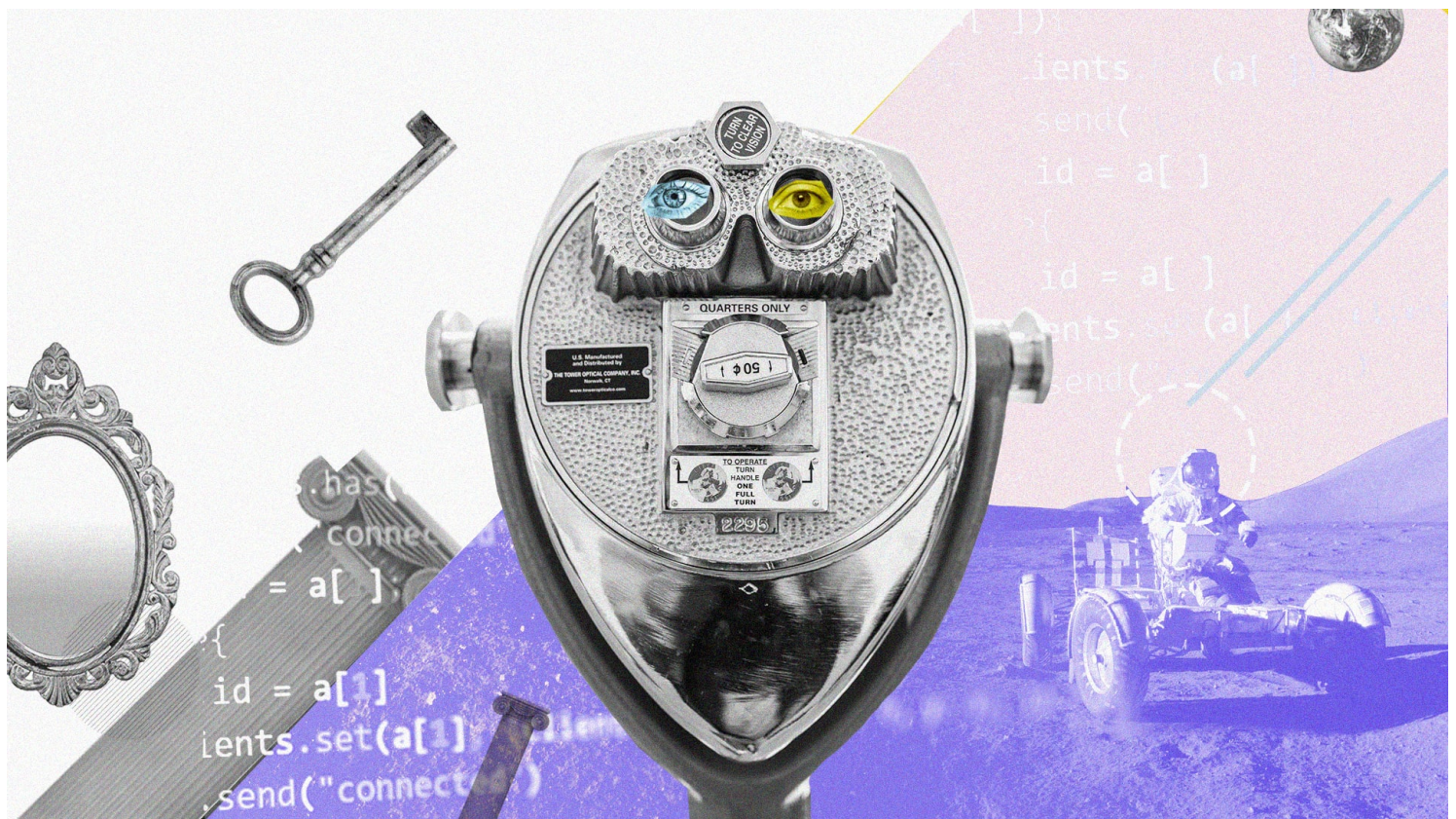# The Three Pillars of Scrum

[Zuzanna Talik](#)

Writer

at Boldare - [Product Design and Development Company](#)
May 31, 2022

(Briefly) What is Scrum?

For a definition, let's check in with the [Scrum Alliance](#), the community-run trade association that supports 'the agile movement':

> Scrum is a lightweight yet incredibly powerful set of values, principles and practices. Scrum relies on cross-functional teams to deliver products and services in short cycles, enabling: fast feedback, continuous improvement, rapid adaptation to change, accelerated delivery.

Sounds good, but what does that mean for [digital product design and development](#)?

Scrum breaks down the work of developing any product into small pieces. These 'pieces' are prioritized and then addressed in a series of sprint planning meetings, usually periods of one or two weeks. **Each sprint results in an iteration of the product, functional in some aspect**. The priorities, the product, and the process are regularly reviewed. In this way, a Scrum team can respond to external changes (to user needs, the market, etc.) and pivot the development process. This ensures that the final product will match the needs of end-users, and the product owner's business requirements, and therefore be more likely to succeed in the marketplace.

Scrum is empirical

Scrum works with evidence, facts, and experience. Instead of abstract concepts and plans, the focus is on the observable reality of product development. **One of the Scrum values is that it doesn't get hung up on the initial idea and vision for the product**, it experiments with them, checking that they are genuinely what is needed. If reality (in the shape of facts and feedback) says something else is required or some aspect of the product must change, then the project changes direction – always focused on creating the right product for the circumstances.

In a sense, **Scrum depends on observation of reality**. The payoff for that observation (and responding appropriately to reality) is faster innovation, more rapid development of a tangible product, improved user experience and satisfaction, and better team morale.

But in order to achieve these results – to match your process of experimentation and observation to reality – **any Scrum team must work with a few key principles in mind, the so-called three pillars of scrum:**

- Transparency

- Inspection
- Adaptation

Let's look at each in turn…

What are the three pillars of Scrum?

1. Transparency

Put simply, **transparency means that everyone involved knows what's going on with the product**. When we say 'everyone' we mean the Scrum team, the client or product owner, representative users or customers, investors… Such a high level of transparency in your development team means that everyone on the team can contribute to the product development process. **There are no meetings in which individuals are snoozing until 'their' agenda item comes up – everybody is engaged in the whole process**; everyone potentially has something to contribute. In practice, transparency means:

- A common goal for the team: an agreed definition of done for each sprint and project element.
- A common language for the team, with clearly understood jargon and phraseology.
- Free and easy flow of information between team members. Scrum features and tools, such as the product vision and mission, product backlog, sprint backlog, etc., hold all the necessary information, accessible to all.
- Regular meetings for all team members: sprint planning meetings, daily Scrum meetings, sprint reviews, sprint retrospectives…

Not only does transparency make for smoother teamwork, it also means that **the individuals in the team and their contributions are much more visible**, not being hidden behind a project manager role.

2. Inspection

Inspection is another Scrum pillar. The process and the product, in its incremental iterations, are regularly inspected as part of Scrum. However, there is no 'inspector', nobody with a specific responsibility to audit. **Everyone involved in the product's development also inspects that development. Inspection is only possible when there is transparency.** You could say that when we have our transparency, inspection is what we use it for. We inspect:

- the product,
- the people involved,
- the process,
- the tools,
- the artifacts.

A clear example would be that after each sprint, the latest iteration of the product is shown or demonstrated to the client or product owner. **That inspection results in feedback and input that then influences the next sprint**. Which leads us to…

3. Adaptation

Adaptation follows from the first two pillars of Scrum (it is driven by them, in fact) but really adaptation is the pillar that has the most direct impact on the product. Using transparency to ensure in-depth and comprehensive inspection, we adapt the process (or the design, or the team, or the business objectives, etc.) to optimize the final product, ensuring it has the best possible chance of succeeding in the chosen marketplace.

Adaptation may also be the pillar that most distinguishes Scrum from the traditional waterfall style of software development (in which everything is planned rigidly up front and changes are difficult and few).

Scrum is by nature flexible, but there are certain 'fixed principles' and the abovementioned regular meetings are one of them. Between sprint planning and reviews, the daily Scrum meetings, and sprint retrospectives, a scrum team has multiple opportunities to adapt the product's development.

Remember, **Scrum (and Agile) is a process of experimentation and continuous improvement:** we build an iteration, we test it, we learn from that testing, and that tells us how to refine our approach. You could say, Scrum is adaptation.

The three pillars of Scrum in practice (at Boldare)

The three pillars of Scrum: transparency, inspection, and adaptation are the core principles and if you really embrace this particular agile way of working, they become key elements of your organizational culture. That's how we see it here at Boldare.

Transparency in practice

Our communication and our actions are transparent, both within Boldare and with our clients and stakeholders. For some years now, we have worked as a holacracy. **A holacratic system is decentralized, with decision-making distributed throughout the organizational structure**. This has led us away from traditional manager roles. We find they often act as gatekeepers of information, preventing (deliberately or not) access by other team members to what they need to know. Our experience is that people work better (and the results are better) when there are no project managers in the traditional sense.

We've found that this kind of openness across the organization also makes it easier for people to work remotely (which is very helpful given the global events of the last year or two). **This pillar of Scrum has also been a pillar of the Boldare culture**, ever since we adopted a policy of radical transparency, getting further away from a traditional hierarchy.

Inspection in practice

Inspection is at the heart of our approach to team working at Boldare. Using the previously mentioned set of Scrum meetings, we ensure that no matter what product we're working on, the whole team has frequent opportunities to review and feedback on the current state and direction of the product.

Our philosophy is: *everyone's perspective is valuable.* To embed this in our culture, we use specific rituals that help team bonding and encourage people to feel comfortable with giving feedback and input. A couple of examples:

- we set aside a little 'complaining time' at the end of each week to let off steam in the company (it is usually a constructive process, and we don't insult each other!),
- we get to know each other better using funny questions or games.

Adaptation in practice

Every Boldare product development team is always ready to pivot and change focus when presented with new facts or input. A key building block in that readiness is the relationship we build with every client and product owner. We see them as an essential part of the team and invest time upfront in getting to know them, their business, their customers and users, their strategic goals. and so on.

For this, we are big fans of product discovery workshops, using them to really drill down into the details of the project, including the reason for the product, the type of product (are we making a prototype, an MVP, or scaling a mature app?), consider technology choices, explore the risks, and define success. **According to agile principles, we ensure we are focused on users and their needs, balancing those with the client and product owner's business priorities.**

Why follow the 3 pillars of Scrum?

Scrum offers multiple tools, techniques, and artifacts, all of them highly practical and with a variety of uses. However, the reason why Scrum is an extremely effective and efficient framework process for digital product development is because *it is built on the three pillars of transparency, inspection, and adaptation*. **These Scrum principles are the context in which everything else works.** They define the culture of Scrum, and following them will lead you to Scrum mastery.