Whitepaper

No such thing as a free lunch

About the conflicts and the hard work in teams, also when using SCRUM

teamresponz

Table of Contents

Nothing Is For Free

Put a team together and wonderful things happen, like collaboration and productivity. What else does the ScrumMaster have to look out for?

Agile development yields productivity gains. Teams of developers, managing their own work in collocated spaces, outperform externally managed developers sitting in cubicles or offices. These teams are at least twice as productive. This productivity is coupled with other benefits, such as more creativity in deriving solutions to problems, higher quality by cross-checking each other's work, and better morale through the socialization.

All of these benefits have seemed to be free! Put the teams together, get their commitment to a goal, and have them work within a time-box. What has been lost by taking the team members out of their individual offices? What has been lost asking them to manage themselves as a team? Conflict! Unsurprisingly, it turns out collocated teams working under commitments and deadlines often have different values and opinions about the best way to accomplish their work. They sometimes come to work in a less than collaborative mood, resembling Attila the Hun rather than Tom the adult who happens to be an programmer. Conflict is inevitable. However, nothing in the Agile vocabulary says what to do when it happens. To date, we've all been willing to take the benefits without anticipating this cost. No wonder, for who likes to deal with conflict?

I was at a client recently when a conflict occurred. An analyst was upset that a programmer had taken liberty with an agreed-upon design without consulting her. The programmer felt that the change was so minor that he was well within his rights by just going ahead with it. She felt that he was disrespectful of her work and responsibilities. As a result, voices were raised, nerves were frayed, and tears were spilled. Other members of the team tried to mediate, to soothe the conflict, without avail. The conflict ended in both of the participants fleeing the team room to a private space where they could get away from the other, lick their wounds, and emotionally recover. They were both torn between feeling they were right and being embarrassed that they had openly fought in front of the others. They both didn't know what to do.

I am by no means trained in resolving conflict. When I entered the team room, everyone kept their eyes on their workstations. They were very upset by what had happened. I felt that we had to talk about this, so we gathered together and shared how the team mebers felt. They all felt embarrassed that they had witnessed the conflict. They also felt bad that they couldn't have helped those having the conflict to resolve it, or to avoid it. They were also agitated and worried that this would upset their family, their team, and they didn't know what to do to resolve the problem.

Do not ignore Conflict

We decided that we couldn't ignore the conflict, that leaving the bad feelings unaddressed would create a poisonous atmosphere in what until then had been an easy and collegial atmosphere. Worse yet, we all acknowledged that if many more unresolved

conflicts occurred, the team might not be able to work together. So we forged the following rules.

1. We accepted that conflict is a natural event when people work together.

2. When a conflict occurs, no work will continue until the conflict is resolved; no sweeping conflict under the carpet.

3. The first thing to do to resolve the conflict is for everyone in the team to describe how they feel (the guys had a hard tie with this at first, mistaking analysis of the situation with feelings).

4. Everyone would work together on a solution. We hypothesized that if no solution was forthcoming, it was probably because emotion was still clouding our thinking, so we would go through steps 3) and 4) in a loop until the solution was derived and everyone was able to report that they were feeling ok.

I'm certainly not a conflict resolution specialist, so I recommended to this organization's management that they bring in a specialist to work with each team. The specialist would teach the teams how to resolve conflict in a more effective way, one that could handle more types of conflict than they team and I had dealt with.

Rules of Conduct

When I implement Agile processes, I sometimes help the organization develop rules of conduct, or etiquette. Sometimes I do this because ill-will already exists and I don't want it exacerbated. Other times I help build the rules because I feel that the people are truly at a loss on how to get along; sometimes this is because of different cultural perspectives, sometimes it is simply because they have spent so much time working alone that they have forgotten, or never knew, how to work in teams.

Some of the rules we've devised are:

■ Never use the work "you" because the other person may feel on the spot and defensive.

■ Never refer to history ("three months ago, you said !;.").

■ Be on time for meetings; if you are late, apologize and pay a late "penalty";

■ If everyone is talking at once, use a pen to determine who talks. Whoever is holding the pen talk, everyone else listens.

■ Everyone's opinion is important and needs to be understood and taken into account.

■ No name calling.

So forth, depending on the organization, team, situation, and past experience.

In retrospect, I'm surprised that I didn't foresee this cost. The team members had previously been kept in relatively conflict-free situations, with their management being responsible for resolving anything that came up. Now, this was up to the teams.

Posted by Ken Schwaber Sunday September 12 2004