

SCRUM MASTER EDITION



# BECOMING A CATALYST

Using Everyday  
Interactions  
to Accelerate  
Culture Change

LEN LAGESTEE

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# ***Introduction***

## ***The Glaring Need***

The Scrum Master, often misunderstood and underutilized, is a role filled with great opportunity and promise. Opportunity for the Scrum Master has emerged today because two significant forces are affecting organizations throughout the world. The first is the workforce's lack of energy and motivation and the second is the demand on organizations for increased responsiveness and agility.

Low employee engagement and morale have placed many workforces in a tenuous position. Good, hardworking people are finding alternative places of employment as their tolerance for dysfunctional organizations is evaporating. This is happening for a variety of reasons, but demoralization from poor management and a lack of vision, direction, and purpose are typically cited as the primary causes. Often, the people who remain in these organizations are overworked, unappreciated, undeveloped, uncared for, and in extreme cases stressed to the point of being physically and emotionally unhealthy. They often feel this way in silence, not letting anyone know their true state of despair. Some are just watching the clock and ticking off the days until retirement. Tragically, I have discovered many people working in these conditions and I'm sure you have as well. Perhaps you are one of them.

Companies are also being driven to become more innovative and responsive in today's fast-paced and competitive environment. "Innovate or die" is the phrase often heard. Gone are the days when customers will wait months or years for something new or better. The response to changing market conditions is now measured in hours or days and many organizations are falling behind.

The impact of these two forces has revealed a glaring need. When the force of an unmotivated and disengaged workforce collides with the force of responsive innovation, many organizations attempt to transform using Agile. I have seen firsthand how an Agile transformation can help a disengaged workforce return to a degree of vibrancy and become a little healthier. However, a far too frequent occurrence is that the change initiative becomes just "another thing" mandated by leadership and the organization quickly falls back into old behavior and dysfunction.

Within this bleak picture there is also hope. The future of the workplace will be dramatically different in a generation or two as cutting-edge and forward-thinking organizations experiment with new organizational structures, models, and practices. Until that day arrives, however, we will need to override existing, broken systems with catalysts of positive change.

In other words, **we need you!**

While we need everyone to be influencers in a transformational change journey, this book specifically addresses how Scrum Masters can accelerate culture change. We delve into the uniqueness of their role and how, when combined with the motivation to become a powerful yet subtle force, they can participate in shaping a positive workplace environment. Your company may be at the beginning of a transition to Agile methodologies or maybe it has been at it for a while. Perhaps your company is not even trying to change, but regardless of your situation this book will explain how your organization's circumstances should not deter you from making an impact.

Perhaps you have recently decided to become a Scrum Master. You are familiar with the expectations of the role found in the Scrum Guide or through a training class. Maybe you are currently a project manager curious about Agile and how to transition to become a Scrum Master. Maybe you have just become a Certified Scrum Master and want to know how to take what you have learned and make a difference in your organization beyond process mechanics. Maybe you have been a Scrum Master for a while and are looking to improve on what has been working. Or maybe you have found that your own energy, morale, and motivation have been diminished and are looking for ways to get out of your rut.

Whatever your current title, motivation, or experience level with Agile or Scrum, throughout this book, you will be called a “Catalyst.” We define what it means to be a Catalyst in Chapter 1. Throughout this book, however, whenever you see “Catalyst,” know this means you – a Scrum Master who is making radical things happen for your teams and organization. To get there, however, you will need to take a little journey.

## ***The Journey***

The journey starts with the first two chapters, which prepare you for what's coming.

You must first understand and embrace the need for Catalysts. Chapter 1 will answer your “why” questions and is intended to **motivate you** to embrace your role as a Scrum Master to the fullest. The Scrum Master is in a unique position to instigate change and this chapter shares why Scrum Masters are desperately needed. This chapter also introduces the shift in attitude necessary to become a Catalyst.

Next, you must find your spark by developing a passion for people, for change, and for influencing a vibrant company culture. The people in your organization are reaching out for someone to lead them to a better, more human, and more dynamic workplace. Are you willing to heed the call? Becoming a Catalyst will require energy and action. Perhaps you have been discouraged or disheartened as a Project Manager, so Chapter 2 is intended to **encourage and energize you** to step outside your comfort zone and find your spark again. This chapter begins to paint a picture of the mind-set of a Catalyst.

The next chapter will equip you.

Once you have reignited your spark and developed a passion for improving culture and human dynamics, you can begin to develop the fuel for your journey. Chapter 3 provides specific areas to **mentor and coach you** during your personal growth and development. This chapter suggests eight important traits of a Catalyst to provide fuel and energy for your journey and the means to gauge your progress through your own retrospectives.

The last two chapters will put it into practice.

Once you've regenerated your spark and provided fuel for your journey, it's time for movement and energy. Chapter 4 shows you how to **leverage everyday team activities** and group settings to provide meaningful but subtle impacts. This chapter suggests ways for Catalysts to leverage every conversation and interaction to cultural advantage.

Finally, we focus on you and how to renew your belief that coming to work can be fun. Chapter 5 is intended to **keep you healthy** and provide suggestions for how to design your day to keep the fire of change alive. This chapter suggests a few habits you can form to sustain yourself over the long and arduous road of transformational change.

## ***How to Use This Book***

In each step of your journey, you will encounter roadblocks and chaos, opportunities and frustration, joy and satisfaction – perhaps all in the same day! The hope for this book is that it serves as a guidebook for your everyday life as a Catalyst Scrum Master and that it helps you embrace the uniqueness and opportunities of your role.

This book does not delve too deeply into the mechanics of any specific methodology or approach as there are plenty of references available to learn how to implement a

methodology (including the Scrum Guide<sup>1</sup>). Instead, this book focuses on how to use the events, activities, and behaviors of a methodology to accelerate culture change.

The Scrum Guide does begin to introduce the opportunities awaiting the Scrum Master. The guide states, "The Scrum Master serves the organization by causing change that increases the productivity of the Scrum Team; and, working with other Scrum Masters to increase the effectiveness of the application of Scrum in the organization." But how do we do this? How do we serve the organization? What does "causing change" mean? How do we increase effectiveness? How can we use the everyday interactions and events from Scrum or any other methodology to begin transforming our organization? And, most importantly, how can we begin to care for each other as humans and become catalysts for creating an environment for healthy and productive work?

Becoming a Catalyst will prompt you to *answer these questions for yourself*. Every organization, every situation, every team, and every person is different; therefore, your responses to these questions will be uniquely yours. Use this book to stimulate ideas for developing your own approach to addressing the needs of the people you work with every day and for challenging the status quo in your organization.

Becoming a Catalyst will *strengthen your voice*. Overcoming resistance will require a certain boldness and bravery. Use this book to encourage yourself to speak up when needed and to encourage those whose voice has been weakened over time to do the same.

Becoming a Catalyst will *launch the start of your journey*. The stories of this journey will be written entirely by you. Use this book as a set of suggestions to design your own adventure. It's time to get started.

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<sup>1</sup> Sutherland, Jeff & Schwaber, Ken (July 2013). Scrum Guide <https://www.scrum.org/Scrum-Guide>

<sup>2</sup> Gallup (2013). State of the Workforce 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx>  
[Becoming a Catalyst: Scrum Master Edition](#)

# CHAPTER 1

## *The Need for a Catalyst*

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

"There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." — Niccolo Machiavelli



## ***Typical Scenarios***

A magnificent sunrise greets you as you get into your car and head off to work. There isn't a cloud in the sky as you pull into the parking lot, and with a spring in your step you glide through the doors greeting everyone with a smile, a wave, or slap on the back. You settle into your chair with eagerness and anticipation for the day ahead. Your manager has given your team a challenging project involving an important new product that is crucial to your organization's strategy. You think to yourself, "I'm really lucky to work for a boss like her. She has empowered us to work autonomously and prompts us to take risks." Your team gets along beautifully and is filled with top-notch people whose energy matches your own. The work is fulfilling and before you know it you look at the clock and it's lunch time already...

Wait...let's rewind. Perhaps this image is a bit too idealistic.

Actually, as you drive toward your office complex a raging storm settles in ominously over the building as your Fiat 500 pulls into a parking spot. You reach for your umbrella in the back seat and head toward the entrance. As you open the door to the office, you can feel it. The same pall as the weather hits you before you reach your desk. You hate this place and you know deep down that you are just checking off days on the calendar. The results from the last quarter were disappointing so people fear for their job. The tension is palpable. On top of this, the work is uninspiring and your manager has been treating you like you don't exist for years. Most of your teammates feel the same way and that's OK, you don't really like them anyway...

Hold on...this is depressing. Let's try again.

Partly cloudy skies accompany you as you arrive at the office. As the elevators open at your floor you feel...nothing. It's a nice place to work but you haven't been challenged creatively or intellectually for years. Most of your co-workers are nice but you don't have any real connection with anyone. As you sit at your desk you notice the time...9:10 a.m. You begin shuffling papers and handling emails and after what seems like eternity you think it has to be lunchtime. The clock says 9:20 a.m. It's going to be another long day.

Perhaps you can relate to these work experiences or maybe your work life falls somewhere in between. My sincere hope is that you work at a place you love. A place where you walk through the door every morning with a sense of passion, pride, and appreciation for the meaningful work you do. Sure, everyone has challenging days but overall you feel that your work is important and you are contributing to a higher purpose. When your own passion aligns with the values and goals of your place of employment, amazing things can happen.

If this is your reality, be grateful. Sadly, you are in the minority. Many organizations are struggling to provide an environment in which people can thrive. Keeping employees

motivated, engaged, and creative is becoming more and more difficult as the leadership approaches and organizational structures of the past have failed to keep up with today's fast pace, let alone prepare for tomorrow. Recent survey numbers <sup>2</sup>are staggering, with some suggesting that 50% or more of employees are simply not engaged while at work. Talking with many people in my role as consultant and coach leads me to agree with that number; I believe it actually may be a little low.

A natural reaction for leaders facing the dilemma of employee disengagement and decreased productivity is to undertake a change initiative or a transformation effort. It seems that more and more of these transformations involve practices focused on Agile values<sup>3</sup> and principles<sup>4</sup>. While some of these initiatives can be deemed successful, many have not delivered sustainable change or improvement. Let's review a few common transformation scenarios.

In one scenario, an outside coach is brought in to teach and mentor the organization on how to become Agile and perhaps a few folks head off to a week of training on Agile methodologies. Teams initially respond. They enjoy having someone from the business as a part of the team to prioritize and decide what to work on and to be there to answer questions. They take pride in building something over the course of short iterations and seeing it deployed to their customers in days or weeks instead of months. The relationships between team members are improving as they have started collaborating and respecting each other in ways they didn't think possible. Silos are breaking down. Things are looking up.

However, the organization chooses not to keep the coach for more than a few months and soon after the coach leaves, things start to slide back to their old ways. The silos begin to re-emerge, the in-fighting kicks back up, quality suffers, and the business is no longer able to quickly deliver valuable features. When under stress, organizations and teams will often revert to their old habits. In this scenario, the initial spark of excitement *cannot ignite into a flame of sustainable transformation.*

In another scenario, the transformation starts with similar energy and excitement as the first but the change only occurs in pockets and does not permeate throughout the enterprise. Many Agile transformations focus on defining and improving the roles and relationships between business and technology but avoid addressing systemic and structural constraints. These constraints may exist in human resources or marketing departments, in large bureaucratic organizational structures, or in overly complex or fragile technical architectures just to name a few.

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup (2013). State of the Workforce 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Agile Manifesto. <http://agilemanifesto.org>

<sup>4</sup> Agile Principles. <http://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html>

The transformation energy collides with these areas of resistance and begins to dissipate. Leaders become nervous and bring back or establish burdensome governance or gating processes and, before long, the benefits of a transformation are lost. In this scenario, the initial spark *does not have the necessary fuel to overcome the resistance*.

In yet another scenario, the transformation never really gets off the ground. The resistance to change is just too great and the shift to greater agility is talked about and tried a couple of times but never amounts to much. A team or two starts working within time-boxed iterations, a few task walls appear on the wall, and maybe a couple of daily synchronization meetings are held. No one really buys into the effort and the investment of time, money, and energy is never committed to give the transformation a chance. Maybe people don't realize just how much work a transformation is or how much they need to change personally to participate in a truly collaborative environment. It's always someone else who needs to change, not me, right?

In this scenario, there really was *no spark at all*. Just a few sticks being rubbed together with enough intensity to see a little smoke but nothing ignited and spread.

Statistics show that only 30% of change initiatives could be considered successful<sup>5</sup>, so these outcomes should not be entirely surprising. Change is hard. The politics, the fear, the bureaucracy, the years of dysfunction and defensive processes often present an overwhelming challenge.

So, what if we can create a different scenario? One where the initial spark of enthusiasm grows into a flame large enough to consume any resistance. A scenario where change becomes something not to be feared but welcomed, expected, and a part of our daily experiences. A place where one-time change events or transformation activities become a thing of the past - because change becomes a part of the DNA of the organization. I believe this is possible, but it will take some brave people to make it happen.

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<sup>5</sup> Beer, M., & Nohria, N. (2000, May 1). Harvard Business Review Magazine. <http://hbr.org/2000/05/cracking-the-code-of-change>

## ***The Catalyst Defined***

What this book intends to do is describe how the Scrum Masters, among all the other roles in your organization, can play an important part in sustaining real and continuous change. However, not just any Scrum Master will be enough – we must have a person who is willing to be a Catalyst. A person who is inspired enough, bold enough, active enough, and passionate enough to create the environment every company is striving for – delivering value to customers through extreme productivity and making your workplace an engaging and exciting place for the people in your organization. Sound crazy? Perhaps a little but as we dig into defining who our Catalyst is you can begin to see just what sets Catalysts apart from typical project managers or Scrum Masters.

The dictionary defines catalyst as “an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action.” This is a great way to begin describing what it will take to be a Catalyst.

Our Catalyst is *an agent of change*. Catalysts are active participants in the changing of organizational culture. They do not wait passively on the sidelines for change to come to them; rather, they partner with others to facilitate, coach, and encourage others toward a new culture and brighter future. They do not wait for a change initiative to start because they are the change.

Catalysts *intentionally shape positive experiences for people* in the organization and, specifically, people on their teams. They use everyday activities and meetings to focus on improving the culture one person and one interaction at a time.

Our Catalyst is *a breath of fresh air*. Sadly, it often appears as if teams and organizations are dying a slow death. Energy is low, relationships dysfunctional, and trust eroded. The Catalyst will be the antithesis of this by bringing enough energy, excitement, and movement to overwhelm negativity and resistance.

Our Catalyst is *an accelerant*. The Catalyst will take small advances in an improving culture and find ways to magnify their impact. When the organization regresses a bit, the Catalyst gracefully turns up the intensity to return to positive momentum. Becoming an accelerant of change is often the difference in turning detractors into promoters and skeptics into advocates.

The Catalyst doesn't show up to work every day expecting the same behavior as yesterday. The Catalyst realizes every day, every hour, every interaction, every working session, and, most importantly, every person matters.

## ***Answering the Call***

Now comes the hard part.

Are you prepared to become a Catalyst? Before answering this question, take a moment to think through a few additional questions about your current work environment and culture:

- How would you describe your culture?
- How would you assess the current level of engagement of the people in your company?
- Are different departments working well together?
- Are different teams working well together?
- How would you describe the energy level on the team you are currently working with?
- Do people know where your company is headed?

With the current cultural state of many organizations, chances are pretty good there is an opportunity for you and your company as well. If you consider the dysfunction at your company to be substantial, don't worry, you're not alone. It doesn't matter if the company is a startup, large corporation, or somewhere in between; if left uncared for, the workplace can become a place of distress and unhealthy behavior.

So, why you? Why are you the one who can be the Catalyst for meaningful change? Why should we put so much focus on your role as a Scrum Master instead of any another role?

The answer is quite simply this:

You are in a position to shape experiences and craft workplace culture improvement *into the work itself.*

There isn't a need to start a big change initiative or wait for leadership to make an announcement or even wait for your company to formally begin a shift to greater business agility. You don't need a budget or approval from your manager (although both are nice). Through your everyday interactions with the people and teams you work with, you can be the Catalyst for lasting cultural renewal at your company.

You may think this statement is an exaggeration but when you embrace your role as a Catalyst, a Scrum Master or Agile Project Manager willing to be bold and courageous, amazing things can happen. And it can start happening today. The following chapters lay out an approach for you to develop into a Catalyst but before moving forward a question must be asked.

Are you ready to answer the call?

"If you come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little farther." - Andy Du Fresne  
from the movie "The Shawshank Redemption."

If you would like to continue reading, **Becoming a Catalyst: Scrum Master Edition** can be purchased at [www.becomingacatalyst.com](http://www.becomingacatalyst.com).

## *About the Author*

### **Len Lagestee**

Len Lagestee is an Agile coach and blogger at [www.illustratedagile.com](http://www.illustratedagile.com). As an Agile coach, Len interacts with large organizations to connect people, revolutionize leadership, deliver results, and humanize the workforce. The techniques and tips captured in this book are based on years of experience as a programmer, systems analyst, architect, project manager, Scrum Master, manager, consultant, trainer, and coach.

A lifelong Chicagoan, Len resides in the western suburbs with his wife Tara and son Trey.

Connect with Len at:

Blog: [www.illustratedagile.com](http://www.illustratedagile.com)

Email: [len@illustratedagile.com](mailto:len@illustratedagile.com)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/lagestee](http://www.twitter.com/lagestee) (@lagestee)

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/lenlagestee/>