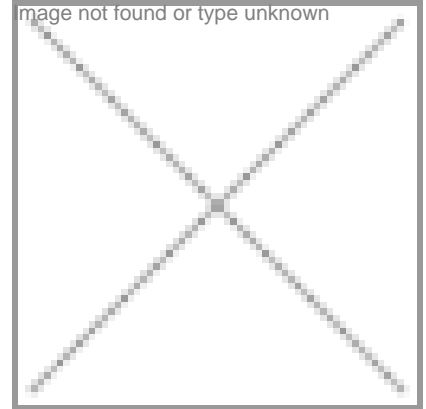


My Primary Criticism of Scrum

by Mike Cohn • 68 Comments

On the first day of my Certified ScrumMaster course, we go over the agenda for the two days. I point out that one topic we'll cover will be "meetings." I usually point out that Scrum is often criticized for the amount of meetings it defines. I then claim that this is a pretty weak criticism of Scrum because most of the meetings really aren't very long, and that if we wanted to, we could find better criticisms of Scrum than "Scrum teams meet too much."



After saying that, I always expect someone to ask for an example of a better criticism of Scrum. But usually, no one asks and I move onto the next topic.

And since I think it's important to remain critical, I'd like to use this post to share one of my own criticisms of Scrum.

The strongest criticism I'd levy on Scrum is that many Scrum teams have become too focused on checking the boxes to say they are done with something, and less focused on finding innovative solutions to the problems they are handed.

Scrum in the mid-1990s (as I implemented it and saw it implemented back then) was all about finding innovative solutions. Teams were given a problem, and given a month (or four weeks) to solve the problem. With that much time, teams were able to try one or more potential breakthrough approaches before having to revert back to a safer, tried-and-true approach.

In today's version of Scrum, many teams have become overly obsessed with being able to say they finished everything they thought they would. This leads those teams to start with the safe approach. Many teams never try any wild ideas that could lead to truly innovative solutions.

I believe a great deal of this is the result of the move to shorter sprints, with two weeks being the

norm these days. Shorter sprints leave less time to recover if a promising but risky initial approach fails to pan out.

I'm willing to take my share of the "blame" for the prevalence of two-week sprints. I've certainly been vocal in my preference for that length (while remaining open to whatever is right for a given team). And, I still think two weeks is the right length for most teams. Two weeks is also my default, initial recommendation to a team until I know more about them.

So, as much good as a shift toward shorter sprints have done for Scrum teams, for many teams, it has come at the expense of creativity, experimentation and breakthrough ideas.

I don't think the answer is for all teams to instantly revert to four-week sprints. I think mature Scrum teams have found ways to balance the pressure to get things done with the benefits that come from occasionally pursuing long-shot ideas that sometimes pay off.

So, there's my biggest criticism of Scrum as I see it practiced today. What's yours? What problems do you see with Scrum as defined or as it's commonly practiced today?

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Tagged: sprinting, scrummaster, teams, meetings, agile problems
