

# Scrumming to What End?

By: Martin C. VanDerSchouw PMP, CSM, PSM

Scrum is one of the biggest trends in Information Technology today. According to one recent survey, over half of all projects are attempting to use some type of agile methodologies. 72% of the time they are using some variant of Scrum. Of these, 82% of the efforts experience some form of trouble. The most common causes of failure include:

- Integration of the team or a failure to teach a team-based culture.
- Communication issues between the team and other areas of the business.
- Issues with the Scrum Master.
- Lack of executive sponsorship.

These issues may incorporate some unfamiliar terms, but they are the same issues faced by teams on every project. The simple fact is, the most common causes of project failure are universal and have nothing to do with Scrum itself. Recognition of this fact presents a unique opportunity. If the problems are not unique, might also the solutions be long standing and universal? I would answer an emphatic yes!

In my experience, the first sign of a Scrum team that is going to fail can be found when the team begins sprinting (the Scrum term for set periods of time where working software must be produced) without having a clear understanding of what success looks like. Typically, this is caused by a misguided notion that the team needs to start sprinting. While it is absolutely critical that the team produces results as quickly as possible and not get trapped in the never ending cycle of defining requirements to perfection, it is equally important that the team has a clear understanding of what success looks like.

According to the rules of Scrum, there are only two documents required to do Scrum. These are the Vision and the Product Backlog. The Product Backlog represents an innovation over other methodologies because it requires the Product Owner, sponsor and/or key stakeholders to prioritize the product features so the team can deliver the most important ones first. I would suggest having a prioritized list of features is a good idea regardless of methodology.

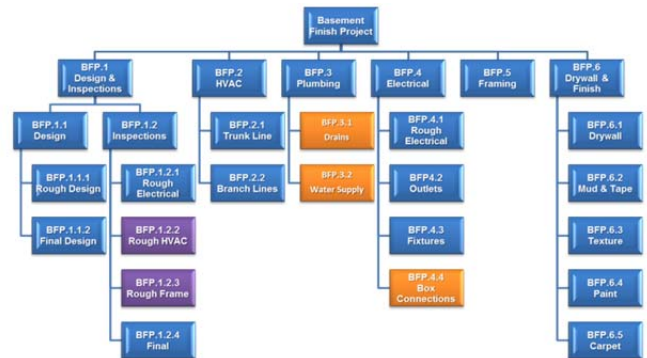
The Vision is a document that when done correctly is identical to a well formed project charter. Most Agilists will not like this statement, mostly because they have seen too many poorly done charters and therefore do not see a Vision and charter as the same. Unfortunately, whether you call it a charter or a Vision they are the same thing. I like to refer to these documents as a 5-Line because they are a single page and contain five critical pieces of information including:

1. A clear description of the business need.
2. An explanation for why the business needs this problem solved, called a justification.
3. Project success criteria that is both objective and quantitative.
4. Project prioritization within the portfolio.
5. Constraints & assumptions

Of these, the most important is the success criteria. The success criteria must provide a quantitative and objective measure of project success. Everything the team does should get the project closer to achieving that measure, and no deliverables should be added that do not get the project closer to achieving success.

Unfortunately, having a well formed Vision and a Product Backlog is not enough to truly succeed with Scrum. To really succeed your team needs to have a little structure around the product definition. Now, I am not talking about a traditional requirements document that can often drone on for hundreds of pages. I am talking about a well formed Work Breakdown Structure or WBS. A well formed WBS (and I specify “well formed” because far too often they are done incorrectly which provides little to no value) is a one page visualization of the product, service or result of the project. It is a picture and shows a hierarchical tree of all the features, requirements or deliverables that must be produced to meet the success criteria. It is not organized by time, sequence or process, but by what features the business believes go together. It resembles an organization chart in appearance, but has nothing to do with resources. And, there is no limit to how many levels it can contain. Each individual box is referred to as a work package. Knowing the appropriate level of detail for a well formed WBS is somewhat a matter of experience. However, four questions can help:

1. Can you estimate the resources (skills) required to produce the work packages?
2. Can you estimate how long it will take to produce the work packages? In a Scrum project no deliverable, feature or PBI should be longer than an individual sprint and no task larger than a day.
3. If someone were to take on the deliverable are you confident they would know what to do?
4. If you deliver these deliverables and nothing else do you meet the success criteria? This last question can also be reversed. If you can pull off a deliverable and still meet the success criteria then the deliverable in question is not necessary.



Adding a well formed WBS can aid your team by providing visibility to changes in the product service or result specifications over time and help the team understand why they are there. A simple model uses three colors to represent baseline requirements, requirements cancelled and requirements added after baseline. When done correctly the WBS is created during the initial 60-90 minute project kickoff meeting and is updated throughout the project constantly being visible just like the Scrum Board and Product Backlog. The big difference is that teams who use a well formed WBS don't get lost in the myriad of sprints and their business stakeholder do not become confused about what the team is doing and why.