

Impediment Resolution with Scrum – Some Tips

Stefan Roock, CST, it-agile, stefan.roock@it-agile.de

Problems

1. If the impediment backlog lives in the mysterious black book of the ScrumMaster, you have a problem.
2. If your impediment backlog does not change you have a problem.
3. If your impediment backlog is empty, you have a problem.
4. If you have an impediment backlog with a growing number of active impediments, you have a problem.
5. If the ScrumMaster resolves all impediments himself you have a problem.

Tip #1 (addressing problems 1 and 2): Make the impediments visible

Write the impediments on a flipchart or on index cards and attach them to a wall in the team room near the taskboard. Make sure that everybody can see the impediments, especially the team during the Daily Scrum.

Rationale

Some of the impediments are really hard to solve. Hiding these will make it very easy to ignore the impediments. Making the impediments visible creates pressure to resolve the impediments.

Putting the impediments near the taskboard creates a nice opportunity for you as the ScrumMaster to give information during the Daily Scrum, like “I resolved impediment 123. What do you think is now the impediment with the highest priority? So I will pick that one.” That way it will become very clear if the ScrumMaster doesn’t remove impediments continuously.

Tip #2 (addressing problem 3): Search for impediments

Every team could perform faster. There is no such thing as a team without impediments. If you as the ScrumMaster don’t know of impediments you are not doing your job. Inexperienced Scrum teams may not mention impediments by themselves. You have to search for impediments actively. For example:

- Whenever there is no movement on the taskboard during the Daily Scrum, it is likely that there is an impediment.
- If there are more tasks “in progress” on the taskboard than developers on the team, it is likely that there is an impediment.

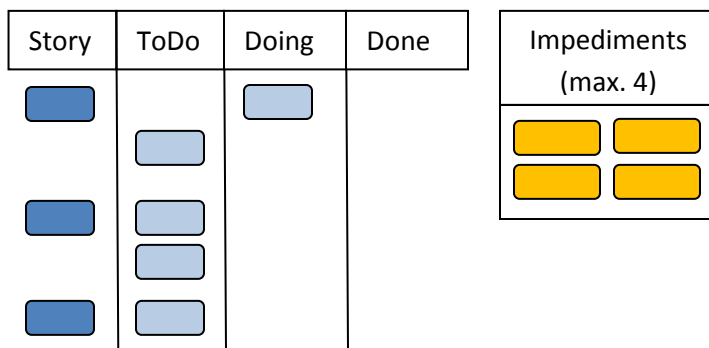
Ask the team about these things and you will discover the impediment. Ask the team about the things that would make them faster. Even if the team members don’t feel that way: these are also impediments; impediments to achieving the highest possible performance.

Tip #3 (addressing problem 4): Limit the number of impediments

Limit the number of open impediments. There are several strategies how you can achieve that. One is to limit the time, another is to limit the number of impediments.

For limiting the time, use a strict rule, like: “An impediment exists for a maximum of 24 hours.” After that time you either have resolved the impediment or trashed it. A trashed impediment may come back only in the next Sprint but not the current one.

For limiting the number set a maximum limit of open impediments (e.g. 4). When writing impediments on index cards and attaching them to the wall you could limit the space for the cards. That way it is simply not possible to attach more impediments to the wall. When you have reached the maximum of open impediments and a new impediment is discovered you just have to decide if the new impediment is more important than one of the existing impediments. If this is the case, remove an existing impediment and put the new impediment in place.



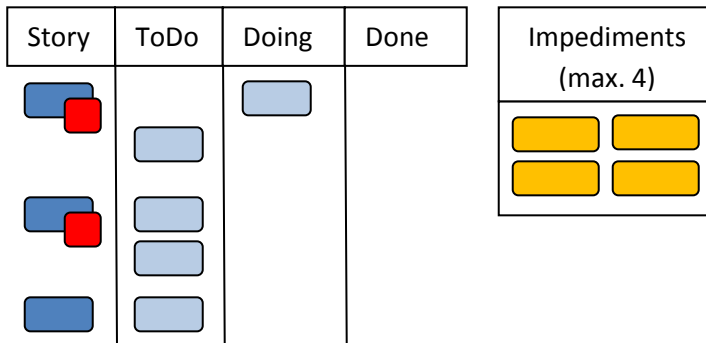
Rationale

Normally new impediments occur much faster than you can remove them. That results in an ever growing list of open impediments. After a short period of time you have a very long list of impediments. That impedes focus, makes prioritization hard and creates a bad mood. Don't manage impediments, resolve them!

Don't be afraid to miss important impediments: They will be raised again later.

Tip #4 (addressing problem 4): Differentiate between local and global impediments

Differentiate between impediments that make the team slow and impediments that block the progress on stories. The first category of impediments could be called *global impediments*. The second category could be called *local impediments* (or blocker). Use tip#3 for global impediments. For the local impediments attach red sticky notes to the stories on the taskboard. Use as many sticky notes as you need.



Rationale

Tip #3 has a pitfall. There may be impediments that block stories. Trashing these impediments would cause problems since the blocks won't vanish. Tip #3 covers global impediments but not the local one. Put as many local impediments on the taskboard as you discover.

Tip #5 (addressing problem 5): Help the team to resolve impediments

As the ScrumMaster don't resolve all impediments by yourself. Over time the team should become capable to remove more and more impediments on its own. Therefore check together with the team which impediments it may resolve itself and what support it needs.

But don't just delegate all impediments to the team. There are still a lot of impediments that are too hard for the team to resolve.

Acknowledgement

I'd like to thank Markus Gärtner and Roman Pichler for their valuable feedback for this article.