

MASTERING PROFESSIONAL SCRUM


**A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO OVERCOMING CHALLENGES
AND MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS OF AGILITY**



**STEPHANIE OCKERMAN
SIMON REINDL**

Forewords by **KEN SCHWABER & DAVE WEST**



The Professional Scrum Series by  Scrum.org

Mastering Professional Scrum

HOW DO SCRUM TEAMS COLLABORATE?

A self-organizing, cross-functional team needs to learn how to collaborate. To do that, team members need to invest in building “collaborative assets.” Five assets help teams reap the benefits of effective collaboration:¹⁰

- Trust
- Productive conflict
- Commitment
- Accountability
- Shared goals and outcomes

These assets, as depicted in Figure 2-4, build upon one another. If you don’t have trust, it will be impossible to have the other four assets. If you don’t have productive conflict, it will be impossible to have commitment, accountability, and shared goals. And so on for each asset.



Figure 2-4 These assets form building blocks for effective team collaboration.

Trust, in this context, means willingness to be vulnerable with one’s fellow team members, such as willingness to admit a mistake or ask for help. When team members trust each other, they are open to productive conflict: They are

10. If you have read Patrick Lencioni’s leadership fable *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), these assets may seem familiar. In his highly acclaimed book, Lencioni presents five dysfunctions. Here we focus on the opposite of these dysfunctions—that is, the assets of collaborative teams.

willing to challenge each other, to challenge assumptions, and to be open to and share what they think may be wild and crazy ideas.¹¹

In Practice: Building Trust

Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable, a willingness to make something important to you be vulnerable to the actions of others. People who work in an atmosphere of trust can collaborate productively, enabling things to get done faster and at a lower cost. Conversely, when trust is absent, business slows down and costs rise as people spend more time trying to protect themselves against those whom they cannot trust.¹²

There is no one sure way to build trust, and there are countless ways to destroy it. We see trust as an ongoing journey that is more about consistency in how you show up in your relationships and interactions. This journey is never complete, and you can easily move backward. Here are some techniques that we use to build trust:¹³

- *Go first.* You may need to be the one to give trust first before you have it returned. Be vulnerable to show others it is okay to be vulnerable. Ask for help. Admit your mistakes.
- *Be willing to say no.* When you overcommit, you put yourself at risk for not following through and negatively impacting others. You can be perceived as unreliable.
- *Assume positive intent.* Do your best to always assume positive intent about another person's actions or words. While it may be appropriate to address a situation when someone's actions or words have had negative outcomes, have that conversation assuming the person had good intentions. This helps you address the conflict, resolve issues, and come to a better understanding of each other while showing you trust the other person.
- *Avoid gossiping.* Talking about people is often perceived as an easy way to make conversation and bond with others. However, the unintended consequence is that it makes you appear to be untrustworthy. If you talk about someone and share something that person told you in confidence with me, how do I know that you wouldn't do the same with something I told you in confidence?

11. For more on this topic, see <https://www.agilesocks.com/build-trust-enable-agility/>.

12. *The Speed of Trust* by Stephen M. R. Covey (Free Press, 2008).

13. For a deeper insight into building trust, see <https://brenebrown.com/videos/anatomy-trust-video/>.

- *Match your words to your actions.* Make sure that you live up to what you profess to believe is important. If you tell your team that sustainable pace is important, yet you work long hours and answer emails on the weekends, there is a misalignment between your stated beliefs and your actions.
- *Be open and honest with people.* Creating an environment in which people can be open and honest about their feelings, their concerns, and their desires is essential for trust. You may have to go first, leading by example. When creating working agreements, ask team members what agreements they need to be open and honest with each other.
- *When you make mistakes, share the learning.* Rather than focusing on blaming (or worse, shaming), help everyone recognize that every mistake is a learning opportunity. Encourage team members to share their own learning opportunities with the team. You may have to go first, leading by example. Refer to your own mistakes when teaching moments arise.
- *Get to know each other as people.* Encourage team members to see each other as people with rich experiences and full lives beyond the office. Create situations that help people bond over their personal stories. You may sensitively ask about family, friends, hobbies, or interests. Consider starting by sharing personal information about yourself first.

Conflict, in this context, means using conflict in productive ways to generate new ideas and explore different solutions. Effective teams use the diverse perspectives of their members to constructively challenge and improve solutions. Passionate arguments, when conducted with mutual respect and while seeking the best possible outcome, are sometimes the catalyst that enables breakthrough solutions. Productive conflict involves questioning the status quo, challenging assumptions, and overcoming limiting beliefs.

In Practice: Navigating the Conflict Spectrum

Once team members trust one another, they can exploit the power of productive conflict. Sometimes the team may even want to seek out conflict to deal with complex issues, whereas at other times they will want to defuse conflict.

So how does a team know if conflict is productive? When conflict exists because team members have different viewpoints but still share a common commitment to achieving the best outcomes for their customers, stakeholders, and organization. If conflict makes you a little uncomfortable, keep in mind that positive conflict always emerges from a desire to change for the better.

It helps to understand your own natural response to conflict, which is an element of your personality. It's not right or wrong; it's simply a preference. You may choose to override that initial preference, if you are aware of it.¹⁴

Conflict tends to escalate in a graduated way. It may start with simple differences in perspectives and ideas. Perhaps personal factors and environmental factors might then contribute to conflict progressing in ways that are driven by a need to protect oneself, to be validated, or to uphold deeply ingrained belief systems. Also, people may turn to techniques such as forming coalitions, undermining, or even threatening. What is important is to recognize the level of conflict and respond in ways that move people toward a shared commitment to seek the best possible outcomes.

Being able to engage in and resolve conflict productively is important for self-organizing teams. Some teams may need help in the form of learning how to engage in productive conflict. Other teams may need help with facilitating the de-escalation of unhealthy conflict. And in some cases (e.g., harassment, risk of physical or emotional harm), immediate action may be needed to intervene, separate, and take appropriate steps.¹⁵

14. The Thomas–Kilman Instrument (TKI) is one tool for understanding conflict response modes.

15. We encourage you to look for additional resources to understand models for conflict. We will offer two to explore here, but keep in mind that the best model is one that helps you and your team engage in productive conflict. While Speed Leas applied his Levels of Conflict model in religious organizations, it has been embraced in the agile community and written about here: <https://dzone.com/articles/agile-managing-conflict>. Another model to consider is Friedrich Glasl's nine-stage model of conflict escalation: <https://www.mediate.com/articles/jordan.cfm>.

Commitment, in this context, means that once the team resolves conflicts and reaches consensus, team members are committed to the decision because they perceive that their ideas and perspectives are respected by their fellow team members. We often use the phrase “disagree and commit” to reflect that team members may still hold to their own opinions, but they commit to their fellow team members to respect the team’s decision.

In Practice: Facilitating Consensus

The consensus techniques described here are ways to gather quick and transparent data about where a team stands on a decision. Here are a few examples of when these techniques could be used:

- To determine the Sprint events schedule.
- To confirm the Development Team’s agreement on the Sprint Goal and the Sprint Backlog.
- During collaboration sessions for design or architecture approaches.
- In Product Backlog refinement sessions to determine how to break down features/functions into smaller PBIs and/or how and when to run experiments for feedback and learning.

The assumption when you use these techniques is that sufficient discussion has already happened to ensure everyone’s ideas have been explored for shared understanding, and everyone has been heard.

Fist of Five is a consensus technique that allows groups of people to quickly understand where they agree or disagree. People indicate their level of support by holding up one hand and indicating a number. It may take a few rounds of discussion and check-in to reach a consensus-based decision. You can use time-boxes to help keep the discussions focused and avoid getting into analysis paralysis.¹⁶

16. For more information, see Jean Tabaka’s book *Collaboration Explained: Facilitation Skills for Software Project Leaders* (Addison-Wesley Professional, 2006).

Roman Voting is derived from how the Romans indicated their will in the gladiatorial arena. With this technique, people indicate their level of support with a thumbs-up, thumbs-sideways, or thumbs-down gesture:

- Thumbs-up means *I support this*.
- Thumbs-sideways means *I will go along with the will of the group*.
- Thumbs-down means *I do not support this and wish to address the group*.

If all thumbs are down or all thumbs are up, you have quite clear consensus. In case of a mixed vote, be sure to allow people with thumbs-down to speak. Be cautious of decisions where all thumbs are sideways because the group may have some artificial harmony or unhealthy conflict that needs to be explored at a deeper level.¹⁷

Accountability, in this context, means that team members hold each other accountable for the commitments they have made. It takes courage to challenge a fellow team member for not upholding commitments. Because accountability is built on trust, along with the knowledge that everyone shares the same goals, the inherent conflict in these conversations is defused and channeled toward productive discussions about how to move forward.

Team members holding each other accountable is more effective than management holding teams accountable. This is also why commitment is the building block that leads to holding each other accountable. Team members will feel more accountable for their *own* commitments than for commitments others make on their behalf.

When team members are willing to hold each other accountable, they enable the team to set and meet higher standards. This could show up as higher quality, better solutions, greater learning, and more innovation.

When there is accountability within a team, it is then possible to focus on shared goals and outcomes.

17. <https://www.mountaingoatsoftware.com/blog/four-quick-ways-to-gain-or-assess-team-consensus>