

SCRUM MASTER

Certification Guide

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Chapter 16

The Sprint Backlog

If you're ever asked about the Sprint Backlog on the Scrum 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.

— 2020 Scrum Guide page 11

Answering the 3 Questions

Notice that the Sprint Backlog answers three questions: what, why, and 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.

Test Yourself

The Sprint Backlog answers which three questions?

- ☐ When, where, and why
- ☐ Who, when, and where
- ☐ Why, what, and how

- ☐ How, what, and where

Option C is correct.

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

Test Yourself

The CEO talks to you, the Scrum Master, and tells you the project will be canceled if a given feature is not implemented before the end of the Sprint. What should you as the Scrum Master do?

- ☐ Add the feature as a Sprint Backlog item in the current Sprint
- ☐ Cancel the Sprint and have the team work on this important feature
- ☐ Have the Product Owner speak with the CEO
- ☐ Have the Product Owner add the feature to the current Sprint Backlog

Nobody can add anything to the Sprint Backlog other than the developers.

In this case, the Scrum Master should have the Product Owner speak to the CEO.

The Product Owner could then speak with the developers and see if they could include the new feature in the Sprint Backlog without putting the Sprint Goal at risk.

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.

Teams can also add or remove items from the Sprint backlog. 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. Again, just like changing the plan, messing around with the Sprint Backlog is 'fair dinkum', so long as the Sprint Goal is not put at risk.

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.

Transparency, Inspection, and Adaptation

One of the 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 shouldn't have to pester the Scrum Team with status meetings and email updates because the Sprint Backlog should answer any questions about what is being developed and how things are moving along.

Test Yourself

When should the Sprint Backlog be updated?

- ☐ During Sprint planning when more details emerge
- ☐ During the Daily Scrum as the Scrum developers adapt
- ☐ During the Sprint review as stakeholders give feedback
- ☐ 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.

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?

- ☐ Change the Sprint Goal
- ☐ Cancel the Sprint
- ☐ Schedule a mid-Sprint planning session
- ☐ Have the team continue to work towards the goal

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

And 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 push items back into the Sprint Backlog.

Of course, when that happens, they should inform the Product Owner. The Product Owner expects what will be finished during a Sprint. If certain items aren't going to get finished, the Product Owner should know.

Furthermore, the Product Owner knows which Product Backlog items are most important, so the PO might have a better idea of which backlog items should stay 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.

— 2020 Scrum Guide page 11

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?

- ☐ The Product Owner
- ☐ The Scrum Master
- ☐ Their fellow developers
- ☐ The stakeholders.

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, not to put the Sprint Goal at risk.
