

Case Study: Breaking a Three-Year Stalemate

Overcoming resistance, building trust, and achieving delivery
in six months

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Background

In 2019, a boutique Managed Fund Administration (MFA) company launched an ambitious project to extend its platform with a Private Equity (PE) facility, in response to corporate customer demand. This was an unfamiliar business domain for the company and was expected to be a strategic differentiator, expanding service offerings and streamlining investment management. The MFA company's strength had always been bespoke extensions to its platform, delivered using a waterfall approach, guided by commercial leadership in response to customer requests.

Rather than using cross-functional teams, MFA used specialist teams: Commercial negotiated projects with customers, Transitions coordinated development, and Operations supported customers post-implementation.

In 2020, a larger financial services organization acquired the MFA company, and most employees were absorbed through the acquisition. The MFA company became known as the MFA area of the parent company.

Integration of employees and systems into the parent company occurred through 2021, and a pilot project to integrate the MFA platform with the broader company flagship products was completed successfully. For the PE project, however, there had been no progress, and by late 2021, company leadership determined that the traditional MFA waterfall approach was not fit for purpose for delivery of the PE project.

The parent company had a bespoke delivery framework, optimized for the incremental evolution of their stable, mature products, and mandated the framework for technology teams across the organization.

MFA teams were trained and coached in the delivery framework, and a week of solution discovery workshops were conducted to build momentum for the PE project.

By March 2022, after 3 years of solution discovery sessions, meetings, and leadership interventions, the PE project had failed to get traction, and corporate customers were growing impatient. Sustained efforts and coaching to get the PE project delivery underway using the delivery framework were unsuccessful.

Corporate technology teams asserted mandated adherence to the delivery framework, while MFA leadership flatly refused to adopt it. This led to a cultural stand-off, and progress ground to a halt.

The previous MFA Delivery Coach had been carrying a heavy load, supporting all of the MFA teams, working to help them integrate into the parent company, and working to get the Private Equity project off the ground. He decided to seek a replacement, and I was promoted to the position. My mandate was to rebuild trust, align stakeholders, and create the conditions needed for successful delivery of the PE project, avoiding the mistakes of the previous 3 years.

Challenges and root causes

Cultural resistance to agile adoption

I joined the parent company in late 2021 as an Engineering Team Lead (ETL) in another area of business and received training in the delivery framework. My early observations suggested it was more *lean* than *agile*. What I saw was a process largely directed by technologists rather than product or business leaders. The emphasis was on flow, elimination of failure demand, and technical efficiency, and not so much on incremental delivery or feedback loops.

The delivery framework focused on process *over* intent. It was agile in language, but linear in practice, with “Measure & Learn” only occurring after “Release & Launch”. I was reminded that “if you Lean things out too much, you can radically diminish your ability to innovate” (*The Scrum Fieldbook*; Sutherland, 2019, p. 186.).

Although Scrum was mentioned in passing in the delivery framework training, there was no specific Scrum training provided to teams organizationally, and depth of Scrum expertise was not evident. There was a perception amongst ETLs and coaches in the organization that “Scrum was for *beginners*”, but I think they had that wrong. I believe that for complex *beginnings*, nothing beats Scrum.

Scrum seemed to have been “run” but not leveraged. For example, Sprint Reviews were recorded by teams and uploaded to a shared drive. People outside the teams rarely (if ever) attended Sprint Reviews, and no one knew if the recordings were ever watched by anyone outside the team.

The MFA teams viewed the delivery framework as an overly rigid, prescriptive, “one size fits all” approach that was siloing teams, thus limiting collaboration, rather than enabling it. They felt that the delivery framework had been imposed without understanding the MFA business, rationale for their traditional project delivery approach, nor their challenges. These concerns and frustrations contributed to their refusal to adopt the delivery framework for the PE project.

The MFA teams saw no benefit in using the delivery framework over their familiar waterfall approach. Their projects had historically leveraged close-knit, responsive communication within and across teams, which had helped to decrease decision latency and contributed to their past successes.

Cynicism towards agile and demand for fixed commitments

The delivery framework promoted cycle time data-driven forecasting for delivery expectation management, incremental planning and flexibility; however, MFA leaders refused to commit capacity to the PE project without fixed delivery dates and traditional project roadmaps. Without allocated team capacity, the usual MFA waterfall approach to estimation couldn’t be achieved, and there was no historic cycle time data available for the MFA teams, so forecasting was perceived as a wild guess. The misalignment between leadership’s expectations and the forecasting approach of the delivery framework led to frustration on both sides.

Lack of a clear starting point for development

For corporate technology leadership and MFA leadership, there was disagreement beyond deciding on the delivery approach; even on where to start. Decomposition and prioritization had never been properly addressed and resolved. Without a clear backlog and refinement process, meaningful progress was impossible.

Without Scrum in place, there was no Product Owner to manage the process of backlog refinement, and no Scrum Master to provide much needed coaching.

A Minimal Viable Product (MVP) view of what a first release might look like had been circulating for some time; however, it was implementation-focused, with technical tasks of varying sizes and complexities, rather than being a description of valuable functionality to PE users. This made it very difficult for the team to articulate to stakeholders what the incremental delivery of the PE project might look like.

Coaching approach and interventions

The deeply rooted challenges that I had observed and the objections that had been raised, reminded me of Covey's words to "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; Covey, 2003) and Sinek's reminder to "start with why" (*Start with Why*; Sinek, 2009).

Earlier attempts to get traction with the PE project had echoed the delivery framework: up-front plans, with limited incremental feedback loops. For example, a week of discovery workshops in late 2021. This approach would be appropriate if the work and team dynamics were complicated, like a game of chess with predictable moves. However, I came to see that the business, work and team dynamics of the PE project were in fact complex, requiring a different stance.

Scrum was a better fit, closer to a game of poker: taking small steps, probing for signals, and adapting as uncertainty unfolded. This aligned with Scrum's empirical approach: running short experiments with feedback loops enabling inspection, transparency, and adaptation. This shaped the way I coached the team, adjusting my approach based on how each project member responded to my interventions.

Leveraging the true heart of Scrum to help the MFA teams align on understanding of intent was key to helping them start winning with delivery of the PE project. It's been said that culture follows structure, and I knew that a small, cross-functional Scrum team would help to establish a healthy culture to de-risk delivery of the PE project. I began coaching the delivery of the project using Scrum principles, through establishing three key foundations:

1. Building credibility, shared understanding, and trust
2. Facilitating alignment and collaboration
3. Overcoming resistance to agile and Scrum

1. Building credibility, shared understanding, and trust

Starting with an observational coaching stance, holding one-on-ones with ~20 PE project members, a key insight emerged: while I didn't clearly understand PE from a business perspective, no one else, including MFA teams, technology, or leadership, fully understood it either. This knowledge gap was a core impediment, and why the MVP was framed in implementation terms rather than user value.

Being new to the project gave me the ability to play the part of the "wise fool," which as Sutherland (2014) explains, can help others involved in the project find the courage to ask questions and learn without losing face (p. 164.). This was an opportunity to demonstrate and encourage the Scrum values of courage, openness, and respect.

Discussions, online courses, tutorials, and other articles helped me to learn about PE, and enabled me to share my learning back with project members. I asked the team to walk through requirements spreadsheets and the MVP content together, to ensure everyone was on the same page, and to provide an opportunity for questions and discussion. Understanding the work that project members were undertaking demonstrated sincerity, credibility, and built trust, which proved crucial in gaining buy-in and enabling healthy conflict. After hours, I built upon my previous experience with facilitation, workshop design, and Registered Product Owner training, which became very helpful in working out how to approach discovery and backlog building with the team.

2. Facilitating alignment and collaboration

As trust and rapport developed throughout the PE project team, and as my own understanding of the context deepened, I shifted my stance from observation towards active guidance. This included facilitating discussions, teaching, mentoring, and asking focused questions to help the team guide conversations.

Observing the cultural shift happening in the PE project, leadership was eager for me to start coaching other areas of MFA beyond the PE project, and I pushed back as an opportunity to demonstrate the Scrum values of focus and commitment. I shared that focusing on PE was helping to reduce my work in progress (WIP) and to understand MFA more broadly. Minimizing context switching, particularly during phases requiring heavy cognitive load, is crucial for harmony, trust, and ultimately success.

Leveraging the Scrum values and Scrum Patterns of Small Teams (§9), Cross-Functional Team (§10), Stable Teams (§15), as described by Sutherland and Coplien (2019), I pitched for the creation of a dedicated, fully focused PE Scrum Team. Eventually, leadership agreed, and this structural change from the usual siloed approach became a critical factor in the success of the project.

We surfaced, clarified, and overcame objections, removing impediments to the project's progress, reducing hidden resistance, and creating psychological safety.

In the first Miro-based discovery workshop, we clarified business needs, refined personas, agreed on current state, removed unessential scope, and split the MVP into 1st and 2nd releases.

Limiting the scope of the first workshop enabled me to plan the next, based upon what we learned. I felt that the PE team and stakeholders could decide on what to build first, if I used a novel, intentional approach to help them get there.

3. Overcoming resistance to Scrum and agile

Intentional facilitation uses a mindful, purpose-driven approach to guide group discussion towards an outcome. I hypothesized that attendees of the second discovery workshop could make a collaborative decision if workshop activities were inclusive, and structured to build up understanding, engagement, and contribution of all attendees, culminating in a vote.

I designed a collaborative Miro activity to enable intentional facilitation and relative estimation: drawing on subject matter expertise and involving all attendees in shaping the first Product Goal. The workshop immersed participants in Scrum thinking and reduced resistance among those previously defensive about Scrum and agile in general. This became a turning point that enabled delivery traction.

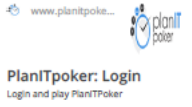
As coaches, if we demonstrate vulnerability first, we can help others become more comfortable asking questions that they might have otherwise felt foolish asking.

I started by asking the SMEs, when each feature might first be used, and, how often it might be used.

Next, I invited the group to discuss the personas that would directly interact with each feature, and importantly, which personas would not.

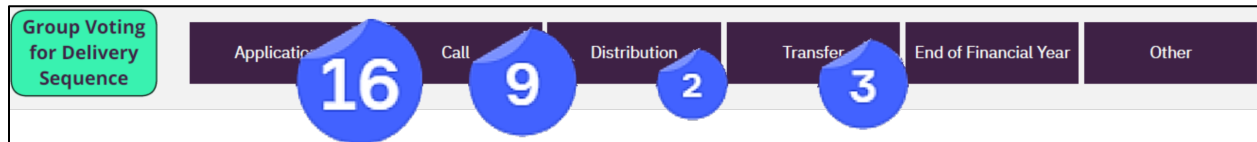
A “Silent Timebox” gives workshop attendees a fixed amount of time, referred to as a “timebox” to capture their thoughts as post it notes on a virtual whiteboard like Miro. At the conclusion of the timebox, a facilitator helps participants come together to discuss the thoughts that were captured. Using this approach helped draw out ideas on how development progress towards completion of the Product Goal could be demonstrated to stakeholders representing our personas. Participants started thinking about what Sprint Reviews might look like, and who might attend to represent each persona.

Planning Poker is a “gamified” approach to gaining participant consensus for estimation of work, using relative sizing. Attendees were invited to use this approach for sizing each feature, which further helped to draw out differences of opinion, and to educate and align understanding for attendees.

SME Discussion	When will it first be used?
SME Discussion	How often will it be used?
Group Discussion	Which personas will directly interact with it?
Silent Timebox	How might we demonstrate progress to interacting personas?
 PlanITpoker: Login Login and play PlanITpoker	How big is it? (effort / complexity / risk)
Silent Timebox	What if we don't do this first?

Attendees were then invited to silently brainstorm and capture their thoughts about the impact and consequences of delaying each feature, which we then discussed together as a group.

As the activity proceeded, discussion became richer, defensiveness faded, and the quieter voices became more confident and bolder.



Finally, I invited attendees to use 2 votes each to indicate which feature they now believed should be our first Product Goal. This gave us the clear ranking we needed to move forward with User Story Mapping and the creation of the Product Backlog in the third discovery workshop.

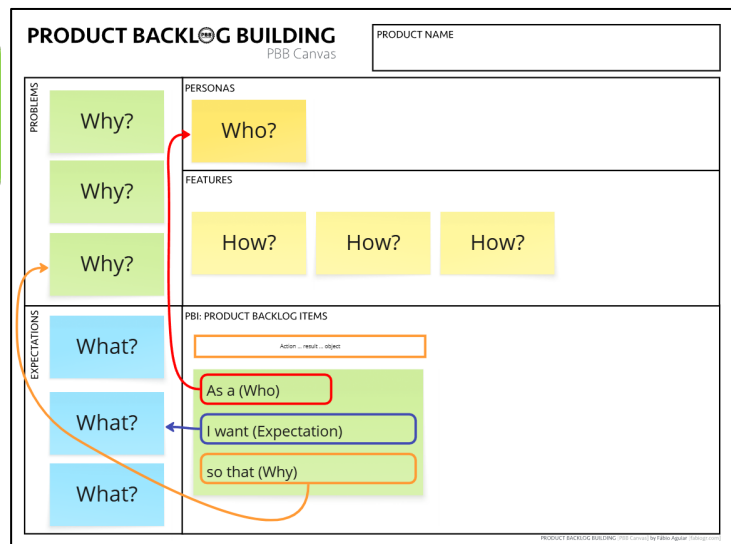
While it might be tempting to just reuse this approach because it worked, a key learning here is that, as coaches, we need to “think on our feet”. Context is everything, and we need to apply tools and techniques thoughtfully and intentionally. I may or may not ever use this approach again: it all depends upon what’s needed and what might be helpful at the time.

For the third discovery workshop, I introduced Story Mapping to the team as a method to start building our backlog. We decomposed the first feature to be built into Epics that would enable incremental delivery of end-to-end functionality.

Use ARO Format for PBI Title:

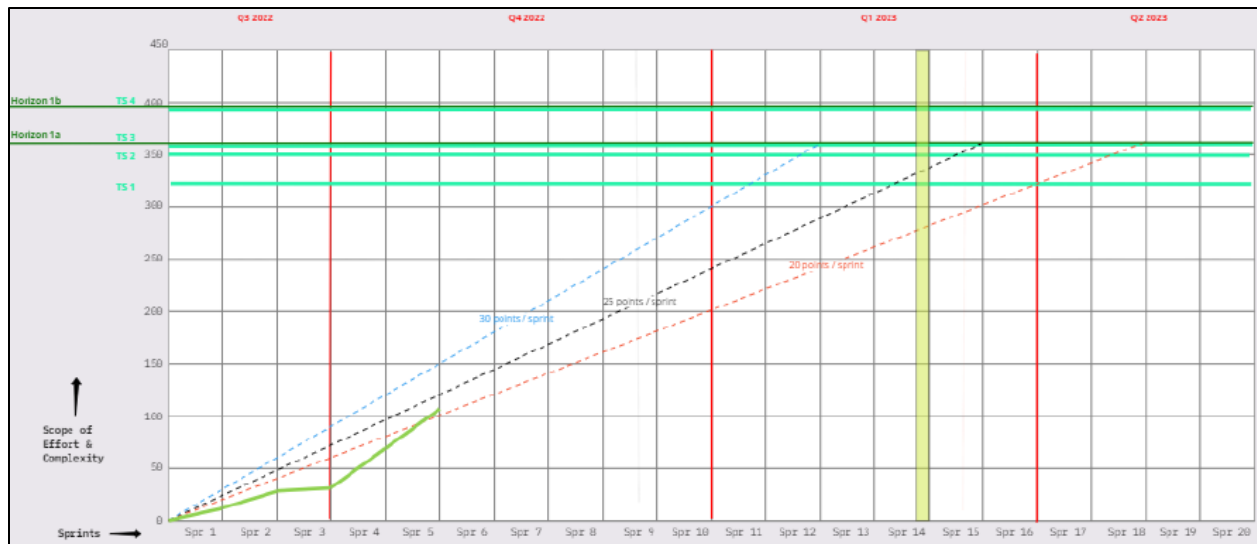
Action (*conduct*)
Result (*the search*)
Object (*for a book*)

Each Epic in turn was decomposed into User Stories. I used techniques from *Product Backlog Building* for structuring User Story titles, and for workshopping the “Who” (persona), “What” (expectation) and “Why” (problem) of Epics and User Stories (Caroli & Aguiar, 2022).

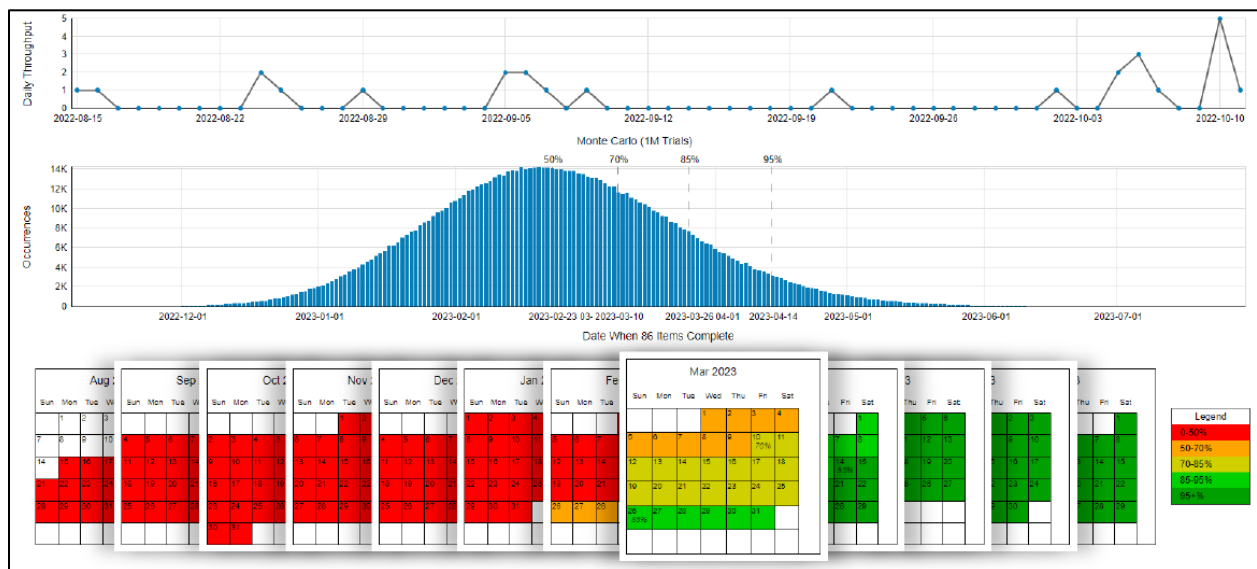


We used large-scale estimation from the Registered Product Owner course to assign points to Epics in the first feature, then extrapolated the story points for the PE project overall. With the new Scrum team lacking velocity data, we projected optimistic (30 points), expected (25 points), and pessimistic (20 points) velocities, and used these to forecast delivery.

We used Miro for our burn-up chart initially, as shown below. The pessimistic forecast in the relative estimation forecast indicates delivery of the first feature (“TS1”) by end of Sprint 16, March 24th, 2023.



A mathematical technique known as Monte Carlo simulation, which predicts possible outcomes of uncertain events using cycle time data, was encouraged as part of the delivery framework as an alternative to relative estimation. I trialed it for the PE project using past team member work data as a baseline initially, as we had no throughput data to work with. The image below indicates an 85% confidence in delivery of the first feature ("TS1") by March 26th, 2023.



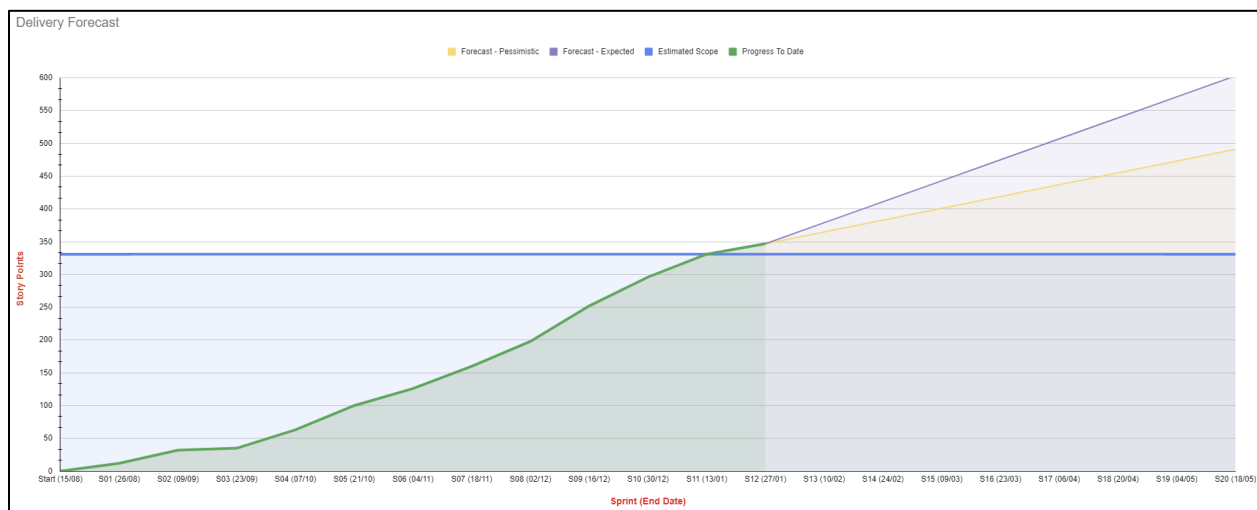
Interestingly, both forecasting methods were well aligned throughout the duration of the project, until the last two Sprints where relative estimation forecasting proved more realistic, given the team's trajectory of acceleration over time.

Using both empirical approaches for forecasting delivery gave leadership confidence due to the alignment of indicated dates through differing methods. MFA leadership found the relative estimation date projections aligned to Sprints easier to comprehend than the "confidence level" forecasting approach of the Monte Carlo simulation.

Challenges encountered and adaptations

Some team members refused Scrum training because of their negative delivery framework training experience, so I embedded Scrum teaching and mentoring into our daily work. Instead of theoretical sessions, I used Sprint Planning, Daily Scrum, Sprint Reviews, and Retrospectives as hands-on learning opportunities. Gradually, resistance diminished as the team saw tangible value in Scrum values, principles, and practices.

The forecasting approach using relative estimation provides us with useful insights. We switched to a spreadsheet-based burn-up and projection chart part-way through the project as one of our Sprint Retrospective process improvements. The green line shows the cumulative points completed for each Sprint. We can see that in Sprint 1 (12 points) and Sprint 2 (20 points), the team was accelerating. However, in Sprint 3 performance dropped significantly to just 3 points.



Our Sprint 3 Retrospective revealed two primary causes for the sharp drop in velocity, and I used these as a teaching and mentoring opportunity. The issues we discovered were:

1. Sprint 3 was overloaded.
2. Product Backlog Item test cases were being written after development had begun.

In their excitement about the success of Sprints 1 and 2, our Scrum Master and Product Owner permitted Sprint 3 to be overloaded, ignoring the Scrum Pattern that I had taught them: “Teams that Finish Early, Accelerate Faster” (¶166). Now with supporting evidence, we revisited the pattern, and the team agreed that they would not allow more work to be pulled into a Sprint than had been completed on average in the previous three Sprints.

The second issue resulted in Developers and Testers having a different understanding of the acceptance criteria for each Product Backlog Item. This caused a compounding volume of rework, as rework items were also misunderstood.

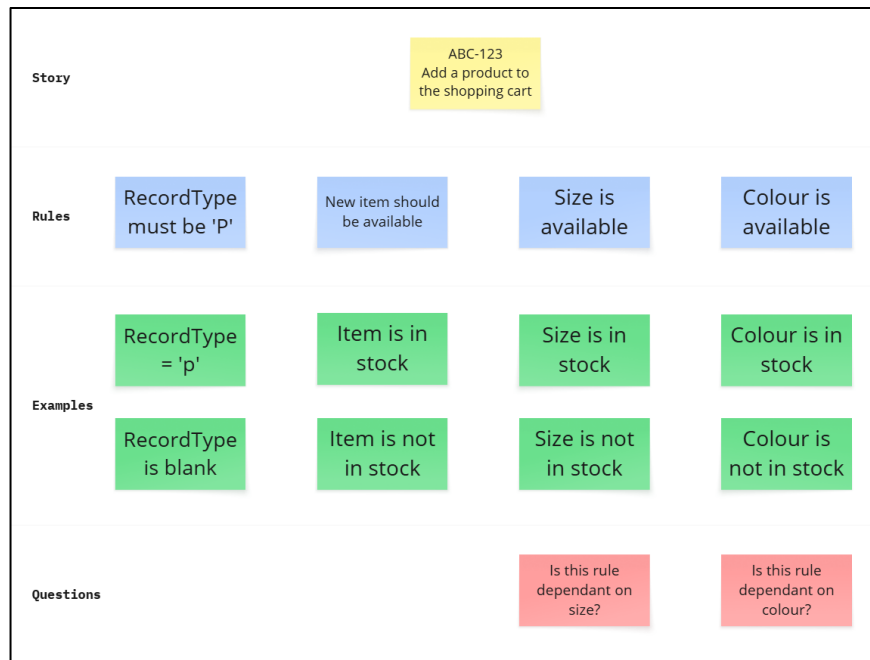
I facilitated a short workshop with the team to help increase understanding of when and why we perform testing. We discussed the intention of testing being to assure quality, and that quality starts with testing our knowledge and understanding, even before work begins. We also

talked about why prevention (validation of aligned understanding) is better than a cure (rework required to fix misalignment of understanding). The team then captured and discussed their thoughts about the purpose of testing.



I walked our Business Analysts and Testers through my Registered Product Owner training resources to help increase their mental ownership and accountability of getting backlog items Sprint ready.

I explored using “Example Mapping” from Behaviour Driven Development (BDD) as a facilitation technique for them to use in developing acceptance criteria collaboratively during backlog refinement and taught it to our team, using the Miro example below.



Example Mapping aligns teams in their understanding of acceptance criteria and uncovers uncertainties by exploring Product Backlog Items, the business rules that apply to them, and concrete examples. Using a tool like Miro to facilitate Example Mapping also enables team members to actively capture their questions without interrupting discussions.

This approach is often referred to as “shifting left”, empowering Business Analysts and Testers as facilitators. It gives Developers an opportunity to contribute and question acceptance criteria as it’s being developed, leading to greater ownership and understanding.

Using this technique had a direct impact on increasing collaboration and happiness in the team and decreasing Product Backlog Item rework during Sprints. The immediate impact that these actions had on our velocity is visible in the green line of the burn-up chart above.

As the PE Scrum team continued to accelerate, the team’s interest and enthusiasm for Scrum increased, and I provided structured Scrum training. The Scrum Master and Product Owner grew in effectiveness, and I stepped back to a more responsive coaching stance, providing coaching and mentoring to the Scrum Master and Product Owner, rather than directly to the team.

Results and measurable impact

- Delivered PE feature in 6 months after 3 years of inactivity.
- Velocity increased 4.5x (12 > 54 story points per sprint).
- Rework significantly reduced through BDD practices.
- PE feature incorporated into top global PE fund administrator’s platform.

Lessons learned and key takeaways

1. Context is everything

We are all guilty of trying to find an easy, off-the-shelf tool or solution to fix the problems that we see. Sometimes we can pick one or more tools from our toolkit to help the team, and that may work. Other times, however, we may need to come up with a new tool, and even if it works, it may not work again.

Takeaway: Observe the team's dynamics and needs continually and select the approach and tools you believe may help.

2. Trust and credibility matter more than process changes

Process changes alone aren't enough in environments with cynicism and resistance. Had I pushed Scrum aggressively without first understanding the team's concerns, adoption would have failed.

Takeaway: Invest in understanding the team's history, frustrations, and culture before introducing change.

3. Data-driven forecasting earns leadership buy-in

Leadership's discomfort with agile flexibility was eased through Monte Carlo Forecasting and Velocity tracking, making projections more data-driven and reliable.

Takeaway: Use forecasting tools to bridge the gap between leadership's expectations and agile principles.

4. Resistance to agile is often rooted in fear

Some team members were initially resistant to Scrum due to their experience with the delivery framework. Understanding and alleviating their concerns, rather than enforcing a process, led to gradual acceptance.

Takeaway: Approach resistance with empathy, patience, and small incremental changes.

5. Real-world learning beats theoretical training

Some team members didn't accept Scrum training initially but learned through experience. Embedding Scrum concepts and theory into daily life proved to be an effective strategy for building up knowledge and disarming resistance.

Takeaway: Use a "learning by doing" approach. Introduce Scrum elements naturally within real team interactions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the success of the PE project was not about enforcing a framework. Rather, it was more about returning to the heart of Scrum: empiricism, collaboration, and trust, and adapting my coaching approach to my observations of what the team needed in each moment.

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