# THE SCRUM ANTI-PATTERNS GUIDE

## CHALLENGES EVERY SCRUM TEAM FACES AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM



**STEFAN WOLPERS**

*Forewords by* **DAVE WEST** & **JANNA BASTOW**

Stefan Wolpers has a remarkable ability to highlight underlying traps and issues for stakeholders, teams, and process. In *The Scrum Anti-Patterns Guide*, Wolpers documents sources of waste and frustration, an amazing compendium of typical ways progress becomes blocked. Depressing! He doesn't leave us there though. He also recommends insightful remedies. Uplifting!

—*Diana Larsen, speaker, advisor, author at dianalarsen.com*

This book is an invaluable treasure for every Scrum practitioner as it shows not only what can (and does) go wrong in Scrum teams, but also how to avoid and overcome these traps. Stefan shares his in-depth experience and provides concrete tips to help the whole Scrum team grow.

—*Jutta Eckstein, coauthor of* Company-Wide Agility with Beyond Budgeting, Open Space & Sociocracy

Stefan Wolpers' comprehensive collection of common Scrum anti-patterns is a great resource for anybody who wants to improve their application of Scrum and fully leverage the framework. Highly recommended!

—*Roman Pichler, author of* Agile Product Management with Scrum

There is so much potential with Scrum that sadly ends up wasted because teams misuse the process. Wolpers does a masterful job of identifying the anti-patterns that cause this waste and points out exactly how to overcome each one. This is a must-have book for all Scrum practitioners.

—*Jeff Gothelf, author of* Lean UX *and* Sense & Respond

The first step to fixing a problem is acknowledging you have a problem. Stefan Wolpers' wonderful book is the ultimate compendium of Scrum anti-patterns. After exposing common Scrum problems, the book serves as a cunning companion that masterfully guides you to transcend the dysfunctions it lays bare.

—*Maarten Dalmijn, author of* Driving Value with Sprint Goals

## 6. Steering Committee Meetings

*Observation:* Unimpressed by the agile ways of working, the stakeholders insist on continuing the biweekly steering meetings to ensure that the Scrum Team will deliver all their requirements on time.

*Background:* Scrum does not comprise a steering committee because it focuses on self-managing teams and direct accountability. The Product Owner is the individual in charge of product-related decisions, using their profound understanding of problem and solution space to formulate and communicate a Product Goal, which is reflected in the composition and the ordering of the Product Backlog. Consequently, the absence of a steering committee streamlines decision-making and negates the delay caused by seeking agreement from numerous parties, which is beneficial in a complex environment.

Stakeholders may insist on steering meetings due to fear of change, lack of understanding of agile principles, distrust in the Scrum Team, misaligned objectives, ambiguity over accountability, and concerns about transparency. These reasons typically stem from comfort in familiar processes and apprehension toward self-management and direct responsibility in Scrum. In this respect, the motivation for this anti-pattern overlaps with other reasons stated earlier.

*Remedy:* You can accelerate the pending change in your organization by multiple practices; for example:

- Educating stakeholders on Scrum's principles
- Sharing success stories from other organizations
- Fostering trust between stakeholders and the Scrum Team by regularly delivering valuable Increments
- Increasing transparency through Scrum events
- Challenging previous "valuable requirements" with data regarding their real value

If necessary, you can propose a gradual reduction of steering committee meetings while increasing the Scrum Team's autonomy, demonstrating the benefits of this shift over time. This approach aims to empower the team while building trust, not to eliminate oversight. Call it an incremental approach to introducing Scrum.

### 7. Talking to Customers Is Off Limits

*Observation:* The sales organization and other functional silos guard the direct access to customers, thus preventing the Scrum Teams from learning directly from customers.

*Background:* The sales organization probably deems direct contact of Scrum Team members with customers too risky (for their sales plans) and prevents it from happening.

The problem is that filtering feedback from customers mainly results in a limited understanding of the customer's situation on the side of the Scrum Team. Furthermore, due to a likely lack of technical competence on the side of the sales organization, critical information regarding potential solutions may never reach the Scrum Team, thus limiting its ability to tailor a solution to the customer's needs.

You may ask yourself why stakeholders such as the salespeople prevent Scrum Team members from directly communicating with customers. There are some possible reasons beyond the usual misunderstanding or principles or lack of trust; for example:

- **Fear of losing control:** Sales teams, used to being gatekeepers of client communication, may fear losing control or relevance if the Scrum Team interacts directly with the customers. They might feel threatened that their roles could be marginalized if the customers start getting comfortable interacting with the Scrum Team.
- **Misalignment of goals:** Salespeople typically focus on closing deals and hitting quotas. They may worry that if Developers interact directly with the customers, it might lead to promises or discussions that don't align with the sales strategies or targets.
- **Concern over professionalism and communication skills:** Sales teams may believe Developers lack the communication skills or industry knowledge to interact effectively with customers. They may worry about technical jargon alienating the customer or that Developers might inadvertently share sensitive project information.
- **Risk aversion:** Sales teams may also worry that direct contact could lead to the exposure of internal processes or conflicts that could damage customer relationships or increase customer expectations.

*Remedy:* To become an effective product creation organization, it is essential that Scrum Team members directly communicate with customers regularly. But how can you persuade stakeholders that fostering a direct dialogue between Scrum Team members and customers is a win-win situation where Developers gain immediate insight into customer challenges?

Here are a few strategies to accomplish this goal beyond generally educating the stakeholder on agile practices and principles:

- **Facilitate joint meetings:** Initially, you can propose joint meetings where salespeople and the Scrum Team interact with customers. This approach can help alleviate fears and build trust over time while ensuring the Scrum Team gets the necessary insights.
- **Develop communication skills:** Encourage Scrum Team members to improve their communication skills, for example, by employing a communication trainer. A team that can communicate well can reassure stakeholders that they can handle direct customer interactions appropriately.
- **Respect boundaries:** Ensure that the Scrum Team understands and respects the boundaries of customer interaction, which can help alleviate the fears of stakeholders. For instance, the Scrum Team should realize that they shouldn't promise customers product features or delivery timelines but instead should refer them to the Product Owner.
- **Regular updates:** Propose a feedback loop where the Scrum Team regularly reports to the stakeholders about customer interactions, what team members learned, and how it impacts the work. This transparency can build trust and assure stakeholders that the process works as intended.

## SPRINT ANTI-PATTERNS OF THE IT MANAGEMENT

Those stakeholders closest to the Scrum Teams—the IT management—also display some anti-patterns.

### 8. All Hands to the Pumps without Scrum

*Observation:* The management temporarily abandons Scrum in a critical situation; see Figure 4.4.
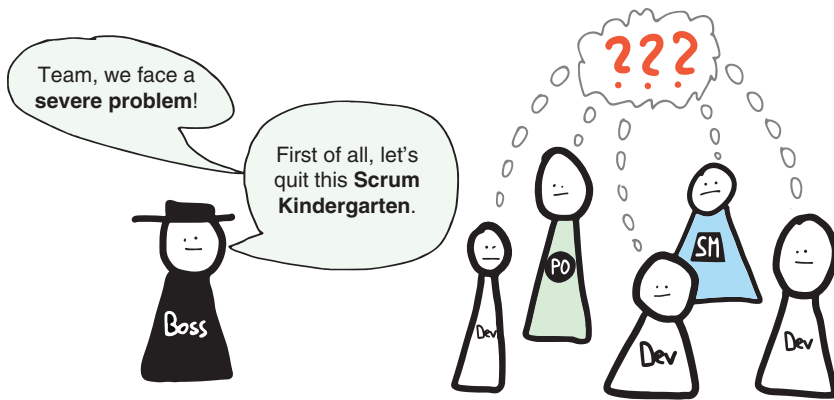
**Figure 4.4** All too common: Abandoning Scrum in a moment of crisis instead of trusting the Scrum Team to identify a solution.

*Background:* This is a classic manifestation of disbelief in agile practices, fed by command-and-control thinking. Instead, canceling the Sprint and gathering the Scrum Teams would likely solve the issue.

However, managers may be tempted to pull rank in such a situation for several reasons; for example:

- **Bias for action:** In a lack of patience, managers may tend toward immediate action in crises, feeling that Scrum's empirical, self-managed process slows response time.
- **Fear of personal failure:** Managers may believe failure is more likely without exercising control, considering traditional command-and-control methods and clear communication structures are more reliable.
- **Misunderstanding of Scrum:** Misconceptions about Scrum can lead managers to abandon it under pressure, considering it incompatible with crisis management.
- **Influence of power structures:** Hierarchical power structures might prompt managers to seize control in crisis situations, neglecting Scrum's self-management principle.

*Remedy:* There is no shortcut to overcoming this anti-pattern. Pointing to the Scrum Guide in a situation where your line manager probably fears for their career will accomplish nothing. Instead, cultural change requires time and perseverance. Here are some approaches that may help:

- **Highlight Scrum's empiricism:** Show that Scrum's flexibility, inspection, and adaptation mechanisms are particularly effective in managing crises.
- **Foster trust:** Help managers build trust in Scrum Teams' ability to self-manage, including during crises. Showcase examples where Scrum Teams effectively handled crises.
- **Engage management:** Involve managers in Scrum events such as Reviews and Retrospectives to help them better understand Scrum's effectiveness and the team's capabilities.
- **Emphasize learning from failure:** Reinforce that failure is a part of the learning process in Scrum and a valuable source of insights for improvement.

### 9. Reassigning Team Members

*Observation:* The management moves team members from one Scrum Team to another.

See Chapter 5, anti-pattern 23, for a detailed description.

### 10. Team Autonomy Undermined

*Observation:* A manager assigns specific tasks directly to Developers, thus bypassing the Product Owner and ignoring the Developers' self-management prerogative. Alternatively, the manager removes a Developer from a team to work on such a task.

See Chapter 5, anti-pattern 24, for a detailed description.

## Incentivized Scrum Stakeholder Anti-Patterns

There are numerous ways in which stakeholders can impede the progress of a product team. Five of the most common ones are listed in this section.

### 11. "My Budget" Syndrome

*Observation:* Stakeholders do not pitch for a Scrum Team's attention but claim that they allocate "their" budget on feature requests as they see fit, ignoring the Product Owner's prerogative to define Product Goals and manage Product Backlogs.

*Background:* As mentioned before, the Product Owner is the one who handles all decisions about the *product*. They use their deep understanding of the issues and

potential solutions to create and share a Product Goal, which is visible in the makeup and order of the Product Backlog. Effectively, Scrum separates budgetary authority from making product decisions.

Conversely, the "My Budget" Syndrome anti-pattern attempts to preserve that product decision-making authority on the side of the stakeholders, defying Scrum's purpose and leading to the pursuit of local optima at a silo or departmental level. Here, stakeholders may be guided by a fear of losing control, a lack of understanding of agile practices, siloed thinking, traditional performance metrics, and a general lack of trust in Scrum Teams. Often, this effect can be observed in organizations that tie additional benefits or incentives to the individual stakeholder. (Note: Pet projects also fall into this category.)

*Remedy:* Generally, product development capacity needs to be allocated in the spirit of optimizing the return on investment for the whole organization. Scrum supports this approach by separating the budgetary from the product decision-making authority.

To counter this anti-pattern, you could consider initiating the following actions:

- **Change advocates:** Identify and work with champions within the stakeholders who understand and support the Scrum approach. They can help influence their peers to accept the change.
- **Incremental change:** Encourage stakeholders to gradually relinquish control over a few small-scale projects to observe how Scrum functions and build trust in the process.
- **Education and training:** Facilitate workshops to explain the role of the Product Owner and the concept of self-managing teams to stakeholders. Show how Scrum decentralizes decision-making, leading to more customer-centric, profitable products.
- **Promote collaboration:** Encourage regular interactions between stakeholders and the Scrum Team. Invite stakeholders to Sprint Reviews to give them a voice, include them in the decision-making process, and generally help them see the value created by the team.
- **Realign metrics and incentives:** Work with the people management or other relevant departments to re-evaluate and redesign performance metrics and incentives that align with Scrum principles, encouraging cooperation.