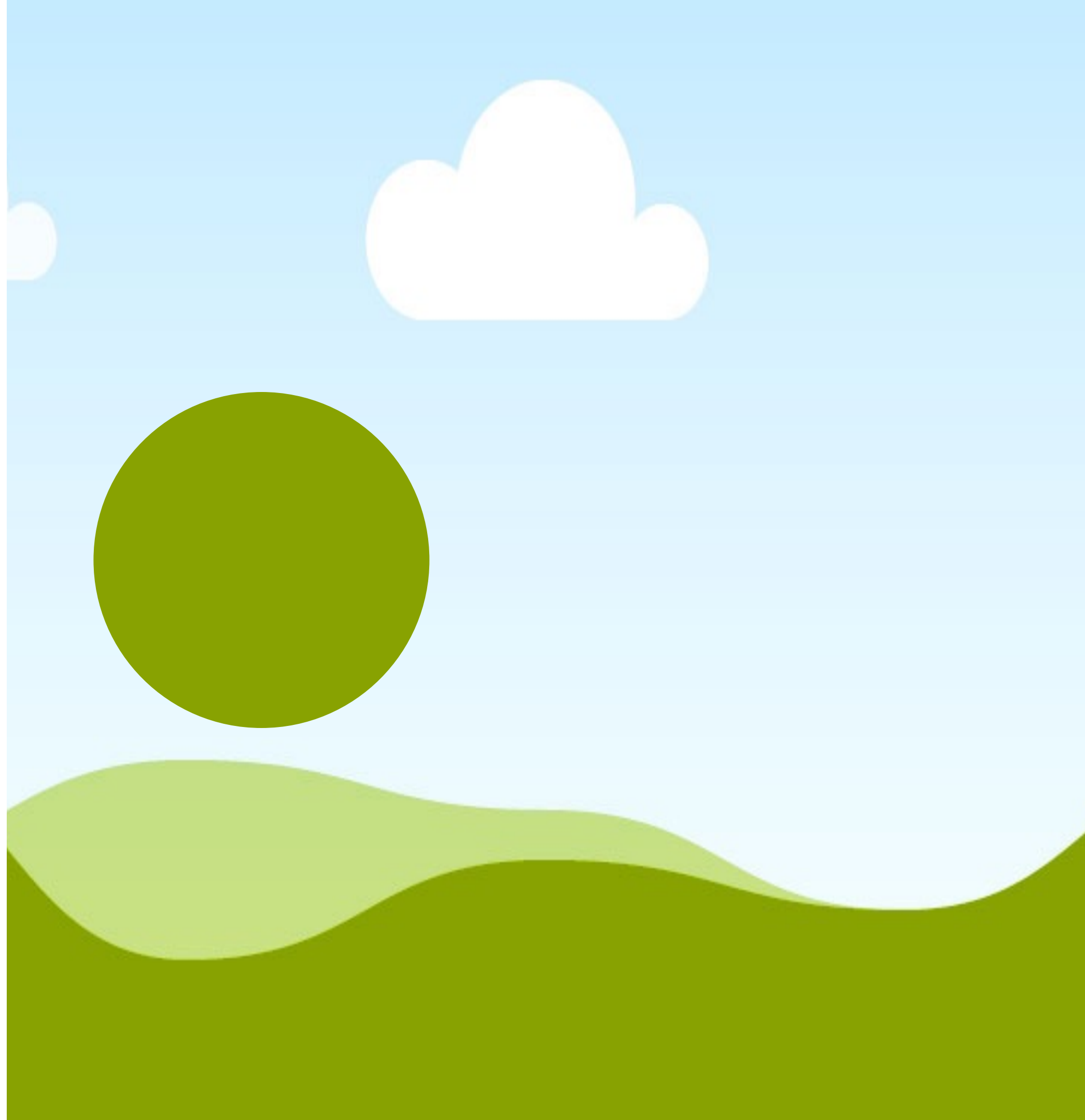


XP
2025

Contracts, Coalitions, and Countermeasures

An Agile Coach's Guide to Navigating Power Games

Roman Lobus





How does your coaching engagement typically start?

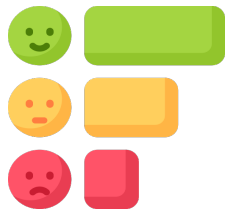


**Contracts! Contracts!
Contracts!**

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

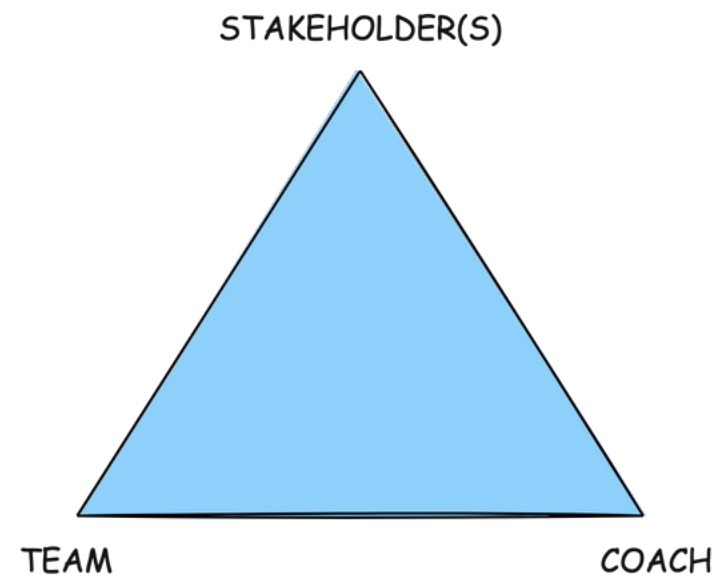


Holding the coaching relationship together

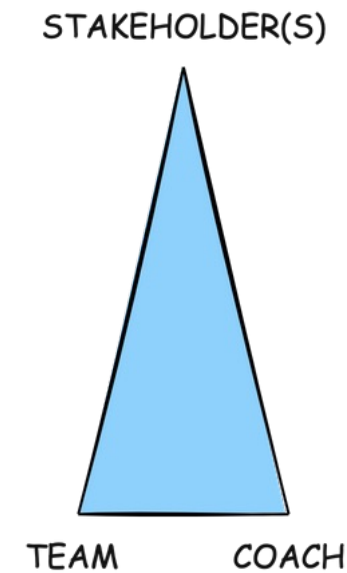


**Agile team coaching is about
navigating relationships and
expectations**

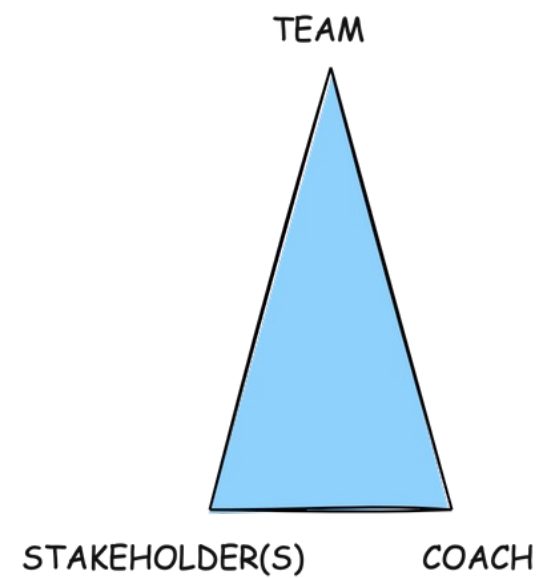
The three-cornered contract and psychological distance



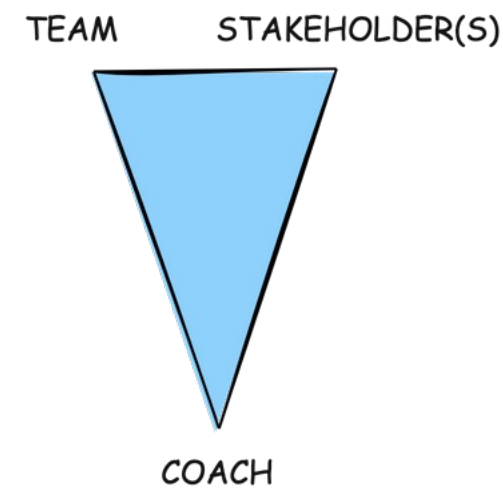
Type A



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

In essence, diagnosing psychological distance is about **being alert to misalignments**

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
communication
(coach as facilitator,
not messenger)**

**Align on shared
goals and values**

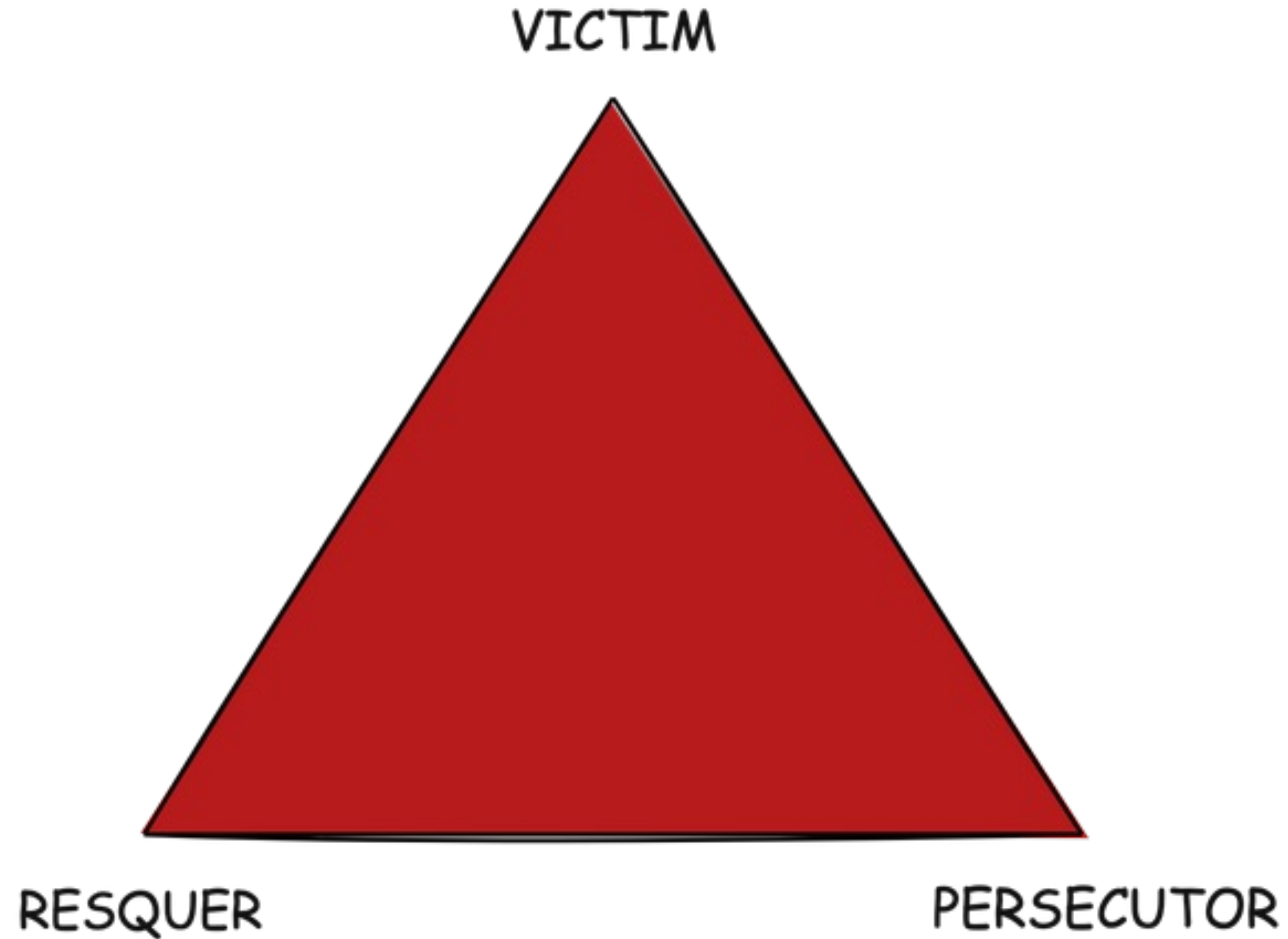
**Acknowledge and
address feelings**

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

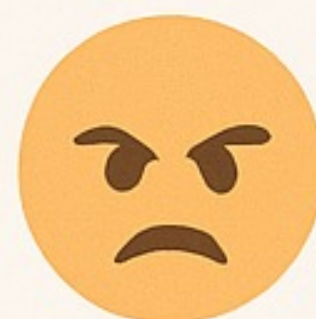
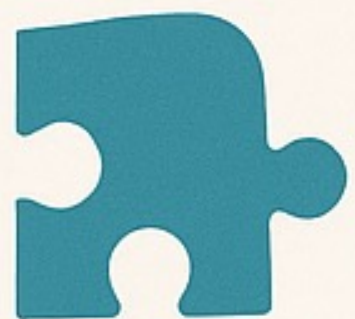
**Make it a
continuous process**

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:** A person repeatedly asks for help but rejects every solution with “Yes, but...” – appearing to seek advice but really validating their own helplessness.
- **Roles:** The complainer plays the Victim; the helper becomes the Rescuer. This dynamic often escalates, leaving the helper frustrated and the Victim blaming others.
- **Impact:** YDYG erodes trust and collaboration – coaching conversations stall, problems go unsolved, and a cycle of learned helplessness develops.
- **Spot It:** Listen for serial “Yes, but...” responses – it’s a sign to stop advising and shift the dynamic.
- **Break the Game:** Shift to questions like “What do you want to try?” or “How is your current approach working for you?”; stop rescuing and invite accountability.



“I’m Only Trying to Help You”

- **Pattern:** The helper (often a coach or leader) jumps in with solutions the other party didn’t ask for, seeking validation or control; when their help is rejected, they feel hurt, blame the other, and shift into Victim or Persecutor mode.
- **Trigger:** The Rescuer’s over-involvement, offering excessive or unsolicited help to a team or individual in a Victim stance, often under stress or uncertainty.
- **Impact:** Creates dependency, resentment, and stalled progress—teams tune out, feel controlled, and undermine the helper’s efforts; the coach feels unappreciated and frustrated.
- **Spot It:** Watch for chronic unsolicited “help” being met with resistance or passive “thanks but no thanks” responses; notice frustration or martyrdom narratives like “I’m only trying to help!”
- **Break the Game:** Pause, ask permission before offering help, shift to Adult-to-Adult dialogue (“What do you want to try?”), stop rescuing, and co-create accountability; remember: don’t work harder than the client.



"If It Weren't For You"



- **Pattern:** A person or team blames external factors (leaders, policies, clients) for their lack of action or results, claiming "we could succeed if it weren't for them" – avoiding responsibility and reinforcing helplessness.
- **Trigger:** Frustration, external constraints, and power imbalances create an easy scapegoat; the Victim uses a Persecutor as an excuse for inaction, e.g., "we'd improve if not for management."
- **Impact:** Erodes accountability, fosters learned helplessness, and creates a cycle of complaining instead of problem-solving; collaboration breaks down as blame overshadows solutions.
- **Spot It:** Watch for patterns of external blame, phrases like "we'd be fine if not for X," and resistance to exploring internal contributions to challenges.
- **Break the Game:** Shift focus to agency: ask "What can we control?", encourage solution-focused dialogue, reframe constraints, and contract for shared accountability – "Even if X is true, what will we do?"

" Now I've Got You, You SOB"

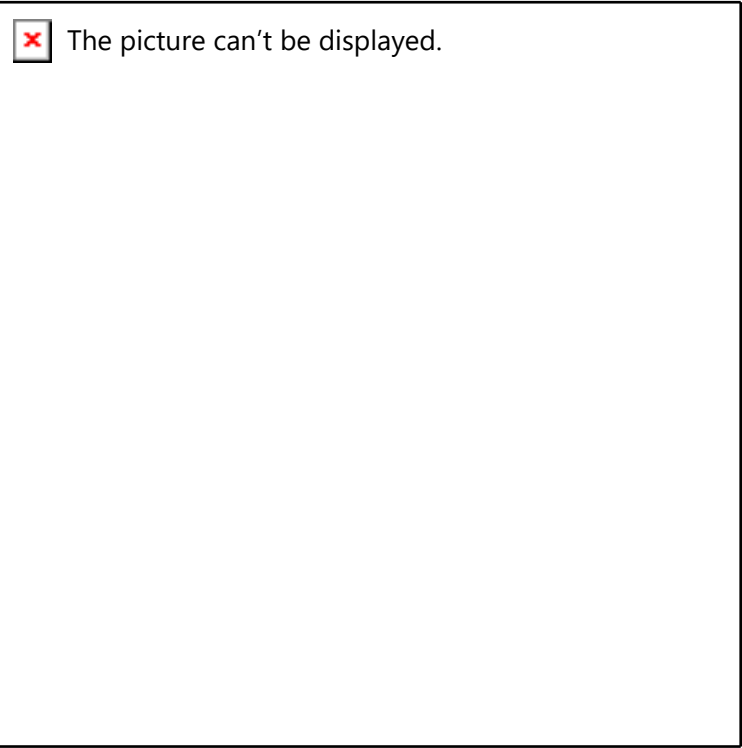


- **Pattern:** A person builds resentment, waits for someone to make a mistake, then pounces with harsh blame or punishment, saying "See? I knew you'd fail!" – masking their own frustration as righteous criticism.
- **Trigger:** A pent-up grievance + a visible mistake (deadline miss, error) → erupts into an attack; common in low-trust, high-pressure environments where blame replaces problem-solving.
- **Impact:** Destroys psychological safety, fuels fear and resentment, and shifts focus from systemic issues to scapegoating individuals – learning stops, blame dominates.
- **Spot It:** Watch for someone "lying in wait" to call out others' errors, sudden escalations after a minor mistake, or justification narratives like "I had to call this out."
- **Break the Game:** Stay calm and neutral – pause the blame cycle with reflective questions ("What's the real issue here?"), reframe mistakes as learning, establish no-blame norms, and hold private follow-ups to rebuild trust.

"Ain't it awful"

- **Pattern:** A group engages in a "misery competition," exchanging negative stories and complaints to bond over shared hardship—escalating into a contest of who has it worst.
- **Trigger:** Stress, bad news, or uncertainty invites negative bonding; the game often replaces open problem-solving with collective victimhood and blame.
- **Impact:** Drains morale, creates a culture of pessimism, stalls progress, and fosters learned helplessness; coaching sessions risk becoming gripe sessions without real solutions.
- **Spot It:** Listen for repetitive, escalating complaints with no forward motion; when positive suggestions are dismissed and the conversation spirals into "nothing works" territory, the game is in play.
- **Break the Game:** Gently acknowledge frustrations, then pivot: set limits on venting, ask empowering questions ("What's one thing we can do?"), model optimism, and celebrate action-taking over complaining.





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;)



<https://lobus.works/xp2025>



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?

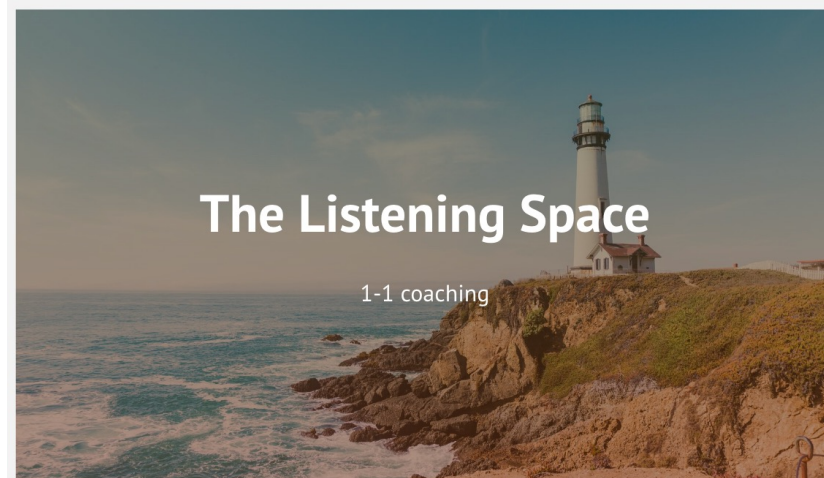
- Agile Coaches, Scrum Masters, Team Leaders
- Anyone guiding teams toward greater self-organisation
- Coaches transitioning from 1:1 to team-level coaching

What will you get from it?

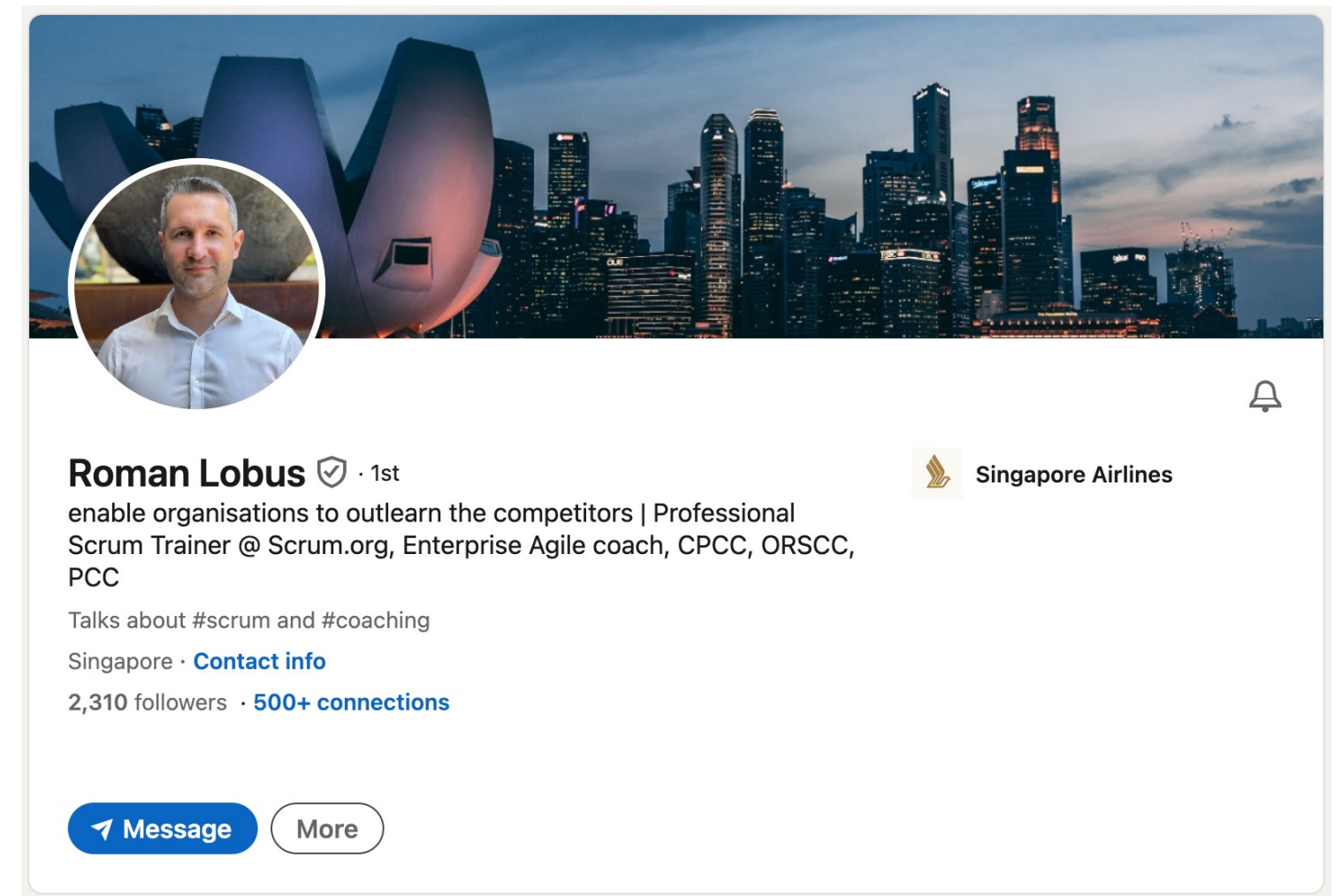
- Real-world strategies for contracting with teams
- Techniques to surface and address hidden dynamics
- Tools for creating reflective and self-aware Agile teams
- Insights drawn from coaching supervision and systems theory

Availability

Coming in early 2026



<https://lobus.works>



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

Thank you!

I'd be glad to answer your questions!