

Communication in Agile Inter-team Development

Sarthak Tiwari

School of Computing, Informatics, and Decision Systems
Engineering
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona, USA
sarthak.tiwari@asu.edu

Ruben Acuña

School of Computing, Informatics, and Decision Systems
Engineering
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona, USA
ruben.acuna@asu.edu

Abstract

As the complexity of software development increases, companies relying on agile processes are asked to apply agile at large scale. A typical approach is to run several agile teams in parallel, however, this can conflict with the basic tenets of agile which focus on interaction and flexibility. A key aspect in this transition is maintaining quality communication to ensure progress, which can be addressed with appropriate adaptations in process, technology, and architecture. In this paper, we review the use of agile for large projects, and appropriate adaptations.

CCS Concepts • **Software and its engineering** → **Agile software development**; *Programming teams*; • **Social and professional topics** → *Project management techniques*.

Keywords Agile, Software Engineering, Software Development, Process Models, Inter-team, Management

ACM Reference Format:

Sarthak Tiwari and Ruben Acuña. 2019. Communication in Agile Inter-team Development. In *SER574 '19: Advanced Software Design, January 20, 2019, Mesa, AZ*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3281122.3281124>

1 Introduction

Agile approaches are popular in software development for numerous reasons such as its adaptability towards change in requirements, early customer satisfaction and increase in team effectiveness with time. However, the structure of an agile process does not lend itself to large teams and is not suitable for large projects [6]. In complex software, situations arise where multiple agile teams need to work together to achieve a common goal.

When scaling to multiple teams, the most important consideration is enabling effective communication, both personal and architectural, which is the focus of this paper. For an example of a company developing a complex piece of software, consider Spotify AB who has over 30 teams [4]. Spotify is a streaming music client which supports media, commercial, and social features. The basic element of development organization at Spotify is the Squad, analogous to a Scrum team. Squads in related areas are grouped together into Tribes. The overall structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

As outlined in the Agile Manifesto [2], an agile process gives individuals and interactions value over processes and

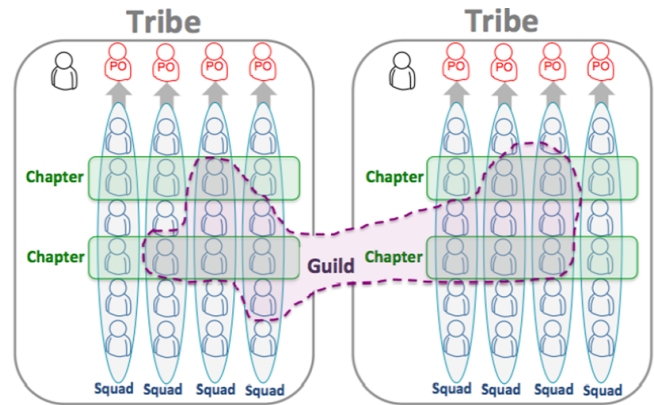


Figure 1. Agile team organization at Spotify [4].

tools. An agile team should contain all that is required for them to do their work, thus interactions are intensely intra-team. However, diverse feature sets such as required in the Spotify application necessitate many skill sets and substantial manpower. By using a multi-team model, large projects can benefit from agility, provided that the process is adapted. Multiple teams increases the importance of communication, from simple interpersonal communication to system specification. The agile approach of interacting in-person can fail due to reasons such as the vertical structure of company organization and layers of middle managers [3]. The large number of intermediaries can cause an agile process to break-down as it takes longer than usual for messages to reach their destination than can be afforded. In an agile process, where Big Design Up Front may typically be avoided, the move to multiple teams also motivates a need to communicate design decisions. For successful integration of technological components, system elements must have well defined functional specifications, and interfaces.

This document is organized as follows: Introduction, Communication Concerns, Supporting Communication in Inter-team Development, and Conclusion. In Section 2, we discuss example communication concerns. In Section 3, we present some process adaptations that can help resolve issues. Lastly, Section 4 concludes with an overview of important aspects of inter-team agile development.

2 Communication Concerns

A fundamental issue in tasking teams with separate goals is that teams can become isolated from other teams pursuing similar or related goals. Consider a scenario at Spotify [4]: a tester in a particular Squad invested time to solve a particular problem, which was also faced by another tester on a different team. Without communication, these team members would perform redundant work. To address this problem Spotify defines Chapters, which are crosscutting groups which gather individuals with similar roles across different Squads. At Spotify, offices are laid out so that the Squads making up a Tribe are spatially close [4]. This leads to an environment where an informal exchange of information on the Tribe's work will occur.

Consistency becomes an issue when expanding to multiple teams. The product owner in an agile process model is the person with the project vision, and with a small team, they can clearly communicate it to every team member. Members can even query the product owner directly when in doubt. However, in large projects where multiple teams are working together, it is practically impossible for the owner to continue what they did in a small team. This motivates a need for a formal definition of their vision as it gives teams something to consult to when encountering a design decision. Without a functional specification, teams will be unable to produce components which can be easily integrated.

3 Supporting Communication in Inter-team Development

The general problem of communication can be tackled from two perspectives. First, stakeholders at and across different levels need to have communication channels. This can be addressed by adaptations in development process and leveraging technology. Second, the quality (e.g., accuracy) of communication needs to be high. This can be addressed by thorough system specification through architecture.

3.1 Process Adaptations

There are many changes [1] that can be incorporated into a process model to decrease the chance that parallel agile teams run into problems during development or integration.

One critical aspect of an agile process is daily standups which are a platform for letting each team member know the work being done in other parts of the team and correlate it with the work they are performing. This uncovers differences in understanding early in development and prevents last minute discovery of discrepancies. In the case of multiple agile teams this problem is compounded as a stand up is a closed activity of the team itself, thus preventing other teams from knowing the results or discussions of each other. This can be resolved by having a representative of each team be present in a standup, e.g., a Scrum of Scrums, where typical

stand up questions are given but reframed for a team context (e.g., "What will my team do before we meet again.." [6]).

Although the product owner is responsible for agile teams under his supervision, projects with multiple agile teams may have multiple product owners, and so over time the vision of the owners may drift and lead the development in different directions. This can be limited by having regular meetings of product owners where the scope and vision of the project can be synchronized.

All the initial, intermediate and final planning sessions should be organized such that teams which are, or could be, impacted by that part of the project are part of the meeting. This can assist in early agreement on high-level requirements and standardization of inter-team interfaces.

3.2 Technology Improvements

Selecting an appropriate technology stack plays an important role in enabling communication and task management so that teams can work together efficiently.

Since agile focuses on interactions, like face-to-face conversation, video conferencing tools can lower the bar to inter-team interactions. They also make communication real-time, reducing delay due to time spent communicating ideas across teams. Continuous integration tools can go a long way in identifying inter-team problems early in development as it reveals the impact of changes on the entire project.

3.3 Importance of Architecture and Design

System design or architecture acts as a common vision for not only the teams but also for the communication between all the product owners and thus is the theme or topic for most of the inter-team communication that happens in a multi-team agile environment. Being such a frequent piece of discussion, it needs to be as formal and as clearly defined as possible as it is the system design that acts as a "deadlock breaker in decisions" [7] for situations where teams disagree on a particular design path, and ensures that components will be constructed so they can be integrated into the whole. A second approach addresses this issue from an organizational standpoint by defining a "system owner" role [4]. This role is more casual than an architect role, and focuses on defining a "go-to" person who can maintain a long term stewardship over a sub-system.

In addition to specification, proper architecture can also be used to enable team agility. As discussed by Parnas [5], there are two general approaches to decomposing systems: 1) compartmentalizing a computational process and, 2) focusing on information hiding. The latter approach is ideal for agile development since it defines system components in terms of hiding design decisions, which empowers individual teams to design their own solution.

Another way in which a formal architecture description helps in mitigating the communication problems is by minimizing the need for inter-team communication as a good

design document is clear enough for a developer to incorporate the design in the system without the need of any other document. Thus, a good design documents sometimes acts as a proxy for product owner when it comes to detailing the requirements of the customer.

4 Conclusion

As we have seen, inter-team communication can be an obstacle when agile teams work together, as intermediaries in communication and lack of personal communication causes disruption in the agile process. To reduce this problem a number of adaptations can be made to the process to ensure the flow of information. However, the most important adaptation is a well defined design and architecture which is available across teams and enables teams to produce individual system components which can be easily integrated.

References

- [1] U.S. General Services Administration. 2018. Collaboration Across Agile Teams. https://tech.gsa.gov/guides/Collaboration_Across_Agile_Teams/
- [2] Kent Beck, Mike Beedle, Arie van Bennekum, Alistair Cockburn, Ward Cunningham, Martin Fowler, James Grenning, Jim Highsmith, Andrew Hunt, Ron Jeffries, Jon Kern, Brian Marick, Robert C. Martin, Steve Mellor, Ken Schwaber, Jeff Sutherland, and Dave Thomas. 2001. Manifesto for Agile Software Development. <http://www.agilemanifesto.org/Teams/>
- [3] Nicolas Frankel. 2016. Making Sure Inter-Team Communication Doesn't Work. <https://dzone.com/articles/making-sure-inter-team-communication-doesnt-work/> [Online; posted 13-October-2016].
- [4] Henrik Kniberg and Anders Ivarsson. 2012. Scaling Agile Spotify with Tribes, Squads, Chapters & Guilds. <https://blog.crisp.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SpotifyScaling.pdf>
- [5] D. L. Parnas. 1972. On the Criteria to Be Used in Decomposing Systems into Modules. *Commun. ACM* 15, 12 (Dec. 1972), 1053–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1145/361598.361623>
- [6] Kenneth S. Rubin. 2012. *Essential Scrum: A Practical Guide to the Most Popular Agile Process* (1st ed.). Addison-Wesley Professional.
- [7] Scott W. Ambler. 2012. The Architecture Owner Role: How Architects Fit in on Agile Teams. <http://agilemodeling.com/essays/architectureOwner.htm/>