

From the Trenches

Improving the Scrum Daily Standup Meeting

Dick Carlson

Abstract. Among the most important work sessions in “scrum” is the scrum daily standup meeting. This meeting, which must be held every working day in order to be effective, is critical for team members to communicate their work commitments to each other.

The most significant reasons why daily standup meetings are not effective become apparent after years of working with “Agile” teams, but ranking these reasons is difficult. In order to do so, one can rely on personal experiences. During the many years I have spent “in the trenches” facilitating and coaching teams, I have observed that most daily standup problems are caused by problems with either individual team members, project teams, or management.

This article addresses several examples of unfavorable daily standup scenarios that exemplify all three of these causes. It is assumed that readers are familiar with the daily standup process; therefore, steps on how to conduct a standup meeting are not discussed in this article.

Not Holding the Daily Standup Every Workday

Scenario: As an Agile coach and transformational authority, I am often asked to help problematic teams. The first question I ask a problematic team’s scrum master is “Does the team hold daily standup meetings?” If the answer is yes, I follow up with a seemingly unnecessary question: “How often does the team run the daily standup?” They usually say that they hold them two or three times a week. This answer helps me to identify the root cause of their problems. I immediately think, “What part of the word ‘daily’ does the team not understand?”

Solution: The team must know that the daily standup is a short meeting that does not hinder productivity. Rather, the meeting increases project transparency so that everyone knows what the team’s sprint goals are and whether the team will be able to meet those goals. In terms of productivity, this means that duplicate work and rework are avoided. It is also a meeting that is owned and run only by the team. Each team member shares his or her work commitments with the entire team openly and honestly. As the team begins to understand the real value of the standup meeting, they eventually adapt and make it an essential part of every workday.

Poor Daily Standup Attendance

Scenario: I have also observed how a lack of team member participation in the daily standup causes a decay of the scrum process. When people do not show up for the daily standup, the team’s productivity suffers. This happens frequently, and it is one of the main reasons why teams struggle and often fail. When people do not communicate with each other on a daily basis, things go awry. Daily standup meetings are often poorly attended due to lack of interest.

Solution: When training project teams, I remind team members that showing up late to daily standup meetings or not attending at all is disrespectful to their teammates. In scrum, the daily standup meeting is a work session to which every team member must commit; otherwise, the Agile and scrum approach begins to fail. It is imperative that the entire team attends this important daily meeting so that

every team member is well-informed on what other team members have completed and what their plans are going forward. The team also learns about issues and obstacles that may affect their sprint goals and those that have impacted their work in progress.

When a team loses interest in the daily standup, it’s usually because team members are ignoring the agreed-to process or the scrum master is failing to detect a uninspired team. Enter the Agile coach! I have made many on-the-spot corrections through counseling and additional training. When standup practices need to be changed, I encourage teams to make those decisions as problems are detected and to resolve problems during sprint retrospectives. This activity supports process improvement of the daily standup.

Not Starting the Daily Standup On Time

Scenario: I have arrived at many daily standup meetings early only to realize that I was the only one there. In many instances, I watched as several members of the team showed up 10 to 15 minutes after the scheduled meeting time. This roadblock is often caused by insufficient scrum training, team members who do not realize the value of the meeting, or inadequate meeting facilitation. In a recent survey by Version One [1], the daily standup was found to be the most widely practiced Agile technique implemented at 83 percent, followed closely by short iterations and prioritized backlogs, at 82 and 79 percent respectively.

Solution: Daily standup meetings often do not start on time because team members believe that the work they are doing is more important than the meeting. This presents an opportunity for the scrum master to remind, through coaching, those who arrive late or not at all of the importance of the daily standup. The scrum master’s counseling will eventually change such behavior and help prevent communication and information loss among team members. As a gesture of fun, I invite team members to vote on whether those who arrive late, regardless of the reason, “donate” one dollar to the team’s pizza fund. Most people, if not all, agree to the one-dollar fine. It’s an inexpensive correction action that adds fun to the activity.

The Daily Standup Lasts Longer Than It Should (Time Boxing Ignored)

Scenario: It is common to see project teams with one or two members who like to indulge in lengthy discussions during daily standup meetings. Examples of unnecessary topics include how a person solved a problem, the wonderful experience another person and his buddies had on their whitewater rafting trip over the weekend, or the nauseating details of how a team member found major design flaws and made corrections. Such lengthy discussions are commonly referred to as “bunny trails.”

Solution: As with all scrum work sessions, the daily standup is time boxed. This means that the meeting begins and ends on time, as scheduled. Some people like to talk excessively without regard or respect for other team members who prefer to hear only what other members are doing, who needs help, and more about completed sprint tasks. This is the main reason why the scrum master facilitates these meetings. He or she is not there to run daily standup meetings — that’s the team’s responsibility. However, especially with new teams, the scrum master attends the meetings to ensure that everyone is following the agreed-to daily standup process and to prevent unnecessary and needless conversation. Discussions that involve solutions should be deferred until after the daily standup meeting has ended. This way,

those not affected by or interested in the resolution discussion are not held up discussing a topic that does not affect their work.

Solving Impediments and Other Problems During the Daily Standup

Scenario: Many new teams attempt to solve impediments and other problems during the daily standup. There are times when the problems are so significant that even the scrum master gets pulled into the turmoil of resolving them. These situations can easily distract from the main goal of the meeting, thereby changing the focus of the daily standup and sending the meeting into a chaotic whirlwind.

Solution: Should such problems be resolved on the spot? No. Is it wrong to settle a very bad situation during the daily standup? Yes. Is it wise to ignore the threat when it is identified? No. As obvious as these answers sound, they are often misunderstood. Solving problems during the daily standup is one reason why the daily standup meeting is ignored, branded as “unproductive,” or considered a waste of time. New teams are frequently plagued by these situations because they are not yet disciplined or because their scrum master loses focus in the pandemonium. There are ways to solve problems, but they require control and order.

Sure, the problem being discussed may be major and may cause catastrophic results if not corrected in a timely manner, but panic won't help. Should such problems be resolved on the spot? No. When teams become mature and begin working together well, they know what must be done. First, team members should take note of the impediment or problem, then plan a side meeting immediately following the daily standup with individuals who can help with the resolution. Then the team can continue with the daily standup meeting until everyone has communicated his or her situation. The daily standup is a very short and strategic meeting. It would be unwise to stop the team's communication and continuity because of a perceived problem. It is unwise to ignore a threat when it is identified, but unless the problem is an immediate threat to the lives of people, take note of the problem, defer the resolution for a few minutes, and continue with the meeting.

Impediments Are Not Identified or Defined Well During the Daily Standup

Scenario: When I started coaching teams many years ago, it never occurred to me that some people would be afraid to report issues and problems, but they are. The reasons for this vary but are typically either related to fear that the problem is not as severe as the person believes or fear of being labeled a tattletale. Other instances of this occur during a daily standup when a team member fails to mention an impediment. In both situations, failing to report or identify anything that could cause the team discomfort, inconvenience, or a waste of time is far worse than reporting it. The problem could impact the entire team.

Solution: When I teach students the importance of holding the daily standup every day, I emphasize impediment identification and resolution. New team members have to learn how to be open, honest, and forthright. Potential issues, problems, and anything else that might impede team progress must be reported as quickly as possible — either to the scrum master, product owner, project manager, or team members — to ensure prompt resolution. Fear of reprisals, blame, shame, or uncertainty should never become a part of impediment identification and removal.

Too Many Disruptions During the Daily Standup Meeting

Scenario: There are many reasons why daily standup meetings are disrupted. Here are three example situations most can relate to, but there are many more:

1. You arrive at work and walk over to the “scrum room” to attend the daily standup only to see a manager lecturing the team on something that has nothing to do with the sprint's goals.
2. During the daily standup meeting, a senior manager from engineering walks in unannounced and begins a discourse on architectural patterns.
3. While team members are communicating their progress, a few sideliners strike up a conversation that disrupts the flow of the meeting.

Solutions: These examples are common interruptions that occur during daily standup meetings. In all examples, the scrum master is responsible for immediately stopping the disruptions. Although the team owns the daily standup meeting, the scrum master is responsible for facilitating the meeting and protecting the team from unrelated project activities by keeping the team focused on sprint-related work, ensuring the team follows the agreed-to standup process, and ensuring the team is fully functional and productive.

Management Dictates Daily Standup Meetings

Scenario: An organization adopts Agile and right away, management steps in with their “preferred” execution strategy. The manager may have attended a class or a briefing on Agile and believes he or she understands the process well enough to dictate how it should be implemented, beginning with how to run the daily standup meeting. The manager insists on attending the meetings and determines where and when they will be conducted. Management does not show up on time to the meetings, and when they do show up, they interrupt the conduct of the meeting by announcing trivial content unrelated to the project and the team. If that isn't enough, management frequently interrupts the meeting while team members are attempting to successfully conduct the meeting according to the agreed-upon scrum practice.

Solution: The most effective solution to this problem is special management training and coaching. Management must understand the benefits of Agile methods. They must also allow the team to conduct and manage standup meetings for the benefit of the team and to ensure efficient and productive product development. Organizational despots who dictate the nature of daily standup meetings guarantee the failure of the project's Agile execution. Since the team uses the meeting to communicate project commitment progress, the team should be able to manage the conduct of the meeting to ensure effective communication and avoid wasted time.

Kanban (Project Task Boards) Are Not in View During the Daily Standup

Scenario: The Kanban, or project task board, is commonly used by scrum teams to show and track sprint work derived from selected product backlog items (PBIs). It is the team's responsibility to understand the scope of effort for PBIs selected for each sprint. During the daily standup meeting, the task board is a useful tool in determining work in progress.

However, many teams — both new and experienced — conduct their daily standup meetings in locations away from the task

board, which reduces project transparency and team effectiveness. This prevents team members, scrum masters, and onlookers from seeing which tasks are problematic and which team members have too much work in progress.

Solution: The task board is a dynamic tool used by the team to track sprint progress and identify issues and problems. Therefore, the most effective way to promote team effectiveness and project transparency is by establishing a designated team or project room at the beginning of the project. Such a room, often regarded as the “Agile” or “scrum” room, defines a specific and centralized location where the team can work in a highly collaborative environment. The room should not be secluded or isolated from the mainstream organization. Rather, it would be prudent if the room were conveniently located within the pulse of the project to ensure that anyone interested in the project could benefit from ongoing project execution activities.

Statistical Evidence

To quantify the reasons for using the daily stand-up and other Agile methods, key metrics have been included that validate the examples in this article. These metrics are based on a recent survey conducted in 2015 by VersionOne the 10th Annual State of Agile Survey.

The survey makes it clear that Agile software development has grown increasingly popular over the last decade. Participation in the survey has grown more than three-fold. In 2006, there were fewer than a thousand respondents to the survey, while the latest survey has 3,880 respondents.

Barriers to Adoption and Success

While adoption of Agile is increasing, there are still obstacles to overcome. The key barriers to further adoption usually hinge around culture, including the ability to change, general resistance to change, and management support. Interestingly, the majority of respondents pointed toward the company’s culture as the reason for failed Agile projects as well. Once these barriers are overcome, the limiting factor most often cited has been availability of personnel with the necessary Agile experience.

Top 3 Tips for Success with Scaling Agile

Now that momentum around scaling agile is growing, what are the key factors for success? The respondents said the top three tips for successfully scaling agile are:

1. Consistent process and practices (43%),
2. Implementation of a common tool across teams (40%), and
3. Agile consultants or trainers (40%).

Size of Organization

Percentage of respondents who worked for organizations with:

1. Fewer than 1,000 people: 44%
2. Between 1,001 and 5,000 people: 17%
3. Between 5,001-20,000 people: 15%
4. More than 20,000 people: 24%

Size of Software Organization

1. Fewer than 100 people: 38%
2. Between 101-1,000 people: 31%
3. Between 1,001-5,000 people: 15%
4. More than 5,000 people: 16%

Benefits of Agile

Top 3 Benefits of Agile

1. Ability to manage changing priorities: 87%
2. Increased team productivity: 85%
3. Improved project visibility: 84%

Top 5 Agile Techniques Employed

1. **Daily Stand-up: 83%**
2. Prioritized Backlogs: 82%
3. Short Iterations: 79%
4. Retrospectives: 74%
5. Iteration Planning: 69%

Success Metrics

Top 3 leading causes of failed Agile projects

1. Company philosophy or culture at odds with core agile values
2. Lack of experience with agile methods
3. Lack of Management support

Top 3 barriers to further Agile adoption

1. Ability to change organizational culture
2. General organizational resistance to change
3. Pre-existing rigid/waterfall framework

Top 3 Project Management tool used and preferred

1. Taskboard: 82%
2. Bug tracker: 80%
3. Spreadsheet: 74%

Conclusion

The various scenarios discussed in this article are real. The solutions applied to the problems are actions and techniques I have used to resolve the problems. If these problems are not resolved, a significant reduction in team productivity will certainly result, which may have an adverse effect on overall project progress. Reclaiming team progress requires your own personal problem resolution action.

There are many other situations that you may have experienced that are not mentioned in this article. I urge readers to share their own experiences by identifying problematic situations and how they were resolved so that others can become better practitioners of Agile.

REFERENCES

1. 9th Annual State of Agile Survey, VersionOne, 2015.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dick Carlson has a B.S. degree in business management and is certified as a scrum professional, scrum master, scrum product owner, and in Lean-Agile project management. He has shared successful experiences of agile, lean, and scrum implementations at conferences, workshops and symposia. Dick’s engineering career spans 50 years, and he has taught courses in mathematics, electronics, CMMI, configuration and data management, agile, lean, and scrum for more than 30 years.