Managers vs. Agile Teams: Who Makes the Decisions?

**Session Type:** 180 Minute Workshop  
**Keywords:** agile, decision making, tactical and strategic decisions, decision quality  
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**Background**

Agile team members are faced with decision points on a daily basis in a dynamic environment with rapidly changing requirements, expectations and underlying data. Participants in this workshop will learn the key strategic and tactical decisions agile teams make, including how they draw on their experience to drive decisions. This will be an interactive session that reviews how decision quality is assessed, how decision quality metrics are implemented and how these metrics can be improved on their teams. Participants will rate their own levels of decision quality around particular agile activities. Participants should have some experience working on agile teams and include roles such as manager, scrum master, business analyst, product owner, testers and developers.

**Process & Mechanics**

At Agile 2010, we conducted a workshop that focused on the key tactical decisions made by agile teams during sprint planning meetings, sprint execution, sprint review meetings and retrospectives. We discussed the obstacles to decision making at these points and possible solutions for these obstacles. Participants gave positive feedback, describing the workshop as “an excellent and informative session” (Sr. Technical Project Manager) where “so many great techniques and lessons to be learned and so many valuable bits of information [were] gleaned (especially in your presentation)” (IT Specialist). The only complaint last year was that there was not enough time for deeper discussion.

Therefore, this year, we are expanding the workshop to 180 minutes to accommodate more discussion and activities to improve decision making on agile teams. We build on last year’s workshop to focus on three new areas:

1. What tactical versus strategic decisions agile teams make and who is involved in each
2. How experience drives both tactical and strategic decisions
3. How the quality of decisions can be assessed and improved

In addition to looking at how the _tactical decisions_ are made, e.g. decisions concerned with the day-to-day activities, we will also look at the _strategic decisions_ agile teams make, e.g. decisions concerned with the long-term health of the organisation. In agile, the development team makes most of the decisions, but last year there was little discussion on strategic decisions. This year, we will facilitate discussion on the specific types of strategic versus tactical decisions made by agile teams to understand how different roles participate in the decision making process.

Based on our experiences of working with companies using agile methods, we have developed a framework for identifying how experience drives tactical and strategic decision making and how the quality of those decisions is measured. Agile teams work in short iterations with constant customer involvement and multiple team members with varying experiences and perspectives, so the decision quality trade-off between effort and accuracy for making decisions is paramount. Our evidence suggests that agile team members rely on their experience and knowledge to estimate and prioritise tasks rather than choose between multiple options for tasks. For example, when deciding whether to take on a task, one
developer commented, “Experience matters, so if the person is having good experience in the particular area definitely that task should go to that particular person.” Thus, it is worthwhile to demonstrate and discuss how experience drives tactical and strategic decision making on agile teams.

We deliver this workshop with a number of companies on an ongoing basis and will facilitate it with a local Agile User Group prior to the Agile 2011 conference.

**Session Outline**

- Introduce the topic of tactical and strategic decisions making, including why decision making and team behaviour is important for agile teams (10 minutes)
- Present 4 decision models that rely on experience and how they apply to practice (20 minutes)
- Conduct activity where participants discuss the key tactical and strategic agile decisions, when and how they are made, who makes them, and how their experience drives these decisions (40 minutes)
- Present metrics to assess quality of decisions (20 minutes)
- Conduct activity where participants use these metrics to assess their current decision quality and examine how to track this quality over time (40 minutes)
- Facilitate discussion on how to implement decision quality metrics for tactical and strategic decisions on their own teams (30 minutes)
- Provide conclusions for how to better assess decision quality for the business and development team (20 minutes)

**Learning Outcomes**

After attending this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Understand the relevance and benefits of decision making for their organization
- Identify when and how the key tactical & strategic decisions are made on agile teams
- Reflect on current decision making activities in their own teams and organisations to recognize how experience drives their decisions
- Apply the pragmatic framework of the 4 decision models discussed to decision making in their teams
- Define contemporary metrics their agile teams can use to assess the quality of their decisions
- Understand how to implement decision quality metrics in their own agile teams