

Meeting the challenges of agile principles: An offshore Scrum Master Perspective

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December 2013

Abstract

The 12 agile principles lay the foundation of a successful agile team to deliver a product that exceeds customer expectations. Every principle is an absolute necessity to build great software and great teams. While these principles have stood the test of time over a decade now, much has changed the way we build and deliver software, especially from an offshore perspective. Adoption of agile methods does not simply imply a framework or a process implementation, but it goes beyond that. It should make an agile team think about the significance of agile values and principles and how these principles influence the team and product when teams are distributed across geographies. What challenges the team may come across while adopting agile or is it just “ScrumBut”? Do they have solution to these challenges? This report highlights some of these challenges and solutions from a Scrum Master perspective.

Trust

Trusted & Motivated People

**Build projects around motivated individuals.
Give them the environment and support they need,
and trust them to get the job done.**

Trust is the foremost important thing in an agile environment, especially even more important when teams are not co-located. The team and business partners must have complete faith in each other which bonds and projects them as a team. Team needs little direction but more freedom and support which is often a challenge for the Scrum Master. Some of the challenges that were faced by the team include:

- Micro-management by customer due to lack of faith in the team’s capability, dictating who should do what and how. This type of behaviour killed the basic value of self-organized teams.
- Fatigue and burnout due to frequent changing priorities left the team demotivated. This resulted into attrition and poor quality.
- Many of the technical and process suggestions were ignored without providing valid reasons. This

defeated the purpose of innovative thinking.

- For unknown reasons, team felt inadequate support from their own management which was frustrating for the team.

To address above challenges, following actions were taken:

- ★ The Scrum Master got everybody on the table with all checks and balances, metrics dashboards proved to be the savior.
- ★ Expectations were reemphasized with customer and product owner on collaborative environment and that they ought to change their conventional way of working by giving more freedom to team.
- ★ By taking ownership for the success of the program, the Scrum Master ensured regular and open communication at all levels so that a healthy relationship and trust exists between team, management and customer.
- ★ Expectations were set on results with each team member and assured unwavering support, rewards and recognition were announced.
- ★ No action could have replaced the cross visits of onsite and offshore teams. This step played a significant role in building trust as well as learning new things from each other. There is no substitute to cross visits.

Technical Excellence

Attend to Quality

Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.

With continuous emergence of new technologies and fast changing user needs, it is a MUST for the team to keep pace with these dynamics. Opening of new markets led by innovation, demands agility and the team should always be in a position to respond to new markets' needs. Some of the challenges, which could have resulted into poor quality were:

- Insufficient pool of skilled and experienced resources on emergent technologies
- High technical debt due lack of automation and other agile technical practices. This was the biggest pain point. While everybody acknowledged the importance of automation but no one had the courage to take decision.
- What is a the best way to design the solution, was always a question. There was always difference of opinion between onshore and offshore and could hardly reach any conclusion. The integration points were missed out and non functional requirements were delayed in the design.
- It was difficult to get support from customer to impart training to the team on new technologies as the customer was unwilling to invest time and money.

The above challenges were handled by taking below actions:

- ★ “Innovation Day” concept was introduced. The team worked on some cool ideas that were relevant to product and technology. This resulted into big time value add to the product as well as building team’s competencies such as manual QAs acquiring automation skills and building framework from scratch, reusable templates so that developers become productive early, IPs, etc .
- ★ Decision analysis process was introduced for any new proposed technology, framework, platform, practices, and tools. Sometimes it is just too overwhelming for the team or customer to go with new technology without having sufficient knowledge.
- ★ Technology forums were set up for knowledge sharing. Regular interaction across technology streams helped in building overall competencies. Trainings were conducted outside working hours.
- ★ Subject matter experts were introduced whose help was taken to address technical debt which later on became part of definition of done and entire architecture was overhauled to make it modular.

Change

Embrace Change

Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer’s competitive advantage.

Welcoming change is one of the often misused agile principles. Under the pretext of embracing change, the changes to priorities and requirements are frequent during the sprint. Welcoming a change is good when it throws an opportunity for a great idea. But if it is due to lack of discipline or off-the-cuff approach towards product backlog grooming then it does no good to anyone and often results into lot of rework. The challenges on frequent changes were:

- Team was losing rhythm and focus due to unplanned change requests and resulting into regression defects.
- The Scrum Master was finding it difficult to keep Team’s discipline and motivation intact due to an unorganized product owner and fragile backlog
- Customer would not agree on the justification for decreasing velocity & quality
- Commitment to Sprint Goal lost its value due to a moving goal post.

Actions taken to control further damage were:

- ★ A strict no-no guideline was defined for insprint changing priorities.
- ★ On going pre sprint planning sessions were set up between team and product owner to set priorities and content of the release
- ★ Impact analysis process was introduce to identify the need, severity and magnitude of change request before going ahead with the change.

While there was certain amount of success, every new day continues to bring up new challenges and actions to address these challenges.

Conclusion

Some of the benefits that could be achieved due to the actions taken are summarized below:

1. Retrospections played a big role in introducing new processes as well as improving some of the existing processes such as impact analysis, pre sprint planning, improved requirements management process, communication and collaboration process, continuous integration, automated unit testing, code review management, etc. Improving the retrospection process itself was an energy draining exercise.
2. The defect leakage % could be brought under control due to strict adherence to definition of done
3. The user story stability index is helping control unplanned changes and rework effort.
4. Change in mindset or thinking away from waterfall method was a challenge and it still exists. But gradually the team members have started to accept the reality of being “multi skilled enabled” and not just remain labelled as “developer” or “QA”. This is now part of expectation management. Flexibility is the essence of agile teams.
5. Budgeting for the quarterly cross visits has helped immensely
6. CI-CD is the next milestone to be achieved.

The agile principles are simple and straightforward but the real challenge lies in putting these principles into practice. It needs a lot of commitment, courage, different thinking and behavior, discipline, etc. from every section of the organization.