SOFTWARE ENGINEERING RADIO

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Ryan Ripley on Making Scrum Work

Kanchan Shringi

From the Editor
Ryan Ripley, Scrum trainer and host of the podcast "Agile for Humans," discusses Scrum and Scrum antipatterns. Host Kanchan Shringi spoke with Ripley about prerequisites for Scrum adoption; the need for management buy-in; scaling; Scrum values and roles; certification; product and sprint backlogs; high-performing, self-organizing, cross-functional, and remote teams; consistency among feature teams; exploratory work; minimum viable products; empowered product owners; the definition of "done"; bugs; Scrum activities; and interactions with stakeholders. We provide summary excerpts below; to hear the full interview, visit http://www.se-radio.net or access our archives via RSS at http://feeds.feedburner.com/se-radio.—*Robert Blumen*

Kanchan Shringi: Why do organizations adopt Scrum?

Ryan Ripley: Scrum is not the goal. Organizations want delivery, customer satisfaction, and consistency, and Scrum delivers these. Current methods—defining milestones in the future and trying to hit them—don't work, so companies turn to empiricism and learn by doing. They take observed behaviors and outcomes, inspect what's going on through transparent work, and make frequent adaptations as they go.

What are Scrum prerequisites?

Leadership must support shifts in mindset and changes in the way people work. The second prerequisite is to throw out the playbooks and do many small experiments—just get started. As Woody Zuill says, "It is through doing the work that we learn about the work we need to do."

Which Scrum principles can be changed, and which ones can't be?

Leave the framework alone. Companies can change events, artifacts, and roles to fit their contexts within the boundaries of Scrum, but they shouldn't change the framework itself. When companies want to modify Scrum, it's usually to cover up some impediment or organizational dysfunction.

Why were the Scrum values added to the guide?

Scrum is a framework, not a process. The values remind us that, although events, artifacts, and roles are important, Scrum is a human practice, and behavior is paramount. The values remind us that, although events, artifacts, and roles are important, Scrum is a human practice, and behavior is paramount.

Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MS.2020.3031231
Date of current version: 22 December 2020

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People and culture will crush a Scrum implementation faster than anything. The values of focus, openness, commitment, courage, and respect teach us that culture is important. Focus is doing fewer things at once but getting things to "done." Teams must be open to new ideas, being wrong, and supporting diversity and inclusion. Commitment is not to scope but to bringing our best selves forward and being positive teammates. Courage is willingness to tell a stakeholder, "No," or tell a customer, "Not yet." And this must all be done respectfully.

What experience should a Scrum master have?

They come from various backgrounds, but three things are most important: 1. They love their teams and have a deep care for the people they're serving. 2. They want every member on this team and the collective team to be as successful as possible. 3. They have zero tolerance for organizational impediments. I can teach the framework, but I can't put those three things into someone's brain. As long as they have that servant–leadership mindset, we can teach the rest.

What antipatterns should Scrum masters watch out for?

We do the most disservice when we step in and try to fulfill the product owner's role for them, tell the development (dev) team what to do, or neglect the organization and fail to talk to leadership or to human resources. If you can fulfill your three levels of service to the product owner, dev team, and organization and do that in a way that empowers without commanding and demanding, you'll be okay.

Many Scrum masters violate this. A Scrum master is a servant–leader but not a doormat. Sometimes you have to take direct action, to uphold Scrum or protect the team. But usually you're there to help people discover their own truths for themselves. You're still in a powerful, influential role, but you wield that power to promote and build other people up, not to command and direct them.

How does a product owner order items in a product backlog to express value?

The product backlog expresses the product owner's vision for the product. It holds all of the things that we could do to achieve our product vision; a feature story, a bug, or whatever the team is going to work on is ordered in the backlog by what the team values most. It communicates vision and value with the dev team and with stakeholders.

There is no guarantee that a product backlog item will be completed, and they are not all equal. When we order something, we are explicitly saying, "This is the most valuable thing, this is next," and so on.

The product backlog supports short-, mid-, and long-term visions. The short-term vision corresponds to the minimum viable product. Product owners have to be ruthless about what's needed. The sooner we can get something in front of a customer, the sooner we can get feedback. Taking

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KANCHAN SHRINGI has worked on many layers of the software stack over more than two decades. She has had a full stack experience all the way from operating systems to application UI as a developer and in engineering management. She enjoys learning about the constantly evolving landscape of software development from podcasts and other practitioners. Contact her at kshringi@gmail.com.

too long to get a minimum viable product puts us at huge risk. The sooner we can validate with a customer that we're on the right path, the more we can protect our investment. A ruthless product owner, laser focused on value and validation, gets us there.

Is a sprint backlog a forecast or a commitment?

A forecast. It defines the things that we think we could achieve during a sprint. We're not committing to them. We believe that the things on the sprint backlog will help us achieve the sprint goal, which is where our commitment lies.

What inspection is needed to make sure the sprint progresses in the right direction?

During the daily Scrum, the dev team members see whether they're making progress toward the sprint goal and looks at the sprint backlog to see what they have learned so far. They may have to make some adaptations. It's through doing the work that they learn about the work they need to do, which is why they meet in a daily Scrum to update the sprint backlog, track progress toward the sprint goal, and collaboratively build a plan about how they will work together over the next 48 h. They're learning, discovering, and experimenting, and that sprint backlog is an expression of that learning.

What happens when the team discovers that the work is larger than anticipated?

Team members should pull the product owner into a discussion. The dev team and the product owner have a highly collaborative relationship. The product owner should be pleased that the team found an issue. They now must decide how to reshape the scope of the sprint backlog: "How do we reshape this so that we can still achieve our sprint goal?" They always protect the sprint goal, but the forecast of work can change based on what they learned. Although the dev team owns the sprint backlog, this is a collaborative decision and discussion with the product owner.

That's just professional Scrum. That sprint goal gives us focus. It's what we commit to. We have to be open to shifting the scope to maintain focus and commitment.

IEEE Software (ISSN 0740-7459) is published bimonthly by the IEEE Computer Society. IEEE headquarters: Three Park Ave., 17th Floor, New York, NY 10016-5997. IEEE Computer Society Publications Office: 10662 Los Vaqueros Cir., Los Alamitos, CA 90720; +1 714 821 8380; fax +1 714 821 4010. IEEE Computer Society headquarters: 2001 L St., Ste. 700, Washington, DC 20036. Subscribe to *IEEE Software* by visiting www.computer.org/software.

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