The Scrum Taskboard

by Richard "Dick" Carlson

Introduction

Scrum is the most widely-applied Agile approach because it uses simple practices to manage software projects. Probably the most effective information radiator used to communicate by Scrum teams is the *taskboard*. The taskboard is also referred to as a *Kanban,* project, or Scrum board. Scrum teams use the taskboard to show decomposed work committed for a sprint. Its straightforward design and appearance makes the taskboard simple to read and easy to determine the team's health during the sprint.

How the Taskboard Works

The taskboard is a simple tool that can be used by any team with work commitments. The taskboard is most useful if it is collocated with the team, because team members can gather around the taskboard to collaborate. There are many variations of the taskboard–any of which are suitable for a project team. Tasks are shown as cards or Post It Notes that consist of work activities decomposed from features, feature sets, or user stories estimated to take two days or less to complete. Information on the task is limited to the space provided and includes the related feature or user story, work details, who is working the task, the date work on the task started, and an estimate in hours to complete the task.

While we are on the topic of team metrics and productivity, it is a good idea to locate the sprint burn down chart next to the taskboard so the team and others can see progress in action. I cannot emphasize the following point strong enough, but I'll say it anyway; *set up the team taskboard where the team meets*. Place the taskboard so that the team will be able to see it without interference several times each day. Make sure there is enough wall space for the entire team to stand around the taskboard and update their tasks, as necessary.

The Taskboard Aligns with Scrum Values

I like and have lived the Scrum values for a long time. When I train people and project teams, I emphasize Scrum values and cite clear examples. The Scrum values that align with the purpose and application of the Scrum taskboard are Commitment, Focus, and Openness.

- **Commitment** – Commitment is our willingness to dedicate ourselves to a goal and to do our best to meet that goal.
  - o Scrum teams are dedicated and motivate to complete and implement project goals. The taskboard is a sounding board of information that provides overt and honest status.

- **Focus** – We concentrate on and are answerable for doing the things that we have committed ourselves to do, rather than allowing ourselves to become distracted or diverted.
  - o Project commitments made by Scrum teams are realized by the dynamics of the taskboard every working day, and since team members are dedicated full-time to the goals of the project, distractions are minimized by converging on the work tasks shown on the taskboard.

- **Openness** – Scrum keeps everything about a project visible to everyone.

- o As the most effective information radiator used in Scrum, the taskboard ensures that this value is upheld through daily Scrum meetings. Completed tasks and tasks selected for the next work day are reflected on the taskboard during the daily Scrum. Visitors and onlookers can see this immediately, and the majority of their curiosities and questions are most apparent when they understand the ongoing work displayed on the taskboard.

Types of Taskboards

There are many ways to build a taskboard. During the last 10 years of coaching teams, I constructed several types of taskboards that were used by both collocated and distributed teams.

Tasks should be written on 3" x 5" Super Sticky Post It Note for optimum adhesion that will last two or three weeks. An alternative to the sticky notes are 3" x 5" collaboration cards, which will need tape or push pins to stick to the board. A typical task might read as the example below.

		Release 3, Sprint 2
Task Description:		
Code the login screen, write test cases and test scripts, and then run the tests		
Initiated by:	Verified by & date:	Implemented by:
DJC	*TA – 5/22/2014*	*SM*
Estimate: 8 hrs		Actual completion time: 7.5 hrs

Several types of physical taskboards are described below.

1. The first type of physical taskboard and the cheapest and easiest are built using plotter paper or Post It® tabletop sheets. Both versions require Scotch tape, push pins or tacks, and a medium black marker or Sharpie pen. I have constructed dozens of paper taskboards, and both are easy to build.
   a. Start by tearing off a 6 foot length of plotter paper or by taping three Post It® tabletop sheets together and then mounting to the wall where the team can see and stand around it. The examples below are similar and effective. The difference is the addition of the story first. My recommendation is try one, then the other to determine which works best for the team. Let the team decide which they prefer.
   b. The horizontal and vertical lines are made with a Sharpie pen to separate the stages of work in progress and keep work tasks separate from each story. Don't get too artistic; there are no prizes to be won in the construction of a taskboard.

    c. Another suggestion is to use the same color sticky notes for tasks related to a story. I've also seen some teams use a specific Post It Note color for each member of the team. Either method can be tried by the team. Improvements can be made at the sprint retrospective.


2. The second type of physical taskboard is a cork board or a blank wall. Taskboards made from cork must be built by hand or purchased ready-to-use. Unless you or members of your team possess the requisite skills to construct a cork board, the better alternative would be to purchase them. They are reasonably priced and can be set up for use in a very short length of time. Examples of taskboards made from cork or a wall are shown below.
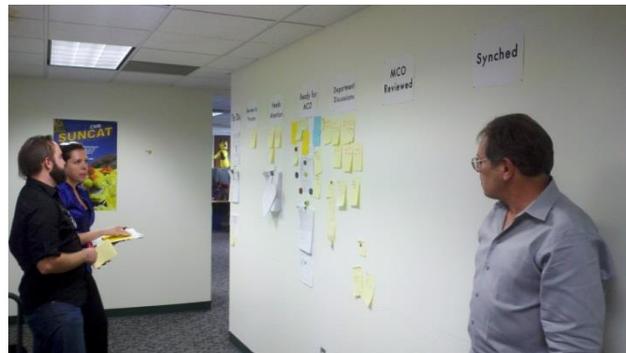
3. The third type and most expensive physical taskboard is the flat-screen monitor. I've seen several monitors supported by applications that display all parts of a taskboard in which team members can easily modify to update the status of work progress. Taskboard monitors must be connected to a computer, include an application that supports taskboard maintenance (e.g. MS PowerPoint) which can and should be controlled by the team. Distributed team members can be accessed to the application and allowed editing privileges to maintain their tasks.
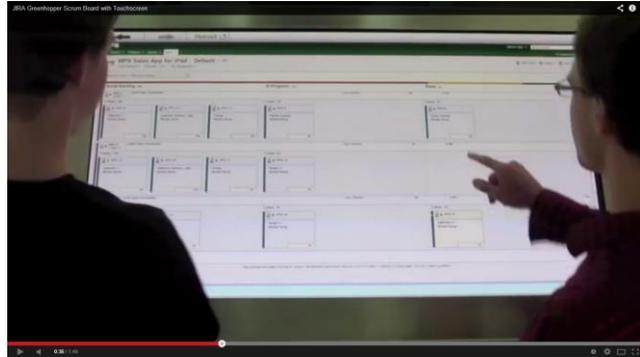
Conclusion

As mentioned in this paper, the taskboard is an excellent information radiator for the team and anyone interested in knowing the status of work during a sprint. The taskboard communicates:

- The team's commitments
- What is "Done"
- What the team is currently working on
- Whether the team is working on the right things
- Whether the team is really working together (collaborating)
- Whether the team is working on too many tasks (multi-tasking)
- What each member of the team must work on next

The aforementioned can be discussed during a status meeting, but why waste the team's time by holding a meeting that prevents them from working on their tasks?

About the Author

Dick Carlson has been an active Agile transformational leader for many small and large projects, and has frequently shared his experiences of successful Agile, Lean, and Scrum implementations at conferences, workshops, and symposia, and regularly advises executives and organizational leaders on the cost, quality, and schedule benefits of using those initiatives and techniques. He has actively coached teams for more than 20 years on Agile and Lean Project Management fundamentals, and follows up with mentoring activities to ensure successful project execution. Dick has also provided concentrated Agile coaching support and led many organizations, programs, and projects that varied in size from six to more than 2,000 engineers, and that ranged in costs from under $50,000 to more than $1.4B.

Dick used Scrum practices and principles to manage and form the start-up of the Agile & Lean Education Associates (ALEA) Company that began July 2013. He continues to share his practical knowledge of Agile, Lean, and Scrum through more than two decades of experience by means of Agile and Lean training and the right amount of coaching to companies and other activities that want to increase their competitive advantage. The ALEA Company website (http://www.a2zalea.com) provides information about who we are and what we do.