

Agile Musical Chairs

What is it?

Games are a great way to learn and a great way to coach. This game focuses on self-organisation and fast feedback loops or learning through failure. It's high energy, can be run with groups as small as 7 but scales well to large groups. All you need is space and chairs and 45-60 minutes.

The basic concept is that chairs are placed around the room maximising the space between chairs with one more chair than players (the team). The goal is to prevent the facilitator from sitting in a chair. The team works in (up-to) 1-minute iterations / sprints with feedback and retrospectives in between.

Learning objectives:

This game enforces the importance of SELF ORGANISATION, COMMUNICATION, and TRUST

- A self-organised team is efficient (no manager needed)
- The team should find a quick and simple way to communicate (short verbal word)
- Each member should trust other members (for taking care of the chair they left)

You also want the team to learn quickly by failing in rapid succession and learning from their mistakes. The game drives short cycles, inspection and adaption and lays down some restrictions that they (initially) can't work around (just like in the real world).

Agile self-organizing teams prove extremely efficient because they can spend less time on project management and more time on solving problems and completing work. Self-organizing teams quickly decide on the tasks they need to work on and how they can meet the corresponding deadlines which directly leads to better speed of delivery.

When to use it?

You can play Agile Musical Chairs as a team icebreaker, as a team retrospective or at an Agile Conference, such as Agile Prague 2023. Its great used as part of a team formation to unite the team, remove traditional barriers and set the scene for what retrospectives could look like. It will drive some interesting reflections on how they work as a team and can re-invigorate retrospectives. It can also be used to kick of team planning or release train planning days. It can also be used as a community building activity.

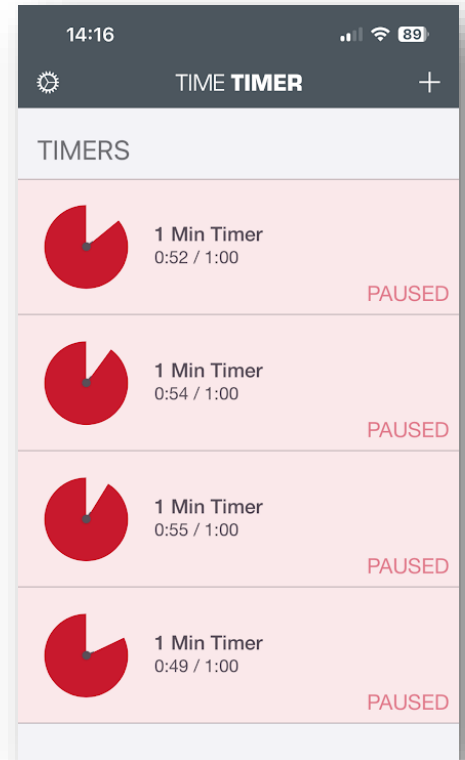
How to facilitate it?

Timing

The game generally takes around 45 mins through 1 hour and can be played with as few as 6-7 people or as large as 100.

Preparation

1. **Timer:** make sure you have a timer on your phone that you can use for each iteration to track how long it takes you to achieve the goal of sitting in a chair. I like Time Timer (iPhone) as it has a visual countdown as well as allowing you to keep a record of each event.
2. **Printed Rules:** Print out the simple rules to make it easy to refer to rules of play.
3. **How to Notes:** Print out these How To Notes so that you can rope in additional facilitators if you have too many people wanting to play the game.
4. **Review Supporting material:** So that you understand some of the background behind Self Organising and Self-managing teams.
5. **Review the Hints and Variations :** So that you are prepared to pivot to help the learning process.
6. **Bring along Bluetack, post-it notes and printed rules** as supplies that may form part of a material corner – this could be a red-herring.
7. **Have your own post-it note and pen:** So that you can keep some notes on what you noticed – or create a graph on a flip chart to share metrics with the team



In the session

Setup

This can be played with a group as small as 6 or 7 but can scale to up to 100. With large numbers, you will want to break into groups of 25-30 with a facilitator per group (it's very easy to recruit and instruct a facilitator on the spot).

To setup, you need an open space with one chair per player, one for the facilitator and plenty of room to move.

Optionally, as facilitator you can

- Post the rules on the wall.
- Create a Materials corner.
- Clear obstructions in the room, or at least define a game area that avoids obstructions.
- If there is a blackboard or a whiteboard or paper, create a sprint grid with Number and timings and a column for observations to allow the team to see the trend of times. The facilitator can update this while the team run their retro.

Instructions to the group

Introduction

Hello and welcome to Agile Musical Chairs. This is an opportunity to engage in gameplay. Where we can model constructive (or destructive) systems that occur in the workplace using games.

Hopefully, you will walk away from this session not only enjoying the experience, but also taking away some learnings for yourself through this simple activity with opportunities for insight that you can use with your own teams and organisations. It offers deep learning with respect to self-organisation and learning cycles.

Principle 11 of the Agile Manifesto states

"The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams."

Principle 5 also states:

"Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need and trust them to get the job done."

And the Scrum Guide says:

"Self-organizing teams choose how best to accomplish their work, rather than being directed by others outside the team."

However, a self-organising team doesn't just happen. It requires, trust, good communication and alignment around a common goal.

More on that in the debrief.

Rules of Play

Let's talk about the goals of the game and set the ground rules.

Chairs:

Ask each team member to grab a chair, and to randomly organise themselves in the space available.

- You don't want a regular arrangement, and certainly not an orderly circle.
- You want chairs facing in multiple directions fairly evenly distributed throughout the space (some in the middle, some on the edges).
- The seat of the chair must be far enough from any obstacle so that you can easily step away from the chair.
- Initially: no two chairs may be put directly next to each other.

Goals:

- As a team your goal is simple: prevent the facilitator from sitting in an empty chair for 60 seconds.
- As a facilitator, my goal is the opposite: to find an empty chair and sit in it before 60 seconds are up.

Constraints:

- Any number of people can be moving at once to occupy the chair the facilitator is aiming for.
- Once you have stood up (or even half stood up), you cannot sit down in the same chair ... you must find a new chair to sit in.
- The chairs cannot be moved from their starting position.
- No physical force or blocking is allowed. You can't push the facilitator out of the way or impede them from moving in their desired direction.
- After each failure, the group will have exactly 60 seconds to conduct a retrospective and alter strategy before the facilitator starts moving again.

Playing the game

- The facilitator will be responsible for timing each sprint. They will say Go when the 60 seconds starts. They will track time using a timer on their phone.
- Each Sprint will take a maximum of 60 seconds; the sprint ends when the facilitator or the team achieve their goal.
- The team will then have up to 60 seconds to conduct a retrospective, gather feedback and determine actions or strategy to improve their time.

- Each person must move at least once per sprint.
- The team can use audio or visual clues as part of their strategy.
- The facilitator can provide feedback during the retrospective on how they have gone and update “sprint metrics”, i.e. how many seconds the sprint lasted for.
- The facilitator may choose to share sprint metrics on a flip chart.

Debrief

The debrief usually drives itself, but here are some questions to kick things off:

- What did you notice?
- What did you see?
- How did you feel?
- What did you expect to happen?
- What had to change to improve your results?
- When were you high performing? How does this translate to everyday?
- Are all high performing teams self-organising? Causality?
- Which strategy worked the best?
- What could you have done differently?
- What will you do differently?
- What benefits can they identify for self-organising teams?

Key learnings to draw out should include:

- A self-organising team still needs a strategy and some agreed rules. It needs to be developed by the team to guide the way they work together.
- The uniting power of a shared mission
- The notion of improvement through small course corrections. A retrospective should identify a small change which can be actioned within 2 weeks, then evaluated as an input to selecting the next small change. It’s too easy to fall into the trap of large “all or nothing” changes.

Supporting Material

Hints that can be provided:

Drop these slowly into the retrospectives if they don't progress as fast as you would like. Or as you notice issues. Or as a good coach generally would.

- Are they hearing every voice at their retrospectives or allowing dominators?
- Have they remembered that the game is about self-organisation (if they make the inevitable mistake of attempting to have one or two people co-ordinate)?
- Are they trying to reinvent the wheel every retrospective? What about making a small tweak then testing it? It generally takes 10 seconds to decide whether a change was positive or negative (as long as it takes to fail) as opposed to debating it for 40 seconds?
- Variations: Allow them to change the layout. As with many of the obstacles we face, we first need to show it really is an obstacle before any changes are allowed to it (just like any IT-processes in their real world). So, after a couple of rounds, give them permission to re-layout the room and allow them to have their chairs be placed against each other. Essentially changing this rule:
 - Initially: no two chairs may be put directly next to each other

To:

- Chairs are allowed to stand next to each other as long as every chair can still easily be reached and has an open space in front of it.
- No chair may be setup in such a way that any other chair essentially is unreachable.
- No chair may be placed directly against a wall or obstacle.
- Add other dimensions to the game that will cause a rethink in strategy by making new rules.
 - Get them to run a sprint with no talking at all – just visual cues.
 - Get them to run a sprint where they can only use one word per person per move – good for planning out rules of communication.
 - Get them to run a sprint where one member is called away (to say pop 9 post-it notes on a wall in a grid pattern) emulating how difficult it can be when you don't have a full team.
- The most important ingredient in a self-organising team is trust! (This is usually the last hint that helps the breakthrough. Most teams find a winning strategy then have one or two people who keep panicking and breaking it)

Options for more than 25-30 people

1. Separate the participants into two teams and elect another facilitator and brief them.
2. Identify a Volunteer facilitator for each group and facilitate them to facilitate each group.
3. Separate into 4 groups, 2 groups playing and two groups watching and determining their own strategy through observation. Swap after 10 sprints.

What are the benefits of self-managing teams?

Self-managing teams offer several benefits in various aspects of an organization. Here are some key advantages of self-managing teams:

1. **Autonomy and Ownership**: Self-managing teams have the authority to make decisions and take ownership of their work. This autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability among team members, leading to higher levels of motivation and engagement.
2. **Flexibility and Adaptability**: Self-managing teams are empowered to make decisions on how to approach their work, which enables them to be more flexible and adaptable. They can respond quickly to changes, adjust their strategies, and allocate resources effectively to meet evolving needs and challenges.
3. **Improved Efficiency and Productivity**: When teams are self-managing, they can eliminate bureaucratic bottlenecks and streamline decision-making processes. This efficiency leads to faster execution of tasks and projects, ultimately resulting in increased productivity and faster time-to-market.
4. **Enhanced Innovation and Creativity**: Self-managing teams encourage creativity and innovation by allowing team members to explore and experiment with new ideas. With the freedom to make decisions and try new approaches, team members can contribute their diverse perspectives, leading to fresh solutions and improved outcomes.
5. **Collaboration and Teamwork**: Self-managing teams promote collaboration and teamwork as team members collectively determine how to achieve their goals. By working together, sharing knowledge, and leveraging each other's strengths, team members can accomplish tasks more effectively and build stronger working relationships.
6. **Personal and Professional Growth**: Self-managing teams provide opportunities for personal and professional growth. Team members have the chance to develop a wide range of skills, such as decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership, as they take on more responsibilities and contribute to the team's success.
7. **Higher Employee Satisfaction and Retention**: Self-managing teams often lead to higher job satisfaction because team members feel empowered, trusted, and valued. This sense of fulfillment and engagement contributes to increased employee retention, as individuals are more likely to stay in an environment where they have autonomy and can contribute meaningfully.
8. **Better Decision Making**: Self-managing teams bring together diverse perspectives and expertise, enabling more comprehensive and informed decision-making. With collective intelligence and a shared understanding of the team's objectives, they can make better-quality decisions that consider various factors and potential risks.

Overall, self-managing teams can foster a more agile, collaborative, and empowered work environment, leading to improved outcomes, increased employee satisfaction, and a stronger organizational culture.

Why is fast-feedback essential?

Fast feedback and small changes are crucial in the learning cycle for several reasons:

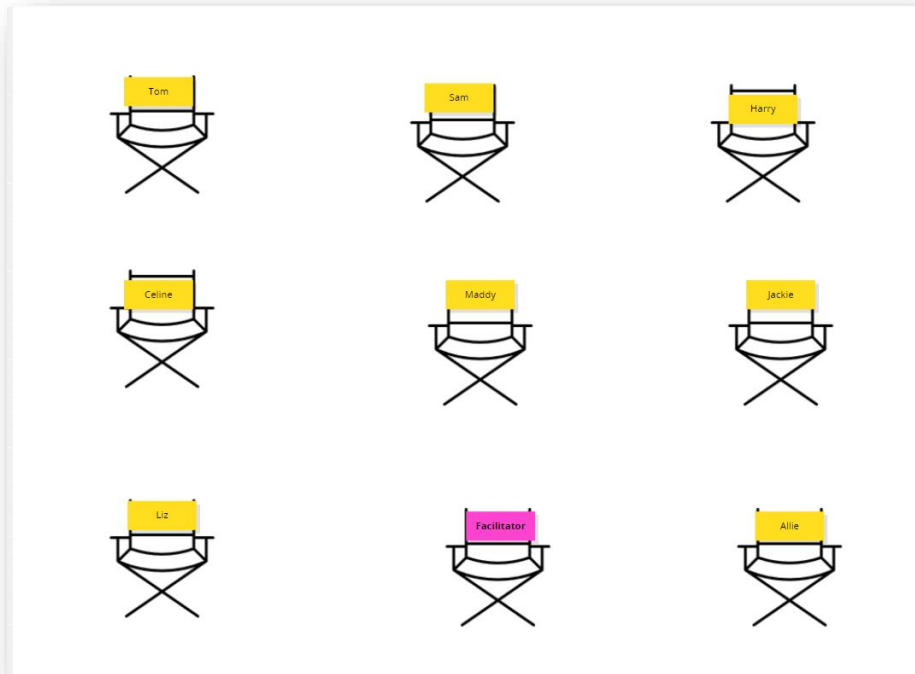
1. **Iterative Improvement**: Fast feedback and small changes allow for an iterative approach to learning and improvement. By receiving feedback quickly and making small adjustments, individuals or teams can continuously refine their work and make incremental progress. This iterative process helps to identify and correct errors or inefficiencies early on, leading to more effective outcomes over time.

2. Rapid Learning: Fast feedback enables individuals or teams to learn more rapidly. When feedback is timely, it provides valuable information that can be used to assess performance, identify areas for improvement, and adjust strategies accordingly. Rapid learning accelerates the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and insights, enhancing overall performance and competence.
3. Course Correction: Small changes based on feedback allow for timely course correction. When deviations or issues are identified early, they can be addressed promptly and effectively. By making small adjustments instead of waiting for major overhauls, individuals or teams can avoid bigger problems down the line and maintain a more consistent and positive trajectory.
4. Risk Mitigation: Fast feedback and small changes help mitigate risks. By monitoring progress and receiving feedback in a timely manner, potential risks or obstacles can be identified early on. Addressing these risks through small adjustments minimizes the chances of major setbacks or failures, allowing for a more controlled and proactive approach to risk management.
5. Agility and Adaptability: Fast feedback and small changes foster agility and adaptability. In a rapidly changing environment, the ability to respond quickly to feedback and make small adjustments is vital. It allows individuals or teams to adapt their strategies, processes, or products/services to meet evolving needs, preferences, or market conditions. This agility enables them to stay competitive and responsive to changing circumstances.
6. Motivation and Confidence: Fast feedback and small changes contribute to motivation and confidence. Regular feedback provides a sense of progress and achievement, boosting motivation levels. Small changes that lead to tangible improvements reaffirm individuals or teams' belief in their ability to learn and grow, building confidence and a positive mindset.
7. Resource Optimization: Fast feedback and small changes optimize resource allocation. Instead of investing significant time, effort, and resources in large-scale changes that may be unnecessary or ineffective, the iterative approach allows for efficient resource allocation. Small changes can be implemented quickly and with fewer resources, ensuring that resources are utilized effectively and efficiently.

In summary, fast feedback and small changes in the learning cycle enable rapid learning, course correction, risk mitigation, agility, motivation, and resource optimization. By embracing these principles, individuals or teams can continuously improve, adapt to change, and achieve better outcomes in a dynamic and competitive environment.

Remote facilitation

I have thought about how you could run this with a remote first attitude. And I think using a whiteboard tool like Conceptboard, Miro or Mural or even Whiteboard in MS Teams could be a solution.



And you have to move the post-it note...

Need to think about this a bit more as I haven't (yet) been asked to facilitate remotely!

Credit

Full credit for this game goes to Mark Richards, who according to his notes played it first in Florida. I first played this at a LAST conference in 2016 in Melbourne. Mark facilitated it then and these were his facilitation notes:

<http://www.agilenotanarchy.com/2016/07/agile-musical-chairs-facilitation-guide.html>

Good Luck!

Michelle Prosser-Roberts | Head of Operational Excellence

Accuteque Global | T. 1300886282 Ext.805 | M. +61415954233 | E. mpr@accuteque.com

NB: The following page of rules can be printed separately if you wish. I have occasionally been asked by a team to look at the rules 😊

Agile Musical Chairs – Rules

Chairs:

Each team member to grab a chair, and to randomly organise themselves in the space available.

- You don't want a regular arrangement, and certainly not an orderly circle.
- You want chairs facing in multiple directions fairly evenly distributed throughout the space (some in the middle, some on the edges).
- The seat of the chair must be far enough from any obstacle so that you can easily step away from the chair.
- Initially: no two chairs may be put directly next to each other.

Goals:

- As a team your goal is simple: prevent the facilitator from sitting in an empty chair for 60 seconds.
- As a facilitator, my goal is the opposite: to find an empty chair and sit in it before 60 seconds are up.

Constraints:

- Any number of people can be moving at once to occupy the chair the facilitator is aiming for.
- Once you have stood up (or even half stood up), you cannot sit down in the same chair ... you must find a new chair to sit in.
- The chairs cannot be moved from their starting position.
- No physical force or blocking is allowed. You can't push the facilitator out of the way or impede them from moving in their desired direction.
- After each failure, the group will have exactly 60 seconds to conduct a retrospective and alter strategy before the facilitator starts moving again.

Playing the game

- The facilitator will be responsible for timing each sprint. They will say Go when the 60 seconds starts. They will track time using a timer on their phone.
- Each Sprint will take a maximum of 60 seconds; the sprint ends when the facilitator or the team achieve their goal.
- The team will then have up to 60 seconds to conduct a retrospective, gather feedback and determine actions or strategy to improve their time.
- Each person must move at least once per sprint.
- The team can use audio or visual clues as part of their strategy.
- The facilitator can provide feedback during the retrospective on how they have gone and update "sprint metrics", i.e. how many seconds the sprint lasted for.
- The facilitator may choose to share sprint metrics on a flip chart.