AGILE

For The

Long Haul

Avoiding Fatigue

And Burnout

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Agile, when it works well, is fast, and it delivers high-quality outcomes, increased customer satisfaction, and exceptional value to an organization. Speed results from proper scope of the sprint. Quality and customer satisfaction are derived from focused efforts and a constant engagement loop between teams and customers. Properly tuned Agile teams that embody this combination of elements unlock new business value for organizations.

The interactions of speed, focused effort, and constant engagement generally put levels of pressure on Agile teams that traditional methodologies do not. Over the medium and long run, these teams must hit strides that they can maintain. If teams or customers become fatigued, drag will manifest, quality can suffer, transparency in the feedback loop can disappear, and a departure from an outcomes focus can pull teams into the mud. Drag or fatigue can also cause turnover, individual project failure or, worst of all, a loss in organizational support for the entire Agile approach.

BURNOUT AND POOR DECISION MAKING BECOME PROBLEMS WHEN TEAMS DO NOT FIND THEIR STRIDES WITH SMOOTH, CONTINUOUS, OUTCOMES-BASED DELIVERY PROCESSES. ORGANIZATIONS THAT WANT TO MAINTAIN SOLID TEAMS IN THE LONG RUN MUST CREATE SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR THESE TEAMS, AS WELL AS A CULTURE IN WHICH OUTCOMES DEFINE SUCCESS, AND THEN ENSURE THAT TEAMS ARE AWARE OF THIS CULTURE OF SUPPORT FROM THE TOP OF THE ORGANIZATION ON DOWN.

Read more about how Macro Solutions works to avoid fatigue by focusing proper attention on transitions, roles, and the cadence when implementing Agile methodologies.

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A QUICK TRANSITION FROM WATERFALL CAN CREATE THE RIGHT CULTURE TO ALLOW THE AGILE PROCESS TO TAKE HOLD.

Many agencies today are in an Agile transition period. One way to avoid creating an environment that is ripe for burnout is to start individual projects quickly. Here are some action items for a quick transition:

1. Ensure the backlog is just good enough to start – Striving for perfection and detailed elaboration sends the wrong message and, in fact, may create tension between teams that know Agile and customers that are holding onto traditional Waterfall methodologies. Starting quickly with an imperfect backlog will communicate to teams that Product Owners and Scrum Masters are going to let the process work, reducing the stress and anxiety that is natural at the start of any project.

2. Create lightweight norms – When forming teams, the norms created around tools and usage should be explicit and short. Similar to the backlog, this will create the right culture and mindset and it will allow teams to focus on objectives rather than on lists of rules. Over time, team norms will grow or be refined. Ultimately, teams' collective ownership and knowledge will lead them to have a say in future norms, making for a low-stress culture.

3. Maintain norm discipline – Lightweight, starter norms will go a long way toward helping teams maintain norm discipline. With few norms laid out early, Scrum Masters need to stress the importance of maintaining the few norms that do exist. Everyone must respect the norms and understand that the process will work. Teams agreeing to this level of respect, both of team norms and of the Scrum Master, will work together well and will build camaraderie and morale at the early stages of a project. It's also important to remember that abandoning norms mid-sprint can create conflict.

THE TRANSITION SETS THE TONE FOR THE PROJECT. STARTING FAST AND LIGHT, WITH A TRANSPARENT CULTURE AND A DECLARED COMMITMENT TO THE RETROSPECTIVE PROCESS, SURROUNDS TEAMS WITH A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT.

4. Expect the retrospectives – Retrospectives are the glue that tie Agile components together. Teams that understand that they will have chances to contribute to improving processes once sprints are complete are teams that will cooperate, operate smoothly, and experience less stress during a transition to Agile or at the start of a new project. This is one Agile tenet that should never be tailored out.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Federal leadership should allow Agile teams to start fast and imperfectly, showing support for the retrospective process and evolving team norms. By showing support for outcomes over measures, team energy and enthusiasm will rise right out of the gate.

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TEAM MEMBERS ARE THE WORKHORSES OF THE AGILE TEAM. THEY ARE THE CREATORS AND THEY WILL DELIVER THE OUTCOMES DESIRED IF THEY ARE OPERATING AT OPTIMAL LEVELS.

Agile development truly is a team endeavor. Just as in professional sports, teams need to win games in order to make it to the playoffs. It can be a long season for a baseball team, just as it can be a long haul for an Agile team. Here are some ways that organizations can support Agile teams during product development:

1. Give individuals ownership and recognition – Teams in which individuals are permitted to take ownership over the commitment to sprint goals and longer-term backlog items – and then given recognition for success – are teams that will drive forward with energy.

2. Realize that perfection isn't the goal – Striving for perfection creates a culture of hesitation and second guessing, slowing teams down. On the other hand, teams that embrace a certain level of imperfection with the support of the customer can move much faster and spend less emotional energy on diminishing returns. Perfection comes over time and can't be forced; attempting to do so will frustrate teams that are trying to move quickly and focus on priorities.

3. Create a safe environment – A major component of fostering a safe, open environment is allowing teams to take ownership of the Agile process, including their failures. Customers who support teams by allowing them to fail, learn, and correct are removing a key source of angst in any team. Maintaining this safe environment in the long run is important—not just for deliverable work, but also in fostering communications.

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT WITH THE RIGHT LEVEL OF EXPECTATIONS ENABLES TEAMS TO CONFIDENTLY JUMP INTO THEIR WORK AND TAKE RISKS.

4. Remember to focus on creativity – Don't ask teams to be creative and then restrict them with fear and risk management. Fostering ownership, giving recognition, and allowing for risk-taking and idea generation encourage creativity to emerge, stoking team energy and morale. Customers and Scrum Masters who foster creativity will enjoy working with high-energy teams that generate desired outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION
Federal leadership should empower teams to take risks, fail, and learn in a safe environment. These practices will increase speed, boost creativity, and reduce angst. Teams should be encouraged to own their successes and failures, for Agile teams that own their work will endure in the long run.

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SCRUM MASTERS ARE THE SERVANTS OF THE TEAM AND FACE THE HIGHEST RISK OF BURNOUT.

Scrum Masters are not traditional project managers and should not be treated as such. They alone should not bear the burden of success. Instead, they should operate with confidence that success comes from engagement among team members and customers. Here are some ways to support Scrum Masters in their role:

1. Offer team support – Teams should understand the Scrum Master's role and support him or her as he or she tries to foster the proper norms and culture for the team's success, not the Scrum Master's success. Scrum Masters who have the support of their teams will have free rein to remove blocks and open communication channels. They will also have more energy to spend on getting teams to operate at higher levels.

2. Offer support at the management level – While it might seem like a truism, customers and contractor managers need to understand the Scrum Master's role as well. A Scrum Master working without management support and understanding is operating with one or both hands tied and will tire quickly, if not walk away entirely.
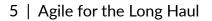
3. Empower Scrum Masters to lead teams – The combined support of team and agency management creates empowered Scrum Masters who can focus valuable energy on providing business value. By observing the teams, the Scrum Master is a key contributor to putting in place the norms that reduce team fatigue. This focus on business value will also help Product Owners, as easy give and take in well-run meetings and day-to-day communications is a huge factor in reducing fatigue across the board.

A PROPERLY EMPOWERED SCRUM MASTER CAN DELIVER A HUGE BOOST BY FOCUSING ENERGY AND HELPING TEAMS FEEL THAT THEY ARE SUPPORTED FROM MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS.

4. Create a rotation of Scrum Masters – A more direct approach to combat fatigue over the long haul is to build a second team of Scrum Masters. Nothing feels better to a high-performing Scrum Master just returning from vacation than finding that their team didn't miss a beat while under the care of a Scrum Master who has rotated in. In addition, Scrum Masters need some diversity of activity as well, especially in well-run teams where there are few challenges in the day-to-day or sprint-to-sprint execution.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Federal leadership should support Product Owners and contractors as they seek to empower Scrum Masters appropriately. Scrum Masters are not project managers and they are not solely responsible for team success. An Agile Scrum Master that feels pressured to maintain the responsibilities of a traditional project manager may quickly burn out. Maintaining a team-focused approach to success removes the pressure from a single individual.

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PRODUCT OWNER PARTICIPATION CAN MAKE OR BREAK AGILE ADOPTION.

Product Owners can burn out just as easily as any other team members. Product Owners often have other duties in an agency – responsibilities that can pull them in many directions and distract them from their teams. As a result, they may disappear from their teams, contributing to team fatigue. Here are some ways to support Product Owners:

1. Offer team support – Teams need to support their Product Owners regardless of whether or not they are the end customers. Teams can support Product Owners by showing that they are dedicated to the project, the process, the norms, and each other. In turn, Product Owners must be energized so that they're willing to support their teams. This dedication breeds a culture of endurance, which will allow Product Owners and their Agile teams to sleep easily, knowing that they stand a very good chance of quickly finding a solution no matter what challenge is in front of them.

2. Offer management support – Enthusiastic Product Owners that have management support to oversee Agile adoption will rarely run out of steam. Indeed, they will infuse the rest of the team with feelings of positivity. Risks to the Product Owner's endurance can come from sources outside of the team itself, and supportive senior management can directly help manage the inevitable outside pressures a Product Owner faces.

3. Gather information proactively to make informed decisions – While not always easy, a Product Owner's key role is to be plugged in to the parts of the agency that affect or are impacted by the Agile project team. This allows for easy decision making during grooming, planning, and Scrums. Fast-moving teams can put pressure on Product Owners to make decisions, and if there is a constant scramble to get the needed information, those Product Owners will spend more and more energy trying to keep up. Proactive bridge building is a main activity of Product Owners, and spending some energy up front will ultimately pay dividends for the entire team.

PRODUCT OWNERS WILL HELP SET A TONE FOR TEAMS. ASSISTING PRODUCT OWNERS IN FINDING WAYS TO MAINTAIN ENERGY AND FOCUS IS CRITICAL.

4. Create partner Product Owners – Another more direct approach to avoid Product Owner fatigue is to have multiple, well-informed Product Owners. This will help reduce demands on a single individual during surge periods and allow for broader information gathering to support decisions. Having two Product Owners will also insulate teams from gaps created when Product Owners are distracted by their other duties.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Federal leadership should support and respect their Product Owners, both allowing and expecting them to maintain commitments to Agile teams as a whole. This will go a long way to preventing Product Owner burnout and it will help teams maintain energy that can otherwise be drained by a lack of direction caused by disconnected Product Owners.

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CADENCE CAN MAKE OR BREAK ANY KIND OF TEAM. THE AGILE CADENCE, WITH ITS SPRINTS AND SUPPORTING MEETINGS, IS NO DIFFERENT.

Outcomes should be the gauge of success – not how many points are achieved, how much is talked about, or how many promises are kept. If the desired outcome is to cross the finish line with a successful project or to have a successful Agile program across multiple projects, then an agency needs to support teams with strategies to balance the fast pace and focused effort. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Keep iterations short – While each project team needs to establish its own ideal iteration length, short iterations with smaller scope tend to relieve the pressure felt by teams as they aren't creating large, overarching solutions or promising huge, risky chunks of work. This also relieves system users from having to accept overly complex solutions.

2. Keep meetings short – Short meetings tend to be more targeted and allow team members to focus their energy on achieving desired outcomes. Hold more meetings if necessary, but keep them short. As teams get ready to start a new sprint, chop up long planning meetings. Lengthy meetings wear teams out.

3. Create technical debt iterations – There is a certain drag and drain that builds up in the form of technical debt as effective teams plow forward quickly with the right level of imperfection. Reserving an iteration to clean up and declaring this as a strategy early will give teams confidence that they will have the opportunity to clear technical debt down the road. Cleaning up technical debt will also allow teams to clear the path for more creativity while improving velocity. This boosts a technical team's morale.

TEAMS WHO KNOW THAT LESS-INTENSE R&R DAYS ARE COMING WILL STAY FOCUSED AND POSITIVE TO THE END OF EACH SPRINT.

4. Create opportunities for rest and relaxation – Keep an eye on teams' Review and Retrospective (R&R) days. While there will always be some small amount of clean up, teams should not be striving to finish work on these days. If they are, teams may want to look at their estimating process or create a norm that an R&R day is an off day from commitment execution.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Federal leadership should look to the collective team to manage time wisely. Keep an eye out for teams holding long, drawn-out meetings or teams that continuously miss commitments. Support technical debt reduction as a value-added activity since the right level of imperfection enables speed. Do not force arbitrary sprint lengths on teams; rather, allow them to find their own equilibrium that is aligned directly to customers, not to some reporting requirement or contractual element.

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High-functioning Agile teams transition quickly and support team members and norms. Agile teams also recognize, respect, and support the distinct roles that Scrum Masters and Product Owners play, respecting cadence and always keeping eyes open for signs of fatigue. These teams are also well supported by federal leaders. By starting from a place of trust and awareness, teams can reduce fatigue or avoid it entirely. When fatigue is reduced, teams operate more efficiently.

Self-organizing teams need objective observers. A team may emotionally want to win the World Series in the first game of the playoffs but this approach will burn teams out. Agencies need to adopt a culture that gives teams space that will develop strategies that will counter fatigue and burnout, which are very real threats to their own success.

FEDERAL AGENCIES SHOULD KEEP AGILE TEAM BURNOUT IN MIND AND EMPOWER PRODUCT OWNERS AND SCRUM MASTERS TO CREATE THE PROPER TEAM NORMS AND CULTURE. THEN HIGH-PERFORMING AGILE TEAMS CAN WIN CHAMPIONSHIPS, NOT JUST INDIVIDUAL GAMES.

To learn more about avoiding agile fatigue and burnout in the federal government, visit:

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