

The Daily Scrum

by Richard “Dick” Carlson



Introduction

Scrum is the most widely-applied Agile approach because it uses simple practices to manage software projects. The most important practice is the *Daily Scrum* (a.k.a *Daily Stand-up*). This short meeting is important because it serves as an effective means of team communication. The goal of the Daily Scrum is to establish a global snapshot of the project, discover any new dependencies, address any personal needs of committed individuals, and adjust the work plan in real time to the needs of the day.

How Daily Scrum Meetings Work

The team holds a Daily Scrum every sprint day. These meetings are often held at the same location and at the same time each work day. In my experience, I have found that Daily Scrums held in the morning help set the context for the day's work. All team members are required to attend the Daily Scrum, and the Scrum Master facilitates the meeting. Visitors are allowed to attend, but in a listening capacity only. This rule assures the Daily Scrums is executed effectively, as it was intended and finish without interruptions, and within the allotted time-box. The Daily Scrum meeting is an excellent way for a Scrum project team to disseminate status information. If you would like to hear current project status, this is the meeting to attend. However, I strongly recommend that you coordinate with the Scrum Master first before showing up.

During the Daily Scrum, each team member responds to the following three questions:

1. What did you do yesterday?
2. What are you planning to do next?
3. Do you have any impediments?

The Daily Scrum is not used as a problem-solving or issue resolution meeting. Issues that are raised are taken offline and usually dealt with by the relevant sub-group immediately after the Daily Scrum. Failures in Scrum are greatly attributed to the Daily Scrum. That is, not holding them daily or not at all.

By focusing on what each person has accomplished since the previous Scrum meeting and what they plan to accomplish next, the team gains an excellent understanding of completed work and remaining work. The Daily Scrum is not a status update meeting in which a boss is collecting information about who is behind schedule. Rather, it is a meeting in which team members make commitments to each other. If a team member says, "Today I plan to finish the data storage module," everyone knows that at the next Scrum meeting she will let everyone know whether or not the work is finished. This has the effect of helping teams understand the significance of these commitments and that their commitments are to each other.

There's an old Scrum fable about a conversation of commitment to a project or cause between a chicken and a pig. The cartoon version is shown below.



The joke is meant to illustrate the difference between those who are committed on a project and those who are only involved. Scrum affords special status to those who are committed and many teams enforce a rule in which only those who are committed are allowed to talk during the Daily Scrum.

Scrum Ground Rules

As with any other Scrum activity, a few ground rules are necessary to ensure Daily Scrum meetings are held as they should without interruption. The following rules are time tested and recommended as a starting point for all Agile Teams. Improvements to these rules should be made by the Team at the Sprint Retrospective.

1. Try to limit the time-boxed Daily Scrum meeting to 15 minutes.
2. Hold the Daily Scrum at the same location and at the same time every work day so that Team Members can depend on showing up at the same place and at the same time.
3. Daily Scrums conducted the first thing in the morning seems most favorable, because it's the first thing Team Members do upon arriving at work.
 - a. Allow Team Members to choose the time that is most convenient for them.
4. All Team Members must attend.
 - a. If for some reason a Team Member cannot attend in person, the absent member should try to attend by phone or have another Team Member report what the absent Team Member has completed and what he plans to do next.
5. Team Members must be prompt.
 - a. The Scrum Master starts the meeting at the appointed time.
7. The Scrum Master begins the meeting by starting with the person immediately to his left, and proceeding counterclockwise around the room until everyone has communicated to the team.
8. Each Team Member should limit their response to the three questions asked.
 - a. There should not be any digression into solutions, issues, discussions of problems, or gossip.
 - b. The Scrum Master is responsible for quickly moving the communication from person to person.
 - c. During the Daily Scrum, only one person talks at a time; the person reporting her status.
 - d. Everyone else listens. There are no side conversations.

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9. When a Team Member reports something that is of interest to other Team Members or needs the assistance of other Team Members, anyone can immediately arrange for all interested parties to get together after the Daily Scrum.
10. People who are not Team Members attending the Daily Scrum meeting are not allowed to talk, make observations, make faces, or otherwise make their presence in the Daily Scrum meeting obtrusive.
 - a. They may stand on the periphery of the Team so as not to interfere with the meeting.
 - b. If too many attend the meeting, the Scrum Master may limit attendance so that the meeting remains focused and orderly.
 - c. Talking with team members during the Daily Scrum is not allowed. Discussions must be deferred until after the meeting.
11. Anyone who cannot or will not conform to these rules may be excluded from the meeting.

Does the Daily Scrum have to be so strict?

Can these rules be customized? Absolutely!! Not every team is small enough to keep such a meeting to a 15-minute maximum. Don't be afraid to experiment. Extend the time as necessary to allow for your larger team to complete its Daily Scrum, but restrict each Team Member's response time. If your team is not co-located, factor in the different time zones and allow the Team to decide what time works best for them. Avoid dictating to the Team what time it should be conducted. This is their meeting.

Can (or should) management attend? Well, that depends. Scrum tells us that managers should not be allowed to attend Daily Scrums because their presence may affect or otherwise restrict responses from some team members. For example, a team member may not identify an impediment that is caused by an attending manager. Intimidation or fear of reprisals may also be a deterrent. Should this be the case, discuss the importance of the Daily Scrum with the manager and get them to commit to the basic rules. If they continue to be disruptive, then speak to their manager and ban them from attending the meeting.

Can the Daily Scrum be facilitated by someone other than the Scrum Master? There are times when even the Scrum Master cannot attend due to illness or a schedule conflict. In this case, a designated and responsible Team Member appointed by the Scrum Master should facilitate the meeting—just as the Scrum Master would. Make sure that everyone knows who this person is to avoid delays and a waste of time.

Team Members respond only to the three questions and do not digress into solutions, issues, design problems, or gossip. What happens from that point on is amazing. First, everyone hears what all other Team Members have attempted or completed. Next, they hear what each member is going to work on next. Finally, everyone is alerted to potential problems, issues, obstacles, and any new risks identified.

How to ensure a successful Scrum meeting

The Scrum Master has three primary responsibilities in addition to facilitating the Daily Stand-up meeting:

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1. The Scrum Master needs to know what tasks have been completed, what tasks have started, any new tasks that have been discovered, and any estimates that may have changed. This makes it possible to update the sprint burndown chart and Sprint Taskboard that shows the cumulative work remaining day-by-day. The Scrum Master must also look carefully at the number of open tasks in progress. Work in progress needs to be minimized to achieve lean productivity gains.
2. The Scrum Master needs to identify dependencies and obstacles, which are impediments to the Scrum Team. These impediments should be prioritized and tracked. A mitigation strategy should be identified and implemented for impediments, as appropriate, in prioritized order. Some impediments can be resolved by the Team, some can be resolved across multiple teams, and others will need management involvement as they may be organizational issues that block all teams from achieving their sprint goals.
3. The Scrum Master may notice personal problems or conflicts within the Scrum that need resolution. These need to be clarified by the Scrum Master and resolved by dialogue within the team, or the Scrum Master may need help from management.

So, what can go wrong?

There are some who feel the Daily Scrum meeting is a waste of time, and although the meeting that is time-boxed at 15-minutes or less, they feel that meetings that last an hour or more are better. Lengthy meetings are a waste, because work is not being done during meetings. The longest meeting in Scrum is the Sprint Planning meeting that is conducted on the first day of every new sprint. The Sprint Planning meeting is necessary to determine what needs to be completed during the sprint, and how it will be built. A 15-minute communication interchange among team peers is not a waste of time. There's a logical reason why the Daily Scrum is sometimes called a Daily Stand-up meeting: it's conducted every day (hence the term "Daily"); and everyone is required to stand up, because it's a short meeting and the team goes back to work as soon as it is over (in 15-minutes or less).

Any impediments that are raised become the Scrum Master's responsibility to resolve as quickly as possible. Typical impediments are:

- “My ____ broke and I need a new one today.”
- “I still haven't got the software I ordered a month ago.”
- “I need help debugging a problem with ____.”
- “I'm struggling to learn ____ and would like to pair with someone on it.”
- “I can't get the vendor's technical support group to call me back.”
- “Our new contractor can't start because no one is here to sign her contract.”
- “I can't get the ____ group to give me any time and I need to meet with them.”
- “The department VP has asked me to work on something else "for a few days.”

In cases where the Scrum Master cannot remove these impediments directly himself (e.g., usually the more technical issues), he still takes responsibility for making sure someone on the team quickly resolves the issue.

Conclusion

The intent of the Daily Scrum meeting is to allow the Team to communicate and coordinate spontaneously amongst themselves. It is not a status meeting for the benefit of the Scrum Master, Product Owner, or Project Manager. The Daily Scrum enables Team Members to speak freely and openly with the goal of completing work and improving their work practices.

References

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About the Author

Dick Carlson has an extensive engineering background that includes many years of practical knowledge and hands-on experience in the implementation and deployment of Agile, Lean, and Scrum values and principles in communications-electronics engineering, software engineering, and systems engineering within the aerospace, DoD, IT, and industry domains. He has developed and actively conducted comprehensive training courses for Scrum Teams, Scrum Masters, Product Owners, project/program managers, customers, executives, organizational leaders, and others interested in learning how to implement and deploy Agile, Lean, and Scrum.

Recently retired from Boeing, Dick has been an active transformational leader for many small and large Agile projects, and frequently shares his experiences of successful Agile implementation at conferences, workshops and symposia. He regularly counsels executives and leaders on the benefits of using Agile, actively coach's teams on Scrum and Lean-Agile Project Management fundamentals, and then follows up with mentoring activities to ensure successful project implementation.

Mr. Carlson has a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland, and is a Certified Scrum Professional, Certified Scrum Master, and Certified Scrum Product Owner, and holds a Lean-Agile Project Management certification. Mr. Carlson has presented Agile topics at Software Technology Conferences every year since 2010.