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How Can We Use Scrum and Agile Principles to Increase Personal Effectiveness?

Premise

Most of us, when asked, would like to be more effective. Most of us would say we are overloaded, too busy and so feel less than effective. We seem to have too much to do and no easy way of digging ourselves out of the hole.

I have found that you can apply Scrum principles to your personal life to become more effective. The result for me is that I know what I am doing and why, I can respond at a good pace to anything coming in and I have a sustainable workload. Most importantly I feel that I am effective (hopefully my customers have the same view:-)) contributing more to their organization than I would otherwise. I've spoken to many people about this issue and the approach I've taken, especially about the email problem, but the reality is that it took a bunch of experiments to determine something that worked for me, and so it took me a long time to get there.

How Did You Get Control of Your Email?

Many people ask specific questions on the approach I take. It comes up when I mention that I only have 5 items in my inbox. Or perhaps it comes up as people talk about using personal Kanban board. Irrespective, it's been a while since I had to worry about the email queue (not backlog – while in the inbox implication is that we have to do something about it) since I keep the inbox below 5. Result is that I simply allocate a couple of “iterations” (25 mins) at the beginning of each day to deal with the influx overnight and then check it a couple of times a day.

But I didn't start that way. I needed to set things up so that I didn't get interrupted by email all the time. This meant two things:

1. I needed to feel like I was being responsive to things I needed to be responsive to.
2. I needed to set things up so I was not reviewing 600 items (actual inbox at the time) with incoming rate of 150 items / day.

I started fairly simply to address both of these. For

1. I simply said “review email for a couple of iterations when I come in”, “make backlog items out of ‘large’ things as part of a daily planning activity” (in other words first couple of iterations we not planned, but set things up so they were plan-able). I could then review during the day at lunch time and at end of day (another iteration each). Also when I do an iteration of normal work, I often finish up early and so can glance at email if it is worrying me.
2. Since I was at the 600 figure I had to determine how to get it down to 300 and then maintain at

300. Once I did this, target was 150, 75, etc. Basically “maintenance” worked by being disciplined about the primary “rule of the game” – you cannot go home until you hit the target. This forced me to work the issue. And through this I found that by working through the queue I noticed that there were a number of common things that I could do to remove them from the queue – heuristics that worked for me. For example:

1. A number of these were only in the queue because I needed to come back to them at some future date. So I got these out of the inbox by dragging them into tasks (using Outlook) and setting a date when I look at it again. This meant my daily planning now also included a quick glance at the task list for the day.
2. Another thing I noticed was then number of “keep this in case I need to read it again” or “keep this because I probably should read it”. I became more aggressive about disposing of these figuring if it wasn’t important enough to do something about it when I first saw it, it was unlikely to get more important and, if it did it would portably come back in the form of another email. So I filed them.
3. And a final thing I noticed was that my filing system was ridiculous – a massive hierarchy. Problem was that I would often need to file things in two or more ways (by customer, by person, by activity) and so not only was it hard to file anything, it was also hard to find anything. But then I discovered that “search” worked pretty well so now I have only two categories “business” and “personal” and that works pretty well.

In the end it took me about 6 months and I was below 50 on a regular basis. Getting to 10 was easy from there.

What Approach Would You Suggest I Take?

The good news is that you can probably get there faster. The best summary of how you can become more effective that I have read is in the mini-book ["The 3 Pillars of Personal Effectiveness" by Troels Richter](#) (note: requires free registration on the site to access free book).

The book turns out to be a bit of a sales pitch for a tool he is developing but I don't think that matters. The reality is that I have used the ideas here – the personal backlog prioritization to understand what to do, “mind maps” to brainstorm ideas, visualizing my workflow especially with regard to email so that I get it under control, using the Pomodoro Technique to help focus when I need focus time, personal retrospectives to look back on what I've been doing and so on. Your understanding of Scrum, agile and lean will make the ideas behind this seem self-evident, but the key here is that there are a set of things you can try that will step you along the way – Scrum / lean / agile applied to the personal world.

It does require that you step back a bit from the day-to-day hassles of work, but the benefits will outweigh any downside.

Want to Know More?

Write-up on the basics

<http://lifehacker.com/productivity-101-a-primer-to-the-pomodoro-technique-1598992730> and from the “inventor” <http://cirillocompany.de/pages/pomodoro-technique>

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