



Team alignment and adaptation in a crisis

NATALIIA LUHOVA, SIMCORP

In this experience report, I discuss managing teams across different safety levels amid global crises, specifically the war in Ukraine. Despite tremendous challenges, fostering trust and empathy, adapting communication strategies, and maintaining team morale were crucial. The report emphasizes the importance of acknowledging personal well-being alongside work tasks, leading to resilient, empathic, and highly engaged teams.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's global world, businesses often work across different places, bringing together teams from various locations. But managing a team spread out like this has its own challenges, especially when team members are in places with different levels of safety. In this experience report, I will talk about how I managed teams, with some members in safe places in Europe and others dealing with the difficulties of a war zone in Ukraine. While it is natural to focus primarily on work-related tasks and goals, differences in fundamental safety changes the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and significantly impacts the team's pace of work. It is often difficult to become aware of this influence and to work with it. Additionally, it is important to recognize that addressing non-work-related issues is not a distraction from the task at hand but rather an essential part of building a resilient and cohesive team. By acknowledging and working with these influences, teams can cultivate a culture of empathy, understanding, and support that enhances their ability to navigate challenges and achieve their goals. This report shares my experiences in dealing with these complex situations and gives tips on how to make team collaboration work well, even when facing tough circumstances in different places.

By acknowledging the challenges faced by team members in different safety environments, we can integrate Sustainable Development Goal number 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." This goal emphasizes the importance of creating environments where individuals can work and live safely, regardless of their geographical location. When managing teams in diverse safety contexts, fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and support becomes crucial. This includes actively listening to team members' concerns, offering resources for mental health and well-being support, and implementing flexible work arrangements where possible.

Through my experiences, I have found that open communication channels, regular check-ins focused on well-being, and proactive conflict resolution strategies contribute significantly to team cohesion and productivity. By addressing safety disparities directly and integrating strategies aligned with SDG 16, teams can navigate challenges more effectively and work towards shared goals while promoting peace and inclusivity across different environments.

2. BACKGROUND

SimCorp is a global organization with headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark. We have over 2,300 employees of more than 60 nationalities spread across the world. Around 600 employees work in the Product Division. Out of those 600 – around 230 employees work in Kyiv, Ukraine. In 2017 SimCorp moved to Agile, adopting SAFe. However, as our Agile journey progressed, we evolved beyond SAFe. Instead, we shifted our approach to Product Areas, which offered a more focused and streamlined method of product development. Under this structure, teams within a Product Area collaborate closely, sharing a single backlog and working together on specific product components. Which means that team members work closely together daily. After years of transformations, teams were shuffled around, and many distributed teams were created.

I have worked for SimCorp for over 10 years. During these years I changed different roles, from QA to Developer and eventually becoming a Scrum Master. I have had the privilege of collaborating with teams across various geographical locations, including Ukraine, Denmark, and the UK. Being fun, supportive, empathic, and adaptable

helped me and my teams during the time of Covid and the next crisis: a full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine. Being Ukrainian myself it was not easy to always stay objective and calm. Here I will share how I cultivated compassion, removed guilt, brought back joy, empathy, and fun to our work environment.

3. STORY

I returned from maternity leave in May 2022. Month 3 of the all-out war in Ukraine. My family and I moved out from Kyiv, the capital, to the western part of Ukraine, which got hit much less. My son started sleeping through the night, so I felt comfortable enough to go back to work.

In my Product Area there were 4 teams working on the same part of the product with a common backlog and a common focus on a specific part of the product. 2 teams from Ukraine, 2 teams from Denmark. I must add here that during the past several years we dedicated a lot of effort to nurture trust between team members, many of whom had worked together for nearly a decade. Before Covid times we had many business trips together, social events, team building events, and shared personal milestones such as weddings, births, new pets, vacations by showing photos, fostering deep connections. We knew quite a lot about each other's lives, even though we lived thousands of kilometers apart. Maintaining this safe and supportive environment during the pandemic became a top priority, ensuring that the teams remained connected and motivated despite the global disruptions. These efforts contributed significantly to the cohesion and productivity of our teams, keeping individuals closely bonded and engaged in collaborative work. After many welcoming meetings with our Scrum Master community, it was agreed that I would pick up 2 teams based in Denmark.

From the beginning I started to gather information about what had changed since the start of the war. I engaged with my manager and fellow Scrum Masters to grasp how they were handling the situation. What new processes were in place? How did we manage during air raids in Ukraine? What contingency plans did we have for critical errors, especially when key developers could not be reached due to bombings? How were product releases managed? I also talked to developers from different teams. Do they have enough support from teams in safe locations? How can I help? The company had done a great job in supporting the Ukrainian employees. It was incredible to see the resilience of the people and I was inspired by the outpouring of support from our expat colleagues. To see this spirit of cooperation and mutual support between team members was really heartening. Despite the tremendous support, the huge gap in living conditions made it increasingly difficult to talk about uncomfortable issues and challenges. During meetings I started noticing more silence than usual, no more chit-chat, no laughter. Developers located outside of Ukraine started reaching out to their Ukrainian colleagues through Scrum Masters or managers, fearing that it might be not the right time. One of my colleagues from Denmark told me that she felt guilty being in safety while we are in constant danger. Reflecting on my initial questions, I realized our immediate focus was on firefighting, which was necessary given the circumstances. But had we overlooked another critical aspect—human well-being? Were we recognizing how the drastic changes in safety in one place were affecting everyone's ability to work together effectively? These were important considerations that needed attention alongside our operational concerns.

3.1 Building trust between me and my teams.

But what about my two Danish teams? Building trust between me and the teams was crucial for effective teamwork. Since I joined the teams, they have been constantly concerned about my wellbeing. When I asked about their daily problems or obstacles, I would get a response like "Our problems are nothing, you have real problems in your life". Their concern for my life shows that they care, but when they say "your problems are bigger than ours" it makes it hard to connect. To build trust, it is important to understand their daily challenges too. Another problem I encountered was their fear of sharing anything good that was happening in their lives. They thought that my life was so horrible at the moment that it would be incredibly rude to share anything positive in front of me. Whenever I asked how things are or what might be the problems, they said 'Our issues are nothing compared to your own and what you're dealing with'.

Steps I have taken to help build a trust environment:

- **I have shared happy parts of my life.** Since we moved to the western part of Ukraine, we lived in a small house with our friends, surrounded by beautiful mountains. I shared a lot of our hiking trips, my son starting to walk, and some delicious meals we had. Everything that made me happy. I always had my camera on, showing them that I was OK and there for them. Eventually they started sharing some parts of their weekend, their holiday or just anything fun that happened during the day. What looked like a giant elephant standing in our room started to disappear.

- **I made sure to keep saying that my problems did not make their problems any smaller.** This meant that I wanted them to know that even though I was dealing with tough stuff, their problems were still important. I wanted us to understand that everyone faces different challenges, and we should support each other no matter what. I found that continuing to emphasize that my personal challenges do not diminish the significance of their own issues is crucial for fostering mutual respect and understanding within a team. It is essential to realize that while everyone faces different obstacles, each person's struggles are valid and deserving of attention and support. By consistently reinforcing this message, I was validating their experiences and affirming the importance of acknowledging and addressing their concerns. This helps prevent a hierarchy of suffering where one person's difficulties are deemed more significant than another's, fostering compassion and a more equitable team dynamic.
- **I kept things real.** After staying in the western part of Ukraine for over 5 months, my husband and I decided to come back to Kyiv. I was overjoyed to return to our home and rest of the family. But constant rocket attacks did not make our life easier. While I did not want to frighten my teams, I felt it was important for them to understand the gravity of the situation facing all our Ukrainian colleagues. If I experienced a sleepless night in a shelter due to the attacks, I did not hesitate to take a few hours off and explain the situation to my teams. I wanted them to know that while I was managing, many of our Ukrainian colleagues might need support the next day due to similar circumstances. By being transparent about my experiences, I hoped to foster empathy and understanding among my teams. I wanted them to recognize the resilience of our Ukrainian colleagues and to be mindful of the challenges they were facing, even if they were not directly experiencing them themselves. Additionally, by openly discussing these challenges, I aimed to create a supportive environment where team members felt comfortable expressing their own concerns and seeking help if needed. It was important to me that we stood together as a team, offering support and solidarity during difficult times.
- **I tried not to overshare.** While I believed in being honest and open with my teams about the challenges, I faced returning to Kyiv amidst the rocket attacks, I also made a conscious effort not to overshare. I understood the importance of maintaining a balance between transparency and professionalism. Oversharing could potentially overwhelm my teams or distract them from their work. Therefore, I carefully considered what information was necessary for them to understand the broader context without burdening them with unnecessary details. Instead of delving into every personal difficulty I encountered, I focused on providing relevant updates that directly impacted our work or the well-being of our Ukrainian colleagues. This approach ensured that my teams remained informed without feeling overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation. Moreover, by exercising discretion in what I shared, I maintained a sense of professionalism while still fostering a supportive and empathetic work environment. It was important to strike a balance between being authentic and maintaining boundaries, ensuring that my personal experiences did not overshadow our collective focus on work and mutual support. In doing so, I hoped to create a culture where open communication and empathy thrived, allowing us to navigate challenges together while remaining focused on our shared goals and responsibilities.

3.2 Trust and alignment between distributed teams.

One of the developers on my team called me. She was very hesitant, and it was obvious how difficult it was for her to talk about it. I asked her to come straight to the point. Apparently, the problem was that one of the Ukrainian-based team members had been quite rude and impolite to her, and she always feels comfortable giving direct feedback. But "since you have a war in your country, I don't know how to deal with it". I assured her that having critical situations at home should not make you rude and unprofessional. We talked a bit more and then she handled the feedback perfectly herself. But that conversation made me realize how much harder personal disasters make our communication.

Do the usual tools for building trust work in such difficult situations? We had a joint retrospective between several teams in Denmark and Ukraine. A simple check-in question was asked by one of the facilitators. "Where will your next holiday be? What you would expect to be a non-threatening, tolerant question was blown out of the water by answers like "I'm going sailing on my new yacht", "I'm going to the front line to see my husband who I haven't seen for a year", "Thailand", "No holiday because my wife and children have been evacuated to another country and I can't join them". Do not get me wrong. Taking vacation is an important part of our work-life balance. Sharing about it can break the ice

and find a conversation starting point for people. So how do we find this balance? We agreed with other Scrum Masters to use 'safer' questions. Like 'What your ideal vacation would look like?'. This approach allows for conversation starters without unintentionally highlighting disparities in experiences. Finding this balance is crucial in creating a supportive and inclusive environment where all team members feel valued and understood. While traditional tools may need to be adapted to suit the unique challenges of difficult situations, thoughtful communication and empathy remain essential in building trust and cohesion within teams.

Recognizing the different circumstances in which we all find ourselves becomes crucial in the online business world. Imagine that you are having a remote planning meeting with multiple cross-located teams. You are in the middle of a discussion and suddenly the air-raid goes off. Half of the people shut down their laptops and ran to the nearest shelter. In this scenario, the abrupt disruption highlights the stark reality of operating in an online business environment. While some may continue the meeting without interruption, others are forced to prioritize their safety amidst unforeseen emergencies. It underscores the importance of acknowledging and accommodating the different situations team members may encounter, whether it is unstable internet connections, power outages, or even safety concerns during times of crisis.

After observing several of such situations I created some guidelines for building trust between distributed teams:

- **Think about your audience.** Drawing from the principles of Training From the Back of The Room, I recognized the importance of prioritizing the needs of my audience when facilitating, teaching, or coaching. I check out who is joining my remote meeting. What do they need right now? Sometimes a check-in question like "How are you feeling today?" is better than sharing something about your life.
- **Adapt team rules.** I asked my teams what rules they thought it made sense to keep in new circumstances. For example, we changed the rule "camera always on" to "camera on when you can".
- **Acknowledge the different conditions in which we all find ourselves.** Whether facing unstable internet connections, power outages, or personal safety concerns during crises, each team member's situation was unique and deserving of recognition. Whenever we had a distributed meeting, I always said out loud that there might be a power cut in Ukraine. If there was an air raid, the Ukrainian colleagues might have to leave and continue from a shelter. In that case we would take a break. By saying this calmly, I wanted to reassure everyone that we are prepared and that Ukrainian colleagues should not feel guilty if any of the disruption happens. By openly acknowledging these differences and showing empathy and understanding, we cultivated an environment where everyone felt valued and supported.
- **Bring back online team building games and activities.** I found that "safe" music/movie quizzes work quite well. They bring people joy, let them distract from daily work and issues, and do not require heavy life discussions.
- **Be ready that any of the activities could bring up painful topics.** And that is ok. We created a slack chat called "simcorp-cats", where everyone could post pictures of their cats. You might think that such a channel could only bring happiness, but occasionally pictures of cats from ruined homes and occupied cities appeared there. I came to understanding that this was part of our new reality, and we needed to embrace it.

3.3 Adaptation and alignment in a crisis.

If I take a step back and summarize the previous chapters, I can see a clear emphasis on two vital elements: adaptation and alignment within teams during crises. These are not just theoretical ideas; they represent actionable strategies essential for maintaining team resilience and productivity.

Adaptation Strategies:

Open Communication and Understanding: Adapting communication strategies to understand and address the unique challenges faced by team members in different safety environments.

Flexible Work Arrangements: Adapting to the situation by implementing flexible work arrangements to accommodate team members' needs and challenges during crises.

Balancing Transparency: Being transparent about personal experiences and challenges while maintaining a balance to avoid overwhelming team members.

Adapted Team Rules: Asking teams for input on rules and adapting them to suit new circumstances, such as changing the "camera always on" rule to "camera on when you can."

Alignment Strategies:

Building Trust and Empathy: Building trust by sharing personal experiences and fostering empathy within the team, acknowledging, and validating everyone's challenges.

Creating a Supportive Environment: Emphasizing mutual support and solidarity among team members, creating a safe space for open discussions about challenges and concerns.

Enhanced Communication: Improving overall communication between teams, encouraging constructive discussions, and problem-solving sessions.

Acknowledging Different Circumstances: Openly acknowledging and accommodating different situations team members may encounter, fostering a sense of inclusivity and support.

3.4 Finding my own support.

In "Fearless Organization" by Amy C. Edmondson, the importance of psychological safety in teams is highlighted. As a Ukrainian living under the constant threat of rocket attacks and experiencing sleepless nights filled with fear, maintaining a cheerful and supportive demeanor when interacting with my teams was sometimes incredibly challenging for me. To cope with these immense pressures, I found solace and support in a group of fellow Scrum Masters. Every day we had a 15-minute Scrum of Scrums meeting, which gradually evolved into an unofficial support group. During these sessions, we shared our daily struggles, joys, and updates from our respective teams. Edmondson emphasizes that psychological safety is about feeling safe to take interpersonal risks, such as speaking up without fear of reprisal or rejection. This safe environment enabled us to express frustrations, shed tears, and celebrate victories openly. Our camaraderie not only helped us emotionally but also improved our ability to handle job challenges. Our experiences underscored the value of empathy within a team, reinforcing how mutual understanding and support can foster resilience and success, especially in trying times. This small group reminded me how essential empathy is within a team. It reinforced the notion that understanding and compassion towards one another's struggles can significantly enhance teamwork, foster a supportive environment, and ultimately lead to greater success and resilience, especially during challenging times.

4. RESULTS

I believe that my overall efforts have helped to break down the wall between 'us' and 'them'. I restored the ability to talk about uncomfortable issues and challenges without hurting each other's feelings. Some of the positive results I observed:

- **Reduced fear.** Acknowledging different circumstances made it easier to ask questions. I noticed how my team members started to ask our Ukrainian colleagues about their lives, realizing that the answer might not be pleasant. As you can imagine, it is much more fun to talk about a great weekend than a night spent in a bomb shelter.
- **Increased empathy.** Through open and honest conversations, team members developed a deeper sense of empathy and understanding for their colleagues' experiences. Not only did Danish team members begin to appreciate the challenges faced by their Ukrainian colleagues, but vice versa. Building an empathetic team helped us to be happy for others when we might not always be happy for ourselves. This increased empathy strengthened interpersonal relationships and created a more cohesive team dynamic based on mutual respect and compassion.
- **Increased morale.** I helped team members to connect on a personal level and enjoy light-hearted activities together. This contributed to increased engagement, morale, and overall job satisfaction within the teams.
- **Resilience in Challenging Situations.** Teams demonstrated resilience in the face of unexpected challenges, such as power outages or safety concerns during emergencies.
- **Enhanced Communication.** Overall communication between the teams improved significantly. Team members felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions, leading to more constructive discussions and problem-solving sessions. The ability to address uncomfortable topics openly and respectfully paved the way for greater collaboration and innovation between the teams.
- **Increased psychological safety within the teams.** Chit chats and laughter returned to our lives. Software engineers felt safe enough to contact each other, without a third party. They understood the circumstances and accepted that they might not get an immediate answer. They began to give constructive feedback without fear of hurting each other's feelings.

5. WHAT I LEARNED

The most significant lesson I learned was the realization of how much non-work-related issues can impact our team's productivity and atmosphere. Understanding that personal concerns, external stressors, and cultural differences can affect our work dynamic was eye-opening. It is challenging to recognize and address these influences, but it's crucial to do so. By acknowledging and working with these factors, we can create a more supportive and productive team environment. Here are some key learnings:

- Close relationships build more resilient and strong teams. That is what I learned from my Scrum Master team. I constantly compared this team to other groups that I worked with. Why it was so much easier to share and be heard in this group but not in others. The bond we shared allowed us to navigate through challenges with greater ease, fostering an environment where everyone felt valued and supported. This demonstrated the importance of fostering strong interpersonal connections within teams to enhance collaboration and overall effectiveness.
- Compassion and understanding indeed form the foundation of effective leadership, but my experiences taught me that it goes beyond just listening and supporting. It is about actively engaging with team members on an emotional level, validating their experiences, and empathizing with their challenges. This means not only hearing their concerns but also taking meaningful actions to address them and provide necessary support.
- Flexibility and adaptation are essential in navigating challenging circumstances. As the situation evolved, we had to adjust our approaches, processes, and communication strategies to accommodate the changing needs of the team. Embracing flexibility allowed us to remain agile and responsive, enabling us to overcome obstacles and continue moving forward despite the uncertainty.
- Leveraging the support of colleagues and building a network of trusted allies can provide invaluable assistance during difficult times. By tapping into the collective expertise, resources, and support of fellow Scrum Masters and colleagues, I was able to navigate challenges more effectively and provide better support to my team members.

Overall, these key learnings underscore the importance of resilience, empathy, flexibility, and collaboration in fostering a supportive and productive team environment, particularly during times of crisis. By embracing these principles, we can better navigate challenges, strengthen relationships, and ultimately achieve success as a team.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family – my husband and son. Your unwavering support, patience, and love have been my constant source of strength and motivation, especially during these dark times. Thank you for standing by me through every challenge and triumph, and for always believing in me.

I am also incredibly thankful to my fellow Scrum Masters. Your empathy, wisdom, and camaraderie have not only helped me cope with the pressures of our work but have also enriched my perspective and understanding. Our daily interactions and support for one another have been invaluable, and I am truly grateful for your friendship and solidarity.

A special thanks to my shepherd - Maryse Meinen, whose guidance and insights have been crucial throughout this journey. Your constructive feedback, encouragement, and expertise have significantly shaped the direction and quality of this report. I am deeply grateful for your time and effort in helping me refine my ideas and bring this work to fruition.

Finally, I extend my appreciation to everyone who contributed to the development of this report, directly or indirectly. Your support and encouragement have been instrumental in achieving this milestone.

REFERENCES

Sustainable Development Goal 16, <https://www.unodc.org/romena/en/SDG/sdg-16 -promote-peaceful-inclusive-societies-for-sustainable-development--provide-access-to-justice-for-all-and-build-effective--accountable-and-inclusive-institutions-at-all-levels.html>

Sharon L. Bowman Training From the Back of the Room!: 65 Ways to Step Aside and Let Them Learn 1st Edition

Amy C. Edmondson Fearless Organization