

# An alternative to Scrum

---

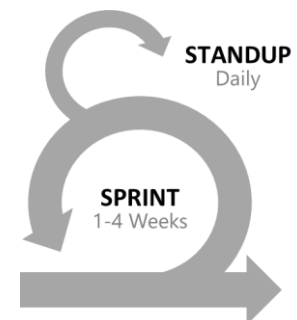
Jon Ward

I am often asked what is Agile? It is a difficult question to answer. I use the following headline statement; *Agile is a different and constantly evolving way of working using organisational constructs of collective intelligence, with devolved authority and decision making.* I then need to explain the nuances of my statement and illustrate Agile practices using examples. I also explain that Agile, although originating with software development, has a much broader application.

Inevitably at some point, my questioners ask, so is Agile Scrum? I answer Scrum is one of the frameworks used in Agile. However, increasingly, I am becoming concerned by individuals and organisations thinking that all they need to do to create agility is to use Scrum.

Most enterprises adopt Agile, seeking benefits of faster time to market, lower delivery costs and improved product quality. These enterprises almost universally are seeking performance improvement of some sort. Most organisations I have worked with use Scrum. In fact, the most frequently Agile framework used worldwide is Scrum. Scrum embodies Agile ways of working and new organisational constructs, but does it consistently deliver the Agile promise of improved performance?

I looked at the popular image of Scrum with the looping back to the beginning, an image that by-the-way, does not appear in the scrum guide. I have begun to question if this picture somehow subconsciously infers to Agile teams that they should merely repeat what they did before. In other words, is the Scrum framework itself limiting Agile teams urge to explore and seek new beneficial ways of working? How is Scrum enabling the collective intelligence of the team?



I recently heard that if a team is working in the same way as they did three months ago, they are not learning. Consequently, for a team that only repeats the same pattern, the promise of continuous improvement is lost.

In this paper, I ask the question, is Scrum as valuable to novice Agile teams as its popularity would suggest. Or is there an alternative that could focus on team effectiveness and more readily produce the performance improvements many enterprises seek?

## The performance of my Scrum Teams

Obviously, team performance cannot continuously improve. Every team's performance will eventually plateau. However, I have frequently seen the performance of a Scrum team plateau after only four or five sprints! Surely the cause cannot be because every team that plateaus is doing something wrong or misunderstanding Scrum values or principles. The cause of performance stagnation using Scrum has to be more foundational.

When coaching Scrum Masters, I have noticed some patterns that have caused me to ask if there is a better way. I have seen teams doing Scrum events almost parrot-like without really exhibiting the degree of control that empiricism and lean thinking would imply. I have seen teams doing their traditional activities with siloed responsibilities but walking a task board every morning. Then I observe their management wondering why they do not see performance improvements from Agile! I frequently find Scrum teams focussed on doing Scrum instead of concentrating on how effective they are.

Systems thinking suggests that we look holistically at how the components of a situation interact to produce a result. I recognise that Scrum is purposely incomplete. A stance that, in my view, has significant negative impacts on novice teams. However, when I took teams back to Scrum basics, the absence of performance improvement forced me to look holistically and more closely at the Scrum events.

Initially, my reaction to a plateauing Scrum team is that they are not doing Scrum. I thought that if I coach them back to pure Scrum, performance should improve. Yet this was not the case.

I also became increasingly concerned with the limited Scrum guidance concerning quality. Granted, the Scrum Guide 2020 mentions quality in four places;

- the adherence to a definition of done,
- a statement that during a Sprint quality does not decrease,
- the purpose of the retrospective is to improve quality, and
- the definition of done being a formal description of the state of the increment when it meets the quality measures.

In my view, these statements without elaboration are inadequate, and the statement that the retrospective is designed to improve quality hard to understand. I find teams struggling with poor quality outputs yet finding that the three retrospective questions not helping them at all! The three questions suggested in the Scrum Guide 2020 are;

- What went well?

- What problems were encountered? and
- How those problems were or were not solved?

These questions do not seem to me to suggest a behavioural change or activity designed to improve a teams' performance.

## The Daily Scrum

According to the Scrum Guide 2020, the purpose of the Daily Scrum is to inspect progress. When coaching novice teams using Scrum, I have noticed teams merely focussing on three questions;

- What did I complete yesterday?
- What shall I do today? And
- do I have any impediments or blockers?

In only asking these questions, novice teams miss the point of “*creating an actionable plan for the next day of work*” suggested by the Scrum Guide. They also don't create the transparency required by Scrum. Instead, they focus on the immediate actions of individuals rather than clarity regarding the overall progress towards their sprint and product goals. Novice teams rarely consider their burndown charts mid-Sprint to look at trends or team performance; actually, the Scrum Guide suggests that this is unnecessary. It, therefore, can come as a surprise to a team when they miss their Sprint Goal or find a critical item still on the backlog a day before the end of the Sprint.

## Retrospective as a means to improve quality?

I started to question why all the Scrum events are the retrospective the most difficult for teams. Universally coaches and Scrum Masters seek ways of making the retrospective more exciting and engaging. Advice from community leaders for running a retrospective include:

- Create a safe environment,
- Make sure all criticism is constructive,
- Use games and activities,
- Do anything you can to make the retrospective fun.

I respect these leaders, but in my view, this list of problems and suggestions do not sit comfortably with the Scrum Guide's statement that “*The purpose of the Sprint Retrospective is to plan ways to increase quality and effectiveness.*” The purpose seems more severe than the advice suggests.

## The timing of performance improvement

The Scrum guide states, “*The Sprint Retrospective concludes the Sprint.*” It is the last thing the team does. So, how does this sit with human nature and our ability to retrospect and learn?

In *Leading Teams*, by J Richard Hackman<sup>1</sup>, organisational psychologist Connie Gersick’s findings<sup>2</sup> explain why certain types of coaching interventions are helpful at different times in a team’s task life cycle. To be more explicit and to use Scrum terminology, different coaching interventions are appropriate at the beginning, mid-point and end of each Sprint.

Connie Gersick found that each of the teams she tracked developed a distinctive approach to its task as soon as it commenced until almost halfway through the task duration. At the mid-point, all teams went through a transition where they were willing to consider new perspectives to their work. They altered their ways of working to achieve their goal. Following the mid-point, the teams adopted a finisher-completer focus until their task was complete.

An analogy used by Richard Hackman is a sports team that has just won a major trophy. Is this team in a mental state to reflect and learn? No, they want to celebrate! Similarly, a team that has just lost a significant trophy. Are they in a mental state to reflect and learn? Probably not because they are dealing with their disappointment and emotions of losing. Extreme examples, but we know that an Agile team who has just completed a Sprint may be exhausted, received negative feedback in a Sprint Review, or want to start the next Sprint. Are they also in a mental state for objective reflection and learning? Probably not! Could timing and team psychology be the key to ineffective retrospectives? Connie Gersick’s research suggests that mid-sprint be better timing for a process performance improvement activity?

### Three elements in Scrum

Studying how teams are using Scrum, I identified three elements interacting: the Scrum framework, the team behaviour and the ecosystem or ways of working. The focus on the product in Scrum is clear with specific events and artefacts; Product Backlog Refinement, commitment to the Product Goal, prioritisation, the Sprint Goal, definitions of ready and done, the Sprint review, etc. I called this product orientation, making sure the appropriate solution is built.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances - The Five Keys to Successful Teams*, J Richard Hackman, 2002 Harvard Business School Publishing

<sup>2</sup> *Time and transition in work teams*, Connie J. G. Gersick, 1988 *The Academy of Management Journal* Vol 31

Equally clear is that the purposely incomplete statement in the Scrum Guide applies almost entirely to building the product right. The Scrum Guide states, *“How this is done is at the sole discretion of the Developers. No one else tells them how to turn Product Backlog items into Increments of value.”* However, if they are a novice team, how do they make these decisions? How do they know what are sensible choices? They have to be guided or coached.

Therefore, if an organisation asks a coach, “come and show us how to be Agile” , simply training Scrum is only part of the answer for improved productivity. Similarly, engaging Certified Scrum Masters, or sending Product Owners and Scrum Masters to Scrum Classes, will result in only partial knowledge. How will they know the Agile practices to create a product efficiently? They will only learn or be qualified in one half of the jigsaw, and novice teams will struggle.

I decided that this partial knowledge could explain why several of the teams I have been asked to coach recently are still using waterfall development techniques, but with Scrum events. I have found that to improve the delivery performance of an Agile team; it is necessary to coach a minimum set of Agile delivery practices. I introduce lean concepts with broader use of empirical control in addition to the use in Scrum.

### **Scrum values**

The Scrum Guide talks about people becoming proficient in living five values:

- Commitment,
- Focus,
- Openness,
- Respect, and
- Courage.

However, having described these values, the Scrum Guide describes a work focus on the product goals, work challenges, and progress towards the goals. My conclusion is that these values are not genuinely behavioural but more product orientated. The behavioural elements are loosely described in terms of respect for each other and courage. Words such as learning together and collaboration are explicitly missing, although learning is alluded to as experience.

I have concluded, and I know this may generate an adverse reaction in some, that some events, though extremely important in Scrum, are ineffective due to the process itself and are not caused by the people or the coaching.

Albert Einstein is widely credited with saying, *“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly but expecting different results.”*

So, what can we do differently? Can we do better? Using the concepts of experimentation advocated by the LeSS community, I have focussed my analysis and research on the problem or goal of performance improvement and the potential leverage this will give the team rather than seeking a readymade solution that I may copy.

The result is the Agile Lineout approach.

An Agile Lineout is an organisational-centric approach to Agile that enables teams to build the right product and build it effectively. A Lineout is contextual; it helps teams to focus on continual performance improvement.

The lineout has three elements, the product line focusing on building the right solution, the delivery line, which considers the appropriate use of techniques, tools and processes. And the Team Behaviours looking at the way the team is operating together.

The lineout is a new Agile approach that is tailored for IT and NON-IT activities. It uses systems theory, behavioural science, lean principles and Agile wisdom to help teams create high-value solutions quickly.”

For further information regarding Agile Lineouts, go to: <https://leanpub.com/agilelineoutanalternativetoscrum>, or contact [Beneficial Consulting](#).

Jonathan Ward



Beneficial Consulting Ltd  
Dashwood House  
69 Old Broad Street  
London  
EC2M 1QS

Web: <http://www.beneficialconsulting.co.uk>  
Email: [Jonathan.Ward@beneficialconsulting.co.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Ward@beneficialconsulting.co.uk)  
Office Tel: +44 (0) 207 562 8389  
Mobile Tel: +44 (0) 7802 884598