

Organize for Accelerated Transformation

Lean Agile Center of Excellence (SAFe™) / Executive Action Team (Scrum@Scale™)

Too many Agile Transformations are falling short of expectation, operating for multiple quarters or in some cases years with little or no results to show. In this article we will discuss alternative ways to organize, measure, and pros and cons of each with recommendations how best to organize those who are responsible for implementation for success and what guardrails are most effective.

The Scrum framework solves the problem of raising impediments for a small team. At the Sprint Review, where progress to Product goals are celebrated, the plan going forward is collaborated, and importantly impediments are reviewed with their stakeholders; teams ask for help removing them. Leadership works to collaborate and assist the teams removing impediments, those under their control. However, ultimately, they too will run into “organizational impediments” when they are not able to resolve higher level issues. Often we see a team go faster and faster every sprint as they are given the freedom to remove impediments. Eventually the improvements require higher level decision authority and reach a plateau. We call this an organizational impediment and its important to remain open and transparent on what is slowing a team down, the Sprint Review and if one exists, the Scrum of Scrums meeting is where cross team impediments are raised and removed.

Extra-Team Impediments: Consider the case where two stakeholders are peers and one owns (direct reports) the team of DBAs, often rationalization is justified: “the database is a critical component and any changes to it must be done with utmost expertise; the DBAs must stay within the DBA team and their manager will prioritize their work.” The second owns all the other developers on the team and there are regular “cross team dependencies” where a story needs to have the database touched and the people usually work well together but sometimes there are “prioritization” conflicts which delays the work and reduces predictability of the primary team. Additionally, there is additional delay and extra overhead needed to coordinate across the teams, both the delays and the overhead impedes “flow” of work through the system. This is a common example of an “organizational impediment” only the senior level leadership can resolve.

Scrum of Scrums: Often, Scrum Masters from multiple related teams will assemble a “Scrum of Scrums” to discuss execution, coordinate dependencies and highlight additional impediments as they arise; leaders may attend periodically to become aware of and to help the teams resolve problems. Examples of impediments that may be identified and resolved at the Scrum of Scrums include uneven loading of a specific skill set, dependencies on a shared service, integration across teams problems, capacity imbalance, maintenance and support issues, evaluation of a new technology or new practice. Sometimes leaders from different scrum of scrums get together to discuss and resolve even higher level organizational impediments: cross product domain loading, budgeting, portfolio prioritization, human resource policies. In the Scrum@Scale framework, the Scrum of Scrums meetings cascade daily ultimately to the Executive Action Team potentially removing even the most egregious organizational impediments in days rather than weeks, months, or quarters.

An Agile Center of Excellence: An additional approach is to set up an Agile COE which would encompass the charter of a traditional PMO and would include portfolio management, governance as well as Agile Operations. These can be highly effective so long as the people representing the three areas of responsibility remain aligned, the backlog of impediments to be worked originates from execution teams’ escalations, and there exists an escalation path with comprehensive decision authority. However, in many cases, due to legacy norms, procedures, and policies it can be challenging to break the status quo and to implement practical and timely solutions to execution problems.

Implementation: Be aware some of the decisions made by either of these teams will be “centralized” for the better of the overall system. Some should be easy to implement through the Scrum Masters – for example, the collection of specific metrics, data entry integrity checks, or format of the Sprint Review Confluence report; others more difficult, but the Scrum Masters as ultimately accountable for removal of impediments and they are typically accountable for implementation of many of the central decisions.