

Separate Estimating from Committing

by Mike Cohn • 19 Comments

A fundamental and common problem in many organizations is that estimates and commitments are considered equivalent. A development team (agile or not) estimates that delivering a desired set of capabilities will take seven months with the available resources. Team members provide this estimate to their manager who passes the estimate along to a vice president who informs the client. And in some cases the estimate is cut along the way to provide the team with a “stretch goal.”

The problem here is not the team’s estimate of seven months is right or wrong. The problem is the estimate was turned into a commitment. “We estimate this will take seven months” was translated into “We commit to finishing in seven months.” Estimating and committing are both important, but they should be viewed as separate activities.

I need to pick up my daughter from swim practice tonight. I asked her what time she’d be done (which we defined as finished swimming, showered, and ready to go home). She said, “I should be ready by 5:15.” That was her estimate. If I had asked for a firm commitment—be outside the facility by the stated time or I’ll drive away without you—she might have committed to 5:25 to allow herself time to recover from any problems, such as a slightly longer practice, the coach’s watch being off by five minutes, a line at the showers, and so on. To determine a time she could commit to, my daughter would still have formed an estimate. But rather than telling me her estimate directly, she would have converted into it a deadline she could commit to.

Don't let your estimates become commitments. Remember the difference between an estimate and a commitment and keep the two activities separate, educating management and customers as necessary. I talk much more about agile estimating and committing in my new book, [*Succeeding with Agile*](#).

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