7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE RTEs

BY ANDRES JANSEN

SENIOR TRAINER AND AGILE TRANSFORMATION CONSULTANT
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RTE: A NEW ROLE FOR A UNIQUE GROUP OF PROFESSIONALS

The role of Release Train Engineer (RTE, Chief Scrum Master) has only come into existence over the past decade or so. Its origins can be found in the Scrum Master’s role, in short: the coach operating in a single Agile Scrum Team, with roughly 7 +/-2 members. As enterprises scale up their development using Agile practices, the effect is that more Agile Teams start to work together on larger programs. These Teams need to work together as an effective, self-organizing, long-lived team-of-teams, labeled as Agile Release Train (ART) in SAFe®. This group of courageous, pioneering professionals is still rare. Now, however, there’s enough critical mass to begin to see and understand the key traits that characterize the effective RTE.

Those currently acting as RTE tend to come to the role from two different routes: either from the program-side (Program Manager or Project Lead for example) or from the Scrum Master-side. The project overview and people orientation of the program-side is a natural point of entry to becoming RTE. So is the Scrum Master’s passion for improvement/focus on bringing teams and individuals to a higher level.

For those who have arrived at RTE from either route, certification training can be an important consideration to deepen your knowledge and to strengthen your skills. The role is new - and already in high demand. RTE certification is internationally-recognized
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and can really broaden career perspectives of those who take the challenge. Gladwell Academy’s 3-day SAFe Release Train Engineer course with RTE Certification enables acting RTEs to acquire official RTE designation. What we’ve heard from those who take the course is that it is more than a great opportunity to prepare for RTE certification. The real game changer is that they can spend three days reflecting on their role and organization, and meet and share experiences with other acting RTEs.

Most of the trainers that Gladwell Academy selects for this advanced course, like myself, have acted in the role of RTE themselves for at least a couple of Program Increments (PIs). This hands-on experience boosts the value of the course, with the trainer more easily able to relate to the course attendants and able to provide concrete first-hand examples.

Andres Jansen, Senior Trainer, Gladwell Academy

“I learned a lot… It’s the theoretical basics together with practice from colleagues in the field and you can exchange a lot of ideas and solutions for common daily problems.”

— Paul te Bokkel, course participant ¹

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZU8fHRD9TwC

WHAT GOES WRONG WITHOUT AN RTE ON BOARD?

Close your eyes and imagine your favorite piece of orchestral music. Every section – the strings, the brass, the woodwinds and percussion – come in and depart at exactly the right instant, creating an integrated harmonious whole and delivering an experience of beauty and value in a stable rhythm/cadence.

Now imagine if the orchestra had made that music without a conductor. All those ‘teams’ of instruments would have little to no idea of precisely when to enter or exit the symphony. The constant, subtle signals of the conductor, who never makes a sound, are what sustain the harmonious whole.

And what about the practice? Who will bring all these musical teams together to learn and improve? Who reflects on the existing status and makes sure they will (over)deliver on the expectations of the audience?

Or even one step further… Imagine that one team, say the percussion-team, is performing in the most professional way possible. That does not necessarily mean that the performance of the orchestra is state-of-the-art as well. Their super-level could actually have negative effects on other teams. We need someone on board with the ultimate focus on the performance of the team-of-teams. In the end, it is only the feedback of the guests in the concert hall that counts. And, that feedback is often not on individual or team level, it’s on the overall performance of everyone involved in making the music.
Of course, real passenger trains also have conductors. And you can easily imagine what happens to any train without a conductor… The same is true of an Agile Release Train! The RTE is the servant leader of the whole Agile Release Train. Without the RTE on board, there is no one clearing impediments, switching tracks, and otherwise ensuring the timely and coordinated ‘arrival’ of the ART.

“Corporate Agile environments need frameworks such as SAFe and LeSS to govern tens of teams running around… At this scale, everything’s connected and interdependent. The RTE has a crucial part to play in keeping priorities clear, keeping stakeholders informed and expectations managed.”

— Gerd Buter, Business Manager ALTEN (Gold Partner RTE Summit 2018)
WHAT DOES THE RELEASE TRAIN ENGINEER DO?

The RTE is:

- Coach for the whole program, the governing roles and the stakeholders of that program;
- Facilitator for ART-level rituals and events that are part of SAFe;
- A true Master of Ceremonies able to organize a whole ART ‘event’ like a wedding planner;
- Responsible for guiding the whole train in the right direction;
- Tasked with improving transparency, alignment and trust in the ART and its environment, e.g. via metrics.

You might label a SAFe implementation as ‘Scrum on Steroids’. You need a Scrum Master on steroids as well then, to keep that ART on track! RTE is a complex, challenging and intense role that carries a great responsibility for the whole enterprise. The label Super Scrum Master is therefore not an understatement.

7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE RTES

In general, the management classic ‘The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People’ (Stephen Covey, 1985) is very applicable to the Agile world. That’s especially true for all leaders, leaving behind a Command and Control style and adopting a new style based on servant leadership. Like RTEs.

Gladwell Academy has been a pioneer in training many certified RTEs to date, and coaches RTEs in different enterprises around the globe on daily basis, giving us a deep understanding of the challenges faced by those in the role – and what makes the RTE tick.

And with the yearly RTE Summit (www.rte-summit.com), founded in 2015, we have given ourselves a unique-in-the-world opportunity to hear from, and share the experiences of this unique group of professionals. The anecdotal evidence we’ve gathered from the RTEs we know has resulted in some unusual insights into what makes them effective.

The baseline traits of the highly effective RTE are a mash-up technical and people skills. There has to be deep understanding of Lean/Agile principles like, for instance, flow and queuing theory, the ability to create and manage cadence and synchronization, and the application of systems theory. You can’t lead a group towards something that you don’t understand, right? On the other hand the RTE has to be a great presenter and compelling host, someone with flair and showmanship who can effortlessly facilitate large groups – up to 150 people. Every RTE has some combination of all these baseline traits.

WHAT ARE THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE RTES?

AGILE FANATIC

Effortlessly conveys confidence in the way that Agile provides value. This is drawn from the RTE’s own knowledge, experience and personal conviction. It’s more than a mindset, it’s the strong belief in another, better new paradigm. You have to be willing to passionately repeat your messages again and again, to set – and lead - by example. And you must follow-through, even in times where the rest of the enterprise has, let’s say, ‘different opinions’. The crowd will closely follow you every step, and they’Il be happy to remind you when you’re not sticking to your own Lean/Agile principles.
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PRAGMATIC
The highly effective RTE has the ability to balance between “purist” rules/roles and pragmatic solutions, needed to create and maintain momentum. While some Agile principles/roles/artefacts can’t be messed around with from the start, others may be ‘good enough to start now’ and improve later on. Pragmatic does not equal ‘simple’ or ‘shortcut’; in many situations we don’t know upfront the optimal route to take, a more evidence-based approach is needed to keep moving and improving. And it’s hard work to create, share and actually use that evidence – like an actionable set of metrics.

BRILLIANT SIMPLICITY
An RTE is effective when they have the ability to simplify things, and to narrate complex situations and issues so they are understandable by the whole group. It’s like Einstein’s quote: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” This simplicity is essential to create focus and alignment in an often complex, dynamic environment. There are enough participants in and around the ART that are willing and able to make it complex – so nobody has a clue.

FIT FOR PURPOSE
One of the big surprises that has come up in one-on-one discussions with RTEs is the importance of physical fitness and regular exercise. This is backed up by research from one of the keynote speakers of the RTE Summit 2018, Dr. Yannick Balk of the University of Amsterdam who lectures on Sport Psychology and Work Psychology. Yannick’s PhD research focused on the fitness of coaches and trainers in professional sports. The key message: the physical fitness of the coach has a 1 on 1 effect on the performance of the professionals he or she is coaching! This is an essential (and almost secret) key to being an effective RTE. As Tamara Nation, RTE at Scaled Agile Inc. (provider of SAFe) has noted, your physical presence has another effect too: “Be aware of the impact of your physical presence. Our ART is a complex social network and you as the RTE are often the face of the train.”

HUMOR & PERSPECTIVE
It’s a hard job, very demanding. And not everybody in the enterprise is a huge fan of Agile practices per se. RTEs often face complex problems and have to deal with a lot of pressure. Physical fitness is essential to deal with the stress, but it’s not enough. You need to be able to let go every now and then, to see the sunny side of problems and mistakes, to be able to figure out the ‘third alternative’ in win-lose games. A healthy sense of humor and perspective is needed. I like symphony director and motivational speaker Benjamin Zander’s “Rule #6” from his “Standing in Possibility” books and keynotes: “Don’t take yourself so damn seriously!”

DISRUPTIVE POWER
An effective RTE has to be able to “re-invent it all” continuously to keep everybody sharp. As humans, we love habit. *However, when proven new Agile routines turn into habits again, in behavior with little conscious thought, you risk losing the critical level of respon-

3 (Youtube: “How to give an A”) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTKEBygQic0
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Siveness. How can you, as a Release Train Engineer, break this vicious circle? Add a ‘continuous disruption flavor’ to your improvement-mindset; relentlessly challenging the status quo of your team! 6

DIPLOMACY IN SERVICE
An RTE needs the political soft skills for effective stakeholder management, particularly in environments in which there is some skepticism about the SAFe journey. Diplomacy can open doors and eradicate impediments. This is, above all, the trait that all effective RTEs have. In true service to the teams and people they lead, the RTE is empathetic and has a deep understanding of people. The RTE is also courageous – without a doubt! – and will speak up when it’s necessary. Tactful and persuasive, the servant leader wins the trust of their teams through authenticity, transparency, and inherently invested in getting the best out of people. But why not go to the source, Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the term ‘servant leadership’ in 1970:

“A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.”


6 https://www.greenleaf.org/products-page/the-servant-as-leader/
5 https://www.blinklane.com/insights/responsiveness-paradox/

SALARY

What is the typical range of RTE salaries? We don’t talk that much about the ‘salary topic’. It’s still quite often an uncomfortable topic to openly discuss. But here’s a secret. I’ve got quite a large network of RTE’s that I work with, I founded the RTE Summit and am the ‘owner’ of the RTE LinkedIn group (Release Train Engineer - EU [RTE & STE]). And every now and then, I’m consulted on this topic. We RTEs have a great hunger for this information.

I don’t have a black and white answer. But I will try to offer you the beginning evidence of where salaries for this role are going…early guidelines! Use what you can.

Because the role of Release Train Engineer is relatively new there is unfortunately no ‘average’ salary. In fact, searches on such European job-listing websites as Glassdoor reveal that there is no information at all (although the site may in fact list RTE jobs).

As of mid-2019, Paysa.com gave the following indication (in USD):

‘A SAFe Release Train Engineer earns an average of $125,276, ranging from $101,439 at the 25th percentile to $144,449 at the 75th percentile, with top earners (the top 10%) earning more than $169,355. Compensation is derived from fewer than 20 profiles, including base salary, equity and bonus.’ 6

Website simplyhired.com gives a lower indication, beginning at around USD$83K and going to USD$150K, but this may not reflect other compensation (insurance, bonuses, company shares, pensions, etc.). Based on my experience, this is however roughly in line with salaries paid for medior to senior RTEs in Europe.

It’s all very contextual of course. A good way to see if the salary offered is fair is to compare it with that of Program Managers and Integral/International Project Leads with roughly the same level of experience, complexity and responsibility.

6 https://www.paysa.com/salaries/safe-release-train-engineer-1
CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

“I’m in the ‘people business’ and RTEs are the people who will soon be in high demand in the world of corporate Agile. I’m sure of it.”

— Wessel van Henwijnen, Founder AgilityMasters.com (Gold Partner RTE Summit 2018)

You should not ‘just’ become an RTE, because you see economic opportunities. That probably won’t work in the long run. And, the colleagues in your ARTs will smell it from miles, if you’re not intrinsically motivated.

If you find yourself waiting somewhere in a queue, and while waiting, you can’t resist thinking about how to speed up the system, how to lower the waiting time, how to improve the process and so on….Then this might be the job for you. If you just take out your phone, relax, wait and see, take the opportunity to update your social media….well this is all important too of course. But if it is more fulfilling for you, then you may wish to reconsider becoming RTE.

If you see your kids or friends active in a football match during the weekend, and you see opportunities to improve the team and feel a drive to support them in taking the opportunity to work better together, leading to more fun and perhaps higher performance – well, that’s what this RTE role ask from you. Are you the type that complains about the mistakes the team makes, and shouts over the field when they’ve missed an opportunity? Better think twice.

THE ROLE OF RTE OFFERS SOME BIG AND UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITIES:

1. Finally, there are more distinct roles: Product Management priority setting and content, and RTE for coaching, improving processes, and so on. The RTE can really focus on improving the system, and is also coach to the Product Manager on the ART, and facilitates in Program Backlog refinement for instance. But the RTE does not have to make the final calls in, for example, escalated priorities.

2. For those who have always liked acting as servant leader to a group, there is now the opportunity to do so in a professional, more official way. Servant leadership is not a ‘nice to have’ in this role. The role of RTE requires a fundamentally different approach, one that can be extremely fulfilling.

3. There is a huge and growing demand world-wide for certified SAFe RTEs. It’s always nice to be needed.

4. There’s the great opportunity to create more positive impact! The role of the RTE is crucial and very visible. Like a professional team depends a lot on their coach to deliver high performance value, the ART depends a great deal on its RTE.
ABOUT ANDRES JANSSEN

Andres Jansen is Senior Trainer at Gladwell Academy. He is SAFe Program Consultant Trainer Candidate (SPCT) and thought leader ‘Agile in Control’. He inspires controllers and auditors in leading enterprises like Schiphol, AirFrance and national financial institutions, with his framework to improve grip, defining Agile-KPIs and Transformation Dashboards. He is currently at ASML where, as Agile Transformation Coach and interim-RTE, he implements SAFe in one of the world’s most complex environments. His background as HW-engineer and BI-developer, and intensive work with change-guru Ben Tiggelaar, helps Andres to adapt, to master complex situations and to secure support in workshops and Agile transformation programs. He is founder/host of the yearly RTE Summit, certified Scaled Agile Program Consultant as well as SPCT Candidate, qualified to teach and examine all Scaling Agile training courses: SAFe Agilist (SA), SAFe Practitioner (SP), SAFe PM/PO (SPMPO), SAFe Scrum Master (SM), SAFe PM/PO (PMPO).

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Contact
Gladwell Academy
Barbara Strozzilaan 201
1083 HN Amsterdam
The Netherlands
+31 (0)20 2402244
info@gladwellacademy.com