Beware of the Scrum Police!

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During my Agile Scrum training sessions, there are several moments that I have to tell the audience that a particular practice has emerged from my own hands-on experience, and is not part of (or sometimes in conflict with) the 'rules of the game' as defined in the Scrum Guide, which document declares that the described Scrum's roles, artifacts, events, and rules are immutable.

So if a participant is following my class as a preparation for the official Scrum Master certification, he or she has to 'forget temporarily' these deviating practices. Every time that happens, I feel a bit awkward. After explaining the essence of Agile thinking, it just isn't logical to present an Agile methodology that has to be followed to the letter.

Agile is a great approach, but I will stay away from the hype, dogma and sometimes even religious-like zealotry…. In my humble opinion, Scrum is not a reserved word for an upfront defined practice or a particular 'school' - and above that, Scrum is not the one and only true way.

Agile implementation of Scrum

In my view, a codified interpretation of Agile that is enforced by the 'Scrum establishment' is a *contradiction in terminis*, and also in conflict with the first of the core values of the Agile Manifesto:

"Individuals and interactions over processes and tools."

I wholeheartedly agree with the values set forth in the Agile Manifesto, but sometimes the label has become a synonym for Scrum as a trademarked method that promotes process over principle. I agree with Martin Fowler [1], that as an Agile method, Scrum welcomes change, in technology and requirements, even to the point of changing the method itself. In other words, the Agile principles should be applied to the implementation of Scrum itself as well: *Scrum your Scrum!* Unfortunately, this is not-done according to the more traditional wing of the Scrum community, resulting in dogmas being proclaimed and anathemas being cast on heretics who don't agree.

Part of dogmatism is also treating Scrum as a silver bullet or the all-encompassing solution. This reminds me of a Yiddish story about a man collecting his new costume made by a tailor. The new suit appears to be quite inconvenient.

When the customer complains, the tailor tells him that the costume itself is perfect, but that there is something wrong with his posture. His arms and legs are not in the right position. He helps the man to move his elbows up, hands the other way round, feet turned inside, knees lightly bended. And yes, the suite fits perfectly now.

The customer pays the bill, and walks out, ill at ease and uncomfortable. From the other side of the street, two women are looking at him in amazement. "Still a pretty good job", the one is saying to the other: "that the tailor was able to make a fitting suit for someone with a such a deformed body!"

Walking the Talk

Please don't get me wrong: I don't welcome the disregard or adaptation of the Scrum rules, just to suite so-called "unique challenges", or to cloak organizational dysfunctions. I have witnessed too many ugly examples of corrupted Scrum in my professional experience already. The point is that if there is a need to adjust a Scrum practice, you must do so on the basis of a complete understanding of Scrum, including the underlying Agile principles.

This does not alter the fact, however, that Agile is a personal mindset in the first place, according to holistic principles aiming to make your project a long-lasting success for your customer, your product and your market, instead of a dogmatic set of very specific practices defined by someone else. I'm therefore not particularly fond of agilists that simply claim that Agile is about following practices X, Y and Z - especially when they don't have extensive personal experience with the idolized method. Again, I believe that turning off your own brain and slavishly following any rule or process is ultimately in the face of core principles of Agile.

As Scrum coach and trainer, I will always make a serious effort to walk my talk. All the suggestions for Scrum modifications or variations I have shared, such as my version of Scrum of Scrums, Refinement, Estimation Tesam, Unplanned Work, Release Planning, Sprint Planning, Agile Architecting, Job Stories, Forecaste Meeting, Spikes, etc., are not theoretical concepts or 'scrumbuts', but are based on my own hands-on experience and collaboration with the many Scrum teams I've supported over the years.

How much dogma is needed?

Experience learns that a beginning Scrum team needs a constructive point of departure, a pragmatic foundation comprising the basic Scrum practices. The beauty of Scrum is that a team starts with the essential elements in place, and then learns how to become more effective by applying the Agile principles of inspect and adapt - and always by applying common sense...

A common pitfall for beginning Scrum teams is that they try to push their current way of working into a Scrum mold, without any hands-on experience of how Scrum really works, and how eloquently the basic Scrum practices are intertwined and depend on each other. Moreover, a firm foundation will (hopefully) shield the Scrum team from returning to 'old behavior' the moment they are facing a serious head-wind. There are quite some implementation pitfalls, and customizing Scrum before having learned and applied the basics, is in most cases a recipe for failure.

Hence, a new Scrum teams starts with a 'constrained freedom'. Although it sounds a bit non-Agile, the new Scrum team implements the basics without upfront modifications or decorations, or worrying about the underlying process. My advice is always: start simple, but not too simple. Nevertheless, the question: "how much dogma is needed to start with Scrum?" represents an interesting dilemma.

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There is no simple answer to this question, but a clue may be found in *Shuhari*, the Japanese martial art concept, describing the stages of learning to mastery:

• Shu ("protect", "obey") - traditional wisdom, learning fundamentals, techniques, following heuristics;
• Ha ("detach", "digress") - breaking with traditions, finding exceptions to traditional wisdom, reflecting on their truth, finding new ways or techniques;
• Ri ("leave", "separate") - transcendence, there are no techniques, all moves are natural.
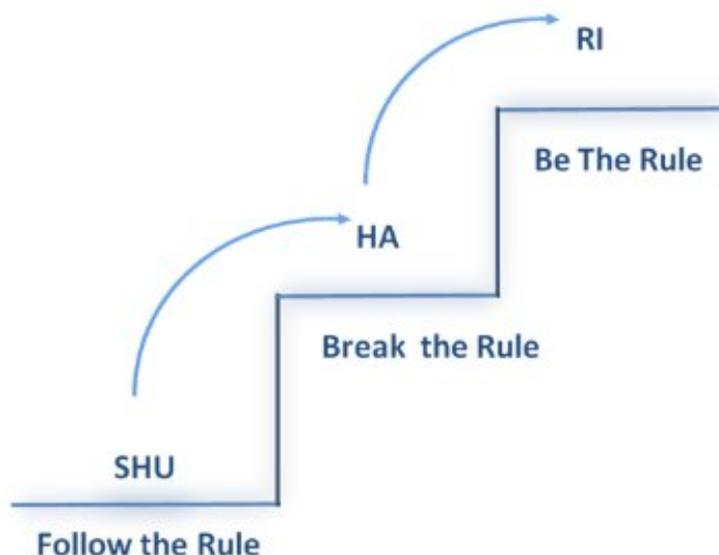
Alistair Cockburn came up with the idea to apply this way of learning to the Agile approach [2]. Indeed there is a principal difference between 'following Agile' and 'being Agile' - the former often locks the practitioner into a dogmatic thought process, while the latter provides the flexibility to adapt to change without being impeded by a predefined process.

However, to arrive at 'being Agile', one must follow the Agile rules first in order to be able to supersede and internalize them. Therefore, it is sensible to start use Scrum by the book and learn and discover from there. Then you know what is officially endorsed and hence have a chance of knowing what can work out of the box.

Starting small and taking it from there, is in most cases not a problem: soon the Scrum team will start to customize their way of working. But for whatever reason, the last step appears to be the most difficult, and often the original set of rules is just replaced by a new set of rules. To be honest, I've witnessed only a few teams (or team members) arriving at the last stage (which has no ending by the way). Perhaps a better description of Ri would be the awakening and realization of the Agile mindset(or growth mindset), as a transcendence of the fixed mindset.

The following dialogue in *Alice in Wonderland* perfectly expresses the whole idea:

Alice: *From the moment I fell down that rabbit hole I've been told what I must do and who I must be. I've been shrunk, stretched, scratched, and stuffed into a teapot. I've been accused of being Alice and of not being Alice but this is my dream. I'll decide where it goes from here.*

Bayard: *If you diverge from the path...*

Alice: *I make the path!*

It is an open secret that transformation impediments such as the growth of the team toward self-empowerment and self-organization are in most cases management level related. Team level impediments, if any, will dominate in the short run and management level impediments dominate in the long run. The (adjustment of the) organizational culture plays a crucial role, and *servant leadership* is in my view a prerequisite to promote and facilitate the journey toward truly becoming Agile.

References
[1] Martin Fowler: *The New Methodology*, www.martinfowler.com (2005)
[2] Alistair Cockburn: *Shu-Ha-Ri*, http://alistair.cockburn.us/Shu+Ha+Ri (2001)

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