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How Do We Talk About Sprint Commitments That Have Not Been Met / Done?

At the beginning of the sprint we make a sprint commitment where the individuals and the team commit to producing an increment of work / sprint goals. The ideal situation is that the team does what it commits to do and demonstrates this at the Sprint Review / Demo. After a few sprints, most teams develop a rhythm and understanding of what they can do and meet the commitment they have made.

But the reality is that the commitment is not a guarantee. The team will discover things and things will happen even in as short a period as a sprint. For example, there could be an outside impact on the team (more production support than expected); the job could have been harder than expected ("oh my, look at this code - wtf?"); as the work was being done, it became clear that the requirements needed to change or be different; and so on. In these cases, from the stakeholder's perspective, a trust is broken in that the team did not deliver what it set out to do. How do we re-establish trust?

During the Sprint Review when the team is talking about the Sprint (eg by presenting the Sprint Burndown chart as a backdrop), the Team should provide explicit data on the "not done" items so they can be seen to be accountable to the commitments they made. This can be as simple as listing out the items that were not completed.

Here is the key thing. We then talk about why the team was unable to meet the commitment and, if it makes sense, talk about possible learning we have made that we expect will allow us to deal with similar situations in the future. Keep the discussion short and focused on improving how we deliver business value.

This is not a blame game where we are looking for the scapegoat. But it is also in sharp contrast to what is often heard at these status meetings. For example, we often hear "I think we did a great job … if you just look at the results from this perspective." We hear long winded excuses couched in techno-babble on why we weren't able to get the work done. Remember that "technical success" is a euphemism for "failure." We often put blame on other people / organizations where, while it might be true that there was another party involved, it is also true that we can work the issue in a different way and meet the commitment. I think we hope that people won't really see what this means, that we did not make the commitment, and hope that people forget that they were after specific business value.

No matter the motives, this approach does not increase a stakeholder's ability to trust the team the next time around. The stakeholder has it in the back of her mind "what's to stop this from happening again?" The best response is to be upfront about the miss and clear about what you have learned as a result.

Consultant, Tools, SprintReview, Done, FAQ, FirstSprint

~~LINKBACK~~ ~~DISCUSSION~~