

How to enhance the effectiveness of a Scrum Team?

Introduction

In this document, we will present and demonstrate why the effectiveness of a Scrum Team is so important and how to achieve it, following the ATEM (Agile Teamwork Effectiveness Model).

ATEM

Firstly, we know that all around the world big companies in all types of industries, need excellent work by their teams, in order to obtain the best results. Teamwork is critical and crucial. There are many types of teams in each company but each one will improve following the principles of agile development, so each member of the team can improve its own skills, learning in a faster and better way.

The ATEM was built following the empirical studies on agile development teams, some studies made about effective teams and teamwork and of course, practitioner advice. Besides this base of study, ATEM also incorporates the core of other studies. This type of development was first targeted for IT teams, however, the exponential growth of this subject has become very popular among other types of workspaces. And this use outside of our “environment” has brought a question: “Why do we need a team effectiveness model?”.

But what is team effectiveness? This term goes towards achieving the project goals through team communication and interaction. To explain in a detailed way, we have to present the “Big Five” model, which ATEM is based on. This model has three coordinating mechanisms and five teamwork components that work together in order to achieve an effective team.

Coordinating mechanisms

- **Shared mental models** are based on the connection between the team members, goals, work progress, etc. Having the knowledge of what each team member is capable of. This is crucial for the good coordination of the team and it can be improved by team activities, quality time spent with each other, interactive talks, etc, creating an environment where the team members feel comfortable and capable of understanding the needs of their partners.

- **Mutual trust** is the trust that the team should have among themselves, that they will accomplish their tasks, that they will not get sabotaged, enabling a “psychological safety”. It’s also admitting their mistakes and sharing their feedback without the fear of being judged, a supportive team.
- **Communication** is a key mechanism to the good functioning of the other two. Without communication, a team is not a real team. When we say we have a team, it’s implied that the team communicates with each other without any problem. A team that does not communicate it’s just a group of people sharing the same space and project. That’s why communication is so important, it enables the creation, the sharing of new ideas, new solutions, new ways of thinking and building a project or something else.

Teamwork components

- **Shared leadership** is important to the good development of a project, assuring each member of the team does what is assigned to them. Basically, everyone can be a leader, where sometimes everyone is a leader or other times, if there is only one leader, it can change often. This empowers the team and creates a self organized team. Helps in the team problem solving, being aware of the team situation and what is happening. This component is achieved when it’s possible to observe that the team can solve problems together.
- **Peer feedback** is being able to identify members' mistakes and supply good feedback to each team member, especially in stressful situations. This allows the team to express their thoughts among each other enabling corrections made from inside the team instead of outside, which usually are more stressful and worrying. When a mistake is detected earlier, it’s easier to fix it, so if we give the power to our colleagues to be able to correct us, it’s awesome.
- **Redundancy** is the ability to recognize workload problems in the team, shifting work to other team members, so it can be more efficient and the workload divided equally. This characteristic it’s an important one, in order to maintain the good and in time development, delivering the product without delays.
- **Adaptability** is being aware of team internal and external environment changes in order to adjust the team goals and needs to improve the project development. If a team can’t understand some changes that can occur, it could waste some time working on the wrong problem. Some usual changes that occur in the IT world are mainly technological changes, new frameworks, languages, always new things that

happen and that are in a constant movement. To be able to identify some future changes, the team needs to acknowledge the plan, the organizational strategy, and structure, otherwise, it will not be able to identify them.

- **Team orientation** is the ability to guide all team members to achieve one common goal, to improve their skills, etc. Team orientation rests on team behavior instead of attitudes. Every team member has to be focused on the team goal and not the individual goal, because if team members focus on themselves, the team will progress and will not make any significant progress.

Implementation plan

To effectively implement the proposed guidelines, a structured action plan that includes actions, timelines and success metrics, as well as reflections on potential challenges is needed.

Actions, Timeline and Metrics

1. Establish Shared Leadership

- Action: Identify team members who are interested in taking leadership roles and schedule discussions on rotating leadership practices.
- Timeline: Implement rotation in the next sprint cycle and review its effectiveness.
- Metrics: Team members feedback on leadership.

2. Encourage Peer Feedback

- Action: Introduce a structured format for feedback during retrospectives and create a safe environment for giving and receiving feedback.
- Timeline: Start implementing feedback sessions immediately, with ongoing adjustments based on team input.
- Metrics: Number of feedback sessions held per sprint and quality of feedback.

3. Promote Redundancy

- Action: Promote pairing team members with complementary skills.
- Timeline: Schedule the first cross-training session within the next two weeks and continue bi-weekly.
- Metrics: Number of cross-training sessions conducted and team members ability to take on multiple roles.

4. Enhance Adaptability

- Action: Dedicate time in sprints for experimentation with new tools and/or approaches.
- Timeline: Begin experimenting in the next sprint and continue throughout the project lifecycle.
- Metrics: Time spent on experimentation each sprint and success rate of new tools adopted.

5. Foster Team Orientation

- Action: Set team goals during the first sprint planning meeting and regularly review progress toward these goals.
- Timeline: Define goals in the upcoming sprint planning session and review them bi-weekly.
- Metrics: Team goal achievement rate and satisfaction scores from team surveys.

6. Develop Shared Mental Models

- Action: Create and maintain a shared documentation space that outlines team processes and expectations.
- Timeline: Launch the documentation space within the first two weeks and update it bi-weekly.
- Metrics: Frequency of updates to the shared document and reduction in miscommunications or errors due to unclear processes.

7. Build Mutual Trust

- Action: Plan monthly team-building activities in order to encourage personal connections and reflect on these activities during retrospectives.
- Timeline: Schedule the first team-building activity within the next month.
- Metrics: Participation rates in team-building activities.

8. Facilitate Effective Communication

- Action: Establish communication protocols and monitor and adjust communication tools as necessary.
- Timeline: Implement communication protocols immediately and review their effectiveness regularly.
- Metrics: Feedback from the team on the clarity and effectiveness of communication protocols.

Potential Difficulties

1. Establish Shared Leadership

- Resistance to change: Team members accustomed to power-based structures may be resistant to rotating leadership.
- Inconsistent leadership styles: Team members accustomed to power-based structures may be resistant to rotating leadership.
- Coordination challenges: If we continue to have a “new” leader every Sprint, the pilot program will not see continuity and long-term planning may be tough.

2. Encourage per Feedback

- Bias in feedback: Some members may give preference to their liking over team constructive growth.
- Fear of criticism: Team members may be worse at providing honest feedback due to concern over interpersonal conflicts.

3. Promote Redundancy

- Skill gaps: Some pairings might not result in meaningful knowledge transfer if the skill gap is too big..
- Overload: When team members are assigned additional roles, they feel outnumbered which would make them less productive.
- Time constraints: Cross-training demands time, something that may not be easy to come by when you are in the midst of a busy sprint.

4. Enhance Adaptability

- Reluctance to experiment: Some members might be uncomfortable trying new tools, preferring to use what they know..
- Over-experimentation: Experimenting too much can be a distraction from core deliverables.

5. Foster Team Orientation

- Lack of engagement: Some members tend to be less motivated because they do not understand the importance and necessity of having team goals.
- Measuring progress: It can be hard to establish clear, objective metrics for team goals beyond individual tasks.

6. Develop Shared Mental Models

- Lack of engagement: Not all members may actively use or update the documentation space.
- Miscommunication: While having a shared mental model is helpful to understand, each member might still interpret in their own way.
- Information overload: Too much documentation could become overwhelming, making it difficult to find key information.

7. Build Mutual Trust

- Slow progress: It requires a lot of effort and time to build trust, and you cannot see the results instantly.
- Scheduling challenges: Finding time for regular team-building activities can be difficult.
- Different personalities: More introvert members might not be interested at a social event to engage

8. Facilitate Effective Communication

- Changing needs: Communication tools may evolve over time, needing constant monitoring and adjustments.
- Tool fatigue: Using many communication tools or switching between them frequently can frustrate the team.

Conclusion

After learning about ATEM, its components, mechanisms and how it works, it's time to apply this knowledge to our development team. This can be done during our retrospectives, mainly with the help of the behavioral markers present in the book¹. We know that besides this practice can be applied to all kinds of teams, it will take longer and more effort to bigger teams than to smaller ones.

ATEM will improve our development processes and we hope it will work with all our effort.

References

- [1] "Right Thoughts and Right Action: How to Make Agile Teamwork Effective"
- [2] "11 Team Effectiveness Models to Build High-Performing Teams."
- [3] "A teamwork effectiveness model for agile software development."
- [4] "Characteristics of a Great Scrum Team."