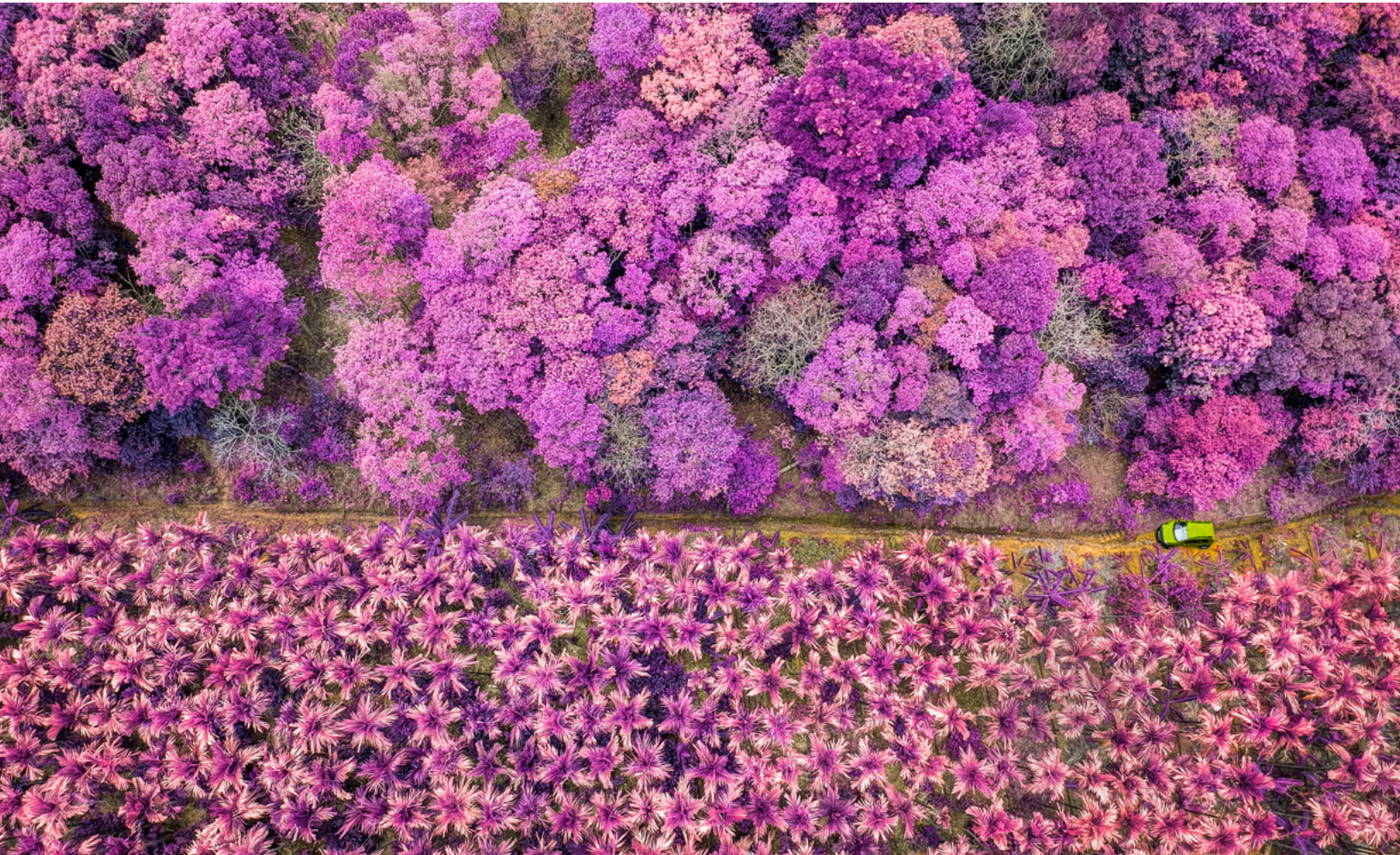


# How to select and develop individuals for successful agile teams: A practical guide

What personality traits and values help agile teams bloom? Discover ways to identify these when recruiting and coaching your people.

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In 2018, Scrum.org and McKinsey & Company started closely collaborating around a shared purpose in helping companies innovate the way their organizations, teams and individuals work.

Having seen agile teams both thrive and falter across a variety of settings, we set out to look more closely at what made the successful teams take off and sustain their ways of working.

We are excited to share the results of our research collaboration in the following article, *How to Select and Develop Individuals for Successful Agile Teams: A Practical Guide*.

This study explores the values and traits of the individuals who make up successful agile teams. It is our hope that this offers a practical guide to both define core concepts as well as offer ways to better recruit for and coach teams.

The findings are based on extensive interviews and surveys of Professional Scrum Trainers and practitioners across the Scrum.org community.

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To survive and thrive, many organizations are making the effort to become more agile. Whereas traditional organizations seem mechanical, hierarchical, and linear, agile organizations feel more organic: they balance stability with dynamism and can adapt for an ever-changing, unpredictable future. In the article “The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations,” we detailed the major differences between traditional and agile organizations. Given the distinctions, the personal characteristics that lead to success in an agile organization also differ from those in a traditional organization.

Much depends on the talent, whether developed or recruited. Broadly, people who flourish in an agile organization need to have the following three capabilities: First, they handle ambiguity without losing focus; second, they concentrate on outcomes over processes; and third, they work and contribute by being a team member.

So, what does success look like in selecting or training the right people or talent (or both)? How

might you approach selecting and training people for your agile organization? Here we outline two sets of factors: the personality traits (innate and acquired, and their constituent behaviors) that make an agile team culture bloom, and the kind of values (and their constituent behaviors) that people bring to their work. We detail how you can not only identify and cultivate similar traits and values when recruiting or coaching your people but also assess and develop your own skills. We developed this perspective in collaboration with Scrum.org, an organization that provides training and agile assessment certifications.

### 1. What we know about the traits and behaviors of agile teams

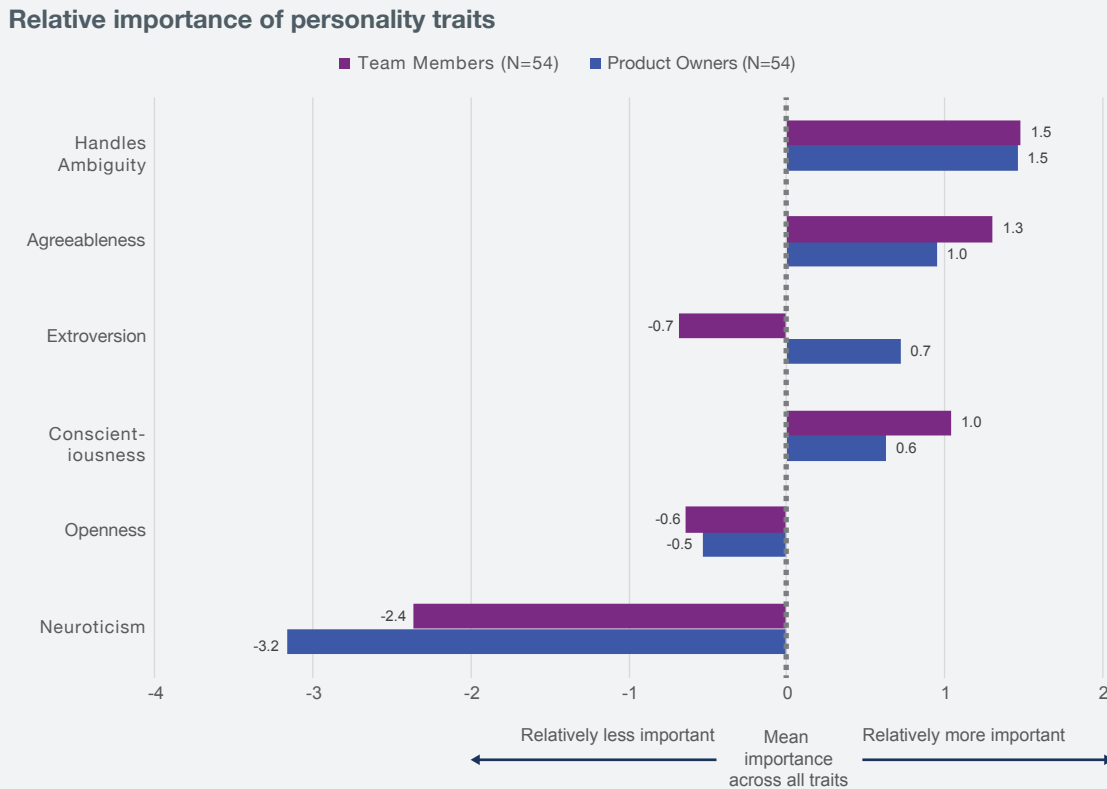
When asked to describe the intrinsic characteristics of an agile person, the subject group identified the attributes below.<sup>1</sup>

Studies conducted with relatively small sample sizes and without numerical data can yield unreliable qualitative findings that make generalizing difficult.

Exhibit 1



**Exhibit 2 Results demonstrating relative importance of various personality traits as indicated by deviations.**



Therefore, we followed a quantitative approach, using the five-factor model<sup>2</sup> (augmented by the trait *ability to handle ambiguity* to complement the model for the agile context), to systematically<sup>3</sup> identify and analyze those traits associated with success in two crucial roles for agile teams: the product owner and the team member.<sup>4</sup>

Below are our principal findings followed by our suggestions for how to assess and observe them. Subsequently, we cover effective methods of further developing your team’s agility.<sup>5</sup> Many of our findings are not unique to agile and can therefore be useful in general when hiring or developing your people.

**i. The ability to handle ambiguity and a high level of agreeableness contribute most to success**

The research makes clear that the two most important factors for a person working in an agile environment are the *ability to handle ambiguity* and a high level of *agreeableness*.

*The ability to handle ambiguity* is no surprise as the nature of agility requires a high degree of flexibility. Teams that handle ambiguity well mainly focus on their goals and prioritize few items to get started instead of investing a significant amount of time to completely understand every single detail and risk and attempting to embed these into the plan.

### Exhibit 3 Ability to handle ambiguity

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about a situation in which the customer or user of your service or product kept changing their mind and were not sure what they wanted.</li> <li>• Describe some of the strategies you used to deal with it.</li> <li>• How did it make you feel?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask for specific examples of when they encountered a complex problem where solutions were initially unknown.</li> <li>• Ask about the specific steps they followed to address the problem; assess based on their ability to make assumptions and work systematically.</li> <li>• Identify people who treat ambiguous situations as opportunities to learn with the customer, to experiment, and to try out new ideas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a fail-safe environment where rules and complexities are minimized so to encourage creativity and innovation.</li> <li>• Discuss benefits of agile mindset and ways of working over linear planning; thereby highlighting the importance of accepting ambiguity; use the flexibility to continuously minimize significant risks.</li> <li>• Normalize behaviors and acknowledge that the discomfort encountered during change is normal.</li> </ul>

The prominence of *agreeableness*, more highly ranked than *openness* or *conscientiousness*, was the most surprising result. *Agreeableness* is the secret sauce of great agile teams. Most cultures teach and reinforce a culture of competition, but we are increasingly seeing other ways to build a high-performing, agile organization. Google reinforced this view in its study of high-performance teams. Similarly, Project Aristotle found the most important characteristic for successful teams was trust, a facet of our definition of *agreeableness*. Another main characteristic is straightforwardness, which means being open and frank with one’s viewpoints while still being courageous enough to politely voice opinions that conflict with the team’s. Being agreeable is not about blindly agreeing without any thinking; in fact, research has found that increased diversity at work is associated with healthy conflict that allows room for group members to test ideas and listen to various alternative

perspectives, which improves task performance. *Agreeableness* means saying “yes, and...” instead of “yes, but.” Rather than avoiding conflict, *agreeableness* is about empathetic listening to the team and their ideas and being attuned to feedback from customers.

High *agreeableness* among product owners means that they are able to work with the team, reconcile differences, and set small attainable goals; ultimately, they better understand and design products that cater to customers’ needs. High *agreeableness* among team members means they respect others and their ideas, are able to work in cross-functional networks, and enable information transparency, understanding, and cohesion among group members. Often, these qualities are most realized in their absence. What would happen if team members were not agreeable? For example, at a check-in a new team member might describe

## Exhibit 4 Agreeableness

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If someone in the team continues to have a different point of view about the customer and solution you deliver, what would you do? How do you typically deal with this conflict?</li> <li>• Imagine that during a meeting, one of your team members brought up an idea which you thought was unreasonable. Surprisingly, the rest of the team seemed to be just as enthusiastic about the idea. How would you handle this situation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An understanding of conflict and others' perspectives is desirable. Listen for strategies and approaches that prioritize understanding and empathy over the right solution and anger.</li> <li>• Create opportunities for questions and focus on how your answers land. The way your interviewee asks follow-up and clarification questions is often a valid indicator of their listening skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask what is important to each member in the team and find common ground.</li> <li>• Help everyone in the team develop "active listening" skills by asking open-ended questions.</li> <li>• Demonstrate being a good listener for them to model this behavior.</li> <li>• Introduce team norms that explicitly cover "how to resolve disagreement and conflict in a constructive way" during onboarding or kick-off.</li> </ul>

## Exhibit 5 Extroversion

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you spend a day with customers learning about their problems, what would you do next? Do you need a day on your own to go through what you've learned?</li> <li>• What has to happen during the course of your day to make it a good one at work? What are your day-to-day activities in this position?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to how they describe their preferred work style, including how they ideally like to spend their day at work or the specific aspects of work which energize them. Extroverts tend to gain energy from social interactions, whereas introverts tend to prefer more solitary settings or smaller groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase social exposure and emphasize advantages of both introverted and extroverted ways of behaving.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Encourage a diverse team of motivated, creative, and self-directed people.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Past research suggests that there are few costs for introverts to behave in extroverted ways: they report more positive emotions without experiencing additional stress or compromising task performances.

something that remains challenging, only to be targeted with questions and hostile feedback. To avoid uncomfortable inquisitions, team members might refrain from sharing genuine views when future challenges arise. This not only results in an unfriendly and opaque work environment but also suppresses input and valuable suggestions.

**ii. Product owners showing extroverted behaviors may have an easier time**

Building a compelling vision, communicating with stakeholders, understanding customers, and leading the agile team are some of the daily activities of a product owner. These tasks require the product owner to work and interact with a wide variety of people. Since a significant amount of the product owner’s effort is spent outside of the team, those who are extroverted may have an easier time. However, research also shows that when given a creative and proactive team, introverts can lead as well as, if

not better, than extroverts. Introverts, excellent listeners by nature, put the spotlight on others and so are often better at modeling empathetic listening skills, channeling talent, and absorbing ideas than extroverts.

Both extroverts and introverts can develop into good product owners, albeit by different means. Product owners who are extroverts may find adapting to their jobs easier and function as a better leader for teams that need stimulation; introverted product owners, when assigned to a group that is self-motivated, creative, and proactive, are more capable of helping team members shine.

**iii. The warning of high neuroticism**

What, then, might we need less of? The data shows that high levels of *neuroticism* are less useful in the agile team environment, both for

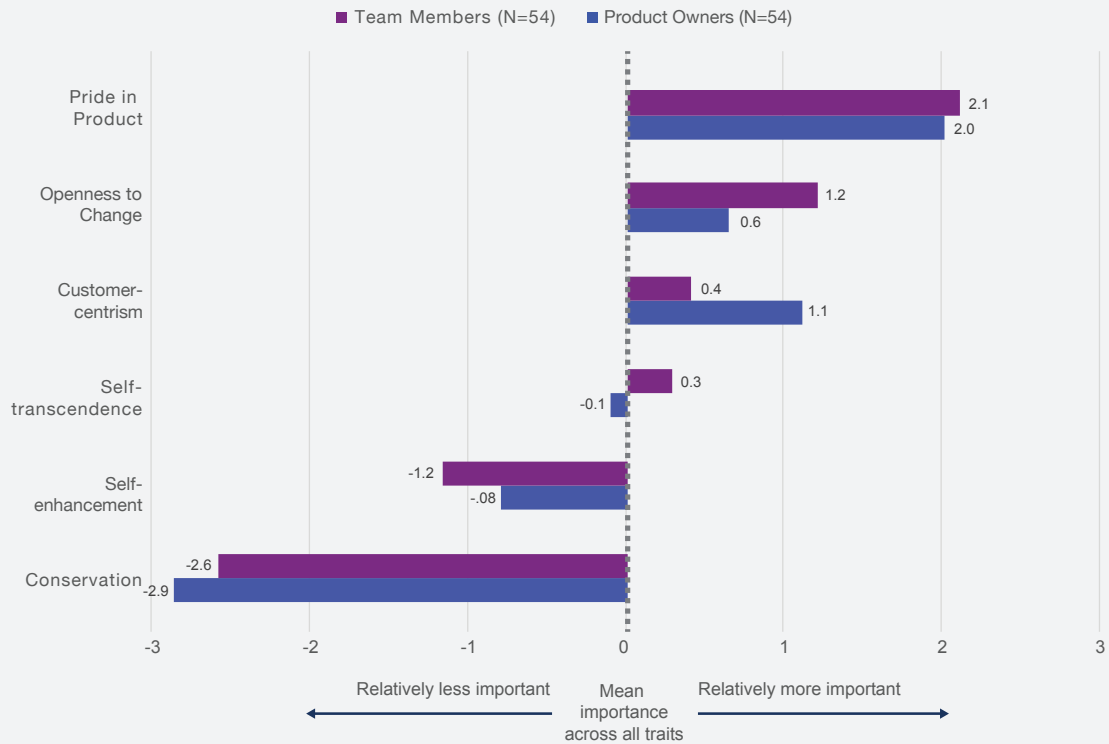
**Exhibit 6 Neuroticism**

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe a time when you were frustrated at work. Why were you frustrated? How did you deal with it? What impact would that have on the team?</li> <li>What is your biggest professional mistake? How did you handle it and what have you learned?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask for specific examples from past experiences or hypothesize an anxiety-provoking scenario and ask how they would react.</li> <li>Observe how they present themselves over the course of the interview. Those low on neuroticism are likely to appear calm and confident; those high on neuroticism may appear anxious and distressed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest time to explain the importance of 1) team over individual achievement and 2) fast adaptation of knowledge gleaned from failures rather than hiding or ignoring failures.</li> <li>Explore situations from a third-person perspective to help distance people from their issue, e.g., “If your friends faced this problem, what would you advise them?”</li> <li>Enhance team support by posing incisive questions and encouraging the team to talk openly about their concerns and fears.</li> </ul>

Exhibit 7

## Results demonstrating relative importance of various personality traits as indicated by deviations

### Relative importance of work values across roles



team members and for product owners. Emotional stability is crucial, as agile organizations focus on rapid learning and decision-cycles, frequent testing, and experimentation. Product owners should not be overwhelmed by anxiety when the product does not turn out as expected or when customers' feedback is negative; team members need to be able to stay calm when unexpected errors and issues arise.

### 2. What we know about the work values of agile teams

Certain work values are associated with success in agile teams. An alignment of values happens when the goals, rewards, and conditions people seek through their work are consistent with the

requirements of agile teamwork. Research on values in the work context has evolved four broad categories of values at work (self-enhancement, openness to change, self-transcendence, and conservation);<sup>6</sup> we added *pride in product* and *customer-centrism* to sharpen the agile context.

#### i. Everyone takes pride in their product

Agile teams take ownership of the product they deliver. For them, pride in the product (the outcome) sits higher than pride in the work (the process): they know that the process can and will change as they review the relationship between the process and value it achieves. Being proud means more than being happy with the work; it also means wanting to be associated with



## Exhibit 8 Pride in product

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tell me about a product or service you helped create. What excited you about this product?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay attention to how they talk about their product, its value and contributions, and the outcomes it has achieved. Delivering products in a large and complex organization is always hard, especially when there are many different people involved. But despite the complexity, agile teams take ownership of their work and enthuse about its value and contributions; they expect problems and challenges, yet focus on the achieved outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have everyone agree on a vision for product outcome.</li> <li>Celebrate small successes and failures; acknowledge team members who have tried experimenting.</li> <li>Help the team visualize how their work affects customers, highlighting the importance of product outcome.</li> </ul>

the product and taking ownership of its values and contributions.

Teammates and teams who take pride in their product manifest three broad attributes: first, quality is natural rather than forced (pride in any product manifests itself in improved quality and ownership); second, teammates are motivated (feeling a connection to the thing you create helps create motivated teammates who tend to be more productive and resourceful); and third, surprising innovative ideas happen (connecting to the product drives new ideas and improvements).

### ii. The customer is the inspiration of agile organizations

Do you have features on your laptop, TV, or cooker that you have never used? The Standish group estimates 50% of all software features are unused, or infrequently used: many of the features that creators spent hours worrying about are used differently or never by the customers. Complexity here comes

not just as a “creator” problem, but also a “user-and-consumer” one. Customers and agile teams learn together. That means that everyone must care about the customer. Customer-centricity allows agile teams to achieve three important ends: first, they find the most economic solutions (when the team is focused on the customers and uses an agile approach, it tends to deliver value to the customer incrementally and frequently); second, they share the responsibility for “getting it right” (many organizations have a single person or group that interacts with the customers, but in agile organizations the teams learn about the customers’ needs and share collectively); and third, they can be motivated because they know who they are helping (what anyone does is clearly understood and relates directly to the end user).

### iii. Agile teammates like to be in control of their own destiny

Our research found that *self-direction* values within *openness to change* were rated as one of

the most important for agile team membership. Clearly, agile teams have to be open to change and to direct themselves. But simply telling someone that they should be self-organizing and empowered does not mean that they will be. Self-organization takes

experience and maturity that is only gained over time.<sup>7</sup>

Broadly, the value of *self-direction* enables three fundamental processes to emerge: first, it helps

### Exhibit 9 Customer-centrism

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me about a customer you helped. What was their problem? Why was it important to them?</li> <li>• Tell me about a product or service you helped create. Who were your customers, and what did they want? Walk me through the steps you implemented to satisfy your customers' expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen for your candidates' abilities to step in customers' shoes; negativity around the customers and their problems could be a red light.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage all team members to be involved in interacting with customers.</li> <li>• Encourage the team to take on a third-person perspective and visualize their likes and dislikes for the product.</li> </ul>

### Exhibit 10 Self-direction

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me how you work with your boss. What do you expect from your manager?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to what they expect from their superiors, including their bosses or managers. As self-organizing and empowered teams are the foundation for agility, people who look for a lot of guidance and support from their superiors may not be the best fit. People who can unleash their creativity based on minimal guidance to create value-delivering products are more likely to thrive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize interventions and instead ask questions to increase transparency; teach and facilitate meetings if problem is due to lack of skills.</li> <li>• Set minimal boundaries and give people the freedom and flexibility to be innovative.</li> <li>• Involve team in decisions, increasing their sense of autonomy and ownership.</li> </ul>

agile practice become scalable (the cost of managing the teams drastically reduces as the teams start to make decisions about their own direction, planning, etc. and therefore allow for additional teams); second, it helps speed (making decisions is faster without supervision); and third, it promotes higher quality work (when those closest to the work take responsibility for it, agile teams increase the quality of that work).

#### iv. A conservation mindset could limit team performance

Delivering value in a complex world requires product owners and agile team members to work against many constraints in the existing organization. That means they must have or develop an entrepreneurial streak or be willing to try different things: to paraphrase Einstein, you cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

People with backgrounds in traditional organizations or with a traditional sense of leadership may try to assert authority and power

over others in the team. Agile teams, however, thrive on confronting the status quo and discarding tradition in pursuit of a vision. They flourish by stretching or redefining existing constraints and by bending rules and traditions when necessary.

To fully embrace enterprise agility, product owners have to lead the team in coming up with novel solutions and designs to cater to customers' needs; team members have to be willing to take risks, work with ambiguity, and not excessively focus on traditions.

### 3. Traits, values, and what to do next

Our research—quantitative and qualitative—shows how successful product owners and team members tend to behave and what they tend to value, indicates how you might think about selection, and gives the development opportunities for your people to adapt to agile work. You can also use this as a guide to identifying and developing your own approach. As with any endeavors across

## Exhibit 11 Conservation

Question and assess	Observe	Develop
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tell me about some rules you have ignored and why. Why do we have rules or processes and why should you sometimes ignore or break them? Where is the line?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Getting work done despite constraints is the characteristic of an agile team. Understanding how a person would fit into that model is important. Those who blindly adhere to all rules and processes without questioning may thrive in a traditional organization but will struggle to adapt to fast-changing and complex agile work environments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge that a preference for conservation and security is normal and inherent in human nature.</li> <li>Encourage outside-the-box thinking by asking open-ended, thought-provoking questions such as “If we had all the money in the world, how would we build the product?”</li> </ul>

any sector, some characteristics and values are innate while others can be acquired; widespread coaching, mentoring, and staff development can help improve performance.

Here are four indicators, framed as questions, to look for when selecting and developing your people.

1. *What motivates them?* Traditional motivators associated with productivity, efficiency, and risk need to be replaced with a focus on outcomes and customers as a grand goal. Ask questions about what they are interested in, what gets them excited and where they see themselves in three years. In addition, those who enjoy solving complex problems and view ambiguity as an opportunity to learn are more likely to thrive.
2. *What do they expect from others?* Agility is about teamwork that requires people who can work in teams, work together, and do what is required to deliver the outcomes desired. It means that expectations of colleagues will be fluid and dynamic. Ask questions about how they work with others, how they manage work in a team, and what they expect others to do in support of them.
3. *Do they have a customer-centric view of the world?* Agile teams are customer-centric: they engage with the customers and learn about their needs. Ask questions about what they might expect as customers and what customer service means to them.
4. *Are they proud of the work they have done?* This seems a simple trait that would apply widely, but caring about their craft, the work they do, and the outcomes it delivers are very important traits for a member of an agile organization. Questions should focus on previous experiences

of things they are proud of and how they connect those experiences with their goals and values.

Working in a complex world requires great teams directed by an inspirational product owner with a clear vision. The ultimate success of the organizations is the combined effort of these people. But great teams do not mean technically the best people or the most experienced. Instead, it means people that have the right personality, behaviors, and set of values for agility, either innately or through appropriate coaching and development. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Group (N=10) of coaches in agile methods.

<sup>2</sup> Five-factor model (also known as the Big Five) is one of the most popular models in personality research. The theoretical framework identified five dimensions of personality (commonly known as personality traits); each of these broader traits is defined by a few more fine-grained facets. **Extroversion:** warm, gregarious, assertive, enthusiastic (activity-seeking), excitement seeking, prone to positive emotions. **Conscientiousness:** competent, prefers order, dutiful, achievement striving, self-disciplined, deliberate. **Neuroticism (emotional stability):** anxious, hostile, depressed, self-conscious, impulsive, vulnerable. **Openness:** introspective, curious, imaginative, insightful, original, wide interests. **Agreeableness:** trusting/appreciative, straightforward, altruistic, compliant/kind, modest, tender-minded. **Ability to handle ambiguity:** flexible, adjustable, yielding, tractable, willing.

<sup>3</sup> Our team sampled 54 Professional Scrum Trainers who were asked to rate (quantitatively) the desirability of personality traits based on the five-factor model. We added “ability to handle ambiguity” to the original five-factor model, as agile teams spend a lot of time dealing with unknowns created by complexity. By adding this trait to the model, we can capture its importance relative to that of other traits.

<sup>4</sup> The product owner is the representative of both the customer and the organization. He or she represents the voice of the business, typically a part of the organization with P&L accountability, and/or the customer. On their behalf, the product owner must help set the objectives to be achieved and help manage the prioritization. The agile team member is a member of a team that is usually, but not always, fewer than 10 people.



<sup>5</sup> These were based on interviews with a relatively small sample of Professional Scrum Trainers (N = 10) which provided interesting recommendations but have yet to be further supported in future research.

<sup>6</sup> **Self-enhancement** work values emphasize pursuit of one's own interests and relative success over that of organizational colleagues and can be broken down into values for power, achievement, and hedonism. Values related to **openness to change** emphasize independence of thought, action, and readiness for change and can be broken down into values for self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism. **Self-transcendence** work values emphasize concern for the welfare and interests of organizational colleagues and can be broken down into values for benevolence and universalism. **Conservation** work values emphasize order, preservation of the past, and resistance to organizational change and can be broken down into values for tradition, conformity, and security.

<sup>7</sup> Tools like the Management 3.0 “delegation poker” provide leadership with practices that help to explore what should be owned by the team and what should be owned by the management.

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