

PM Article

Influence and the Scrum Team

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Scrum development is a structured and an interactive methodology. The peer to peer roles are of equal standing. The success is in gaining consensus by influencing other team members.

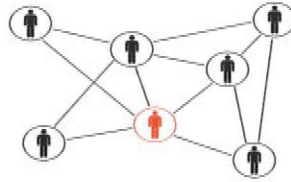
Influencing people is essential in life. More so in a project or an organization or a relationship. At all times your position does not automatically lend itself to make people do things your way. Influence can subtly help in achieving this objective. These skills have to be developed over time.

How can you influence different and diverse set of stakeholders? There is no single standard approach or technique. Even with the same stakeholder the techniques would be different for different situations. It is a tactical game, more situational than person oriented. Experience is built by reviewing the outcome of previous situations to become a more influential leader and a more powerful contributor to your organization's on-going success. Influence has more de-facto power than formal position.

Influencing as a strategy would work when you start to identify your own personal value and that of others; it is a dynamic process, highly dependent on situational factors. In addition, to be a successful influencer, you will need to understand human psychology, social psychology and dynamics of organisation politics, technical competencies are just not enough. It is important to note that you cannot influence what you do not understand.

From my experience the following steps have helped me develop this skill

- Preparation (Intelligence gathering, mental preparation)
- Pleasantries (rapport building and management of impressions)
- Position (reaching a collective understanding of the current situation)
- Problems (coming to an agreement about the issues associated and build a case around it)



- Possibilities (not locking yourself to a single approach or solution, but negotiating around a range of possibilities, create a sense of joint decision-making process)
- Preference (by explaining your thoughts and ideas, you seek to get agreement on specific action that should be taken)
- Proposals (skills of persuasion required, appealing to both logic and emotions, showing at times assertiveness in stating what you want and to build the proposal collaboratively)
- Proactivity (leading the other person / party to act and getting commitment to proactive positive action)

Let's now talk about Scrum teams and the three key roles each team has - Development Team, Scrum Master and Product Owner. Each of the roles has an element of leadership and the very nature of roles bring in a flavor different from other roles. The strategy of Influencing is necessary to have a conclusive outcome.

For example, the Product Owner (PO) would be required to influence the stakeholders or business users on which Product Backlog Item (PBI) will be prioritized and what business value it would bring compared to the other items in the backlog. On the other hand, the PO would also be required to influence the development team on adopting his / her strategy or agree on the order of development. The development team in turn would have to influence the PO on why a particular item should not be prioritized for the current sprint (could be due to technical issues, or dependencies with other PBIs, or dependencies with other Scrum teams). Development team should also think about influencing the Scrum Master (SM) to help understand which components require more urgent attention of theirs, or how a process

should be adopted based on the team's requirements.

The Influencing skill comes to the fore when the development team estimates the PBIs; at this stage, the entire team is required to estimate and come to a consensus or a common ground that nobody is opposing, though it may not be their 1st choice.

The SM has the biggest role to play in terms of influencing the PO, development team, stakeholders, sponsors, business owners (as and when required). The SM must influence the PO and emphasize the maximization of ROI from the development team, or influence the development team on an approach, idea or a new concept to be introduced.

At times, due to business exigencies, the PO may be required to change a PBI item in the middle of the current sprint (going against the Agile principles and values). This is also the place where logical discussions (with the development team) take place and influence is required to sell the concept of why a particular PBI is more important and how would it hurt the business if it's not done in the current sprint. Sometimes, during sprint planning meeting, when the development team has a little bit of spare capacity, it needs to influence the PO to not push for more PBIs but allow them to focus on technical excellence, or reduce the technical debt, or refactor the code / design, or spend a few available hours to learn a new feature, or experiment on something that can be of larger use to the system and project later.

What power cannot achieve, influence can. It is a democratic tool that should be used instead of power, showing the influencer's ability to motivate people to act according to converge to a mutually accepted decision most beneficial to the project or the organization.

There is no dearth of ideas or situations where influence as a theory can be applied to get the desired results for the success of the project. Finally; a word of caution: Influencing comes with a theory of adaptability. As we say in Agile ... Inspect and Adapt.