

# THE WEDDING RITUAL

This is a fairly short talk, but I'm hoping you'll come away with two things: 1) some advice to help people new to agile that you might meet, 2) some practical advice that might help make something I used to find painful a little better.

# AGILE BUZZWORDS

At Lean Agile Scotland, the excellent conference that Chris runs every year, I was helping my friend, Joe, with his session in the beginner track. His session was about "Agile Buzzwords". Like any domain, our community has a bunch of buzzwords that some of us take for granted, some of us badly misunderstand. Some of which are poorly defined, some of which are never clarified for new people. I remember distinctly being puzzled by the word "kanban" for FAR too long.

The goal of this session was to help new people take a small step towards understanding the domain of lean and agile. We weren't under any delusions that we'd come up with a way of fixing the more fundamental issues overnight, but we figure it'd be at least a forum for new people to ask questions and that would be valuable by itself.

While we were explaining something else -- I think it might have been "What is Scrum?", which is a subject that can't easily be summed up in a quick way for beginners --, we kept referring to these ceremonies that are performed as part of SCrums. One of the people new to Agile rightly asked the follow-up question, "What are ceremonies?"

# WHAT ARE CEREMONIES?

At the time, I think we gave an okay answer. I can't recall exactly what we said, but it was something like, "A ceremony is where people get together at a pre-defined time, and go through a well-known process. Sometimes people have parts or roles to play. There is usually a goal, or an outcome that we want to reach." Not great, not terrible. It works. We gave "Retrospectives" as an example of one such ceremony.

Our asker, unsatisfied, followed up again with, "Isn't that just a meeting?" Damn, that's a good question. How are ceremonies any different from a meeting? Well, they're not. They are in many ways a specialisation. You gather together, like in a meeting, and usually talk about something expected, like in a meeting, and it hopefully has some structure, like in a meeting. I know some of you are hearing that and thinking, "Our meetings don't have structure and are about nothing", but that's a bigger issue.

# THE WEDDING CEREMONY

Think about the ceremony that most people outside of the Agile/Lean world think of when you say ceremony: the wedding ceremony. (Apologies, but given the audience I am assuming a Western cultural bias here.) If I asked 3 or 4 of you to sketch the process of a wedding ceremony, from the first people arriving to people leaving, you know that you'd cover a lot of the same ground. Depending on the size and scope of the wedding, different people have different roles, there are variations, but from a reasonable point of view if you saw it you'd know what it is. If you were asked to attend, you'd know what was expected of you. If you're the officiator, then you know you've got a more active part to play. Weddings are a process, with a well-understood structure. They have an expected outcome. They happen at a pre-defined time (usually, but there's always vegas). These are ceremonies.

# RITUALS

As part of some research that might turn into a longer talk next year, I've been thinking a bit about something similar: rituals. One definition for rituals I think is decent:

# **RITUALS VS CEREMONIES**

**"Ceremonies involve a process whereas, rituals involve rules and regulations."**

# RITUALS VS CEREMONIES

**"A ritual refers to group of actions performed for their symbolic value.  
On the other hand, a ceremony is performed on a special occasion."**

I read this and I thought, "Hmm.. that seems familiar"  
Coming back to the Lean/Agile world, let's think about one of our own ceremonies. I'm going to pick on the ceremony with which people are probably most familiar.



# STANDUPS

If Agile has a wedding ceremony, a common thing people understand, it's almost certainly the daily stand-up. Sadly, it's also probably being treated as a wedding ritual that will end in an Agile divorce.

# USUALLY BAD. WHY?

Last week, when I was starting to write this, no fewer than 3 people, unprompted, told me they hate their standups, so I think I'm barking up the right tree.

They're not engaging. Often just using the three questions (What did you do yesterday...?) to tick boxes and do traditional waterfall project management. No engagement, no purpose, no joy.

^ People go on far too long in order to justify their existence. People don't come to work to not do anything, so why make them justify what they did every day? Why make people listen to a list of tasks someone else did yesterday? I promise you that I don't care. It's not news. Just like the "Queen isn't dead".

^ People also often leave all issues until the standup. This is infuriating. If someone else in the team can help, don't wait! Go ask. We might all have pieces of the work, but we all must have the same goal. No-one wins unless we all do.

# STANDUP RITUALS

This is a ritual. Focussing on rules/regulations. No celebrations.

# MAKE IT A CEREMONY

How might we improve?

- ^ Make it a ceremony.

- ^ Focus on the work. Walk the board. Start on the far right (most done) column, and move left so that we focus on getting things finished.

- ^ If people don't speak on a given day, that's fine. Make it clear we just want status and any issues. Don't need a comprehensive walkthrough of what you did.

- ^ Take a minute to think about the sprint goal. Are we still headed towards it? If not, why not? It's okay to not be, but understand why and what could be done. That's what this ceremony is supposed to be for: alignment to and progress towards the sprint goal.

# TAKE-AWAY

Conclusions: I said at the start I'd give you some useful advice on doing something less painfully. That was the bit about standups. Walk the damn board.

I also said I'd give you some advice to help new people: "Be careful with buzzwords." Take the time to think about the words you use, why you use them, and how you would help someone see their importance; not just their literal meaning.

# FINAL QUESTION

As a small preview of the bigger talk I hinted at earlier and also as a thought experiment to take away: What if you did Agile without *any* of the ceremonies? How would you achieve the same effect? Alightment, clarity of work, collaboration etc. Think about it. I did it for two years. Remember: the manifesto has no ceremonies at all.

**THANKS**

**@garyfleming**