



The Importance of Working Toward a Sprint Goal

Adapted from Brian Bozzuto's blog "What's in a Sprint Goal?"

Scrum teams work together to decide what amount of work to pull into the sprint. To do this, the Product Owner prioritizes the Product Backlog, from which the team pulls user stories into the Sprint Backlog. By pulling in these stories, the team commits to do these stories to the best of their ability. It is often the case that the team doesn't complete all of the stories in the backlog and that's okay: it opens up the discussion about why the team pulled in so much work. Was a story unclear or did it neglect certain technical considerations that eat up time and brain power? Did urgent work pop up and compete for the team's valuable attention? Or perhaps the team simply isn't really clear on the amount of work it can predictably finish in a sprint.

In all of these examples, adopting a sprint goal can help the team collaborate more closely to ensure the completion of a specific task, for example, releasing a feature.

WHO NEEDS SPRINT GOALS

Certain types of novice teams in particular benefit from committing to sprint goals:

THE UNDISCIPLINED TEAM

Agile requires a tremendous amount of discipline and many teams may struggle at first to operate in a consistently disciplined fashion, paying close attention to detail and seeing tasks through to completion. Maybe the team is “basically done” with everything but still has lingering tasks that bleed over into the next sprint. Or perhaps they say they’re done but there are bugs in the release. In this case, a clear commitment to complete work, and follow through by the ScrumMaster or other voice of conscience within the team is a critical factor in helping the team hold themselves to a higher standard.

THE FEARFUL TEAM

Sometimes teams are afraid that, with a single missed commitment, they will incur the wrath of managers who want to understand “What went wrong?” Of course, this is a tell for a bigger problem: managers or other stakeholders obsessing over single data points when the trend is most important. The negative impact this can have upon a team is that they consistently undercommit and are unable to improve for fear of not being able to meet expectations. In this case, the team can set two goals: a conservative goal for external stakeholders and a stretch goal to help them improve their productivity.

THE AMBITIOUS TEAM

Some teams want to impress, committing to much work but delivering much less. The risk here is that, in an attempt to get an incredible amount of work done and look good in the process, they over extend and end up failing to deliver the full amount. This affects the business’ confidence in the team’s ability both to deliver and to estimate what they are likely to deliver.

In all three of these team types, sprint goals can help by pulling everyone together under a single banner. It encourages team members to hold themselves and each other accountable for their commitments. With the help of a good coach, these teams can recognize their weaknesses and correct their postures to achieve high-performance—which in turn results in high business confidence and high intra and inter-team esteem.

GUIDELINES FOR COMMITTING TO SPRINT GOALS

Now that we know what a sprint goal is and how it benefits teams, here are a few guidelines for committing to them:

It's the trend that matters, not a single data point.

Some people obsess over a single sprint where the team missed its commitment or wildly over delivered. But this could be normal variation. Even the best teams overachieve some sprints and underachieve in others. The main thing is that the trend line consistent and, if possible, rising. However, if the trend indicates stagnant performance, declining velocity or wild performance variation, then there is probably something you need to investigate to understand what's going on.

Distinguish between "must do" commitments versus "nice to have" commitments.

Agile teams strive to failure early in order to improve long-term performance. Not every sprint will have critical sprint goals, but some will. Make sure teams understand which commitments are critical to project success and which contribute to the team's delivery baseline. It may be helpful for the team to have two commitments: "We commit to delivering these features to the business, and we commit to ourselves to do our best in delivering these additional ones as well this sprint".

Allow for adjustments up or down, even mid-sprint.

Sometimes it becomes clear early on in a sprint that the team won't be able to keep some commitments because of unforeseen circumstances. Similarly, the team may have anticipated that delivering a feature is more difficult than it actually was, and the sprint suddenly seems light. In these cases, make sure the team can adjust their sprint load up or down in response to this new data.

Talk to the team about the implications of team commitment.

The team makes commitments to build confidence and predictability with the business and to form a baseline for their own information. While commitments may be broken in the light of new circumstances, this doesn't mean that breaking commitments should be taken lightly. The integrity of the team as a whole as well as the individual members depends on the team's ability to say with reasonable confidence how much they can deliver in a sprint and, therefore, how much they can deliver over any number of future sprints. Maintaining that predictability is of huge value to the business and should thus be hugely important to the team.