Product Owner Foundation Skills

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Maybe you have a whole department of people in your organization who have the sole task of managing their given product lines. Maybe they are already well versed in what it takes to manage the end-to-end life cycle of a product to maximize ROI and minimize risk.

This entry is not for you.

It is for the rest of us: those of us with Product Owners who are untrained, over-busy and probably got "volunteered" for the role by their boss. These folks are not going to walk into your project on Day One and be productive. You, ScrumMaster, and your team are going to need to help the Product Owner be successful by helping him build some basic skills. Though we all want that Perfect Product Owner, the three Foundation Skills listed below are where you should spend your time and effort in the early days to provide coaching and support.

Foundation Skill #1 - The Ability to Prioritize

Product Owners will constantly be asked, "Is Feature A or B more important?" And they had better learn quickly how to answer. The ability to effectively prioritize is hampered by the fact that the Product Owner may have been burned in the past. He may have learned through experience that when some teams ask the question above, what they really mean is, "What can we skip doing?" So clever Product Owners learn to respond with this pat answer:

"They are ALL important!"

Next thing you know, you have a list of 100 requirements and 40 of them are "Priority 1's." Such ranking is meaningless and will not help the team know where they should put their efforts first.
If your Product Owner gives you the "I want it all now" response, a simple reframing of the question might help him give a more productive response. Consider these options:

- "Which feature would you like us to complete first?"
- "What features would you like to see working the soonest so you can give feedback?"
- "Which requirement meets the most pressing business need?"

Angela Druckman is a Certified Scrum Trainer with more than eight years of experience in iterative software development, including four years working in a Scrum environment. Prior to joining CollabNet in October 2008, Druckman worked as senior project manager at Vertex Outsourcing in Seattle, where she helped clients improve business processes through Scrum.

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Posing the question in a different way can help remove the defensiveness of the response. If you still cannot get a priority from your Product Owner, reiterate that you will be working the backlog from the top downward, so if he is expecting something different, he should commence rearranging the backlog pronto.

Foundation Skill #2 - The Ability to Articulate Requirements
Unless you are very lucky, you will not get a Product Owner that has ever written out formal requirements in any form. In which case, you are going to have to help him learn how to take a fuzzy idea in his head and put it into discrete, actionable language.

With a new Product Owner, I like to ask him to first describe the business problem or opportunity in his own words. Why is the company willing to spend thousands of dollars to build this software? Then look at the individual backlog items and do the same. Why is the first backlog item higher priority than, say, the fifth one? By asking these simple questions, you are helping the Product Owner become more familiar with his own project and his reasoning for prioritization.

Also, offer your Product Owner options. Let's say the team can commit to items #1 - 4 on the backlog, but #5 is huge, yet #6 is small. Let the Product Owner know this - he might elect to change the priority to get more work done quickly. Always work to give your Product Owner the information he needs to make good decisions.

Foundation Skill #3 - The Ability to See the Big Picture
Successful Product Owners do not make decisions in a vacuum. They carefully weigh the needs of internal and external customers to determine the best direction to take the product. You and your team can help your Product Owner consider the implications of the decisions he is making. One way to do this is to keep the Product Owner informed about the technical implications of his decisions, especially conversion and system integration points. You can also remind him to consider organizational impacts as well, particularly to those groups "downstream" from his own. When you feel he is ready, suggest your Product Owner use a Product Roadmap to begin laying out the big picture of functionality and releases in the coming weeks or months.

My advice is to assume your Product Owners have virtually none of these foundation skills. If they do, you can be pleasantly surprised. But if, like most of us, you get a Product Owner with a marginal skill set,

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you can begin helping him build the skills necessary to be successful. Don't confuse an inexperienced Product Owner with a bad Product Owner. Were you a perfect ScrumMaster the first time? As we've said before, allow your Product Owner the courtesy of a learning curve, just as you would your team or yourself.

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CollabNet, Inc.
8000 Marina Blvd, Suite 600
Brisbane, CA 94005
T: + 1 (650) 228-2500
F: + 1 (650) 228-2501

collab.net