



Contracts, Coalitions and Countermeasures

An Agile coach's guide to navigating power games

Roman Lobus





How does your coaching engagement typically start?



A thick, horizontal red brushstroke with irregular, torn edges, set against a white background. The stroke is the primary visual element, framing the text.

Contracts!
Contracts!
Contracts!

How to measure a coach's effectiveness?



You will be asked this question



NPS is bad



Contracting helps to hold the team and you accountable



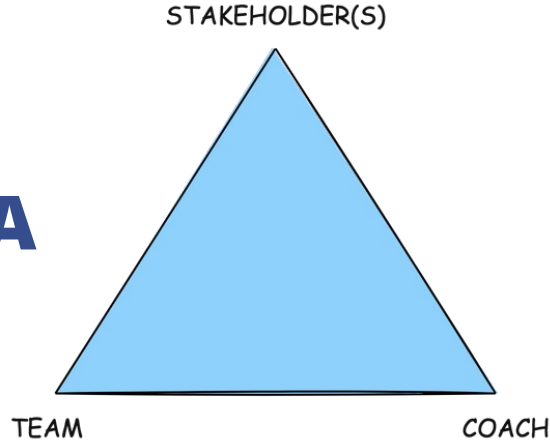
Holding the coaching relationship together



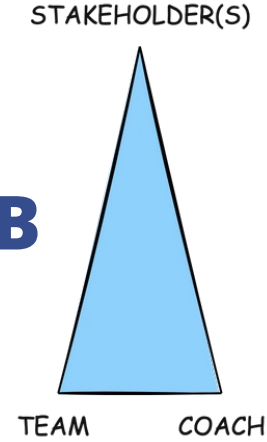
Agile team coaching is about
navigating relationships and
expectations

The three-cornered contract and psychological distance

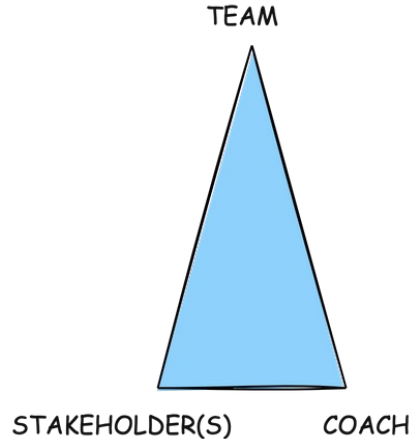
Type A



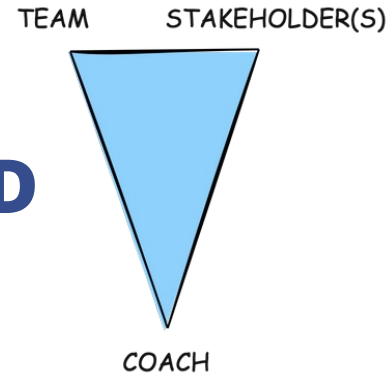
Type B



Type C



Type D



6 ways to diagnose psychological distance



Notice who
talks to
whom and
who doesn't



Observe
emotional
cues and
body
language



Watch for
information
flow issues



Listen for
"us vs.
them"
language



Check
alignment of
expectations
(explicitly)



Gauge your
own feelings
and biases

Ask yourself:

Does everyone feel equally heard and valued right now?

If the answer is “hmm, maybe not,” you likely have a distance issue.

Intervening based on psychological distance

**Re-contract
and reaffirm
together**

**Increase
transparency
across the
board**

**Foster direct
communicatio
n (coach as
facilitator, not
messenger)**

**Align on shared
goals and
values**

**Acknowledge
and address
feelings**

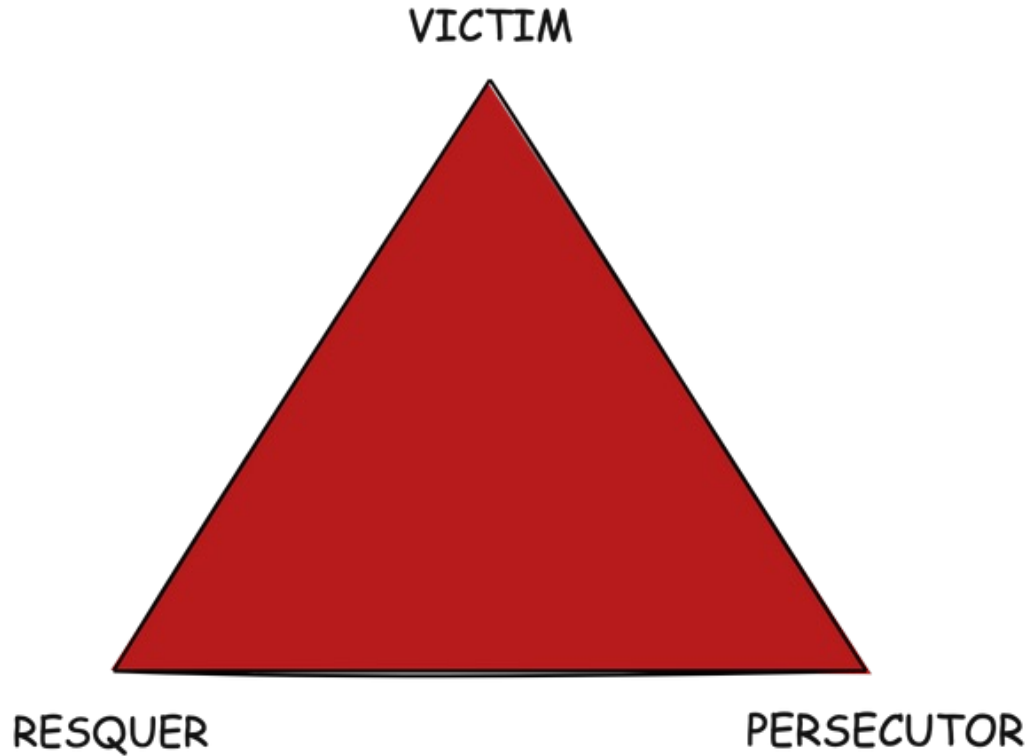
**Maintain an
impartial
stance (avoid
taking sides)**

**Make it a
continuous
process**

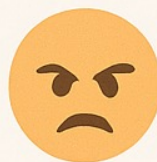
A thick, horizontal orange brushstroke with a textured, painterly appearance, set against a light gray background. The stroke has irregular, torn edges and varying shades of orange.

Let's not play

Games - repetitive, unconscious interaction patterns



The Elements of a Psychological Game



Con (C)

The hook—the sneaky invitation into the game. It's like the bait that makes someone think, "Oh, this is just normal conversation."

Gimmick (G)

The weak spot or hidden vulnerability in the other person that makes them take the bait.

Response (R)

The expected reaction the person wants. They've set the trap, and now they expect you to jump in.

Switch (S)

The plot twist. Suddenly, things flip—what started as a nice interaction turns sour.

Cross-up (X)

The emotional clash. You feel hurt, annoyed, or confused

Pay-off (P)

The emotional "reward" (even though it's negative). The person playing the game gets what they secretly wanted, while you feel frustrated. unappreciated.

“Why Don’t You – Yes, But”

- **Pattern:** asks for help, rejects every idea → validates helplessness
- **Roles:** Victim (complainer) ↔ Rescuer (helper) → frustration & blame
- **Spot it:** serial “Yes, but...” after each suggestion
- **Break it:** stop advising; ask for ownership
 - “What do you want to try?”
 - “What have you tried?”
 - “What will you do next, by when?”



“I’m Only Trying to Help You”

- **Pattern:** Rescuer jumps in unasked; help is resisted
→ Rescuer flips to Victim/Persecutor
- **Trigger:** Stress/uncertainty + over-involvement with a Victim-stance person/team
- **Spot it:** Chronic unsolicited “help” + polite resistance; “I’m only trying to help!” narratives
- **Break it:** ask permission → shift to Adult ↔ Adult → co-create ownership
 - “Do you want ideas or a listener?”
 - “What do you want to try?”
 - “What’s your next step and by when?”



“If It Weren’t For You”



- **Pattern:** Externalises blame (“we’d succeed if not for X”) → avoids responsibility
- **Trigger:** Real constraints + power gaps → Victim uses a Persecutor as the excuse
- **Spot it:** Phrases like “we’d be fine if not for...”; resistance to owning any part
- **Break it:** shift to agency + constraints-savvy action
“What can we control / influence / accept?”
“Even if X is true, what will we do?”
“What’s one step we’ll take by when?”

” Now I’ve Got You, You SOB”

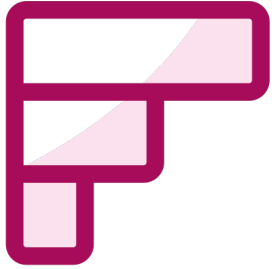


- **Pattern:** waits for a slip, then pounces—“See? I knew you’d fail!”
- **Trigger:** pent-up grievance + visible mistake in low-trust, high-pressure context
- **Spot it:** lying-in-wait, sudden escalation over a small error, “had to call this out” talk
- **Break it:** pause → neutral → learn
 - “What’s the real issue?” “What factors led here?”
 - Set no-blame norms; move sensitive feedback private; agree on prevention steps

“Ain’t it awful”

- **Pattern:** misery-bonding; complaints escalate into “who has it worst?”
- **Trigger:** stress/bad news → negative bonding replaces problem-solving
- **Spot it:** looping complaints; “nothing works”; solutions dismissed
- **Break it:** validate → pivot to agency
 - Timebox venting: “What’s one thing we can do now?”
 - Turn complaints into requests; celebrate action taken





Rank your 'favourite' games!

Takeaways

1

Contract! Contract! Contract!

2

Psychological distance is perceived, so pay attention to feelings and keep the “triangle” balanced

3

Find out which games you tend to be dragged into and develop alternative responses to enjoy game-free coaching;)



Download
materials

<https://lobus.works/banff2025>

Mastering the Art of Creating Self-Organising Teams

Agile team coaching from
a journeyman to an expert
—
Roman Lobus

Apress®



What's it about?

A practical guide to team coaching in Agile environments—blending systems thinking, group dynamics, and psychological insight to help teams thrive without top-down control.



Who is it for?

- Agile Coaches, Scrum Masters, Team Leaders
- Anyone guiding teams toward greater self-organisation
- Coaches transitioning from 1:1 to team-level coaching



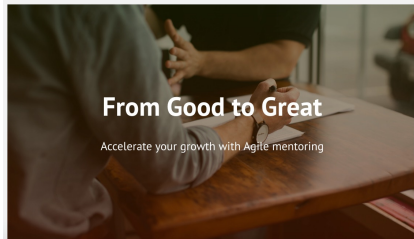
What will you get from it?

- Strategies for contracting with teams
- Techniques to surface and address hidden dynamics
- Tools for creating reflective and self-aware Agile teams
- Insights drawn from coaching supervision and systems theory

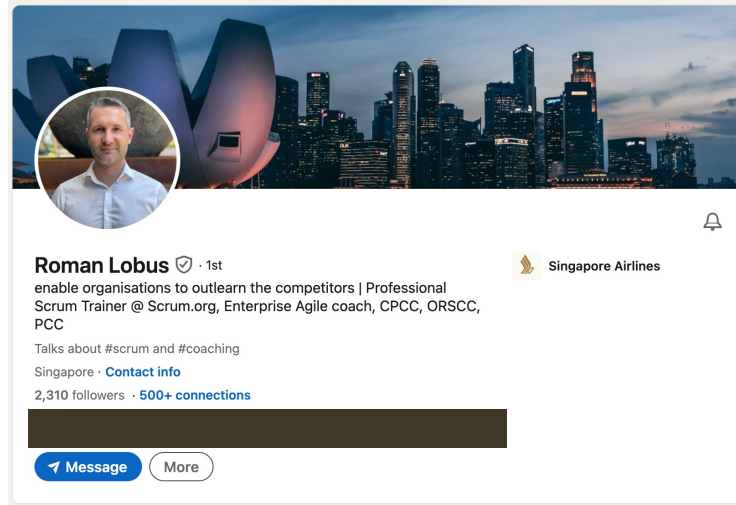


Availability

Coming in early 2026



<https://lobus.works>



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lobus/>

Thank you!

I'd be glad to answer your questions!

