

Scrum for Everyone

CERTIFICATION GUIDE

by Darcy Declute
@scrumtuous



Editors
Prachi Shaw
Amanda Punsammy

Chapter 16: The Sprint Backlog

If you're ever asked about the Sprint Backlog on the Scrum Master certification exam, there's a good chance the answer is 'The Developers.' The Developers own the Sprint Backlog.

The Sprint Backlog is composed of:

- the set of Product Backlog items selected for the Sprint (what)
- the Sprint Goal (why)
- an actionable plan for delivering the Increment (how)

The Sprint Backlog is a plan by and for the Developers.

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3 Questions to Answer

The Sprint Backlog answers three important questions:

- What?
- Why?
- How?

The 'what' is all the items the team hopes to complete during the Sprint. That's all the Product Backlog items the team has 'pulled' and made part of the Sprint Backlog.

The 'why' is the Sprint Goal, which acts as a target for the team to aim at during the Sprint.

The 'how' is the Development team's plan for delivering at least one, and hopefully multiple, usable and valuable Increments of work during the Sprint.

Who Owns the Sprint Backlog?

The Developers on the Scrum Team completely control the Sprint Backlog.

The Product Owner cannot add to it and the Scrum Master can't delete anything from it.

The Developers completely control the Sprint Backlog.

Contrast that against the Product Backlog which is entirely controlled by the Product Owner.

What does that leave the Scrum Master to control? Very little.

Other than a responsibility to guide the team and organization on how to properly apply the Scrum framework, the Scrum Master has very little *control* over the Scrum Team, and virtually no control over the various Scrum artifacts.

On a really well Scrum Team, the Scrum Master has very little work to do. In mature organizations that have been doing Scrum for a long time, a Scrum Master can easily split their efforts across multiple teams. A great Scrum Master eventually coaches themselves out of a job, as the organization becomes so good at Scrum, they hardly meet the Scrum Master at all.

Test Yourself

The Sprint Backlog answers which three questions?

- ☐ A) When, where, and why
- ☐ B) Who, when, and where
- ☐ C) Why, what, and how
- ☐ D) How, what, and where

Option C is correct.

The Sprint Backlog answers the questions of why, what, and how.

Who and where is not a concern of the Sprint Backlog.

What gets Updated Throughout the Sprint

Scrum is all about constantly inspecting and adapting. As such, the team is allowed to change their Sprint plan whenever conditions change, just so long as the changes don't put the Sprint Goal at risk.

Developers can add or remove items from the Sprint backlog any time they like.

Quite often teams choose too much work, or even not enough work, and need to either pull things in or put things back into the Product Backlog. Messing around with the Sprint Backlog is 'fair dinkum', so long as the Sprint Goal is not put at risk.

Every team must be given the freedom to change their plans when necessary.

What can't change? The Sprint Goal.

The Sprint Goal is never allowed to change throughout the Sprint. Once that's finalized in the Sprint Planning meeting, it remains unchanged until the Sprint is over.

The Sprint Backlog is a highly visible, real-time picture of the work that the Developers plan to accomplish during the Sprint to achieve the Sprint Goal.

Consequently, the Sprint Backlog is updated throughout the Sprint as more is learned.

It should have enough detail so that they can inspect their progress in the Daily Scrum.

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TIP

The developers wholly control the Sprint Backlog. Only the Scrum Developers can add to it or delete from it. However, the Sprint Goal, which is part of the Sprint Backlog is formulated through the consensus of the Scrum Team. The Sprint Goal is the one part of the Sprint Backlog that is a collective teams effort.

Transparency, Inspection, and Adaptation

One of the three pillars of Scrum is transparency.

The Sprint Backlog helps to create transparency by allowing everyone on the Scrum Team, along with all of the stakeholders, to know exactly what's going on during a Sprint.

Management should never pester the Scrum Team with requests for status meetings or regular updates through email. The Sprint Backlog should transparently answer any questions stakeholders have about what is being developed and how the development process is moving along.

Test Yourself

When should the Sprint Backlog be updated? (Choose 1)

- ☐ A) During Sprint planning when more details emerge
- ☐ B) During the Daily Scrum as the Scrum developers adapt
- ☐ C) During the Sprint review as stakeholders give feedback
- ☐ D) During the Sprint any time more is learned

Option D is correct.

The Sprint Backlog should be an up-to-date reflection of what is being done and what has been done.

It should be updated regularly.

Sprint Goal

Every arrow needs a target to aim at. For the Sprint, the target is the Sprint Goal.

The Sprint Goal is the single objective for the Sprint. Although the Sprint Goal is a commitment by the Developers, it provides flexibility in terms of the exact work needed to achieve it. The Sprint Goal also creates coherence and focus, encouraging the Scrum Team to work together rather than on separate initiatives.

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The Sprint Goal is the commitment the Sprint Backlog makes.

The Sprint Goal describes what the developers are trying to achieve in the current Sprint. It gives the team something to aim at.

Now let's make one thing clear - the development team doesn't always achieve the Sprint Goal, and that's okay.

Some teams might not achieve the Sprint Goal the majority of the time. If that's a problem, then

maybe it's something the team can talk about in the Sprint Retrospective. But at the same time, it might not be a problem.

What matters is that the Sprint Goal drives the team forward. So long as a usable increment of work is produced at the end of the Sprint and progress is made towards building the product, a missed goal isn't the end of the world.

Test Yourself

Issues beyond the Scrum Team's control have made it almost impossible to achieve the Sprint Goal, and there's still a week left in the Sprint. What should the Scrum Master do? (Choose 1)

- ☐ A) Change the Sprint Goal
- ☐ B) Cancel the Sprint
- ☐ C) Schedule a mid-Sprint planning session
- ☐ D) Have the team continue to work towards the goal

The Sprint can't be canceled unless the Sprint Goal becomes obsolete, and that's a rare occurrence.

You're also not allowed to change the Sprint Goal once it's finalized.

The correct answer here is to just keep working towards the Sprint Goal.

It's not the end of the world if the Sprint Goal is not achieved. Sprints are short. You can create a new Sprint Goal when the current Sprint is finished.

Product Owner and Developer Collaboration

If the Developers have bitten off more than they can chew, and they don't think they can complete all of the tasks they've assigned to themselves, they can remove items from the Sprint backlog.

When this happens, developers should inform the Product Owner. If selected items aren't going to get finished during the Sprint, the Product Owner should know.

Furthermore, the Product Owner knows which Product Backlog items are most important, so the PO might have a better insights into which backlog items should remain in the Sprint and which ones shouldn't.

The Sprint Goal is created during the Sprint Planning event and then added to the Sprint Backlog.

As the Developers work during the Sprint, they keep the Sprint Goal in mind.

If the work turns out to be different than they expected, they collaborate with the Product Owner to negotiate the scope of the Sprint Backlog within the Sprint without affecting the Sprint Goal.

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It's not unusual for teams to overestimate how much work they can accomplish during a Sprint.

If developers need to decompose backlog items or even remove items from the Sprint Backlog, that's fine, so long as all of this happens without risking the Sprint Goal.

Test Yourself

If Developers find the scope of work scheduled for a Sprint is too much, with whom should they negotiate the Sprint Backlog's scope? (Choose 1)

- ☐ A) The Product Owner
- ☐ B) The Scrum Master
- ☐ C) Their fellow developers
- ☐ D) The stakeholders.

Option A is correct.

Any time the developers need to scale back on their work or break down Product Backlog items into smaller pieces, it's always wise to speak with the Product Owner for clarification. The Product Owner can also help developers understand which product features should be included in order to not to put the Sprint Goal at risk.