
WHITE PAPER

Maximize your agility with the Agility Accelerator Protocol



A proven approach to organization-wide agility
that accelerates your product development

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Successfully transform your organization in an agile way

Change has become the new constant. The ability to quickly adapt to ever changing requirements and technologies has become the most dominant strategy to survive. And the need to embrace an agile way of work within product development has almost become common sense by now.

However, while many teams have adopted Scrum in combination with various agile practices to some degree, in reality the **expected benefits often stay behind**. This becomes very visible after a Scrum Team participates in one of my certified Scrum.org training courses. A common remark I get at the end of the course is: “Can you please train the rest of our organization too? If they would only know...”. And indeed, most of the time **it’s not a matter of unwillingness but the absence of a shared understanding**. You can’t expect people and their processes to change if they are not aware how their current way of working impedes agility. In particular if you don’t provide viable alternatives.

“Working towards a shared understanding
is a critical success factor”

This white paper explains why there often is a mismatch between the promise of agile and daily practice. And more importantly, **what you can do about it**. I will explain how the **Agility Accelerator Protocol** provides a solid strategy to help you lead the way forward.

But let's start with the pains you are probably experiencing.

Common pains

Conflicts between Business and Development

Most people working in and around product development will recognize the seemingly never-ending tension between the needs of the ‘business’ versus the reality of product development. They often have **conflicting goals and belief systems** that make it very difficult to find common ground.

I have seen many examples where the product or portfolio management side of the organization doesn’t take the driver's seat in the development effort. Product development feels to them like a scary thing they don’t want to burn their fingers on. And to cope with this situation, **a proxy from the product development side is appointed**. It seems like a sensible thing to do. But it has the opposite effect; it only **increases the gap resulting in even more misunderstanding and frustrations** back and forth. And before you know it, it feels like us against them.

“Product development is a communication challenge”

What makes matters worse is that your current organization structure upholds this tension. With positions and roles that stimulate a transactional relationship instead of a collaborative one with common goals, **these silos won’t miraculously disappear**.

If you recognize one of the common symptoms below, you are probably hindered by these tensions:

- Spending a lot of time negotiating and defining requirements before you can start developing a feature.
- Conversations with stakeholders are about the ‘what’ and ‘how’, but rarely about the ‘why’.
- No stakeholders involved during development: little to no collaboration.
- Limited opportunities for teams to get meaningful feedback from end users and customers.
- The most dominant means of communication with stakeholders is email or other digital means.

Limited support to embrace agility beyond product development

Another common pattern is that Scrum and agility are seen as strategies and approaches just for product development teams. **Only having your Scrum Teams embrace Scrum is not enough** to achieve the desired state of agility. This misconception leads to the belief that the rest of the organization can stay as it is, and that local change within those teams is sufficient. If you want to change the outcomes that your organization produces, you first need to grow a shared understanding of how the current organizational design creates the current outcomes.

“Most of the time it’s a matter of ignorance
rather than unwillingness”

The lack of agility throughout the rest of your organization can massively impede the agility of your teams. And it becomes a big frustration for your teams, because they can see the potential for improvement but experience the **lack of support to move the change forward**. This is not limited to neighboring departments and includes middle and higher management as well. And this isn’t very surprising. Following the agile principles, we typically focus on self-management and delegation of responsibilities in order to quickly respond to new insights. But at the same time, we fail to explain how this will impact our current view on management and leadership. Ironically, **to be successful with agile the need for great leadership is bigger than it has ever been**.

If you see one or more of the examples below in your organization, this probably applies to you:

- Dependencies on other departments and teams that make it difficult or impossible to deliver a usable product every Sprint.
- Being able to release often, but not releasing because of pushback from within your organization.

- A Product Owner that is an order taker instead of a decision maker.
- Change initiatives from product development that impact the operating model have little chance to succeed; power/ego/politics is suppressing reasonable change suggestions.
- Individual objectives or incentives of team members that interfere with the ever-changing goals of the Scrum Team.
- The values and principles you strive for differ from the values and principles you see being practiced throughout the organization.

The agility of the Scrum Teams is lacking

Many product development teams do Scrum, but **very few achieve a high level of agility**. Scrum Teams need to collaborate in very different ways than they were used to, both in terms of in person communication and communication in code. And some of the recommended **agile practices feel counterproductive and are discarded quickly**. Without embracing agility in their thinking and without applying agile engineering practices, teams won't be welcoming last minute changes.

“We neglect to invest enough in the agility of the ones who are creating our products”

For example, if a release feels like a risky undertaking, the easy way out is to release less often. But what you want teams to do, is make it a less risky event, so that we could release (ideally) continuously. Another example I experienced is that team members are **reluctant to try out working in more collaborative ways** like [pair programming](#). Or have the whole team collectively focus on one piece of work like swarming or [mob programming](#). A common argument I hear against these practices is that ‘it’s not efficient’: it takes a lot more time to write initial code and we produce less when we sit with multiple people behind one keyboard and mouse. And in terms of initial output, that is hard to deny. However, what is overlooked are the huge benefits these practices bring: higher quality, less

rework, faster validation, higher speed of learning, which all contribute to an increase in throughput of delivered features. These are all factors that directly increase your agility.

You cannot take for granted that teams have fully incorporated agile and lean thinking in their daily routines; they rarely have. Even if their resumes suggest otherwise. I have worked with hundreds of experienced agile practitioners that had a very narrow understanding of agile values and principles because they never were taught correctly.

If you can observe one of the examples below, there are great opportunities to increase the agility of your team(s):

- [Large units of work.](#)
- [Low integration frequency.](#)
- Long feedback loops in code and/or with end users.
- Limited test automation.
- No shared responsibility for quality and outcomes.
- Only minor changes in their way of work; no fundamental changes proposed.

Stop being a firefighter

Do you feel you spend a lot of time on managing operational issues and escalations? And too little on long-term improvements? It's time to **stop fighting the symptoms** and **start addressing the underlying causes**. And by being involved in the daily work you limit the space the Scrum Team needs to take more ownership and hold each other accountable. Instead, **you need to help them catch their own fish**. And while quick fixes are tempting, usually they are just band-aids that cover up the real issues underneath. By fighting the symptoms, **you are unintentionally supporting the status quo and preventing significant change to happen**.

If you recognize the examples I mentioned so far, keep on reading and see what you can do about it. But let me first introduce myself briefly.

Matthijs de Booij



I am Matthijs de Booij (1981) and I live in Amsterdam (Netherlands). I love travelling and exploring our planet by hiking through the most beautiful places around the world - Nepal is my number one experience so far.

After working as a consultant in a traditional project management setting in the IT sector - including all the frustrations that came with it - I became part of a Scrum Team that successfully released several innovative solutions for large employers in the Netherlands. This experience truly opened my eyes and made me realize that most teams and organizations I have seen are not reaping the benefits of Agile, Scrum, and various agile practices. After practicing Scrum for five years, I decided to use my experience and knowledge for the benefit of more people, which lead to my professional mission:

“Inspiring others to discover new ways of working”

As a certified trainer and consultant, I help organizations grow their agility; their ability to deliver value faster and more frequently to their customers. By partnering with Scrum.org we are able to deliver high-end learning solutions and guarantee consistency throughout all our courses.



Agility Accelerator Protocol

Introduction

The most effective way to manage work with a high degree of unpredictability is an empirical process that [allows the path forward to emerge itself](#). This is the realm of agile and requires a fundamentally different paradigm (values, principles, structures, and practices) from what most organizations have been familiar with. **The key to agility is to grow your learning capabilities** and enable learning to be transformed to change. And the faster you learn and change, the more agile you become. **This will reduce risk and increase business value.** This learning cycle can be found in any agile framework or method and consists of three steps:

Transparency

Transparency is the foundation. Only when everybody can see the objective reality we are in, and understand where we want to go, meaningful learning can happen. Full transparency will only be possible if there is sufficient trust and people show the courage to be open and honest to each other. This implies that all aspects that affect outcomes are visible.

Inspection

Frequent inspection enables you to check the outcome that is currently produced, how it was produced, and to learn if it deviates from the desired outcome. Today's problems are caused by the solutions of yesterday.

Adaptation

Based on what you learned from the inspection you make a change with the intent to positively affect the inspected outcome in the near future.

**“If you want something new,
you have to stop doing something old”**

By successfully applying these three steps throughout the organization you will grow your agility. The faster and more frequently you learn, the more agile you can become.

An effective strategy to grow your agility is to first focus on the parts of your organization that:

- limit your agility the most; or
- enable you to grow your agility with little effort.

But rather than one big change effort, you can address these parts of the organization one at a time. As a matter of fact, by starting with one team or department you will probably discover what other parts need attention first. It's an **organic approach to change management** where the path forward will emerge along the way.

The approach for each part of the organization is in essence the same:

Create a shared understanding

- why do we pursue agility?
- goals & strategies
- values & principles
- roles & responsibilities
- process & practices

Meaningful inspection

- reflect on your own situation and business context
- current strategies and outcomes
- understanding causes: separate symptoms from causes
- identify the gap that needs to be closed

Take action and adapt

- actions and experiments that can be executed today to get closer to the desired outcomes

For whom is this protocol developed?

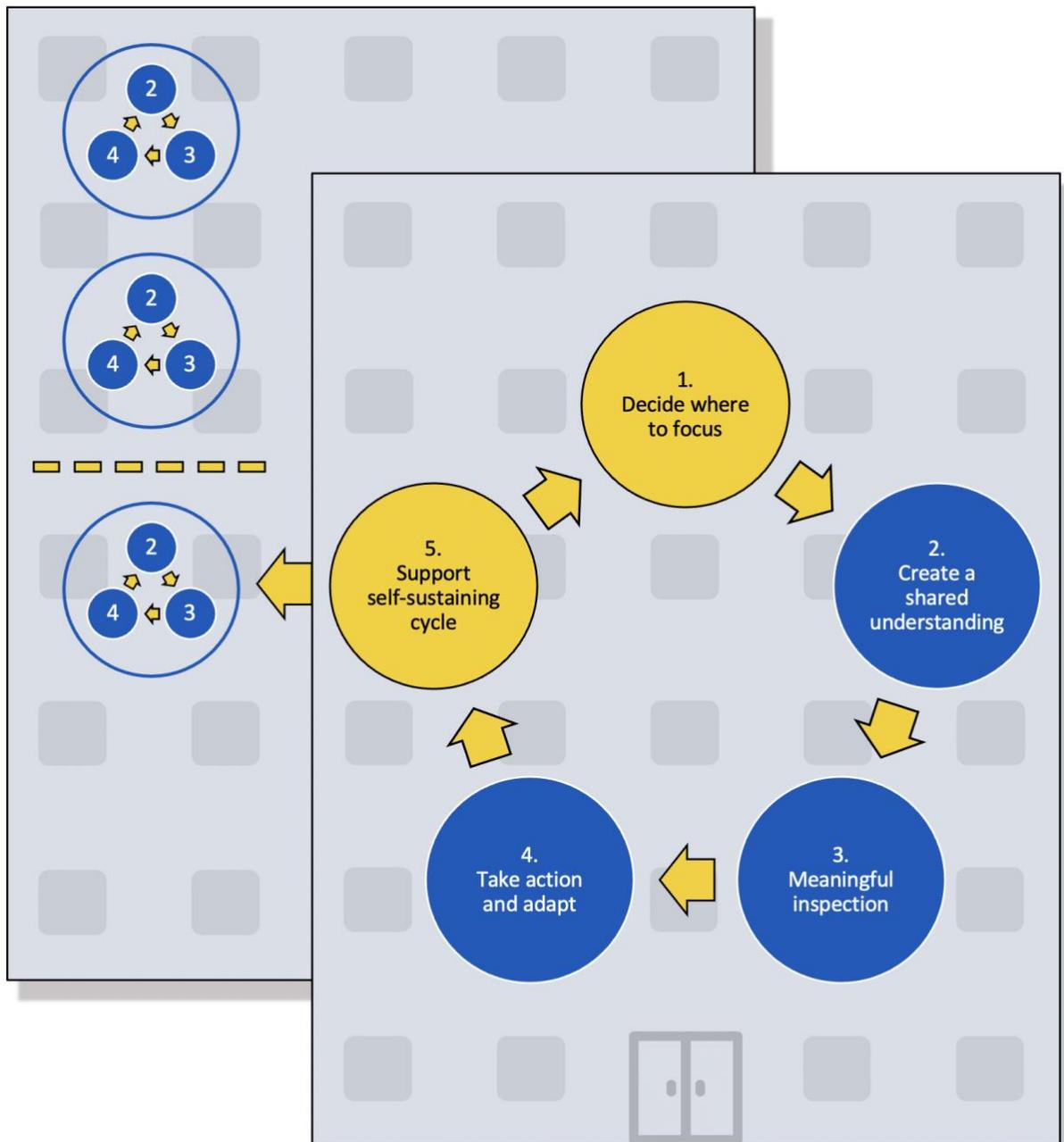
If you prefer an upfront detailed plan for your agile transformation that defines a blueprint for your organization, this is not for you. Nor is it for you when you don't recognize yourself in one or more of the examples I described.

But if you embrace the fact that **growing your agility is an organic process** that will continuously evolve, and you understand that the key to success is growing the learning capabilities of your organization, this is for you. The Agility Accelerator Protocol is made for you if you want to lead-by-example by **increasing your agility in an agile way**. And by doing so, you will maximize the support and ownership for sustainable change and experimentation.

The Agility Accelerator Protocol enables you to **lead and manage the change by yourself**, especially in the absence of an organization-wide agile strategy. It's designed for **spreading agility bottom-up**, while growing maximum support along the way.

What makes this approach different from various other agile transformation strategies is that it minimizes the risk of the change effort; you can start with one team while keeping “the store open for business as usual”. **You don't need big upfront commitments in terms of budget or management support**. You can start today. And by driving next steps based on the learnings from the previous steps, growing management buy-in is more likely to happen.

Agility Accelerator Protocol further explained





1.
Decide where
to focus

You probably already have an idea where there are opportunities in your organization to grow your agility and what is a logical place for you to start. Share your analysis with the people involved and ask for their feedback and perspectives. This will help you figure out where to start.

It is crucial to first create a shared understanding with the people involved. Only if we think and speak the same language, we will find common ground and opportunities to grow. This implies transparency about where we are now, having **an honest look in the mirror**, and making explicit what has been swept under the rug. But that is not enough.



2.
Create a
shared
understanding

Additionally, we need transparency of **where we want to go, and what is needed to get there**. Based on the target audience and learning needs you need to figure out how to best achieve this. Provide the time and space for everyone involved to identify areas that should be inspected first. This provides the necessary input for the next step.

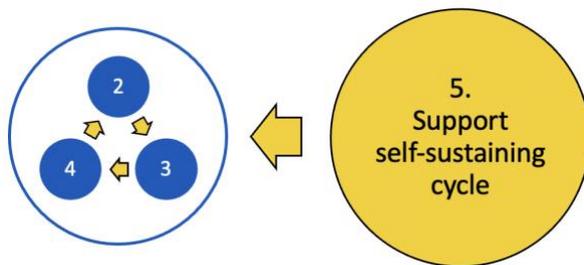


3.
Meaningful
inspection

Discuss and analyze the feedback and suggestions from the previous step. I highly recommend **involving everyone** who participated in step 2 (create a shared understanding) in this inspection phase. Or at least involve everyone who feels strong about it and would like to contribute. It will help grow the support for whatever comes out. Tactics that will help you get the most out of this step are active listening, powerful questions, and various facilitation techniques (like [Liberating Structures](#) and many others). Examples of powerful questions that could help you kick off the inspection are:

- What is standing out for us?
- What surprised us?
- What underlying causes might have contributed to this?
- What didn't we take into account until now?
- What was confirmed that we already thought?

Based on the findings and learnings of the previous step, define the next actionable steps for what must be done to get closer to the desired outcome. Refine it to the level of **an experiment with actions** you can start with today. Again, it is key to provide the right space for the people involved to successfully execute this step. The less you are involved in defining the experiment and actions, the better.



We are often ambitious and energized the moment we have decided to take action and change things for the better. But there is a **great risk things get stranded** here. There might be insufficient commitment to the selected actions, and before you know we fall back into old habits. **If you want**

something new, you have to stop doing something old. And this is the most difficult part.

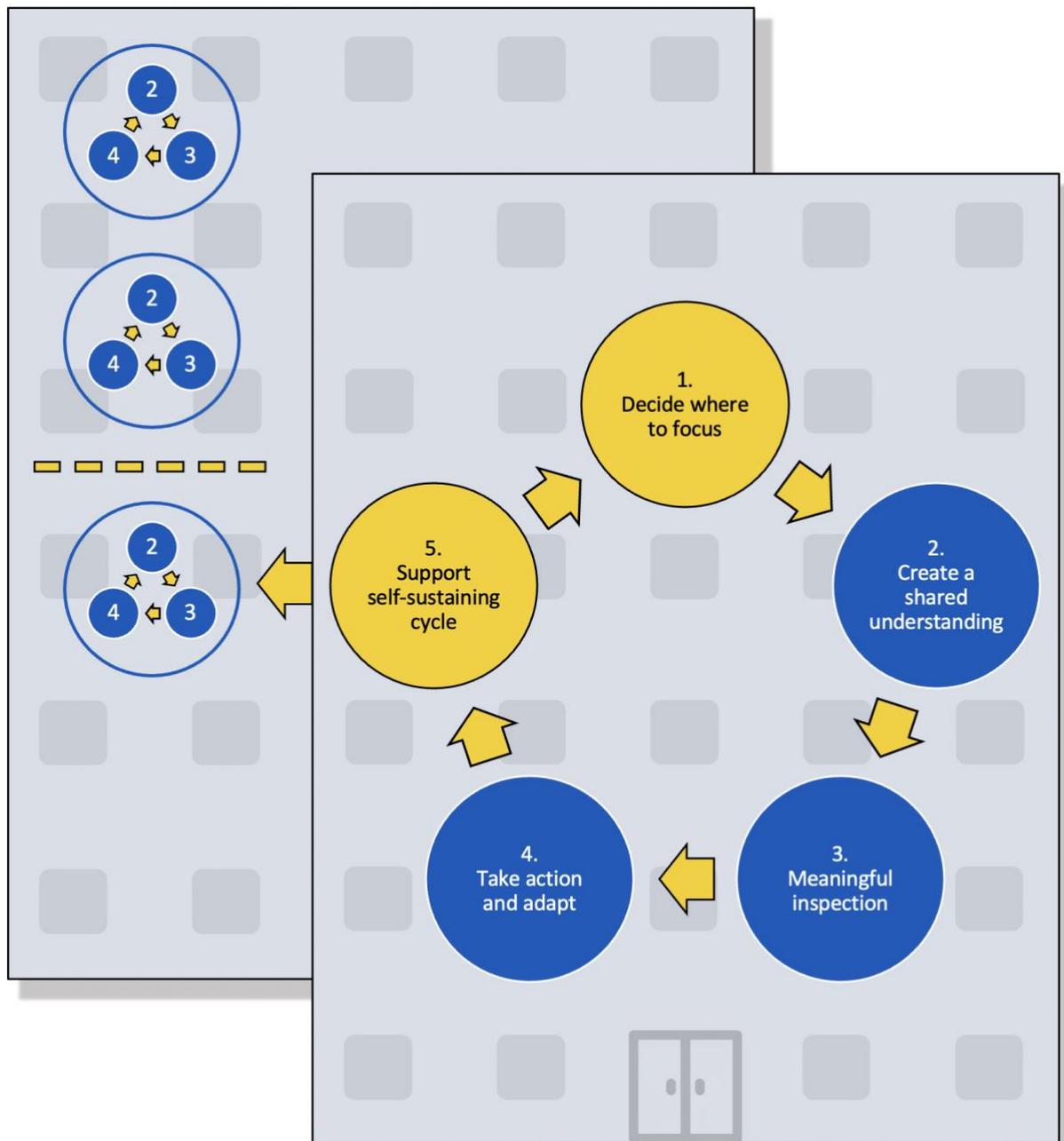
There can be many factors making it difficult to realize the change - unexpected events, new insights, persistent patterns etc. That is why it is crucial that there is a self-sustaining learning cycle that will provide:

- A shared understanding about the outcome of the experiment and actions
- meaningful inspection
- actions and adaptations

The goal is that teams sustain this ever going learning cycle by themselves. But **they need support to pull this off - especially in the beginning.** This can be as simple as providing the time and space to do this, but often other factors will pop up along the way. So, make sure they get the support and help they need.

The key to success

To maximize your agility organization wide, the trick is to inject this learning cycle one at a time and making sure your involvement is eventually not needed to sustain it. Your role is to **help grow the right environment for continuous learning to take place and to be self-sufficient**. And then you can move on to the next part of your organization and repeat the steps.



Objections and downsides

It requires a lot of courage, commitment, and discipline to successfully apply the Agility Accelerator Protocol. Sometimes you go one step ahead but then find yourself going two steps back. However, the only failure lies in giving up. Sustainable change takes time and doesn't happen overnight.

Increasing the transparency within your organization will reveal things that some people may have been hiding for a long time. Or deliberately have been looking the other way. So, take into account that you will be faced with resistance and skepticism. But it is a great opportunity to improve things for the better.

And sooner or later you will identify parts of your organization structure that are in the way of growing your agility any further. It will require a lot of effort to get the necessary support to experiment with alternative structures.

Outcomes

When you apply the Agility Accelerator Protocol and commit to it, you will improve the learning capabilities of your organization and as a consequence your agility. This will help you achieve the following business goals:

- Minimize technical risk
- Minimize business risk
- Improve your customer experience
- Increase employee engagement
- Shorten your time-to-market
- Speed up your innovation

Start today

What is stopping you from making your organization a better place to work in?

To get a better understanding of the various topics I addressed in this white paper, have a look at my:

- [Recommended resources](#)

If you could use some help to accelerate your agility, have a look at my:

- [Training courses](#)
- [Workshops](#)

And if you would like guidance and advice on how to move forward, you can plan a 45-minute strategic meeting with me for free:

- [Plan a strategy meeting](#)

All links from this white paper in one place



Track record

During the past 10 years I have been helping organizations to successfully embrace agility as a business strategy. On Europe's biggest course-comparison platform we have the **highest reviews of all agile training course providers** with an average score of 9.7 out of 10. You can [read all the reviews here](#). My customers especially appreciate my **ability to help translate theory to practical application**, in their specific context.

“Matthijs is without a doubt one of the best trainers. He not only has mastered all the theory behind Scrum, but he has vast experience in applying that knowledge in the enterprise world. In his training courses he doesn't just spout the agile platitudes at you but deals with the real-life messy business of applying agile ideals to the day to day work. Matthijs' training courses are invaluable if you are planning to actually be agile instead of just learning about Scrum.”

Kinshuk Kale - Change Agent, Agile & Innovation coach

“Matthijs can explain complex concepts with great clarity, aided by his awesome drawing skills! I took a course online, and it was such a smooth experience. The course structure left enough space to fully engage with the other participants, and Matthijs expertly incorporated these 'peer insights' in his instruction.”

Hein Ragas - Product Manager



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