Inventing and Implementing "The Scrum Master Dilemma Game"

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Are you a Scrum master or an Agile coach who is focusing on evolving from being a servant leader to becoming a True Leader? Do you feel the transition is difficult and do you feel stuck in dilemmas on a regular basis, where it is hard to come up with the right solution? Then you are just like our 28 Scrum master colleagues who need guidance and acknowledgement in handling leadership dilemmas. In this report, you will be introduced to our Scrum master Dilemma game and how to play it. This report also includes our reflections on our journey in developing the game. The benefit of the game is that it legalizes that we all have dilemmas to share by giving visibility to the situations Scrum masters often experience, where there is no perfect solution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nykredit is a Danish Financial institute mainly located in Denmark, with a minor part of the IT department located in Warsaw Poland. This experience report is written by Agile Coach Charlotte Frandsen, Scrum Master Julie Ravn, and First Vice president Lars Orbesen. Julie and Charlotte were the primary driving forces in developing and designing the Scrum Master Dilemma game, where Lars has had a sponsor/ambassador role.

In Nykredit, the IT organization has been working with Agile practices since 2016/2017. There are nearly 40 teams, mainly organized in the IT department (Digital, Change and IT), which are using Scrum and/or Kanban. The teams are supported by 28 full-time Scrum Masters and two Agile coaches. The Scrum Masters are organized within the Agile Department and the Agile Coaches are organized within the Lean and Agile Center of Excellence (LACE). Both departments are managed by the Competency Manager (Lars, the sponsor of the game). The departments are focused upon the competency development of Scrum Masters and the agile transformation of the surrounding organization.

2. BACKGROUND

Nykredit is in a transformation, in which the organization is becoming empowered to a larger degree. One way of achieving empowerment is by enabling the organization to make decisions and manage problems as close as possible to where the knowledge and experience is. The Scrum Master role in Nykredit has had many different interpretations, which have ranged from Team Lead or Project Manager or Servant Leader to Scrum Mom or Team Secretary.

Nykredit wants the teams to become self-managing. This requires that the team and Scrum Masters become able to handle as many issues as possible by themselves, with minimal interference from managers. It also requires Managers to trust that the Scrum Masters can take on an informal team leadership role (together with the Product Owner). To support the teams, all Scrum masters have therefore been trained in and inspired by

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Lencioni's work on high-performing teams to focus upon building trust in teams, clear communication and the use of Radical Candor to enable quality feedback in the teams (Lencioni 2019) (Scott 2019).

In the spring of 2022, the Agile department re-formulated the vision for the department as: "We create trust in teams, drive changes and unlock effective ways of working". The department also identified five focus areas that could work as pillars to support and enable the vision.

At a department day at headquarters in Copenhagen, five work groups were created to work on each focus area. One of the focus areas emphasized that Nykredit wanted the Scrum Masters of the organization "To act as True Leaders". This was also inspired by the 2020 update of the Scrum Guide, which stated that: "Scrum masters are true leaders who serve the Scrum Team and the larger organization" (Schwaber, K & Sutherland, J 2020). The work group, which included Agile Coach Charlotte and Scrum Master Julie, asked themselves "What does it mean to be a true leader?" and "How can we train Scrum masters to lead without formal authority in a balanced way, that is adjusted to the specific situation at hand?"

3.   OUR STORY

This paper focuses on how we designed, developed and implemented a Scrum Master dilemma game. The intention of the game was to train Scrum Masters in becoming True Leaders. This paper will give the reader insights into the benefits and potential of the game as well as some of the learnings and the things that turned out to be harder than we thought.

3.1   What we did

Developing the prototype

Scrum Masters and coaches (including the authors of this report) elaborated on how we could train the Scrum Masters to act as true leaders. We discussed the different stances the Scrum Masters should be able to take and decided to host a mini-hackathon to brainstorm ideas related to implementing the Agile vision for the department. All the Scrum Masters and coaches were present at the mini-hackathon.

One of the work groups came up with the idea of using gamification. During the day, they developed a prototype for a Scrum Master Dilemma card game. The prototype was developed within two hours and consisted of a cardboard poster describing the purpose and idea of the game, including three dilemmas as examples. The prototype emphasized how to handle everyday dilemmas as a Scrum Master, from the perspective of acting as a True Leader. Two of the authors of this report were part of the group that made the original prototype and became the driving force in developing the minimum viable product (MVP) afterwards.

Designing the MVP

We worked in iterations (consisting of workshops and reviews) while designing the MVP based on the prototype. We met physically in our office where we had a full-day workshop. Prior to the workshop, we had asked the Scrum Master community to send examples of dilemmas from their everyday life that required leadership skills. All the dilemmas were based on real-life situations experienced in the context of Nykredit. They were not based on one specific framework, but added focus on the basic agile principles and values.

Based on the feedback from the Scrum Masters, we were able to create the first version of the MVP in the workshop. Afterwards, we had the design for the cards made internally by one of our talented Scrum Masters. Overall, 18 dilemmas were added to the prototype and the MVP ended up with 21 Scrum Master dilemmas. The MVP was reviewed by a few Scrum Masters and edited based on their comments. Following these edits, we had the game printed, ready to be released.

Implementation

The game ended up being the size of a regular set of playing cards, which provides the opportunity to shuffle the cards before starting the game. The advantage of this design and size is that it is easy to bring along to any of our three locations in Denmark or Poland; you can always have it with you in your bag.

We released the game to all Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches on a department day in October 2022, where they played the game in groups and the work group received feedback. Overall, the entire department (28 Scrum

Masters and two coaches) played the game in pairs. The instant feedback was positive, and the Scrum Masters had several learnings from each other while playing.
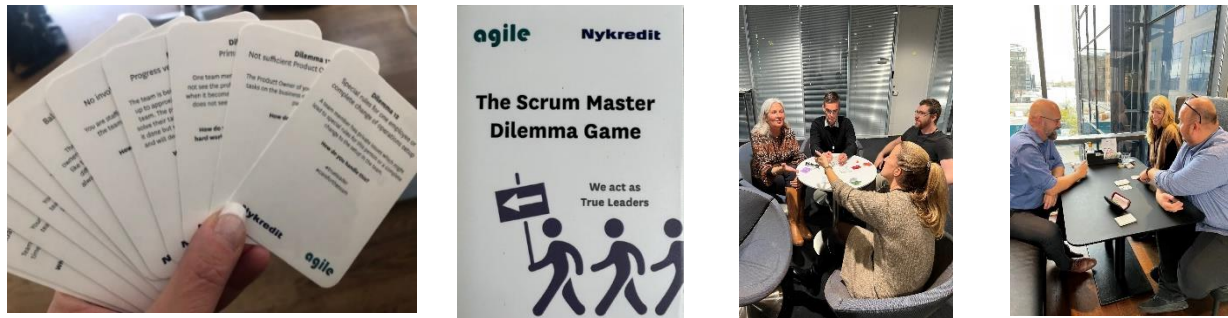

Picture 1-4: Examples of Scrum masters playing the game.

The Game
The guidelines for playing the game are simple: "To train the skills in becoming a True Leader, the Scrum Master can play this game with his or her fellow Scrum Masters, Agile coaches and competency managers. The rules are simple: take turns reading the cards out loud (random order if you prefer), and discuss different perspectives on how you would handle the situation and possible outcomes. The purpose of the game is to share thoughts on how to deal with everyday dilemmas as a Scrum Master and give feedback on a proposed solution. Furthermore, it is expected that the players are open to trying out new perspectives, reflecting and incorporating lessons learned from the game in the team after playing. The purpose is to be challenged and learn new perspectives from your Scrum Master colleagues and yourself, so you are better prepared to handle situations with an agile leadership mindset."

The Scrum masters at Nykredit think that the dilemmas are relatable and universal for Scrum Masters. [See picture below for examples]. The cards with the dilemmas consist of a unique number, topic, description, question (dilemma) and hashtags that we created for the game (which all referred to a theme). They are all formulated to call for action to the given dilemma.
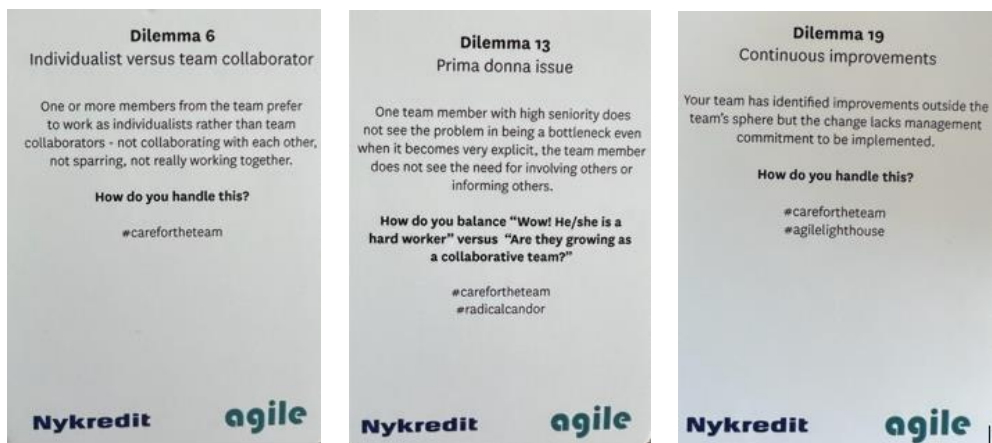
Picture 5: Examples of three dilemmas from the game; dilemma 6, 13 and 19.

Scrum Master "Playdates"

The card game has been distributed to all the Scrum masters in Nykredit and they have been asked to play it when they meet with their colleagues, managers etc., e.g., starting up a meeting by playing the game. After playing the game, two Scrum Masters from a Kanban team at Nykredit commented:

"We played the game at the beginning of our usual knowledge-sharing session and the game helped us to quickly move to the concrete dilemmas of our everyday. We read one dilemma from the stack of cards that we discussed, but quickly we moved on to a 'real' dilemma from one of our teams. We reflected on it together and discussed how to start talking about 'Cherry picking' of tasks in the team. How do you start the talk, how do you manage the talk, creating reflections and not pointing fingers at each other etc. The cards were our can opener to dilemmas."

The idea is, as mentioned earlier, furthermore, to start every Department Day in "Agile" by asking Scrum Masters for new dilemmas for the game and to reflect on these in depth and then to add these dilemmas to the card deck for future use to ensure that Scrum Masters continuously improve their leadership skills.

3.2   Results & Potential Benefits of the Game

We expect many benefits from playing the Dilemma game in the Nykredit Scrum master community. The game has potential on many different levels, which will be fulfilled iteratively. We acknowledge that not all its potential is realized yet, due to the fact that we are still in the implementation phase.

Organizational Benefit

On an organizational level, we have identified the following benefits of the game: by playing the game in the community, it is possible to align expectations and behaviours across Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches. By asking the Scrum master to play the game, it legalizes having and sharing dilemmas and spending time with peers discussing them. We believe playing the game will empower our teams to be more self-managing, because the teams feel confident discussing and tackling dilemmas. We expect knowledge-sharing in the community and competency development in the process to increase, professionalizing the Scrum Master role in time.

Scrum Masters' Benefit

For the Scrum master, the benefit is seen as more straight-forward. The game has the potential to create a more common, shared language for the Scrum masters and transparency about dilemmas. Playing the game can train the informal management muscle for the Scrum Masters. Furthermore, we see that playing the game also can help introvert personality types as well, because the game element ensures that everybody participates on equal terms with no regards to personality profile or preferences. The game also clearly states that there are no right answers, so you can't fail, which creates a safe space to explore different opinions and approaches.

The game legalizes that we all have dilemmas to share by giving visibility to the situations Scrum masters often experience, where there is no perfect solution, or the good solution can be difficult to see. By seeing the dilemma written in front you, you realize that somebody else has at some point had the same or a similar dilemma. This realization legalizes the sharing of dilemmas and reaching out to your Scrum master community.

Playing the game also continuously trains the ability to look into why Scrum masters or teams are in the given dilemma and to see it as an opportunity to change something which is not working. The more abstract discussions triggered by the game will typically put focus on long-term solutions instead of quick fixes.

Here is a concrete example of the effect of the game: A group of Scrum Masters played the game and discussed Dilemma 13 "The Primadonna issue" shown in the above picture (see picture 5). This inspired one of the Scrum Masters to go back and handle a concrete issue in the team by using Radical Candor to provide feedback to the "Primadonna" in the team. The feedback was inspired and structured through the discussions facilitated by the game. Through the feedback, the team member could see the harmful effect of his/her behaviour. This enabled an open dialogue in the team on how to minimize the bottleneck effect going forward.

Benefits for the team

For the team, the benefits are more smooth facilitation, communication and collaboration between team members and faster conflict resolutions within the team, because the Scrum Masters is more prepared to handle

different dilemmas. This also has the potential to result in less interference from managers and stakeholders outside the team.

The benefit of it being "a game"
The physical expression of the dilemmas is a card game, but the rules are simple, and the content is created for the players. The card game offers the dilemmas and facilitates discussion. If the players don't find one dilemma relevant or interesting, it is easy to pick the next dilemma and see if this opens up reflections. The cards function as "mindmaps" into "real-life" dilemmas and brings the "small talk" directly to something with more substance, leading the talk to something that is relevant to be shared. The game acts as a framework for knowledge-sharing.

Feedback Internally and externally
The dilemmas have been received positively. Scrum Masters can easily understand and relate to the dilemmas, but, of course, some dilemmas are more relatable than others. The following is a quote from our Scrum Master Claus Abildgaard Christensen (he is the Scrum Master in two IT teams):
> *"To me the dilemma game is a nifty little tool to sharpen the Scrum Masters knives. It doesn't require anything other than to pull out a card and start discussing with a peer. Playing the game widens your perspective on different situations as your co-player often has another take or approach to cope with the dilemma. Although it is designed as a multiplayer game, it also works great for self-reflection and preparing oneself for future dilemmas you might encounter. To me a must have in any Scrum Masters toolbox".*

Claus has actively used the game both with his peers in Nykredit and with fellow Scrum Masters from other companies in Denmark. One of the other companies expressed positive feedback after playing the game in their Scrum Master communities:
> *"The dilemma game is a great way to have open discussions. The fact that it is dilemmas and that we see the world differently allows the players to broaden their horizon and create new insights together. As an agile coach it is a great tool to start a conversation with the Scrum Masters I am working with. Besides that, it's just a really cool little package Nykredit have created".*

4.   WHAT WE LEARNED

It has been challenging, for some Scrum masters, to find the time to play the game. Change is always slower than you think and furthermore, it takes time to discuss a dilemma in depth and reflect on it, in order to bring forth different perspectives and learn from each other. Besides this, it requires time for the Scrum Masters to reflect on the key learnings and adapt them to their behaviour when returning to their teams. Changing your preferred behaviour is hard, but having a community to share your reactions and reflections with makes the change easier to stick thereby using the nudging principles of Consistency and Social Proof. To keep the learnings present, and ensure it is not just something we developed once and then forgot all about, Scrum Masters have been asked to bring new and relevant dilemmas to quarterly department meetings and to play the game with their peers, whenever there will be physical gatherings at our locations.

The experience when playing the game is that it legitimizes sharing dilemmas across roles and situations. There are concrete experiences and dilemmas that we sometimes don't share because they are difficult, or there are sensitive themes at play. When the dilemmas are written on a card in front of us (and we have set aside time), we can in some way relate and open up, because it becomes safe to talk about them. Playing the game with a peer Scrum Master naturally opens the talk to new and present dilemmas. A necessary foundation for having these discussions and sharing dilemmas is psychological safety amongst the people who play, otherwise the reflections and discussions can easily be superficial.

Picture 6-8: Examples of Scrum masters playing the game.

What we have learned so far is that Scrum Masters need to prioritize this competence development activity on the same terms as one-on-one talks with their manager. The best way to ensure this prioritization is a structured approach, where they book time on the calendar with fellow Scrum Masters to play the game. Negotiating time for Scrum Masters to prioritize this competence-developing activity has been possible at Nykredit due to the fact that virtually all Scrum Masters have the same personnel manager, who also acted as the sponsor of this dilemma game.

A challenge we experienced while developing the game was that it was difficult to design dilemmas that were so generic that most of the Scrum Masters could relate to them, while at the same time they couldn't be so specific that single people or teams could be identified. We handled this issue by having several rounds of reviews from both agile coaches and Scrum Masters. In this review process we re-formulated several of the dilemmas so specific team characteristics were left out. An example of how we generalized a Dilemma was the following: A Scrum Master reported an ongoing dilemma with the Product Owner in their team being fond of "over-controlling". The issue was very easy to identify due to the facts mentioned in the dilemma and specific Product Owner characteristics. In the review process, we therefore left out the specific facts and connected the dilemma to an overall theme regarding micromanagement from within. Afterwards we tested and confirmed that several Scrum Master could relate to re-formulated dilemma.

Another lesson we have learned is that it is easier for Scrum Masters to prepare for dilemmas after they have played the game and gained different perspectives on a given situation. They have been given the mandate (by their personnel manager) to take charge and be the True Leader in situations where they earlier could have been in doubt of the responsibility or mandate related to other manager roles in Nykredit. They gain a broader horizon on handling dilemmas and gain insights into different ways to act as a true leader.

However, training the Scrum Masters in becoming "True Leaders" isn´t enough, as the organization needs to be mature enough to acknowledge this role as an informal leadership role. This is where it is still a bit tricky in our organization. We are in the process of aligning the "True Leader" role with the other leadership roles. There are several manager roles in our company with the responsibility for personal competence development and roles with responsibility for the delivery streams. All of these roles have been given formal authority and all participate in management meetings which do not include the Scrum Masters. Ensuring the best collaboration between these management roles and the Scrum Masters, without stepping on each other's toes in the individual Scrum teams, is something we are still elaborating on, as Nykredit is in the process of re-formulating role descriptions for several roles. We see this as an ongoing process because roles and organization continue evolving.

In summary:
1) We have managed to create a safe space for sharing dilemmas, where Scrum Masters learn.
2) The game allows the Scrum Masters to self-reflect together and be better prepared for difficult situations: the gamification part helps turning a difficult situation into an "easy" and safe spot.

3) We are not done when changing the mindset of the Scrum Masters; we need the other leadership roles in the organization to acknowledge the change as well

5. FROM WHERE WE ARE TO WHERE WE HOPE TO BE

Changes seen
We have seen an increased self-awareness in some of our Scrum Masters; the more they play the game the more they feel confident in handling dilemmas, showing a direction for the team. Some of the examples we have seen are an awareness of giving and receiving feedback from team members by using Radical Candor (the dilemma game includes issues on this as well). Some Scrum Masters have learned new perspectives from their fellow colleagues, so they now can enter dilemmas in a more nuanced way; as Scrum Master Claus Abildgaard says: *"Playing the game widens your perspective on different situations as your co-player often has another take or approach to cope with the dilemma".*

Future benefits
Not all of the potential of the game has been realized yet, as we are still in its implementation phase. We would like the game to be the preferred way to train handling dilemmas for our Scrum Masters, first and foremost because it gives more nuances on how to act as a Scrum Masters, second because it gives a stronger bond between our Scrum Masters, and thirdly because it constantly challenges the way the Scrum Masters lead the teams. Playing the game is still new to our Scrum Masters community; it is our hope that playing the game will be the new routine or standard.

How to keep the game fresh
In order for the game to stay present and relevant, the Scrum Masters have been asked to play the game whenever they meet with their fellow Scrum Masters. The continuous collection of new dilemmas is intended to keep the game alive.   The intent is to update the game with new dilemmas every time the Agile department meets physically quarterly, thus the game will be developed iteratively as new dilemmas occur.

Keeping the game alive might not be as important as keeping on acknowledging that we have dilemmas that we can discuss and nuance together. The game reminds the Scrum Masters that they have a network of colleagues who can help, that the colleagues also have dilemmas, that dilemmas can always be nuanced and might not be as multi-folded as we fear, but might instead be simple and straight-forward from somebody else' perspective.

Next up
Based on our learnings, we will continue to play the game with Scrum Masters, both new and experienced ones. There is still a way to go for having Nykredit accept Scrum Masters as having an informal leadership role, so by creating awareness on the role and the dilemmas Scrum Masters handle every day, we believe this is the way to proceed. Besides this, we will continue to create awareness about the game and the everyday dilemmas our Scrum Masters face by presenting the game to the other manager roles in our company.

Due to demands from the Product Owner community of Nykredit, we have developed a Product owner dilemma game while writing this report. The method and process has been to ask for Product Owner dilemmas in the organization, situations that are occurring on a regular basis. We ended up with 26 dilemmas for the MVP. They have all been reviewed in our Product Owner community, where we had 30 Product Owners gathered at our headquarters. The Product Owners were divided into groups of three playing the game by taking turns to read a dilemma out loud. They discussed each dilemma back and forth and shared how they would handle each of them related to personal preferences and experiences. They also reviewed each dilemma by rating whether they found the dilemma to be relevant. They added new dilemmas, and we edited some for clarity communication-wise. One of the dilemmas that was added was Dilemma number 25: "As a Product Owner, you often experience that the business defines specific solutions instead of defining the problem they want to be solved – what challenges do you see and how do you handle them?"

The Product Owner Dilemma game was released in April 2023 at a product owner community meeting. A majority of the product owners of Nykredit was present and received a game. The response was very positive,

and they saw the game as very useful. The next step for the overall 50 Product Owners will be a session where they can play to together with their peers and have time to reflect on dilemmas and how to solve them in different contexts.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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