growing agile

FLOW

help work to flow

30+ tips, techniques and games to improve your productivity

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Samantha Laing and Karen Greaves

This book is for sale at http://leanpub.com/helpworktoflow

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Preface

In 2012, we (Karen and Sam) took the plunge and started our own business. Being new business owners was a steep learning curve for us. We were blown away by how many "company admin" tasks we had to do! Silly things like: blogging, accounting, payslips, marketing(!), sales, proposals, following up on payments and so much more. It seemed that we had more admin tasks than tasks for our core business.

Over the last 3 years we have mastered this problem. It wasn't easy. We tried many things, some worked and others didn't, some seemed to work and then backfired. Sometimes we even forgot about the things that worked and had to learn the lesson all over again!

Now we find ourselves able to work efficiently, get everything done, and enjoy what we do regardless of the task. Reflecting, we realised we are easily able to create a state of flow.

We see so many people struggle with this. Recently we taught a group of small business owners about a simple way to help them get more done, and achieve flow. They loved it. This session inspired us to share what we have learned. This book contains all our tips to get into flow and getting stuff done.

As a bonus we've included two of our favourite techniques that we use daily to help manage our work, as well as two games we use when we teach other people about the benefits of flow and limiting work in progress.

If you are thinking, great now I have to add reading this book to my huge to do list, don't worry! We know you picked up this book because you want to get more done with your time. We made sure it's a short book, that's quick and easy to read. You don't even have to read it all at once. Browse through and pick up just a few tips, you can be on your way to better flow in under 5 minutes!

About Karen and Sam

Sam Laing (left) and Karen Greaves (right)

We are Sam Laing and Karen Greaves. We have worked in software our whole lives. With Type A personalities and a strong work ethic, we have both done our share of overtime on death march projects. Eventually we knew we had to find another way. This is when we discovered agile software development. A new way of working that finally made sense and seemed to restore some of the sanity and humanity to the business of software development.

Agile is also what brought us together. Karen interviewed Sam for a position in a company where she was introducing Scrum (an agile framework). As soon as we met, we knew we had to work together. The rest as they say is history. Although we worked at different companies after that, we stayed in touch, and attended conferences together.

In 2012, we took the plunge and started our own business, Growing Agile. Since then, we have been doing the work that we are passionate about: introducing people to agile and helping those experienced with agile to continuously improve. What we love most is having a positive impact on other people's lives.

Many of the tips you will find in this book come from our experience with agile and helping teams improve. We've applied most of these tips to our own business and realised that agile techniques are often just common sense. They work as well for small business owners as they do for agile teams in large corporates.

We hope this book brings peace, clarity and flow into your life.

If you'd like to contact us, you can email on **karen.greaves@gmail.com**[1] and **samantha.laing@gmail.com**[2].

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Introduction

Have you ever been so engrossed in your work that you lost track of time? This is called flow. It's a state of mind where you are fully immersed in the task at hand. You might say "I was in the zone" or "in the groove". Being in a state of flow is almost peaceful and that's a surprising word to use for when you're being super productive!

What is flow?

Flow is a concept credited to Mihalyi Csíkszentmihályi, a Hungarian psychology professor, who described his observations in academic articles and in the popular book Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience[3]. According to this book you can achieve flow by doing these three things:

- enabling immediate feedback
- balancing capability and challenge
- setting clear goals with visible progress

Let's look at each of the necessary elements of flow in a bit more detail.

Enabling immediate feedback

Have you ever completed an important time-consuming piece of work, delivered it on time, and had absolutely no one even comment on it? We have. It's soul destroying, and a good way to lose motivation for doing any further work. As humans we crave feedback. It's also critical for productivity. Without regular feedback from customers, or colleagues it is easy to expend effort going in the wrong direction.

We believe one of the reasons we are productive is that we always work together. As soon as one of us completes a task (like writing this chapter), the other person reviews the task and gives feedback. If changes are needed we can do them immediately and get the task completed, rather than waiting for feedback and moving on to another task whilst we wait. Immediate feedback is a key principle in agile, this book includes lots of ideas from agile that help you get quick feedback.

Balancing capability and challenge

Karen is an avid Xbox gamer. She can spend hours engrossed in a game without realising how much time is passing. She is in a state of flow. However if the game is too difficult, for example she keeps dying, or can't finish something in the required time, she quickly gets annoyed and bored. Flow is gone. Sometimes she even shouts at the TV!

The idea of balancing capability with challenge is critical. It's also unique to each person. For example, Karen is really good at strategy games. She has a high capability for them. Because of this, she enjoys playing even difficult strategy games. In fact, if the game is too easy, she gets bored. Driving games is a whole other story. She can't even drive for 15 seconds in Grand Theft Auto without crashing the car. (Note from Sam: Karen struggles with real life driving too!).

If you find work frustrating and boring, think about your capability for the work you are doing, as well as the challenge the work presents. If they are not a good match, you might need to either grow your capability or take on more challenging work.

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[3]http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0061339202/

Setting clear goals with visible progress

One of our favourite quotes is from Peter Drucker[4]: "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all."

If you don't know what your goal is and how you are doing against it, you might very well be heading in the wrong direction. That doesn't result in flow or productivity. Our favourite way to check this is with a visible task board. We have a Kanban board between us on our desk. Each morning we plan what needs to be done, add tasks to the board, and shuffle priorities. There is nothing more satisfying at the end of the day than a bunch of tasks in the "Done" column. In fact the amount of tasks done is usually correlated with how much flow we achieved during the day.

A good game?

If you've studied game design, or if you are a gamer you might notice a similarity with some of the requirements for a good game.

Jane McGonigal[5] defines a good game as any activity with:

- a clear goal
- clear rules
- a way to obtain frequent feedback
- optional participation

Given this, it is not a surprise that achieving flow regularly at work increases your happiness and reduces your stress. It's like spending your day playing a good game, rather than working!

Using this book to achieve flow

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could experience more flow in your everyday life? This book is designed to help you do just that.

You can use this book in a number of ways.

- You could devour all the content at once and live happily ever after in flow
- You can dip your toes in, read a tip or two and try them out for yourself or your team
- You can pick a technique to improve your flow and then later refer back to the book for more tips
- You can play a game with your team to experience flow and discuss how your team can work towards achieving flow daily

We highly recommend revisiting this book regularly. You should not adopt all the tips in one go. Try a few, and when those are working well, dip in to this book for a few more ideas. Some tips might work better than others for you. Definitely remember to pick up this book whenever you are doing a headless chicken dance - thats our term for running around multitasking and not getting anything done!
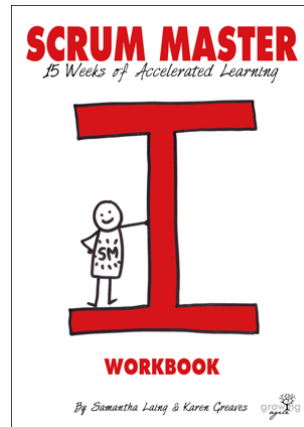
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[4]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Drucker
[5]http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1594202850/

Growing Agile Books

Scrum Master Workbook - 15 Weeks of Accelerated Learning

Essential for new Scrum Masters! This is a workbook you print out and fill in each week. It will guide you through a range of topics that are critical for Scrum Masters to understand. Each week will include reading, exercises and a journal page for you to reflect. We also include cutouts for your toolbox on a range of different topics.

Scrum Master Workbook is available on Leanpub[6].

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[6]https://leanpub.com/ScrumMasterWorkbook1

The Growing Agile Coach's Guide Series

This series provides a collection of training and workshop plans for a variety of agile topics. The series is aimed at agile coaches, trainers and ScrumMasters who often find themselves needing to help teams understand agile concepts. Each book in the series provides the plans, slides, workbooks and activity instructions to run a number of workshops on each topic. The interactive workshops are all created using techniques from Training from the Back of the Room, to ensure participants are engaged and remember their learnings after the workshop.

The series is available in a bundle on Leanpub[7], or you can purchase the books individually.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Training Scrum

We have been training teams in Scrum for about three years. During this time we have spent many hours preparing training plans and creating workbooks, flipcharts and slides. This book will help you plan and deliver interactive, fun Scrum training for anything from a short workshop on a particular topic to a full two-day course.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Training Scrum is available on Leanpub[8].

A Coach's Guide to Agile Requirements

Our requirement workshops are aimed at different stakeholders ranging from business, to Product Owners and teams. This book is a collection of some of those workshop and can be used to help improve the way you think about and communicate agile requirements.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Agile Requirements is available on Leanpub[9].

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Mastering Backlogs

Often Product Owners can't see the forest for the trees and there are so many items in their backlog and not enough hours in the day to groom it. We run short workshops where we work with the Product Owner's actual backlog. The workshop is a working session, and an hour later the Product Owners emerge with an improved backlog.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Mastering Backlogs is available on Leanpub[10].

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Release Planning

We often hear people say "We're agile, we don't need a plan"! or even worse "We can't plan". This is just not true. We run Release Planning workshops with many organisations. This book is a collection of our workshops that will help you run similar workshops to create agile release plans. We include teaching

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[7]https://leanpub.com/b/coachsguide
[8]https://leanpub.com/TrainingScrum
[9]https://leanpub.com/AgileRequirements
[10]https://leanpub.com/MasteringBacklogs

points on a range of techniques like Story Mapping and release burnups to help you explain to other's how to use these methods effectively.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Release Planning is available on Leanpub[11].

A Coach's Guide to Agile Testing

If a team believes they are agile, but nothing has changed about the way they test, then there is still much to learn. We teach 5 key principles that explain why agile testing is fundamentally different to traditional testing.This books includes a collection of workshops to help teams grasp these principles and adopt an agile testing mindset. It's not just for testers. A key part of agile testing is that the whole team is involved, so we always run these workshops with everyone in the team.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Agile Testing is available on Leanpub[12].

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Facilitation

It's taken us several years to master the skill of facilitation, and it continues to amaze us how few people learn the skill, or even understand what it means. People spend much of their lives in meetings, and yet so many meetings lack facilitation. We hope the collection of tips and techniques in this book will inspire you to grow your own facilitation skills and improve the meetings in your organisation.

Growing Agile: A Coach's Guide to Facilitation is available on Leanpub[13].

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[11]https://leanpub.com/ReleasePlanning
[12]https://leanpub.com/AgileTesting
[13]https://leanpub.com/Facilitation

Other books by Growing Agile

Flow

Do you have a never-ending to do list and not enough hours in the day? Imagine getting everything on your to do list done without stress or worrying. Imagine being twice as productive in half the time.

We have over 30 proven tips and techniques to help you achieve a state of flow, where time stands still and productivity soars. With these tips you will deliver value to your customers sooner in practical and simple ways. You will also be happier and less stressed.

Flow is available on Leanpub[14].

Collaboration Games

Add an element of fun to your meetings or workshops using these 12 short games that teach principles of collaboration.

Collaboration Games is available on Leanpub[15].

Who is Agile in South Africa

This book is based on the original Who Is Agile book, only this is a regional version for South Africa. It's a collection of interviews with passionate South African agilists.

Who is Agile in South Africa is available on Leanpub[16].

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[14]https://leanpub.com/helpworktoflow
[15]https://leanpub.com/CollaborationGamesToolbox
[16]https://leanpub.com/WhoisagileSouthAfrica