

# Don't Defer a Meeting Because One Person Can't Attend

by Mike Cohn • 26 Comments

## Don't Defer a Meeting Because One Person Can't Attend

We're entering flu season. No, no, I feel fine. And you won't catch anything from me just by reading this.

But flu seasons means some of your teammates are bound to be sick soon. And that means they'll occasionally stay home and miss a meeting.

What should a Scrum team do when the whole team will not be present for a meeting?

In most cases, everything should roll forward as planned. Let's look at each of the common Scrum meetings.

## The Daily Scrum

A [daily scrum](#) should never be cancelled simply because a person (or two) cannot attend. The meeting will still be valuable for synchronizing the work of those who can participate. When someone calls or emails to say they'll be out sick, the person can—if necessary—provide a minimal update or pose a question to the team. This would be something like, “Tell Lena I've just about finished the code she's waiting on. I just want to do a few more tests before I check it in.”

## The Sprint Review and Retrospective

I don't recommend canceling a [sprint review](#), and I would never cancel one because a team member was out sick. I have, however, canceled a few sprint reviews that were being given to a client on a contract development project when the key client stakeholder could not participate.

I'd prefer to proceed with only the other stakeholders present. But sometimes the client prefers not to. That mostly happens when one client participant is the boss and that's who cannot attend. The review could proceed with just the other stakeholders. But if they're going to say things like, "We should hold off on that decision until Martin can be here," I think it's OK to reschedule the review as long as that isn't a regular occurrence.

I would also never reschedule a [sprint retrospective](#). Those who are able to participate should proceed as planned.

## Product Backlog Refinement

[Product backlog refinement](#) meetings can be rescheduled if necessary. Since these don't occur on the first or last day of a sprint, they're much easier to move. I would avoid rescheduling this (or any meeting) very often because any rescheduled meeting can feel like an interruption. But, if the product owner or any other truly necessary participant will be out sick, a backlog refinement meeting is OK to reschedule.

## Sprint Planning Meeting

In general, I would not reschedule a [sprint planning meeting](#) because someone is sick. If the person is truly the superstar of the team and we absolutely cannot plan a sprint without that person, go ahead and re-schedule the meeting for the next day. But then spend the rest of the day in an impromptu retrospective discussing how to get out of the problem of being so dependent on one person that the team cannot even plan (let alone, do) its work.

Even if it is the product owner who cannot participate in the sprint planning meeting, a team should be able to plan one sprint without their product owner. If a team does everything I advocate (such as story-writing workshops, product backlog refinement, estimating to gain shared understanding of a product backlog item and so on), the team will have a good understanding of each product backlog item by the time it comes into a sprint.

Sure, they will usually have a few questions left for a product owner to answer during sprint planning. But the team will largely understand what needs to be done to deliver the highest

priority product backlog items. And so, they can plan a sprint even without the product owner.

As a precaution, the team might opt to plan the sprint a bit less full than normal. That leaves room for items to take a bit more effort if needed when the product owner returns and clarifies the last few open issues. Or it allows a product owner to add a user story or two when they return to work. Either approach allows sprint planning to proceed and to be fine-tuned when the product owner is available.

## What Do You Think?

Would you ever cancel one of Scrum's standard meetings? Under what circumstances? Please share your thoughts in the discussion below.

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