

Building Respect and Trust

More often than not, we – the Scrum Masters, find ourselves replacing a very good Scrum Master, or a bad Scrum Master, or working with a team that does not value Scrum. All these situations can be challenging for a Scrum Master. During coaching and training I frequently get this question – “How to gain trust and confidence of the Scrum team in such situations?” Here are some insights and practices I have learnt as a Scrum Master and Agile Coach.

Alleviate Pain

Find. Prioritize. Fix.

I am yet to come across a team that does not have a pain-causing problem. There is always a problem(s) that the team is aware of, but does not know how to solve, or does not feel empowered to solve. This problem is usually feared, circumvented, or ignored.

Find

As you start working with a new team, be vigilant for such hidden, unspoken problems during the Scrum meetings and team conversations. These can sometimes be hard to unearth. Listen intently for comments like:

- “For historical reasons...”
- “Our management wants it...”
- “Yes, we know. But...”
- “It works for us this way...”

When you hear such comments, do some research offline with 1:1 non-threatening conversations and uncover the underlying problem. Be mindful to not make anyone uncomfortable. Know when to start and stop probing.

Prioritize

Next step is to prioritize this list you build in first week or two, and select one problem to solve. Here are some guidelines and tips on problem prioritization and selection:

- It is happening or is triggered by influences or causes external to the team
- It is causing substantial grief to the team or is hindering progress and productivity exorbitantly
- It can be addressed with minimal effort and minimal pushback (low-hanging fruit)
- It can be addressed in a week or two. Remember you want to win the trust and respect of the team sooner than later. Early wins, even if they are small, will go long ways
- Use Product Backlog prioritization techniques like Risk-Value analysis or MoSCoW, if they help

Fix

Once you have zeroed in on a problem to fix, determine and analyze possible fixes for the problem. In most situations, there are multiple ways to address a problem. Here are some guidelines for solution consideration:

- Pursue a solution that brings immediate relief to the team – something you can fix in next Sprint
- Balance between implementation difficulty and solution completeness. If it is not possible to implement the complete solution right away, go with a phased approach



- Pursue a win-win solution for all involved parties, especially when the problem is triggered by external influences
- Do not pursue a Band-Aid solution. It will be harder to implement a real solution later
- Know your strengths and limitations and pursue solutions leveraging your strengths

Fixing a problem can be tough at times, but you got to do it. It's your responsibility as a Scrum Master.

I once worked with a startup where there was no whiteboard in the team area. The team had learnt to work around the problem by gathering around a table and brainstorming on a small piece of paper. I asked one of the team members why there was no white board. He responded, "We are a startup. There is no budget to purchase whiteboards." I knew not to ask further. It would make the situation uncomfortable. It was evident that the team's need was not satisfied due to budget constraints. I had recently learnt about inexpensive sticky and electrostatic whiteboards. I requested the CEO to approve the expense of those whiteboards to make brainstorming and idea generation much easier for the team. He readily agreed. Soon there was an entire whiteboard-wall. This helped me gain trust of a heavily skeptical team. In retrospective, all I was doing was enacting "Servant-Leader" and "Impediment Removal" responsibilities of a Scrum Master.

Facilitate. Really!

Setup. Manage. Retrospect.

From my pre-Scrum days, I have vivid memories of long meetings, with slim attendance, unnecessary discussions, no outcomes, and endless frustration. When trying to steer the conversation in a meeting, an attendee once told me, "Your job is facilitation, not participation." Those were the pre-Scrum days!

Scrum addressed a lot of these issues around meetings by giving every meeting a purpose, input, output, attendee, and duration. However, I still hear the same comment – "Scrum Master's job is facilitation, not participation." I have learnt that it is completely true. Scrum Master does not participate in determining "How and How Much." Development Team does that. However, Scrum Master does *Facilitate*, and it encompasses three areas.

Setup

Setting up a meeting includes logistics like booking a room, inviting required attendees, ensuring supplies, ordering food, etc.

For many teams and team members, facilitation ends here and one is likely to hear comments similar to the one mentioned above. A highly paid Scrum Master is not required to do this level of facilitation. Facilitation is much more than setting up a meeting. It also includes managing the meeting, and retrospection on improving overall meeting experience.

Manage

Next step in facilitation, managing the meeting, does not imply command and control. Here are some thoughts on managing the meeting:

- First and foremost, ensure that the environment stays safe and the energy stays positive
- Ensure that everyone has a voice, not just 1-2 loud ones



- Ensure that team members come prepared to the meeting
- Interrupt derailing conversations and steer the team back to the relevant topic or meeting goal
- Trigger relevant conversations by asking powerful and meaningful questions
- Know when to ask the team to take the conversation offline
- Encourage to create research spikes when the team is not able to agree on the approach
- Demonstrate openness to suggestions for improvements, encouraging similar behavior, to help improve the team dynamics

Retrospect

Third part of facilitation is to retrospect on how the meetings can be improved. Scrum Master is the conscience of the Scrum meetings, and is best-placed to inspect and adapt. Here are some guidelines on meeting retrospection:

- During Scrum meetings, always be on the look for what is not going well. For example – Was the Product Backlog refined and ready; Had the team members reviewed the Product Backlog prior to the meeting; Was the meeting goal accomplished?
- Look for signs of disengagement and/or boredom in the team. Make changes to the next meeting to make it more engaging and fun
- Lookout for team members overpowering others. How can you influence that?
- Seek feedback from team members right after the meeting on how meetings can be made better. One good approach is to spend last 5 minutes of the meeting as a rapid-fire on meeting improvement suggestions
- Also introspect how you did the facilitation and how you can improve.

Do all three steps of facilitation, and you will, over a few Sprints, gain the trust and respect of the team. It will be hard since many believe Scrum Master's work ends with meeting setup. There will be push backs, especially with a skeptical team. Do not falter. Do not stop enacting the second and third area of facilitation. As a Scrum Master, ensuring Scrum enactment is your responsibility. The team will eventually recognize and appreciate that. I once worked with a team whose Sprint Planning Meeting for a 2-week Sprint went on for 8-10 hours. After 3 sprints, their meeting ended in 4 hours. After 5 sprints, they started completing their Sprint Planning in 2.5-3 hours. That is the effect of managing and retrospecting the meetings.

Setting up and managing good meetings gives an early credibility that goes long ways.

Stellar Say-Do Ratio

Think. Say. Do.

Alignment of thought, speech and action reflects integrity and builds trust and confidence. Building trust with the team and the stakeholders is critical to Scrum Master's success. It is therefore inevitable for a Scrum Master to have a stellar Say-Do ratio. This is not a Say-Do ratio of planned vs. actual work, but the ratio of how true are you to your words and thoughts. It is about your personal integrity and genuineness. Say-Do ratio is what you say you will do, and how much of it you really do or intend to do, irrespective of the outcome or success. As a Scrum Master, if you say you will do something for the team, do it. It will gain you trust and respect of the team. Remember – you work for and with the team!



A Scrum Master who says she will protect the team from distractions, and does so at all costs, wins the trust of the team. John was the Scrum Master of a team whose Daily standup call happened first thing in the morning. Most of the members were not plugged into their work day. John asked the team how he can help, and offered to provide coffee prior to the Daily stand-up. John's intent was genuine, but he could not fulfill it. He had to drop his kids to the school before getting to work. He was always rushed to set the coffee brewing prior to the meeting. He could not effectively do what he said he would do. I suggested simple alternatives – start the meeting 15 minutes later, buy a coffee machine with timer and set it up the previous day, request administrative staff to provide coffee. John tried those, and his Say-Do ratio improved with the team.

Having a stellar Say-Do ratio is always a big win with any team. It builds trust and dependability. Do this from Day 1, and you will become successful.

There are many things that a Scrum Master does. This article discusses a select few that allow immediate credibility with the team for a new Scrum Master. Additional thoughts and comments are welcome.

