Product Owner Examples for – Situational Conversations

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Last Updated: 2022

What are decision games?

This work is inspired by Jason Tanner's work on Product Owner – Decision Games. The slide deck referenced here:

http://www.slideshare.net/jbtanner03/product-owner-decision-games

details the idea of situational-based scenario's for

- Discussion
- Exploring
- Gaining understanding

Of the role of Product Owner in Scrum Teams. Jason presented the concept at the Scrum Gathering in Orlando in May 2016.

First Game from Jason's deck

You are a Product Owner at AwesomeSoft for a typical Scrum Team with a ScrumMaster and 7 Development Team members. You have a healthy prioritized backlog. Your Scrum Team spends a day to plan a release once a quarter.

You are halfway through Sprint 3 and you just left a meeting with your manager who told you that the CEO met with six strategic customers at an executive event last week and that there is a vital, new feature that must be released this quarter.

What do you do?

1. Explain what you will do yourself.
2. Explain your interactions with your team and your Scrum Master.
3. Explain your interactions with stakeholders.

You have 5 minutes. You can work alone or in small groups.

Based on his inspiration, I've developed the following scenarios (Situational Conversations) surrounding aspects of the role of Product Owner. While the role is quite Scrum-centric, the scenarios apply to any "customer" relationship to an agile team.

While the games are intended to be fast, it's ok o be thoughtful and spend more than 5 minutes per game. A useful addition to playing the game is trying to figure out the "root premise" that is driving the situation. In other words, what agile principles are being amplified.

Alternative - Dojo Format
Another twist is using a Dojo-formatted discussion to explore the situation, where:

- *1-person role plays as the Product Owner in the particular scenario;*
- *1-person is the PO's "situational role" for the scenario; and*
- *1-person is the observer / coach / facilitator / note keeper. This role also leads the scenario retrospective at the end of the conversation.*

#1, Not having enough time to "manage" the backlog
You're the Product Owner for three teams (count them…3) and you can't seem to keep up with any of them. Sure, you have the product and domain knowledge to do your job. But each team seems to be competing for all of your time. They seem to be so…needy!

You've tried connecting with the Business Analyst on each team to be your surrogate Product Owner. And that's worked out reasonably well. However, the BA's seem to struggle with getting (or interpreting) your vision correctly. So they need a reasonably large amount of time as well.

Bottom line, the teams seem to only be half-meeting your expectations.

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#2, Onshore PO, interacting with offshore team
Basically, it's just hard. You're the Product Owner of an offshore team. You've been working with them for over a year. There are 12 time zones between you and them. You are also incredibly busy, staying on the road with customers for about 50% of your time. So you rarely get the chance to directly interact with the team.

Instead you've gotten into the habit of interacting via email for communicating backlog items and performing backlog refinement with the team. Yesterday, the entire team raised an impediment that

they feel you are distracted, disconnected from them, and not effectively doing your job. The escalated to the Scrum Master but also to your boss, the VP of Product Management.

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#3, Scrum Master disconnect – not supporting you

I thought we were in this together? The Scrum Master of your team seems to be continually "at odds" with you. For example, they don't help you in scheduling demos or backlog refinement sessions. The team debates and fights with you often about the granularity and scope of your stories, but you seem to be on your own defending yourself, without a facilitative partner.

It came to a "head" in the last Sprint Planning meeting where the team started pushing back on the stories and the Scrum Master cancelled the meeting and told you that you have to rework the entire backlog because "it's insufficient". You started to disagree, but they turned and walked out of the room.

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#4, Sponsors poaching your teams time

You are in a wonderful position. The company is a mature start-up that is quickly growing. The founders are still incredibly hands-on in the operation of the company. 6 months ago, you adopted Scrum and you are now the Product Owner of 2 Scrum teams. They are seasoned teams who've been with the company since the "beginning".

Lately (let's be honest – always) the CTO, CEO, CFO and other founders have taken it on themselves to direct specific team members to fix specific customer problems. They circumvent you on these requests – going directly to team members for "special projects". You only find out about the work at the end of the sprint when the team fails to deliver on their initial goals. This has always gone on, but as you grow, the rates seem to be increasing.

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#5, Sponsors changing their minds; inevitably you have to tell the team

You've been with the company for 2+ years working as a Business Analyst. And to be honest, you're the best BA in the organization. Supporting that, 2 months ago you were promoted to Product Owner of one of the teams contributing to a new product portal for your customers. So in a word, life is good.

The only thing you've noticed of concern is that the key sponsors for the portal (CTO, VP of Product, COO, and CEO) have very different views on what the "portal" should look and behave like. And there is not a collective view, so individuals have been giving you different feedback and then changing their minds a lot. The worst thing is the churn this is creating in the team, which is leading to a lack of discernable progress. Everyone seems to think it's a team problem. And the team's morale is at a low-point, as they've lost confidence in your decision-making.

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#6, Scrum team dysfunction; can the PO influence change?

You want out. Your current team is nothing but a frustration. They seem to always want you to write the perfect story before they'll consider it. Which takes way too long. They constantly push back on your ideas. And getting them to deliver is, quite frankly, nearly impossible.

The last 4 sprints have failed to meet their Sprint Goals and the team typically only delivers 50% of their sprint commitment. And of the 50% delivered, many of those stories have issues that "continue" into subsequent sprints.

You've brought this up many times to the Scrum Master, but since you're not invited to the Retrospective, you don't really know what the team is doing to improve.

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#7, The team is always resistant to stretching, to doing more, being flexible…

You just left a Backlog Refinement meeting with the team. In some ways it went very well, as you covered 10 stories in the meeting. 5 of them are actually "ready" for sprint execution. But you have a feeling "in your gut" that the team is sandbagging a bit.

For example, you explored one story that the team eventually evaluated to an 8-point story. When in every ounce of your being you can't see it being more than a 1-point story. In fact, when you challenged the team, the estimate actually went up versus down. Given current business expectations and needs, you need your team to stretch more. The only question is how…

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#8, Scrum Master coaching…you?

Sally had been the best of partners as your Scrum Master. You worked with her for nearly 2-years and you both established a trust-trust relationship where you each solely focused on your roles and drove tremendous results with the team.

Now Bob has arrived – replacing Sally. He's a very experienced Scrum Master with chops from a well-respected agile company. In his first 2-weeks, he's already making a difference in "raising the bar" within the team. However, he also seems to be "coaching" you. He's commented that the backlog (stories) aren't where they should be and that your Backlog Refinement meetings need adjustments.

He just scheduled an off-site coffee meeting with you to give your some more general "feedback". In the back of your mind you are wondering if this is really his job.

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#9, Big Picture, Really?

The team keeps asking you about the "Big Picture" for their current project / product. While it makes sense to you AND you wish you could provide it, your Product Manager (you report to them as do 3 other Product Owners for this product) is not sharing it with you. Instead, they are simply spoon-feeding you stories, 1-sprint at a time.

Now you do understand the why behind it. First of all, the Product Manager is getting both too much and too little feedback, so the landscape is confusing. And you've been working together to sort through things. But you do feel there is a lack of decisive product decision-making and you and the team are suffering through it.

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#10, What Happens in Vegas

You are the Product Owner for a couple of critical teams. Your boss, the VP of Product Management, sent you an email last week asking you to do a "performance assessment" for both teams. That would include the entire team – developers, testers, BA, and Scrum Master. They want a detailed account of who's pulling their weight and who's not. Who's good and who's "marginal".

You feel very uncomfortable do this. It's not that each team is perfect, they're not. But they are both solid teams. The environment though is one of changing priorities, changing work, and constant interruptions. So the perception of the teams is that they're not working hard enough or that they are not professional.

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#11, Not being able to delegate…

You've got the entire picture of the ultimate product in your mind. But you are faced with two key challenges. You have a hard time "describing" it to your teams. And, while you don't have the time to do everything, you can't trust anyone else with your "baby".

This has led to your ever being able to take time off and working 80 hours a week. Simply put, you're exhausted and have fallen asleep in more than one backlog refinement meeting. Seriously. Do you think the team noticed?

The clear answer is to start trusting and sharing more. But with who? And at what cost?

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#12, Alignment?

Your company "went Agile" about a year ago. It was driven from within the technology organization, so the Product Owners were sourced from those teams. In a nutshell, either managers or Business Analysts roles were reframed to be Product Owners.

The Product Managers report into a separate (Product) organization and drive the product development strategy. The problem is that the PO's (in Technology) are not very well aligned with the Product Managers (in Product). Even though the work needs to stream from both of them.

And not only is the workflow priority inconsistent, but the priorities are constantly being debated. I.e., the two functional groups are not effectively aligned and working together.

You are a Product Owner (team-ward facing) in the technology group OR you are a Product Manager (outward facing) in the product group.

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