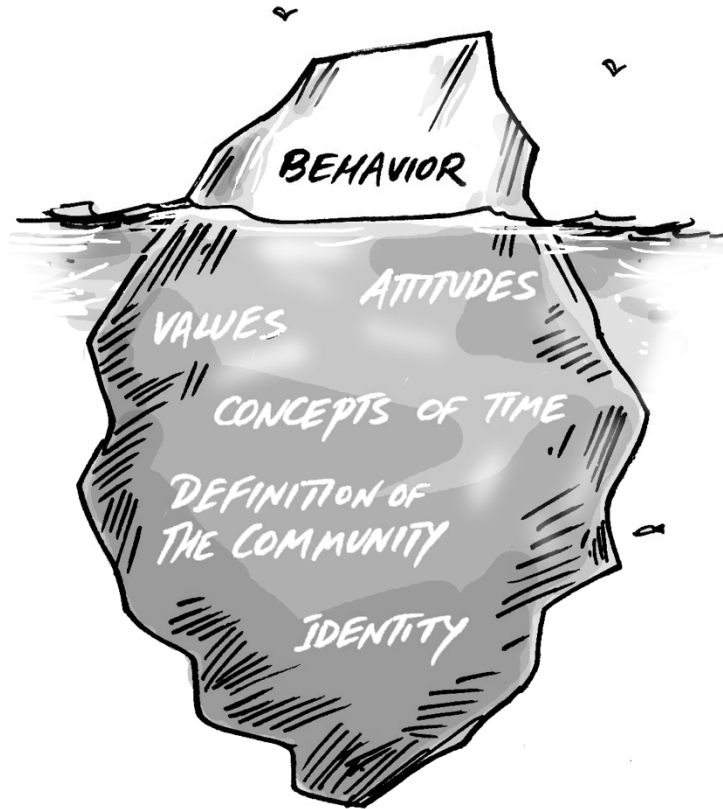
As Jen left the meeting room, she reflected on the conversation and thought back to her coaching training. She sat down and quickly drew the model she'd utilized in the conversation with John in her notebook; she didn't want to forget the approach and wanted to keep it for future reference.

OPENING
CO-CREATION
EMOTIONS
RESPONDING

FOR DEEPER CONVERSATIONS

Rainy-Day Story Debrief

Jen encountered resistance; simply telling or showing John the answer was not going to work. She had no opportunity to come in and implement changes to the way of working. She was not invited in to help the team change their practices. Jen started her coaching engagement in the same manner as the sunny-day scenario; she initiated the relationship but then had to have a reset.

The difference in this scenario was Jen had to take an alternate approach to see what was underneath the tip of the iceberg. It follows a downward pathway; let me explain what I mean by downward.

When people behave in an observable way, there are unseen factors at play. A person's beliefs and values underpin their attitudes and behaviors. When these unseen factors are challenged, the person can become emotional and react as John did when Jen asked for his time. What Jen did was in some way at odds to John's values or beliefs. For example, it is not unreasonable to think that John believes only technology professionals have the right to advise him on how they should work. John may also consider Jen's request disrespectful of his time, which he did not have a lot of. Ultimately, we will never know what it was that caused John to act the way he did, and it doesn't really matter. All Jen can do is change her approach—*respond* to the situation—which she did.

When Jen sat down with John the second time, she wasn't there to bring answers, solve agile problems, or show the team how to do agile better. Her approach represents a coaching model that follows a different pathway—one that is used when a deeper consideration of what's causing resistance is required.

Jen used listening, silence, and open questions to slow down the conversation. She saw John's problems with fresh (non-expert) eyes and empathized with his emotions. This allowed John to "feel felt"; it's where the coach and client both start to "let go" of their opinions and make room for new shared ones with neither trying to drive their agenda. John only did this when Jen's response to his question on what she had observed "hit the mark" and resonated with him. When John felt heard and understood, he then gave Jen the benefit of the doubt.

In conversations like these, there are always turning points; Jen sat quietly awaiting what was about to come. It's the moment when new things can emerge—ideas, options, relationships, or ways forward. It's after this turning point that co-creation starts, and John agrees that they can partner to "do it together." They leave the meeting with a very different relationship than they had prior. The two parties have let go of their old thinking and opinions and created a partnership to improve the team's way of working. The final step is embedding the new system, which in this instance is simply them working together. Jen confirmed and embedded this agreement prior to finalizing the meeting.

We'll refer back to this process in much more detail in the next and subsequent chapters.

The secret to great agile coaching is being able to respond to a coaching request or opportunity by either providing the answer or co-creating it with the client. A responsive agile coach executes

whichever approach is necessary and required in the moment. Read on to see how these two response options interact to form the overall model for Responsive Agile Coaching.
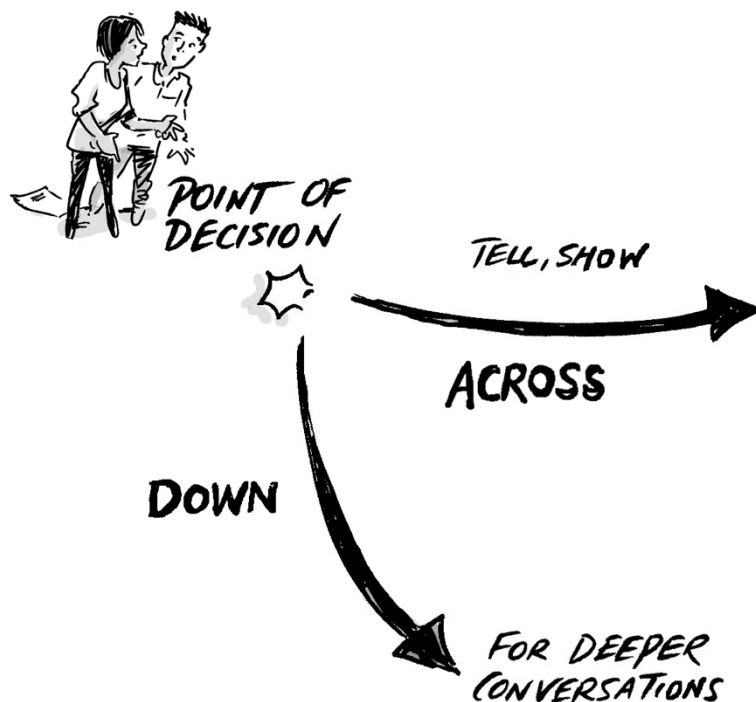
Chapter Summary

- As an agile coach, sometimes you will have the answer to your client's questions, and sometimes your answer is either not accepted or is insufficient to solve the current problem.

- Being responsive simply means the agile coach is aware they have a choice between the two different pathways a conversation can follow.

Chapter 5. Two Pathways, Four Moves, One End Point

Two Pathways

If we combine the two pictures from the sunny-day and rainy-day scenarios, we start to see the two pathways an agile coaching conversation can go down. More than 15 years of research from The Presencing Institute support this pathway model, which is underpinned by "Theory U" and the Work of Otto Schamer at MIT.[2] The Responsive Agile Coaching model takes Theory U and applies it into the domain of agile coaching conversations. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to refer to the first pathway as the "across" pathway and the second pathway as the "down" pathway.

At this stage I want to keep the model in its simplest form to highlight the moment when the coach reaches` a point of decision; a moment where they can make a choice and hopefully respond to what will best serve the client by choosing the appropriate pathway. Each pathway has what I'm going to call a move or series of moves associated with it. Let me take you through what I mean by the word "move," as this is new language and a new concept in agile coaching.

Overview of the Four Moves

The Responsive Agile Coaching model is a flow-based approach to conducting agile coaching conversations. The model is made up of four moves, which will help organize the rest of the book and all the associated concepts. I've used the word "moves" on purpose because each one involves two steps; actions where the coach does something.
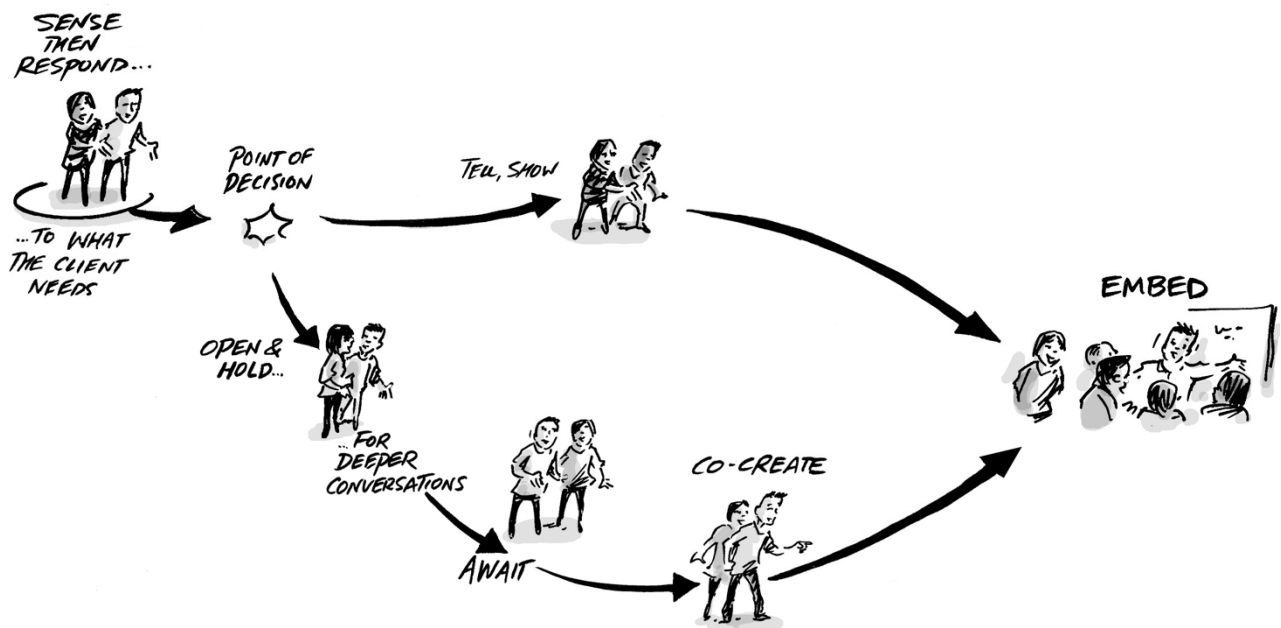
Moves are not static but collectively combine to form the flow of an agile coaching conversation; here are the four moves:

1. **Sense then Respond** to what the client needs.
2. **Tell or Show** clients how to apply agile.
3. **Open and Hold** the space for deeper conversations.
4. **Await then Co-create** new ways of working.

The last element of the model is an end point, which is made up of a single step—to **Embed** the change as a better way to work.

The four moves together with the two conversation pathways help agile coaches navigate conversations to the end point. In the "across" pathway, the coach will *Tell or Show* the client how to do agile. The "down" pathway involves deeper conversations where the coach will *Open and Hold* the space to support clients to enter into a dialogue with the coach. Once in the Open and Hold move, the coach will then *Await* for emerging ideas before moving to *Co-create* the new ways of working with the client. Prior to choosing a pathway, the agile coach *Senses* there is a coaching moment, considers what will best serve the client and the situation, and then *Responds* accordingly.

Here's a simple version of the model to get us started; I'll fill in more detail as we progress through the book.

Let's take a bit of time now to explain each of the steps within each move. At this stage I want you to get the general concepts; these will come to life later when I show you how to actually conduct an agile coaching conversation using the model.