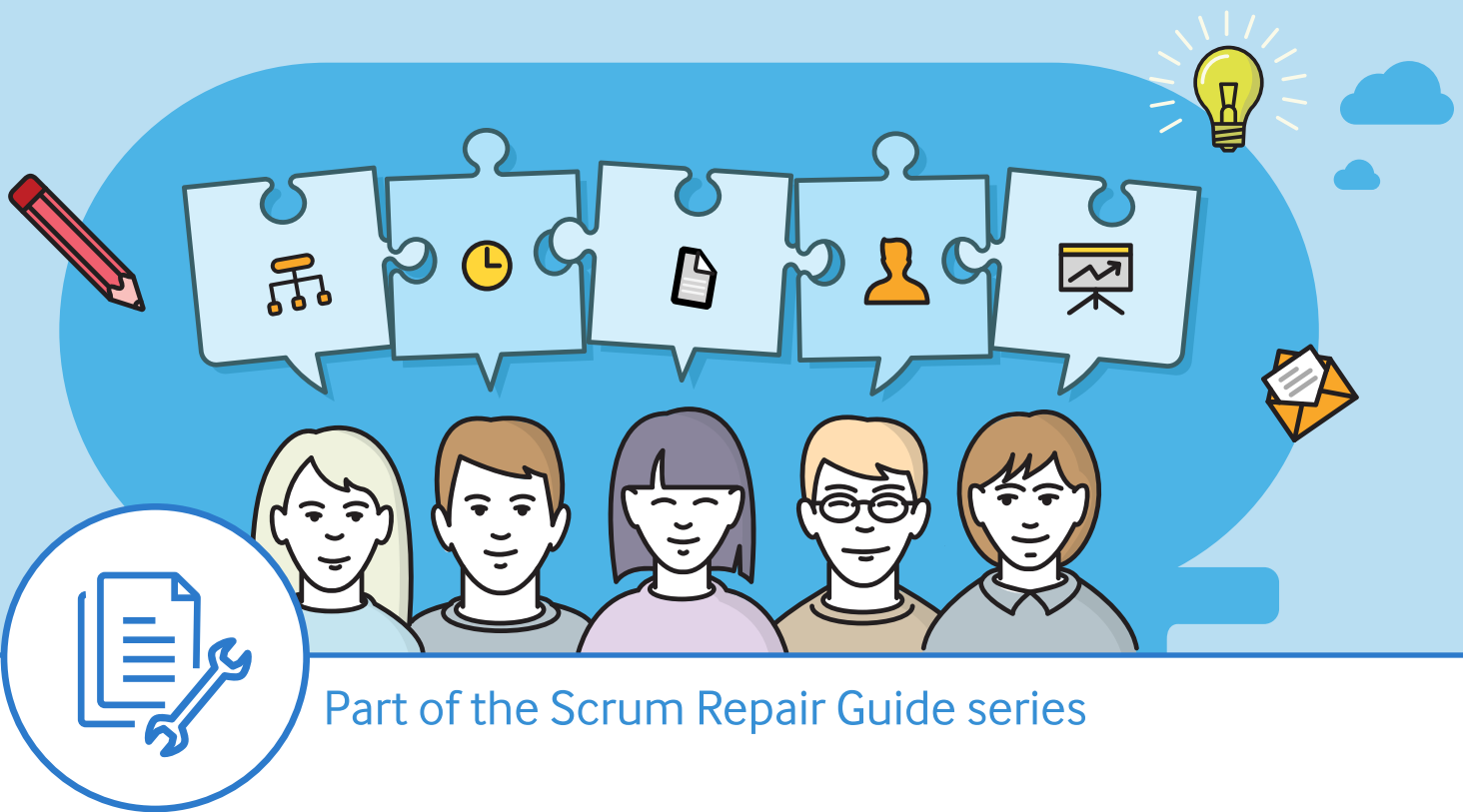


Surviving the Daily Scrum

Practical tips for facilitating successful daily scrums in real-life



Part of the Scrum Repair Guide series

by Mike Cohn

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Welcome to Surviving the Daily Scrum

Part of the “Scrum Repair Guide” Series

The daily scrum can be pivotal to the success or failure of using Scrum in your organization. A 15-minute, daily touch-point to synchronize progress, it allows everyone involved to see what’s happening with the project.

Though the concept is simple, there are challenges that can impede success. A poor daily scrum can negatively affect the wider applications of Scrum, so it’s important to get it right.

This guide will help you to:

- Get team members enthused and energized about attending the daily scrum
- Manage expectations about who should attend (and how people should participate)
- Keep team members focused and attentive throughout
- Elicit clear, insightful updates
- Establish a fun, lively dynamic to each meeting

There are 10 lessons within this guide. Feel free to follow them from start to finish, testing each lesson as you go, or look for ideas based on the issues and challenges you’re experiencing now.

If you want even more practical, real-life strategies for using Scrum successfully, consider signing up for the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#).” An in-depth troubleshooting and how-to guide for overcoming the most common and difficult challenges Scrum teams face.

[Click here](#) to see how the “Scrum Repair Guide” can help you and your team.

Enjoy,
Mike



About Mike Cohn

Mike Cohn is one of the industry's most well respected Certified Scrum Trainers (CST), and is the author of "User Stories Applied for Agile Software Development," "Agile Estimating and Planning" and "Succeeding with Agile." He is a co-founder and former board member of the Scrum Alliance, and a co-founder of the non-profit Agile Alliance, home of the Agile Manifesto.

To find out more about the training provided by Mike and Mountain Goat Software, [click here.](#)

Lesson # 1

How to Get People on Board

First, what IS the daily scrum?

On each day of a sprint, the team holds a meeting called the “daily scrum” also known as the “daily standup.”

Meetings are typically held in the same location and at the same time each day. They are time-boxed to 15 minutes, keeping the discussion brisk but relevant. All team members are required to attend daily scrum meetings.

During the daily scrum, each team member answers the following three questions:

1. What did you do yesterday?
2. What will you do today?
3. Are there any impediments in your way?

The team gains an excellent understanding of what work has been done and what work remains. Any impediments that are raised in the daily scrum meeting become the Scrum Master’s responsibility to resolve as quickly as possible.

One of the biggest challenges Scrum Masters face is getting people on board with the daily scrum. Ideally, each team member is eager, enthusiastic and energized by the meetings, but this doesn’t always happen.

In fact, you may have already experienced resistance from people:

- Not arriving on time
- Not showing up at all
- Not providing clear or useful updates

If people are resistant to the daily scrum, it is usually because they don’t see the value in it.

You may have even heard people say they feel the discussions aren't relevant, or the daily scrum is just a way to micro-manage the team.

The good news?

Most of what you need to do to get people on board will be achieved by following the advice in this guide.

Throughout this guide, I'm going to provide you actionable, real-world advice to help you facilitate meetings where the rules are clear, people show up on time and each person contributes valuable information.

You will start to see your daily scrum meeting becoming more efficient, more fun and with more team members excited to participate.

Bonus tip for getting people on board: Show them the value

If your team is new to Scrum and the daily standup, you may want to copy this real-life example to make team members more receptive to the meetings.

One Scrum Master prepared a 30-minute presentation for the team that simply outlined **why** the daily scrum was important. He found that:

"The daily scrum is now way more interesting to everyone because relevant information is shared and everyone understands its importance/why we are doing it."

Your team may simply need to understand **why** the daily scrum is part of the process, to understand that it's not just an arbitrary get-together.

Want to try something like this?

There's a presentation called "Introduction to Scrum" that you can download, customize and present to your colleagues to help them learn Scrum.

Introduction to Scrum covers product and sprint backlogs, sprint planning and sprint review meetings, and how to conduct a sprint retrospective. You'll also discover the key roles and responsibilities of the Scrum Master, product owner and Scrum team.



You can watch a video of me presenting it, or download a copy in PowerPoint, Keynote and OpenOffice formats so you can customize it for training your teams. This popular presentation has also been translated into more than 25 languages.

- [Click here to watch the video or download the slides](#)

Ready for your next lesson?

If so, we're going to look at one of the biggest challenges that can jeopardize the daily scrum: getting people there on time.

Lesson # 2

Stop People Arriving Late to the Daily Scrum

One of the biggest complaints I hear from Scrum Masters is that people turn up late to the daily scrum. A popular method that a lot of Scrum trainers suggest for overcoming this is to either use incentives to encourage people to turn up on time, or deterrents to discourage tardiness.

But there's a problem here.

Pick the wrong incentive or deterrent and you can quickly alienate team members and upset the dynamic of the group.

Each team is different, so no one incentive is going to work for every team.

I'm going to show you how to pick **the best** motivational tool for your team and give you a variety of practical incentives and deterrents to test.

You'll get more than 20 ideas that have worked in Scrum teams around the world, from having to do push-ups or sing a song if late, to long lunches and time off as rewards for being on time.

Remember, whatever you choose, you really need to make sure the entire team buys into it. The last thing you want is for someone to go to human resources complaining that you're making him do a pushup for every minute he arrives late to a meeting.

What should you consider when picking an incentive or deterrent?

How familiar are team members? A well-established team may have no problem singing a song as punishment, but new team members may feel more uncomfortable.

Are there any physical or dietary needs? Edible treats may not work well with someone who has food allergies, and I'd be careful with some forms of exercise as some team members may have physical limitations (including those you may not know about).

Are there any root causes that won't be solved by motivation? Perhaps the meeting is scheduled too early for the team's chronically late arriver because he or she needs to drop a kid off at daycare and can't do that before a certain time.

Two different (but effective) case studies

These two real-life examples from Scrum Masters show how rewarding the group as the whole can sometimes be more powerful than individual incentives, and why sometimes a simple reminder (at the right time) is all the motivation you need.

Case Study #1: Establish a policy of "if one of us is late, we're all late"

One Scrum Master provided a significant team reward if everyone was on time for all meetings through the entire sprint. The team agreed on a nice lunch paid for by the company, and a consolation prize of a chocolate bar if they only managed being on time 90% of the time.

Did it work?

"The team completely shifted their behavior. I was seeing team members loading up the digital agile board and setting up the conference connection for the remote team members minutes in advance of the standup. The team was holding each other accountable by friendly shoulder taps to make sure they all made it on time. I even observed a team member running across the building to grab someone out of a meeting to make sure she made it on time as well."

Case Study #2: The further away the team member, the earlier the alarm

In this example, one simple prompt was able to change behavior in the long term:

“Sometimes, due to team members not sitting in a collocated space, it would take them a minute or two to get from their desks to our Scrum wall, so I would send out the meeting invitation for the meeting to start two minutes prior to actual meeting time, for example, if the stand-up is at 9:00, the invitation is for 8:58 so their calendar alarm gives them two minutes to race down the hall.”

Did it work?

“Most of them thought the idea was quirky, but it stuck with them, and lateness was rarely an issue.”

On the next two pages you’ll find a list of incentives and deterrent ideas for you to try out with your team.



Deterrents

- Anyone late must read a tongue twister to the team (“Seventy-seven benevolent elephants” or “Scum-sucking Scrum teams scrounge scrumptious scraps.”)
- Anyone late must dance alone without music for five seconds. Rob Dull reported, “It’s quick, amusing for everyone, and it’s a healthy encouragement of vulnerability.”
- Whoever is late must bring coffee or a snack for the team the next day. Be careful—a few people emailed about gaining weight from this one! :)
- Have a “tardy board” as agilist Nadine Sullivan called it that tracks late arrivals or absences. Add rules like everyone is allowed one late arrival during some period. But after reaching some number of late arrivals or absences, the person has to bring something in, such as a snack for the team.
- Toss a beach ball, stuffed animal or some other item to the person who is to speak next. Throw, don’t toss, it at any late arrivers.
- Whoever is late must buy the team an afternoon snack or tea.
- Present a 30-minute knowledge-sharing session on a topic. This was pointed out as being particularly helpful in team building.
- Have whoever is late most frequently during a sprint, facilitate the next review or retrospective.
- Have whoever is late most frequently during a sprint, facilitate the next daily scrum, meaning everyone is waiting for tomorrow’s meeting to start if today’s late arriver is late again.
- If someone is late, they become the team’s “slave for a day” by doing things like getting snacks, soda and coffee for anyone who needed anything from the kitchen.
- Whoever is late must take detailed, precise notes for the team’s next meeting.
- Whoever is late is asked to solve a tricky math problem on the board.
- Whoever is late most during a sprint must buy a book for the office library. How about **one of my books?** :)
- Close the door right at the official start time. A late arriver has to open it to enter, which focuses attention on the person.
- If late, take on a short (perhaps 15-minute) administrative task the team needs done.
- Simply put an indicator to each person’s name on a wall to show how frequently each team member was late.

Incentives

- Reward the first people to arrive with small bits of chocolate.
- Collect a dollar or two for being late, but when the money is donated to a charity, donate it in the name of the person who arrived first at the meeting most often. Since charitable contributions are tax deductible in many countries, this gives incentives for being early and for not being late. Or as agilist Michel Biron pointed out, it was both “carrot and stick.”
- Give everyone who was prompt for each daily scrum a reward like a two-hour lunch or permission to come in late and leave early one day.
- Everyone who was on time for each daily scrum goes to a movie during the day, one day during the next sprint.
- A photo of the team holding a sign saying: “We did it!”
- Start the meeting 15 minutes before everyone wants to go to lunch. Agilist Viktor Buzga told me that the company cafeteria in his company gets very crowded at 11:30 when it opens. Arrive at 11:30 and there’s no wait for lunch. Arrive two minutes later and there’s a 10-minute wait. So he starts daily scrums at 11:15. If the team finishes in 10-12 minutes, they’re perfectly timed for lunch. If not ...

Complementary Lessons from the “Scrum Repair Guide”

If you want help solving wider scrum challenges and problems, consider registering for the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#).”

Throughout this free download, I’ll be linking to specific tutorials from the “Scrum Repair Guide,” which complement some of the lessons.

For example, if you’re interested in team members arriving to the daily scrum on time, I recommend watching: “*The Daily Scrum Should Be Attended, Not Run.*” In it, I show you how to subtly train people to arrive on time so that they eventually do it **without** prompting. A few simple actions really can create a long-term change in behavior.

Lesson # 3

Who Should Attend? (and What Should They Say?)

There is a story in Scrum about a chicken and a pig. One day the chicken decides that the two should start a restaurant. The pig is intrigued by the idea and says, “That sounds great. I’m an entrepreneurial type of hog. I’m sick of working for the farmer. But what are we going to call the restaurant?”

The chicken thinks. Then she scratches and pecks at the dirt and suggests, “Ham and Eggs!”

To which the pig replies, “No thanks, I’d be committed. You’d only be involved.”

This story is told in Scrum circles to point out the difference between commitment and involvement.

The original idea was that the development team members and Scrum Master were committed, but the product owner was merely involved. It was used to claim that the product owner should not participate (or even attend) the daily scrum.

I’ve never been fond of that way of thinking. It sets up an unnecessary divide between team and product owner.

So who should attend the daily scrum?

The team and Scrum Master are considered committed by nearly everyone in the Scrum community. There is some disagreement about the product owner. My view is that a product owner should be considered a committed participant of the project. (And should behave as one, too.)

Anyone else (for example, a departmental VP, a salesperson or a developer from another project) is allowed to attend, but is there only to listen. This makes scrum meetings an

excellent way for a Scrum team to disseminate information – if you’re interested in hearing where things are at, attend that day’s meeting.

Should Scrum Masters and product owners say anything during the standup?

Product owners and Scrum Masters should present an update in daily scrum meetings, but I don’t want them to speak endlessly or talk about irrelevant things.

The following are examples of good things to talk about:

A Scrum Master might:

- Comment about an impediment or two that was removed
- Mention facilitating a meeting with the product owner to demo something to stakeholders
- Mention setting up that important meeting for next Tuesday
- Mention cleaning up the product backlog in the tool based on the results of yesterday’s product backlog grooming meeting

A product owner might comment on similar things, especially work involving the product backlog, stakeholders, users and so on.

The product owner and Scrum Master should talk only about work affecting the current sprint.

But on a day when there is little else to report, a product owner might, for example, say something like, “I got a chance to think about the things I’d like us to work on next quarter. I’ll write them up as stories today or tomorrow.”

The most important thing is that a product owner and Scrum Master contribute, even if they only say something like, “I worked on the other project yesterday.” If either is allowed to not speak at all in a daily scrum, they give the impression that they are above having to share their own progress.

Now you know what to expect from the Scrum Master and product owner, but what about anyone else who wants to turn up?

In the next lesson, we're going to look at how to **practically** handle outsiders at the daily scrum so that the meeting runs smoothly (without ruffling feathers).

Complementary lessons from the “Scrum Repair Guide”

A product owner who isn't available for support or to answer questions can seriously impede a team's progress. Fortunately, there are ways to overcome this.

If you've already signed up to the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#),” you can watch the following lesson to see how to solve the problem of a product owner who is too busy to work with the team adequately:

- *Dealing with an Overly Busy Product Owner*

It shows you how, as Scrum Master, you can effectively remove this impediment, and continue to succeed with Scrum and agile.

Lesson # 4

How to (Carefully) Handle Outsiders

I always like to think of former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer showing up at a daily scrum for a team on which I'm the Scrum Master.

I've never met Mr. Ballmer, so all I know of him is from his public reputation. He was known for yelling at his employees. He once slipped a malware-infected floppy disc in an IBM computer at COMDEX so that OS/2 would crash during a demo.

Yet, conventional Scrum advice is that when Steve Ballmer shows up at my team's daily scrum, I'm supposed to tell him he's just a chicken, [see Lesson 3] and not committed to the sprint. And then I'm supposed to tell him to be quiet.

Not me, brothers and sisters! You may have the guts to tell Steve Ballmer to shut up. I don't.

But what I would have the courage to do is:

1. Thank him for attending
2. Tell him the team is going to quickly run through their agenda for the meeting in no more than 15 minutes
3. Tell him we'd be happy to answer questions from him after that

This may not work with Steve Ballmer, but I've found it to work extremely well with other outsiders who attend a daily scrum. I'll then conclude the normal part of the daily scrum with something like,

"Thanks, everyone. We're done with the scheduled part of the meeting."

Followed by:

- Thanking outsiders for their patience as we conducted our meeting
- Asking them if they have anything they'd like to add or ask

About half the time, the outsider has nothing to add or ask. They were either there to observe or their question was answered by what was already said. While we do want to keep the daily scrum as a team meeting, we don't want to be disrespectful to outsiders who may occasionally attend.

If any outsider attends what you might consider too frequently, consider having a private conversation with that person. Do this especially if the outsider is a manager of one or more team members.

An outside manager needs to understand that although it's acceptable to observe a daily scrum, the team is almost certainly less open when the manager attends. And as a team's Scrum Master, I don't want people hesitating (even slightly) to bring up issues.

Keeping your team's daily scrum to be just for the team, but treating outsiders with respect and allowing them to comment or ask questions afterwards will help your team succeed with agile.

Case study: When *not* mentioning a potential problem is the right thing to do

One Scrum Master shared this story with me, to show how outsiders taking a step back in the daily standup can be many steps forward in the long run.

"A team that I worked with did a stand-up where the program manager attended. In the stand-up, a story was discussed which only needed two hours of work to be finished. Nobody from the team picked it up, and since it was the last stand-up before the demo, the story would remain unfinished in this iteration.

"The program manager decided not to intervene in the stand-up and remain silent. Directly after, he checked with me if he did the right thing. I explained to him that I expected the issue of the unfinished story would turn up in the demo and in the retrospective.

"Giving the team a chance to become aware and deal with it as he did is good. If no team member would bring it up in the retrospective, then I would mention it there, as I was coaching the team on self-organization."

Did it work?

He revealed what happened in the retrospective:

“In the demo, the product owner asked why the story wasn’t finished, which was somewhat embarrassing for the team. Due to that, they discussed it in the retrospective. The underlying cause was that there was only one team member who knew how to do it, and that team member had been ill for a week. The team decided to do more pairing and peer reviews in iterations so that in the future, they would be better equipped to deal with such situations.

“If the program manager had spoken up in the stand-up, then that might have solved this problem. But by being silent, the team has really learned something, and has done a lasting change that makes them a better team!”

In this example, experiencing the cost of the mistake (embarrassment) was more valuable and effective for learning, rather than being simply told what to do.

In the next lesson, I’m going to show you when to break one of the biggest rules of the daily scrum: the 15-minute timebox.

Because sometimes, breaking the rules is exactly what you need to do to succeed with agile.

Complementary lessons from the “Scrum Repair Guide”

As a Scrum Master, your role isn’t to just handle outsiders within the daily scrum, you also have to protect your team from outside influencers such as stakeholders who may impede the work. In the advanced course the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#),” there are lessons to show you how to:

- *Manage stakeholder expectations*
- *Handle early requests to lock down scope, schedule and cost*

Putting these lessons into practice helps you to keep stakeholders and team members happy.

Lesson # 5

When Should You Break the 15-Minute Timebox?

So far, we've covered:

- The challenge of getting people on board with the daily scrum
- Why motivating people to turn up on time isn't as simple as an incentive
- That the Scrum Master and product owner shouldn't be above giving an update (but don't need to answer the same questions as team members)
- How to handle the potential disruptions from outsiders at the daily scrum

All of this will help you run an efficient and energized daily scrum—but what about when you don't have the luxury of being face-to-face with your team? How can this affect the dynamic of the daily scrum?

That's what we're going to cover in this lesson.

One challenge distributed team members face is getting to know one another.

Members of a collocated team get to know one another through small talk. You and I get in the elevator together and ask each other innocuous but friendly questions: Do anything this weekend? How old are your kids now? and so on. This type of water-cooler conversation doesn't happen with distributed teams.

As a Scrum Master for a distributed team, I find it important to help team members get to know each other well. A great way I've used to do that is to tell teams that their daily scrums are required to start with five minutes of mandatory small talk.

No mention of the project is allowed. Team members need to talk about their hobbies, what their kids did the night before, the great movie they went to, or things like that. After

a mandatory five minutes of this, we start the normal part of the daily scrum, which is time boxed to a further 15 minutes.

It's a simple but effective way of building rapport between team members, and making people feel more comfortable with each other.

It doesn't have to be limited to distributed teams. If you're working with a team where members are new to each other, you may want to do something like this in early meetings to help people get to know one another.

And if you're stuck for ideas about **what** to say in this "small talk" section of the meeting, why not try some of these ideas that Scrum Masters have shared with me:

"One of the things some of our teams do is to do a quiz—a set of trivial pursuit questions is good for this. What is interesting is that this evolved to become a quiz about the team members. So people would submit questions about themselves with answers, and these would be selected at random. So they learned about the sports people play, phobias, brushes with celebrities, and so on."

"I like to have a category, for example, what's your favorite candy, thing about summer or so on, and have each of the team members say that before answering their three questions. Though they groan about it, they have a lot of fun laughing and joking about their answers and it helps to get them talking more!"

"I sometimes get people to name three of something. Three places you've been. Three places you want to go. Your three favorite movies. Three places you've lived. Anything like that. It's helpful especially with distributed teams to get to know each other."

We're halfway through the course, and now we're going to dig deeper into how to get the best team interaction during each daily scrum. Starting with how to keep people focused.

Lesson # 6

How to Keep Everyone Focused During the Daily Scrum

In the last lesson, we looked at the value of small talk for building rapport. But what happens when small talk (or any talk) gets out of hand during the daily scrum?

The problem of some individuals rambling on and on and on and on during the daily scrum has been with us probably since the first sprint.

Fortunately, I have some techniques for you to get people to give the most relevant updates in the shortest time needed.

As with the deterrents and incentives we looked at in Lesson 2, you want to choose something that the entire team can feel comfortable with.

1. Make it a little harder to ramble ...

I came across a brilliant technique to help encourage people to keep it short from Certified Scrum Master Kayleigh Main.

Whoever is giving their update during the daily scrum needs to hold a 3-kilogram (6-1/2 pound) medicine ball at arm's length. This is light enough that you can hold the medicine ball while giving your update, but it's heavy enough that you don't want to give a long update.

When team members finish their updates, each tosses the ball to the next person to talk. Kayleigh told me that using the ball also helps keep the daily scrum fun and keeps things a bit less stressful, both of which are always great goals.

2. Tie every update to a user story

Have the sprint backlog and user stories in front of everyone at the meeting: Each team member points to the relevant product backlog item when answering the three questions to keep focused on making effective updates.

3. Use a timer

Set timers for each member and make the timer visible to the whole team so everyone can be aware how long is left.

4. Use playful, visual reminders when someone is heading off track

Some teams use soft, squishy balls to throw at a team member if they're going off track. Other teams I know hold up a rubber rat to indicate that someone is "going down a rathole." Obviously, this tip would work best with a team that is confident and comfortable with each other.

Sometimes, the problem isn't just the person giving the update being distracted, but team members "drifting off" if they feel someone else's update isn't relevant to them. Tip No. 5 is perfect for solving this.

5. Use a quiz to see who's *really* listening

In the past, I've purchased 20 \$5 gift cards from Starbucks and asked one random question at the end of some daily scrums: "OK, who said they need to meet with Bob in marketing?"

The winner would get a card. I wouldn't do it every day, just enough for the team to know to pay attention. The pride of winning was more important than the value of \$5 (as that isn't quite even a coffee in some cities!).

It's important to remember that these techniques aren't for permanent use, but to help people focus when they are getting distracted and affect a positive change of behavior.

The next lesson is a big one, and an important one. I'm going to share with you eight tactical techniques you can use as a Scrum Master to get the **most valuable** updates from your team members.

Complementary lessons from the “Scrum Repair Guide”

Even if you’ve not yet signed up for the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#),” you can watch five lessons from the course for free.

Each video is just a few minutes, so why not watch one now?

- *Welcome—Scrum Repair Guide*
- *Grooming the Product Backlog—What It Means and Why It’s So Important*
- *Selecting the Right Sprint Length*
- *Sprint Planning: Saving Time in Scrum’s Longest Meeting*
- *Leaving Time For Testing: How to Spread Work Evenly Across the Sprint*

Lesson # 7

Getting the Best Updates. As Scrum Master, What Can and Should You Do?

Done well, a daily scrum (daily standup) meeting will feel energizing.

People will leave the meeting enthused about the progress they heard others make, and keen to continue that productive momentum.

It doesn't happen by accident.

While the Scrum Master is there to facilitate rather than dictate the structure of the meeting, there are some subtle but powerful techniques someone in this role can use to improve the daily scrum.

1. Don't call it a "status meeting"

The term "status meeting" conjures up images of sitting around a table with each person giving an update to a project manager. Meanwhile, everyone else feigns interest: either mentally preparing for their own upcoming update or wondering how much longer the meeting will last.

It may seem small, but the language you use can affect the way you and your team approaches the Scrum methodology (see No. 7 in this list).

So instead of calling the daily stand up a "status meeting," think of it as a "synchronization meeting." Team members are synchronizing their work rather than giving an update to one particular person.

2. Ask the *right* three questions

The common version of the questions asked in the daily scrum are:

- What did you do yesterday?
- What will you do today?
- Is anything in your way?

But there's a problem with these questions:

They are about what a person did and will do rather than what the person accomplished.

And so some teams now realize there are better questions to be asked in the daily scrum:

1. What did you accomplish yesterday?
2. What will you accomplish today?
3. Is anything in your way?

When the questions are reworded to focus on accomplishments rather than activity, it becomes clear that the team values progress. Some individuals generate a lot of activity, but no progress. These questions will highlight if and when that is happening.

3. Don't make eye contact

When we speak, we tend to make eye contact with someone.

It's only natural that a team member giving an update will look at the Scrum Master; call it a legacy of too many years under traditional management, but a lot of people on Scrum teams do look at their Scrum Masters a bit like managers to whom they need to report status.

If you're the team's Scrum Master, look at something or someone else so the person giving the update can't lock eyes on you. This will make that person look at the others on the team. This is a subtle way to prevent each report becoming a one-way status report to the Scrum Master.

Each person's report is, after all, intended for all other team members.

4. Count questions versus statements

I often coach Scrum Masters that they should ask questions more often than they make statements. As a Scrum Master training myself to do that years ago, I would literally count questions on my right hand and statements on my left, sticking a finger out (under the table) each time I made either.

It helped me become less directive (command and control), a trap I sometimes still fall into.

5. As a Scrum Master, don't call on people

A Scrum Master should not directly ask people what they did, what they'll do, and what's in their way during the daily scrum. People know the questions and why they're at the meeting. When one person finishes speaking, the next can begin—without a Scrum Master orchestrating the meeting by calling on people and asking the questions.

How do you know who talks next? That's up to the team. Some teams go in order around the room, which works well when everyone is collocated. Others go in alphabetical order. Others have the person speaking at that time name whoever should speak next.

6. Encourage team members to admit when they got nothing done

Some days a team member will have no progress to report at the daily scrum, and that's OK. I have team members say simply "no progress" whenever that's the case. But discuss it with your team. Maybe they'd prefer a different phrase.

There are a couple advantages here.

First: It's more honest to allow people to admit when they got nothing done. Sometimes we're just having an off day, and other times, things from outside the project demand our time.

Second: Using a common phrase makes it really easy for a Scrum Master to notice when progress has stalled. If a team member mumbles something about slight progress on a couple of different things, the Scrum Master might not notice that both really got nowhere.

But with "no progress," it becomes abundantly clear. This allows the Scrum Master to step in earlier than he or she might otherwise and remove a problem.

7. Stop calling them blockers

A word I recommend you ban from your daily scrums is blocker. This comes up in the meeting when team members address if there is anything blocking their progress.

What team members should really address is whether anything is impeding progress. An impediment is something that slows progress. A blocker is something that stops progress altogether. I may not be blocked outright, but my progress may be impeded by some problem.

When we call something a “blocker,” there is a subtle implication that we should only be discussing things that are stopping progress completely. When we talk about impediments, we instead focus on anything that is slowing progress.

And that’s what we want—to remove anything that slows progress, not just those things that actually stop it.

8. Taking minutes or notes

Taking minutes is often wasteful, but I wouldn’t want to rule it out for all teams. There are cases where it could be OK. For example, minutes can be helpful if you have one team member who absolutely cannot participate in the meeting.

I also advise Scrum Masters against taking notes during the daily scrum. If you do want to take notes, I recommend writing the note on a whiteboard or some place where everyone participating in the meeting can see what you write.

I often think people think the Scrum Master is writing the worst possible thing when it’s written in private. The Scrum Master might be writing: “Get Mike some help on the such-and-such task,” but I think she’s writing: “Have Mike moved off the team.”

Taking notes on the whiteboard has the further advantage of letting anyone add to the notes during the meeting or easily refer to them later. If any notes are action items, they’ll be on the board the next day when any old notes can be easily erased. So, take notes in a public place, even if you’re making a note to move me off the team.

There’s a lot in this lesson, but each of the above tips can transform your daily scrum.

In the next lesson, we’re going to look at a common question and challenge, which is whether the daily scrum should be person-by-person or story-by-story.

The answer may not be what you expect ...

Lesson # 8

Should Updates be Done Person-by-Person or Story-by-Story?

Very little of the Scrum literature says daily scrums need to be conducted person-by-person. Yet that is precisely how most teams do it.

But it may not be the best way.

When the daily scrum is conducted person-by-person, it's easy for team members to lose the context of what is being discussed.

For example, perhaps the first team member worked on each of the first two product backlog items. The second team member worked on the second product backlog item and the fifth. The third team member worked on one of those, and did a bit on another item no one had mentioned yet.

For some teams, conducting the daily scrum by product backlog item can make much more sense than going person by person.

When going item-by-item, someone on the team (often the Scrum Master) says, "OK, let's talk about this product backlog item next. Who worked on it yesterday? Who is going to work on it today? And is anyone stuck on anything to do with this item?"

When a team conducts its daily scrums this way, there is less lost context. Everything about a particular product backlog item is discussed at the same time; not three times when three different team members report on it.

Do I think every team should do it this way?

No. For some teams, going person-by-person works fine. If that's working for you, stick with it.

I recommend trying an item-by-item approach to the daily scrum:

- **Whenever a person-by-person approach isn't working well.** Any time something isn't working, you should switch it up and try something different.
- **When the team is fairly big.** Standard Scrum advice is that teams should be five to nine people. If you're pushing that limit, or exceeding it, switching daily scrums to be item-by-item can help. With a large team, the amount of back and forth between items can get excessive.
- **If you've been doing it person-by-person for a long time.** Doing anything the same way for a long time gets tedious. Even if person-by-person is going great for your team, try it item-by-item for one sprint.

Switching to an item-by-item approach rather than person-by-person is a great way to eliminate issues related to a lack of context during the daily scrum. But if you're still struggling to get a clear picture in the daily scrum of what people are working on and the progress being made, the following tips will help.

Make progress visual

One solution is to conduct the daily standup in front of a physical task board and have people point to whatever they are working on. As we saw in Lesson 6: "How to Keep Everyone Focused During the Daily Scrum," this is also a great way to get team members to focus on the purpose of their update.

Assign a "point person" or "story owner"

Another way is to designate a "point person" for each user story the team plans to work on in the sprint. This person is responsible for knowing if the user story is moving along appropriately. The person is essentially a "story owner" but this isn't a heavyweight new responsibility, we're talking about two to five minutes a day of extra work. This person may or may not be the primary contributor to that story—it doesn't affect the effectiveness of it.

Reduce the team size

As I've said, standard agile advice is for teams to have five to nine members. I prefer to be in the range of five to seven. When possible, I try to stay on the low end of the range. If the team is more than nine, it is easy to lose track of what people are doing.

Try both and see which is right for your organization

If you're in an organization with even a handful of teams, randomly split them and tell some to try person-by-person and others to try story-by-story for a full sprint.

Get everyone together afterwards for a short cross-team retrospective and let people say how it went. Hopefully teams could hear the results of other teams and then make a good decision about what to do next.

Shift the focus of the daily scrum throughout the sprint

One Scrum Master told me how he would vary the focus of the daily scrum, depending on where the team was within the sprint:

"When we begin the sprint, we write the important feature set on a board clearly visible to all. At the beginning of the sprint, daily scrum is only person by person. As we approach the mid of the sprint, we include a brief discussion on the important feature set along with the person-by-person approach. As we move towards the end, when many of the features are already knocked off the list and what remains are a few bugs and small functionalities, we become more detail oriented on the board and hence more detailed in the conversation, too."

Make impediments visual

Sometimes you learn more about progress when you can see what's not happening. Here, one Scrum Master outlined a simple way to identify and deal with problems:

"I printed a pile of stop sign cards with a line to write who or what was impeding progress. If someone mentioned a situation that meant the team member could not go on, we added a stop sign to the task board. After each daily scrum, we went through the stop signs and decided how to remove the impediment before the next standup."

This Scrum Master also had a way to monitor potential delays to progress that might otherwise be missed if they relied only on daily scrum updates.

"In our game development project, team cross-functionality was limited, so we had specific burndowns for each discipline: programming, graphics, music and so on. Sometimes

a team member would be waiting for another's work in order to finish the story, but wouldn't always mention it as an impediment.

"Every day, before the daily standup, I would look at the level burndowns for each story. If any story had been started, with progress stagnating for more than a day and no record of an impediment, I would bring up those items and ask if there was a problem that hadn't been reported. This had a remarkable effect in getting things running smoothly. It added just a bit more work for me as a Scrum Master and practically no additional work for other team members."

Make team member progress visible

This simple tip from one Scrum Master uses a great approach to make team activity clear:

"Print out little avatars for each developer and stick them onto the story that each person is working on. You can immediately see from the board not just what state the stories are in, but also who's working on what. Whenever people repair, or start something new, they move the card and stick the avatars on."

"Doing the standup in front of the board then gives a couple of extra benefits. One, if a card doesn't have any avatars on it, or has people that are off sick/on holiday, then it's not being worked on and needs attention. Two, it's really obvious if someone's working on lots of different things at once (they've got multiple avatars on lots of stories). This might not be a problem, but is worth knowing."

In the next lesson, you're going to see how to make sure the daily scrum doesn't disintegrate into an in-depth, problem-solving session, while making sure impediments are thoroughly dealt with ...

Lesson # 9

When Should You Solve Problems?

The general advice is that the daily scrum is not for problem-solving, but often problems do come up and it's easy to spend too much time trying to solve them, rather than focus on updates.

I find it a good practice, however, to allow the tiniest amount of problem-solving in the meeting. For example, I say, "I'm having a hard time doing such-and-such. I need to figure it out today." And you reply, "Oh, change this setting in the compiler."

If I say, "Thanks!" then this was a good exchange to have in the daily scrum. However, if I start asking you where I change that setting and you and I start going back and forth, then we're problem-solving, and it should happen after the meeting.

The following tips will help you keep the focus on updates while still making a space to solve problems ...

The "Sixteenth Minute"

When someone in the daily scrum starts to say something that would go deeper or beyond the traditional scope of the daily scrum, the Scrum Master can say, "That's an interesting point. Let's save it for the 'Sixteenth Minute.'"

This can be used to defer problem-solving, interesting facts the rest of the team should know, and so on. It's an extremely polite way of keeping the meeting focused yet allowing time for additional information to be shared.

***Just to be clear**—the "Sixteenth Minute" may not occur in the actual 16th minute, it's more of a transition period to show that the problem will be dealt with at some point (see next tip).

An extra 15 minutes

One person told me that the daily meeting is booked for a 30-minute slot, but only the first 15 minutes are used for Scrum, and the remaining buffer is utilized for discussions around problems. The 30-minute slots means all parties are already present and it's easier to carry over the discussion rather than find another suitable time with all the intended team members.

Make visible notes and use a “Parking Lot” or “After Party”

Topics that require further discussion can be written on a whiteboard (visible to everyone) during the daily scrum. After the meeting, anyone who wants to be involved in those discussions can stay, and those not involved can leave. This additional meeting is sometimes known as a “Parking Lot” or “After Party.”

Announce the end (and how long it took)

The first thing you should do is to end every daily scrum by announcing how long the meeting took. Do this right after everyone has addressed the three questions and before switching into problem-solving mode.

You might, for example, announce, “Thanks everyone. That took twelve minutes.”

But then, remind everyone of any problems or issues that were brought up. Suggest that those who are needed stay to discuss or resolve them.

This does two things:

1. It stops team members feeling like the daily scrum is too long (by reminding them how long it actually took)
2. It frees up team members who don't need to be present to solve the problem

This means that people know they won't get dragged into long, irrelevant discussions during the daily scrum, making people feel much more positive and energized about attending.

In the next lesson, we'll ask the question: when you tie all of these techniques together, do you really need to do the daily scrum, daily?

And if not, when should (or can) you take a day off?

Complementary lessons from the “Scrum Repair Guide”

Some problems within a sprint will be anticipated and allocated time, but what about impediments that are unexpected and threaten to interrupt the team’s progress?

In the “[Scrum Repair Guide](#),” one lesson looks at practical ways for making sure you can account for (even unexpected) problems so that team members aren’t caught off guard.

This tutorial is:

- *Handling Firefighting During a Sprint*

Lesson # 10

Does the Daily Scrum Always Need to Be Daily?

Back in 1975, Fred Brooks managed the IBM OS/360 project. This was one of the first software projects to be notoriously late. In fact, it was a year late.

Brooks was asked, I suspect with shock and incredulity, “How does a project get to be a year late?”

Brooks replied famously, “One day at a time.”

I believe that daily scrums help our projects from having similar fates. By meeting daily, issues are raised sooner than they would be any other way. And that helps prevent the day-at-a-time slips that led to Brooks’ project being a year late.

But, do we really need to meet every day?

Yes, most teams do. I do believe there are two exceptions to a daily meeting.

But one of them is not “a team that talks a lot, anyway.” I hear this argument a lot. The team doesn’t need a daily scrum because everyone sits near one another and talks frequently.

That’s not the same. Even on such a team, the daily scrum may be the only time each day when everyone participates in the discussion. Most other conversations include just a subset of the team.

Besides, when a team does talk frequently outside the daily scrum, the daily scrum will be extremely short, so hardly worth complaining about.

So, what are the two cases when I don’t think a team needs a daily scrum?

First, on Fridays when the team is highly distributed. Consider a team in which a few remote members are expected to call into a daily scrum at, say, 8 p.m. their time, which is presumably early morning for the rest of the team.

Participating in a nightly call might be OK from Monday through Thursday. But no one wants to give up their Friday night as well.

Second, on days when a team does a sprint planning meeting, many teams will find a daily scrum unnecessary.

Sprint planning usually ends with some discussion that mimics a daily scrum—what tasks from the sprint backlog will each person work on initially? That makes a separate daily scrum redundant.

Daily scrums are important and when done well can help a team immensely. But there are a couple of cases when skipping the daily scrum can help your team succeed with agile.

Remember that the goal of a daily scrum is for team members to synchronize their effort. Everyone should be fully in sync from the sprint planning meeting, making a subsequent, distinct daily scrum unnecessary.

Having everyone in sync at the end of the sprint planning meeting, such that they don't need a daily scrum that day, will help your team succeed with agile.

We've covered a lot in this course.

What I want is for you to have the confidence and the techniques to take your daily scrum from good to great. The advice in this course has worked for hundreds of Scrum teams around the world, and the next step is to choose and test which ideas will work best for your team.

What next?

1. Share the course

If you think someone else would find these lessons valuable, please share it with friends or colleagues.

Simply send them this link for [Surviving The Daily Scrum Email Course](#).

2. Find training for your organization

Looking for more training options? Visit the Mountain Goat Software training page and find training for you, your team or view the most up-to-date public training schedule.

[Click here to find Scrum and agile training](#)

About Mountain Goat Software

Mike Cohn and Mountain Goat Software offer in-person and video training and coaching to help you succeed with agile. Whether you're introducing agile or Scrum to your organization or want to make good teams great, we can help.

Mike Cohn is one of the world's most sought-after and respected Certified Scrum Trainers. He's also the author of three books on agile software development, a speaker, and an in-demand consultant for companies throughout the United States and around the world.

There's a reason why Google, Disney, Microsoft, Southwest Airlines, Electronic Arts, Salesforce, Adobe and many others have him train their employees. Mike's approach to software development is efficient and effective. He is an agile development thought leader and expert practitioner.

What's more, his speaking and coaching style are conversational and engaging. Mike's presentations do much more than just keep you awake, but keep your brain engaged and stepping right along the learning path with him.

Contact us when you're ready to succeed with agile.

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